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A Tale of Mines, Prospectors, and Native Americans

The Making of Glacier National Park

It all began innocently enough as a walk in the park with five colleagues and friends on a September day in 1991. Ed Gensler (State of Montana geologist), Philip Cloues, Janet Wise, Dave Steensen and the author, all from the National Park Service, Denver Office, were in Glacier National Park to investigate abandoned mines. On this particular day we had decided to take the 13-mile round trip hike from Many Glaciers to the Cracker Mine, the largest of the old abandoned mining operations in Glacier. Little did I know that we would not only cover the physical distance, but would venture back in time a hundred years.

It turned out to be a wonderful hike. The day had everything of fall about it; a frosty morning, everyone clad in warm jackets drinking hot coffee and anxious talk about the long day's hike in the Park's magnificent mountains. We started on a well-worn dirt trail that went modestly up and down through the wooded pines around Many Glaciers. We soon got to switch-backs, steeper terrain and crisp smelling alpine vegetation. We

moved along the trail and the tall pines gave way to tundra-like vegetation as we slogged upward with the pronounced steep grade. We came out of the vegetation to an area above the tree line, turned a corner, and were rewarded by a magnificent sight.

In the cradle of these ice carved peaks of the Northern Rockies was a glimmering blue lake which seemed to be enjoying those last sun soaked days before the icy grip of winter rendered the water immobile. Off in the distance were the waste rock piles of the mine and some bent and twisted pieces of machinery punctuated with weathered pieces of once wooden structures. We soon reached our destination.

Since none of us had been here before or knew what to expect, I remember there was a sense of excitement that comes from a discovery experience. We clattered up and down the waste rock piles, climbed on the old rusted boiler, and poked around the metal gears, pipes, and gray-brown wood of what was left of the collapsed mill. And yes, we carefully entered the open mine workings and explored its passageways with lighted lamps atop our hard-hats, prybar and gasmeter in hand. We had lunch and reflected on our good fortune to be hiking on such a perfect day in Glacier National Park's mountain country and to be at this long-abandoned and forgotten mine. We then came back to Denver and wrote these few bureaucratic paragraphs in a government memorandum that was destined to die in battleship gray file cabinets that occupy space in various National Park Service offices:

The Cracker Mine Site is located on the southeast shores of Cracker lake near the campsite. It is easily seen from the hiking trail. The lower portal is closed from caving and the upper portal is open. The mine appears to be a destination point for hikers as candle wax is found throughout the mine workings. Although the rock in the mine is generally competent, there are a few areas with sufficient cracks in the rock to warrant concern of a possible rock fall from the ceiling. A recommended closure method would

Overlook of Cracker Lake from the Cracker Lake Trail.



consist of a 40-inch thick rock and mortar wall at the entrance for an estimated cost of \$650.00.

If the historic significance merits interpretation, and the park wants visitation underground, then the mine should be periodically inspected by qualified personnel and loose rock barred down and then removed to prevent hazards from unstable footing. There are no shafts nor stopes (large rooms) underground and the air quality was good.

The remains of the old mill site consisting of rotting timbers and rusty mill equipment (e.g., jaw crusher, steam boiler, trommel, etc.) are located on the shore of the south end of the lake. The remoteness of the site and the early establishment of the park has prevented this rare find of historic equipment from being melted down for scrap during World Wars I and II. The equipment represents a cultural resource opportunity for interpretation directly connected to the formation of the park.

This one-day excursion to the Cracker Mine peaked my curiosity and prompted me to find out more about the mine and the story of how that related to the creation of Glacier National Park. The tangible objects left behind by past generations, like crushed structures, rusting metal and underground diggings at long abandoned mines, such as the Cracker, can cause us to reflect on the people who were there and the human events of the time. The following story has many of the elements we associate with the Old West, Cowboys (or girls in this case), Native Americans (the Blackfeet), the Cavalry and Buffalo soldiers (African-American troops), a massacre of Native Americans, a railroad and railroad baron, prospectors, miners and mining, a gold rush, a boom-and-bust town, an Act of Congress, and finally a national park.

If our investigation party had been in the area a century earlier (1891), we would have found an interesting scene. The talk would be of the railroad baron James J. Hill building the Great Northern Railroad through the area and if he would get it built over Manias Pass before the winter snow. There would be much discussion over the comparison of the three new saloons in the boom town of Altyn. And yes, there would surely be much talk of Dutch Lui's prospecting and mineral discoveries on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Everybody thought the best gold deposits were on lands legally forbidden for non-Indians to prospect.

