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SNAKE RIVER FINE GOLD

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By 1870 a majority of Idaho miners were Chinese. They did not meet too good a reception near Shoshone Falls, however. A white miners' convention, May 18, 1870, resolved to exclude Orientals from their camp. Whenever, as in Boise Basin by 1870, Chinese miners invaded a district, placers remaining there were regarded as too low grade to interest whites. Chinese miners willingly worked claims which paid less, primarily because they used to earn still lower wages in China. They hoped to retire to China with enough wealth to improve their lot substantially even though they usually were denied an opportunity to profit from any of the better western mines. Many of the Snake River placers would attract only Chinese, and by 1873 they got a public welcome to return.

Like 1869, the Snake ran at a low level in 1870. In normal years, high water made prospecting difficult or impossible until after the middle of August. But in 1870, large numbers of miners still had to leave their regular jobs and the Snake could be examined again. On July 15, a San Francisco Bulletin correspondent reported that extensive prospecting had shown considerable promise:

Through these persistent [prospecting] efforts, prosecuted both from the east and the west, the main stream had been traced and examined quite to its source, in the Wind River Mountains, while most of the upper tributaries have also been pretty effectually explored. On nearly all the bars, both on the two principal forks, as well as the confluents, gold has been found--always excessively fine and generally only in limited quantities--nowhere in very great quantities.

In the Shoshone Falls area, only a few elevated bars could be prospected or worked successfully during high waters. So facilities were limited. A camp at Dry Creek [just below Caldron Linn near later Murtaugh] had four stores, a restaurant, and about six residential tents. Shoshone Falls had a store. At Twin Falls [on the river above Shoshone Falls], "Shoshone City, the largest hamlet on the river, consists of four canvas shanties and a tent, all used as trading posts." In the spring of 1870, enough prospectors had swarmed up and down the Snake to locate workable placer ground in a number of additional scattered places. Aside from Shoshone Falls, miners found gold enough to justify permanent camps near J. Matt Taylor's bridge [at the site of Idaho Falls] as well as around Salmon Falls in Hagerman Valley. Other marginal locations were represented also. A Boise miner reported a fairly typical situation, July 25:

I will now endeavor to tell you what I have seen and know about Snake river. First, for rattlesnakes, scorpions, musquitos, gnats, sage brush and hot sand, it is the best country I have ever seen; but for gold and a mining country, I cannot say as much, although there is scarcely a place on the river that a man cannot get a prospect, but

not in sufficient quantity to pay; the gold is so fine and light that a miner from other countries, is very easily deceived here. We located a claim, prospecting about twenty miles of the river, on a piece of ground that we thought would pay \$8 per day to the hand but after working it we find it will pay only \$3 per day, and this is liable to chop on us any time. There are hundreds of men running both up and down the river that cannot find a place to make grub. They say they don't know what to do or where to go. Some say here that rich mines have been found in the Wind River mountains; others say they have prospected there for the last two years and found nothing.

Some prospectors had better luck. Ralf Bledsoe noted August 14 that his rocker yield had reached \$167 [or around \$64,000 in 1980 prices] in one week and \$114 the next. Even at 1870 prices his return would have set off a major gold rush if more claims of that caliber could have been found. Enough miners came to the Snake that a stage line from Corinne, Utah, began regular service at a modest rate of \$15 for a hundred and eighty mile trip to the mines in the summer of 1870.

By 1878 and 1879, when interest revived in Snake River, new districts below Raft River, at Cold Springs, at Reynolds Creek and Munday's Ferry on the Boise-Owyhee road, at Goose Creek [near later Burley], joined Eagle Rock [renamed Idaho Falls a little more than a decade later], Salmon Falls, and towns along the later Hansen bridge-Shoshone Falls segment as active mining camps. Early in the spring of 1879, a new mining district included the course of the Snake from Raft River to Goose Creek. Another major area at Bonanza Bar, west of American Falls, gained prominence then. By 1882, Boise Valley's New York canal was projected to bring a large volume of water to Snake River placers near the site of Fort Boise, scene of original Snake River gold discoveries in 1854. When finally constructed, this canal served only for Boise Valley irrigation. Even then, interest in fine gold had led to design of a large canal system that still provides water for most of the Boise project.

By 1880, careful observation of Snake River fine gold had identified very small particles, so small that 500 had to be collected to obtain enough gold to equal one cent. Yet at that time, much of the finer gold--for which 3,000 to 4,000 particles had to be gathered to recover a penny's worth--could not be recognized at all. Considering that a five dollar gold piece was only about the size of a copper penny, those particles had become very fine indeed.

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