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MOOSE CREEK

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Placers along Moose Creek--a Clearwater tributary near Montana--attracted prospectors periodically after their discovery in 1864. About 70 miles from Pierce, they could be supplied by Lolo Trail packers who could descend to Kelly Creek and continue north up Moose Creek. A Lewiston correspondent, September 16, 1864, reported their discovery to a Walla Walla paper in a brief notice:

"New mines have also been discovered on the Lolo Fork of Sweetwater [Clearwater], in a north-easterly direction from Oro Fino, distant about 70 miles. Specimens received from the party indicate the gold to be coarse, not unlike the Kootenai. In both the above localities 20 cents to nearly as many dollars per pan of dirt is spoken of as the result of prospecting. Several parties are preparing to visit these localities, upon whose return more reliable intelligence may be had to communicate." (Washington Statesman, 16 September 1864, p. 1, c. 5)

Too limited in value and extent to detain miners in 1864--when large and rewarding gold discoveries at Helena and other highly profitable mining camps discouraged fortune hunters from wasting time in less promising areas--they soon were forgotten and ignored. But by 1866 other camps had declined and rich new placers were needed. So Moose Creek had another chance. Nimrod Poston of Missoula noted renewed interest in Moose Creek placers that summer:

Squire Poston also reports several discoveries on, or near, the headwaters of the Clearwater. The discoverers had visited Missoula City and obtained rockers. But little information could be obtained from these men--their motive for silence being, evidently to return, and secure their claims before an excitement and subsequent "rush." These are what are termed bar-diggings. Of course we can only conjecture as to the locality; but, being near the head of the Clearwater, and near the Lo-lo Fork trail, they cannot be more than seventy-five miles from Missoula City, nor over half

that distance from Fort Owen. We would recommend Western friends, who intend returning this fall to Oregon or California to go by the way of this trail, prepared for prospecting. Though much more rugged than the Mullan route, it is said to be the shortest course by a hundred miles from points in Montana to Walla Walla or Lewiston. (Rocky Mountain Gazette, 11 August 1866, Montana Post [Virginia City], 18 August, p. 3, c. 4)

But at that time, Moose Creek could not compete with Leesburg and possibilities of mining there were soon forgotten. Additional prospecting north of Pierce toward Moose Creek two years later led to a modest gold discovery closer to Pierce than to Moose Creek. Stanford Capps, a prominent miner from Pierce, reported that find, September 11, 1868:

Friend Slater,--You will probably hear distorted of the "new and rich diggings" struck within thirty miles of this place. We have actually found a creek that will pay very well on the north slope of the Bald Mountains if there was sufficient water to work the same. I have been on the ground for the last week. There is scarcely a rocker head.

Out of 500 buckets (or pans) of dirt we got \$27.25. The ground is nearly all taken up. It will take three or four thousand dollars to bring water into the gulch. The water right is located by Capps. Boyd & Co. The creek or gulch is called "Gold Creek."

We have discovered and have located very good [sic] diggings, but as to their extent no man knoweth.

The creek is situated about twenty miles in a northerly direction from Pierce city. (Idaho Statesman, 22 September 1868, p. 2, c. 3)

Although a number of scattered properties attracted some attention in that general area over many years, Gold Creek (somewhere around Orogrande Creek) did not gain any great prominence.

Finally in 1868 and 1869, renewed Moose Creek excitements led to serious efforts to mine there. New gold camps were needed even more than in 1866, and until Loon Creek came into prominence, Moose Creek began to flourish. Lewiston and Pierce provided reports of renewed excitement there:

The Discovery of new mines beyond Lewiston, has created quite an excitement, and arrested all the travel this way. King, the stage driver, had stocked the road, looking for a large influx of passengers this way, but instead of being crowded his coaches come down empty.