The period after the Civil War until the creation of Glacier National Park (1865-1910) brought men to the region with intentions of acquisition and exploitation. The American West



embodied the ideals of free enterprise and untamed capitalism. It was a time when people believed they could better themselves from their own hard work. It was a time of optimism.

The search for mineral wealth in the Rocky Mountains was well under way in the 1860s. Many men moved west after the Civil War (1860-1865) to seek a new life and forget the bloody battlefields of the east. The history of early Montana settlement is the story of one gold, silver, or copper rush after another. The big strike was just over the next mountain or just up the next draw. The first major mineral strike in Montana was in 1862 when gold was discovered. The following year there were several more discoveries and "gold fever" became contagious. By 1864 there were enough people in Montana to achieve territorial status.

During the period of 1865-1869, there were a number of gold strikes in British Columbia and Saskatchewan, Canada. As a result there were prospecting parties that passed through the north-west mountains of Montana, the Glacier Park area, on their way to Canada. One such party of prospectors led by Joseph Kipp explored the St. Mary's Lake region in 1869. These prospecting parties did not stay long in the area because this was Blackfeet Indian Country. The reservation was established in 1855 and had a mountainous and plains section. The Blackfeet were a viable force in the area and they did not take kindly to intrusions into their territory. There were numerous reports of white men being killed by hostile Indians—or was it land grabbers being killed by Indians defending their ever shrinking homelands.

Native American opposition to this intrusion of prospectors to this mountainous region came to

a disastrous end in 1870. It was a year of escalating incidents coming to a head. The Native Americans killed one of the early Montana settlers, a man of some renown at the time, and a cry rang out in the territory for retribution. Major Eugene Baker, U.S. Cavalry was dispatched to punish the Native Americans. He surprised a smallpox-ridden Blackfeet camp and killed nearly 200 individuals. The controversial "Baker Massacre" ended Blackfeet resistance along the Montana Front Range. The massacre, combined with smallpox epidemics, the introduction of liquor, and the increasing number of settlers moving into the area had the effect of destroying the fabric of Blackfeet society. A once powerful force in the region and deterrent to prospecting, mining and settlement was neutralized.

In the 15 years following the Civil War (1865-1880), significant changes in the region of Glacier's mountains occurred. The Blackfeet tribe was reduced from a position of power to a people racked with disease, poverty, and despair. Prospectors who were initially intimidated by the Indians roamed freely through the region. The official boundary survey party came and went having

defined a lasting boundary between the two countries. Army reconnaissance parties were sent through the area to gather mostly geographic information adding first-hand reports of the undocumented territory. They reported a formidable wilderness with spectacular scenery.

During the decade of the 1880s, the plight

of the Blackfeet continued to worsen. In 1882, the last of the buffalo were killed and so went a way of life for these Native Americans. Starvation followed, and soon the Blackfeet were almost totally dependent on government aid. Prospectors began a more intense exploration of the mountains west of and adjacent to the reservation. Shows of gold, silver and copper gave rise to speculation of even richer veins on the eastern side of the Continental Divide on tribal land. To make matters worse, in 1886 an Indian Agency clerk outfitted prospector Dutch Lui to explore in the Swift Current area (now Many Glaciers) of the Indian Reservation, clearly an illegal activity. Dutch Lui's prospecting efforts were successful and he returned with copper ore. Word spread through the mining camps and soon there were other prospectors disregarding the "off limits" status of the Indian Reservation in their search for mineral wealth. The pace began to pick

up when a local town newspaper reported that Dutch Lui had a strike on the Continental Divide at the head waters of Copper and Quartz Creeks.

During the same period of time the area was substantially opened up by the coming of the railroad. The remote wilderness of Northwest Montana was destined for change. The Great Northern Railroad began to be built along the Middle Fork of the Flathead River from the east to Kalispell in late 1891 and later was completed all the way to the west coast.

In the early 1890s, there was considerable mineral exploration activity both legally on the west side of the divide and illegally on the east side. It is reported that over 2,000 mining claims were staked in what is now Glacier National Park by 300 individuals. Most prospectors were not what we would consider professional miners. They were a ragtag cross-section of adventurers lured to the area by "gold fever." One of the most notable of these was Elizabeth Collins, wife of a local rancher, dubbed the "Cattle Queen of Montana." She was to oversee the staking of many unsuccessful mining claims on Glacier's west side. She was a notorious character and was said to have drowned a man while in a heated, drunken argument on Lake McDonald. Activities of the Cattle Queen and other less known prospectors on the "West Side" began to put pressure on gaining access to the "East Side" of the Divide.

