

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

BIG CREEK

Number 563

1980

Mineral discoveries near Elk Summit high on a ridge between Big Creek and the south fork of the Salmon River came a decade before prospecting on Monumental Creek expanded Big Creek mining possibilities into an even-more remote area around Thunder Mountain. Deep canyons and rough country delayed development of mining anywhere on Big Creek, but an early twentieth-century gold rush finally brought a horde of prospectors into Idaho's Salmon River mountain wilderness west of Leesburg and north of Stanley and Deadwood.

Antimony had been noticed in that country years before anyone succeeded in identifying commercial gold and silver there.

A Thunder Mountain lode which no one could develop and some Chamberlain Basin placers had been investigated as early as 1866 or 1867. Nothing came from that activity. Finally James Reardon and L. M. Johnson brought a small discovery party to Big Creek as early as they could prospect in 1884. In June, they found an eleven-hundred foot outcrop of a system of parallel veins about sixty feet wide. A year later, on June 15, 1885, they organized the Alton mining district, and that summer a hundred and fifty miners located about a hundred claims. They found silver ore described by Norman B. Willey as "refractory, but not base." In 1886, prospect cuts had reached a depth of fifty feet. A. L. Simondi, a Weiser assayer, created a lot of interest when he reported a 2,000-ounce silver sample in August. A ton of ore from these exploratory holes, packed out to a railroad at a cost of eight dollars, provided a favorable test yield of 267 ounces of silver later in 1886. Since an eighty-five mile wagon road would have to be constructed at an estimated expense of \$20,000 to reach their district, miners at Alton faced a severe obstacle.

Their ore, distributed in small stringers through a broad zone or lode, could yield flattering assays from selected samples, but averaged only a dollar or two a ton. A large low-grade lode of that kind eventually could be worked profitably by twentieth-century methods where good transportation was available. Elk Summit offered no such attraction.

Gradual expansion of mining possibilities around Alton--both in the immediate vicinity as well as around Big Creek--came during two decades or more of prospecting there. Following some preliminary work by John Osborn in 1880, a modest excitement attracted interest on Sugar Creek in 1887. Then James Hand

located a Beaver Creek claim on August 18, 1893, which he retained for half a century. A more promising find brought more miners to Smith and Government creeks near Alton in 1898. A Topeka firm acquired this property in 1902 and eventually drove about 2,000 feet of development tunnels in a lode two hundred feet wide. Returning to Beaver Creek in the spring of 1899, James Hand "discovered and located the most extraordinary ledge on the North American continent. It is an enormous porphyry dyke of free milling quartz that stands out boldly like a huge cathedral. Measurements taken show the ledge to be 300 feet at the widest and 60 feet at the narrowest part. The ledge can be easily traced for over three miles.

Assays of the croppings of this ledge made by Mr. Tillson, of the Iola mine, show values "ranging from \$18.50 to \$186.60." Another nearby discovery of Charles Crown, came on Logan and Fall creeks in 1899. Crown went on to find "some remarkably rich locations in Thunder mountain" that season. But his Logan and Fall creeks prospects proved disappointing. By 1902, about 200 feet of development tunnels demonstrated an absence of ore (as evaluated in such a remote area), but after some additional effort at development, George Lauffer and Joe Davis relocated this abandoned property in 1908. Nothing but negative information came from all that effort.

North of Big Creek, Richard Hunter reported an unexpectedly successful 1899 placer operation:

In the Chamberlain basin, strikes showing phenomenal values have been made by the Briggs brothers, of Ohio, and a quartet of lucky prospectors from Utah. The Ohio boys located a placer claim on the top of a mountain and worked like Trojans for two weeks to the intense glee of the old rock smashers. The boys succeeded in getting a 12 hour run of water and washed out \$1,876 in coarse gold. In the clean-up nuggets worth \$10 were found. The hilarity of the "way-backs" ended suddenly.

Copper also created excitement in 1899.

Mike Nevins, the genial, big hearted proprietor of Nevin's cosy ranch, at the mouth of Elk creek, has located a colossal ledge of copper near the fork of Elk and Smith creeks. As the ledge towers upward to a height of over 600 feet the reader can form a slight idea of the magnitude of Nevin's discovery. A representative of Marcus Daly has gone to examine Nevin's discovery.

A somewhat more successful effort attended another nearby discovery of 1903. Four years later a small 300-pound prospect mill turned out \$173 in a seventeen-day run. A five-stamp mill,

brought there in 1911, produced a six or seven thousand dollar yield by 1916. In addition, a fourth Alton lode discovery on Government and Logan creeks filled in some mining territory between the 1898 and 1899 segments. Also in 1911, D. C. Macrae and E. F. Goldman located claims along a ridge between Government and Logan creeks, but they had low grade ore at best. Some may have gone as high as four dollar a ton higher up and two dollars at greater depth, but their average ran lower. Development of this series of four mining areas along a single northeast and southwest mineral zone showed that a large lode extended close to four miles in length and one to three hundred feet in width. Yet almost no production could be managed at such a difficult location. During the Thunder Mountain rush, some of these properties acquired an unenviable reputation by reason of unwarranted wildcatting operations of that period, but not a single instance of intelligent mining development was then recorded, and as a matter of fact 90% of the money raised from the sale of stock based on Big Creek properties during that period was used for promotion purposes and never reached Idaho.

Farther down Big Creek, other lodes had more of a chance for development. W. A. Edward's property on a ridge between Logan and Government creeks (below D. C. Macrae's later 1911 discovery), located in 1904, justified importation of a stamp mill. Logan City (later Edwardsburg) began with a saloon, store, butcher shop, and a house on Big Creek flat that summer, and a four-stamp mill arrived in 1906. Milling finally began five years later, with a production of \$1,200 in 1911. Sulphide ores, requiring a cyanide process, continued to present a problem which accounted for so long a delay and such a small production. Edwards also held additional claims twelve miles farther down Big Creek, where a 2,500-foot lode was developed. Most of Big Creek's production came from the Snowshoe mine in that area, with a yield of about \$400,000 between 1906 and 1942.