All the loose men around Lewiston, and the various mining camps, have struck for the new diggings, preferring to risk wintering in the mountains rather than miss the chance of securing good claims. (Walla Walla Statesman, 30 October 1868, p. 3, c. 1)

We have it from Expressman Fettis and Mr. J. Lowenberg and quite a number of other reliable gentlemen that the new mining district, to the north and east of Pierce city, known as Moose Creek, is extraordinarily rich and extensive. It is believed that this new camp will eclipse any that has been found within the last ten years, and will furnish ground enough for a thousand or more men to work. The prospects average on the hills from 10 to 12 cents to the pans, and in the gulches from 15 to 25 cents to the pan; which warrants the belief that this new camp will exceed Florence and equal California in '49. Water is abundant with plenty of fall--dump, and little or no stripping; and the gravel from five to six feet deep. Nearly all from Pierce city and thereabouts have gone there, and parties and pack trains are daily leaving here for there. Mr. Hawthorne & Co. leave here today for this camp with a train loaded with ten thousand pounds. There can be no doubt of the truth of this exciting news. We have given the above as a low estimate of the accounts given us, as we desire to be within bounds. Mr. Lowenberg has dust from there that we think will assay \$17 per ounce. We have a reliable correspondent there and that will give us full particulars for our next issue. (Idaho Statesman, 6 November 1868, p. 3, c. 2)

Winter activity at Moose Creek necessarily was somewhat limited in 1868-1869. Enough fairly rich placer gravel was available that some miners could make good wages even though water was not available for an efficient sluicing operation. A brief notice of successful production there reached Walla Walla:

Moose Creek Mine.--By way of Lewiston, favorable reports reach us from the Moose Creek mines, near the head of the Clearwater. Men who are wintering in there are making from \$5 to \$9 a day to the hand, using rockers. (Walla Walla Statesman, 29 Jan 1869, p. 3, c. 1)

Prospecting continued along Moose Creek all winter with more than satisfactory results:

A party came in from Moose Creek the other day on snow

shoes, having been seven days on the road. They report all well and prospecting. Many good claims have been found during the winter, and considerable money has been taken out with rockers and pans. There is no longer any doubt that they are good mines, both rich and extensive. A party will leave this place for that camp in about two weeks. I intend going as soon as I possible can. (Idaho Statesman, 6 March 1869, p. 2, c. 2)

As soon as travel to Moose Creek became practical, interested miners got organized to go there from supply points such as Walla:

Moose Creek Mines.--In the early part of the week we noticed quite a large pack train fitting out for the Moose Creek mines. The train was owned by miners, who took with them provisions, tools, &c., to last them the summer. (Walla Walla Statesman, 26 March 1869, p. 3, c. 1)

By Spring, a successful mining season got underway. In order to supply a more efficient sluicing operation, a system of ditches was dug early in 1869:

The express from Moose creek this week brings us good news. Claims that are opened are paying from one ounce to fifty dollars per day to the hand. About three hundred men in that district have acquired good claims. The great and indeed only drawback is the want of water for the approaching dry season. This will have to be brought in ditches which are now in the process of construction. The entire country between this place and Moose creek offers a very promising field for prospecting, and is almost untouched.

I. B. Cowen, Esq., our sheriff, has appointed Mr. John O'Meara as his deputy for the Moose region.

So far this camp has yielded rather more than the average amount of dust. We feel confident that we have the best placed camp in the territory. (Idaho Statesman, 8 June 1869, p. 1, c. 5)

Early in May, after spring runoff left most Moose Creek placers with no water for sluicing, production there largely ended for that season:

From the North.--A letter from our correspondent at Pierce City, I. T., dated the 15th, informs us that the Moose creek excitement has partially subsided; the cry there as elsewhere is water! water! The weather is

excessively hot. (Idaho Statesman, 29 June 1869, p. 3, c. 1)

By that time, miners at Moose City began to notice that their claims had a more limited potential than they had originally supposed. Working rich spots with rockers, they had flattering results. But when they began large scale production, they found their claims did not pay very well. This kind of experience was typical of many early operations in a new district: A. C. Wellman, a well-known Walla Walla valley resident writing from Pierce, June 2, explained what had gone wrong and discounted optimistic reports that continued to emanate from Moose Creek:

EDITOR STATESMAN:--Please allow me to correct a statement made by Mr. O'Neil in regard to the Moose Creek mines. He stated that he had been to Moose Creek, and found it to be a rich and extensive camp. This statement is false in very particular. Mr. O'NEIL never was there and knows nothing of the mines whatever. Moose Creek is not rich, neither is it extensive--the best claims are scarcely paying wages and the whole camp will not number over forty claims that pay anything at all, and even these cannot be worked but a short time longer on account of water. Ditches are being brought in, but it will take all summer to complete them. Before the claims were opened the prospects were very flattering; one, two, three, and even twenty dollars was got to the pan, but the leads, after working, have proven to be very narrow and spotted, and fall short of the expectations of every one. The basin is low, yet diggings are well up to the head of the gulches, making natural water scarce. The largest week's work yet made was 48 ounces to two men, and the largest nugget \$117. The distance from this place to Moose Creek is about forty miles, and from Moose Creek to Hellgate valley about the same. Provisions have been very scarce this spring, but when I left, a few days since, teams were coming in from both sides. (Walla Walla Statesman, 18 June; Idaho World, 24 June 1869, p. 2, c. 3)

Discouraged miners from Moose Creek returned to Warren's complaining about a similar experience. L. W. Bacon, an Idaho legislator who operated a Warren's express, reported their dissatisfaction:

The Moose creek mines have already commenced to fail. Mr. [L. W.] Bacon says that for a few weeks before he left Warrens, miners were daily coming in from the

Moose creek diggings, disgusted, flat broke, and anxious to obtain employment. Only a few had gone there from Warrens, but nearly all who had were back again, and with them came numbers who had rushed to Moose creek from British Columbia diggings, from Elk City and Oro Fino, and from the California, Nevada and Eastern Oregon mining districts. All of them pronounced the Moose Creek diggings comparatively a humbug. The area of mining ground is limited, and the richness of the best claims there has been greatly overrated. A few men who had gone there early and had the pick of all the ground, had succeeded pretty well in the mines, and the few traders who got in first with goods and provisions, had made money; but the diggings were no longer paying, except in rare instances; the camp was overstocked with goods of all kinds, and the rush from there during May was far beyond the rush to Moose creek. The excitement was over, the camp was fast simmering down to bed rock grade, and the "rich and extensive Moose creek gold fields" told of in the papers, will sustain no more than half the number who remained there in early May, if so many. (Idaho World, 17 June 1869, p. 4, c. 2)

Moose Creek, like many other camps, soon became more attractive to Chinese than to other mines. Not having produced too much before it declined, Moose City offered only limited opportunities to Oriental miners. Eventually they ran into trouble too:

The old mining camp of this name is located in the eastern part of Shoshone county, Idaho. Rich deposits of gold were found there in 1867 and 1868, and for several years subsequent there was considerable mining done. For the past few years only a few Kanakas and Chinamen have been operating them. The camp is high up in the Bitter Root range of mountains, among the upper tributaries of the North Clearwater, and is about 200 miles northeast of Lewiston. Last Spring four Kanakas who had passed the preceding winter there were found dead in their cabins. The Missoulian gives the following particulars of a similar horrible calamity which befell a party of Chinamen who remained there last Fall to spend the Winter:

On April the 15th a party of miners, consisting of John Bolen, Chas. Felton and Albert Peters started from Moose creek ferry to cross the range and go into the Moose mining district. Six miles out the party

found it necessary to construct snow shoes and were six days in making the trip into the mines. There were sixteen Chinamen left in the diggings last year. Of this number six were found dead, but unburied; and all but one (the China merchant) of the remaining Chinamen very seriously ill with a very severe form of scurvy. It seems that these Chinamen, in order to live cheap, had caught and dried a large number of "bruised" salmon last fall, and this had been their main supply of food. The poor fellows were ignorant of the nature of their ailments, and superstitiously let the sick alone to take care of themselves. Dead men were found on the floor, and sick men on beds in the same room. The bodies were boxed and buried in the snow for the present, until later in the season. During the past Winter it has snowed nearly all the time in the camp, and the men have lived necessarily indoors to a great extent. It is very probably that the enforced inactivity for so long a period has had much to do with bringing on the scurvy. (Yankee Fork Herald [Bonanza], 29 May 80, p. 4, c. 1)

Eventually a drag-line operation succeeded in handling a large amount of Moose Creek gravel that could not be sluiced profitably in earlier years. Most production there came from this twentieth-century mining effort.

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