There was enough promise from prospecting that went on illegally on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation during the early 1890s, that Montana residents put pressure on Congress to open up the land for legitimate staking of mining claims. They were sure the Indian Reservation was the location of the next big strike in Montana. In 1895 George Bird Grinnell, William C. Pollack, and Walter M. Clements were appointed commissioners to negotiate with the Blackfeet over the sale of their mountain lands.

The Blackfeet Indian Reservation in the mountainous area east of the Continental divide was identified as the "Ceded Strip" and sold to the United States for \$1.5 million. The deal was struck in 1896 and a Bill was written by Congress. The transaction officially took place by Act of Congress on April 15, 1898. The Ceded Strip includes all the lands in Glacier National Park east of the Continental Divide.

Between 1896 and 1898 when the land was still closed, prospectors tried to sneak into the reservation. They made themselves quite a nuisance and earned the name "sooners," because they had begun too soon. In a reversal of the normal role where the cavalry was called in to protect the settlers from the Native Americans, the cavalry was brought in to protect the Blackfeet on the



Collapsed Cracker Mill and bull wheel.



Close-up of Cracker Mill boiler with lake in background

reservation from the prospectors. Soldiers came from Fort Assiniboine, near present-day Harve, Montana, to keep the peace. For this unusual and thankless task, they used Buffalo Soldiers.

When the gold rush began at high noon on April 15, 1898, without hesitation the sooners raced into the area and staked their claims at previously located rock outcrops. Although the entire Ceded Strip was prospected, most of the valuable mining claims were clustered at locations on Rose Creek, Boulder Creek, Cracker Lake in the Swift Current valley, and above Slide Lake. Mining claims in most instances were long rectangular pieces of land, 600 feet wide by 1,500 feet long. They were identified on the ground, "staked," by marking the corners. This could be a blazed tree or more likely a four-inch square wooden post (stake) held upright by rocks piled around its base. Those posts were suppose to extend four and one-half feet above the ground.

The Cracker Mine perhaps represents the best mining property in the Ceded Strip which consist of the eastern half of Glacier National Park starting at the Continental Divide. The mine is at the south end of Cracker Lake at the base of Mt. Siyah, known at the time, as the Swift Current Mining District. It is reported that the mine had 1,300 feet of underground workings, approximately one-quarter of a mile. A mill was built at the site with steam driven equipment including a crusher to process the ore. A saw mill was also supposed to have been built in the area. This was a modest undertaking by that day's standards. Two prospectors, L. C. Emmonds and Hank Norris staked the mining claims on which the Cracker mine is located. It is said that the mine takes its name from a lunch of crackers and cheese these two prospectors had at the mineralized rock outcrop on their claims. The mining claims were staked in 1898 and then sold later that year to the Michigan and Montana Copper Mining & Smelting company. Machinery was hauled by wagon up a rough road to the mine in 1900, which put the mine well on its

way to development. However, the death of Mr. Esker, the president of the company, in 1900 was cause for confusion and set-backs.

In 1901, everybody felt a railroad spur from the Great Northern Transcontinental Railroad would be built to the Swift Current Mining District, mainly because of the supposedly good shows of copper ore in the Cracker Mine. However, things did not work out that way and by 1902 mining ceased for failure to discover ore.

By 1902, most prospecting and mining activity in the region and in the Ceded Strip area had ceased. After the boom only a small number of consolidated claims remained. They included the Bulls Head group operated by the Josephine Copper Mining and Smelting Company in the Swift Current Valley; the Reid Mining Milling and Smelting Co. (known as the Van Pelt mining claims) on the North Fork of the Kennedy Creek (today's Slide Lake area); and, the Michigan and Montana Copper Mining and Smelting Company at Cracker Lake. The Cracker Lake mine was the largest and most promising of the mines and it was said the Van Pelt Mine was the only property developed by a "professional" miner. Van Pelt's story is classic: a drummer boy in the Confederate Army, railroad conductor for the Baltimore & Ohio for 20 years after the Civil War, lured to the west by gold fever, learned the trade of prospecting, then turned to speculator and financier. He worked his claims in the park until 1919, when he died. He was the last of the miners.

When the miners moved on to more promising areas, that left the government with a large chunk of land, the Ceded Strip, with no particular interest from the citizens of Montana. By 1910, when Glacier National Park was created, all the fuss about would-be mineral wealth had subsided in the face of hard economic reality. There was no loud voice left to tout the virtues of mining development. All that was left was what had always been present, a marvelous rugged mountain wilderness with breathtaking scenery. The meager scratching, rotting timber, and twisted rusting metal of human mining endeavors seemed insignificant against the mountains and valleys. So it is fitting that on this, the 100th year anniversary of the Act of Congress that created the Ceded Strip, we are able to recount its history and continued existence as part of the nation's abandoned mine legacy administered by the National Park Service.

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