Historic Gold Mining
in Douglas County, Oregon

H.J. Banfield and Joseph Baltazar in front of the Rainbow Mine, Douglas County, Oregon, 1900
The Douglas County Gold Rush

After the California Gold Rush of 1849, miners moved north first to the Rogue River Basin and Jacksonville and then on north to the Umpqua region.

Placer mining was the main source of gold recovery throughout the Southern Oregon region. Water from hand-dug ditches and side draws was used to wash away gravel deposits, collecting the runoff through flumes that contained riffles on the bottom to collect the gold as it settled its way out of the debris.

Prospectors explored essentially all of the streams of Douglas County for placer gold. They found fair to good prospects on only a few of the streams. Noteworthy among these are Starveout, Hogum, Quines, Bull Run, Coffee, and North Myrtle Creeks. Others on which some placer mining was done include Steamboat, Windy, Cow (bench gravels), West Fork Cow, Beaver, Jordan, Willis, Coarse Gold, Byron, Thompson, and Bushnell Creeks.

The first mining camp in the Umpqua region was located at Coffee Creek on a tributary of the South Umpqua 25 miles above Canyonville. By 1855, gold had been discovered in placer diggings at Coffee Creek.

Placer mining in the 1850's was done mainly by hand methods, usually by shovelling into a rocker or long tom sluice box. In the richer streams, the miners were often able to stake out only small plots and worked them the best way they could. If an individual or company bought a sizeable area and had adequate financing or cooperation, a ditch and pipe were installed so that the area could be mined by hydraulic methods. A letter about placer gold mining quoted in The Oregonian, December 18, 1858 stated:

"Coffee Creek is a small branch of the South Umpqua River. Three men had been working the mouth of the creek for several months with sluices, but owing to the fineness of the gold and bad management, very little was made by them. In the latter part of July 1858, a company of men, including one of the above three, started up the creek to prospect. They worked until September when they 'struck a prospect' three miles from the mouth which paid them four dollars per day per man. Further prospecting located a strike which paid as high as two dollars and a half per pan. Each of the party, consisting of seven men, staked claims of two hundred yards each. All the prospectors on Texas Gulch (a tributary of Coffee Creek) got as high as two dollars and a half per pan on bed rock. One man took out a nugget weighing six ounces."
Word of a new claim would travel rapidly. As many as 1000 men could be found on site the following year. This required a great demand for supplies of both hardware and foodstuffs to support the camps.

The great demand for water during the summer months raised disputes between the miners and the farmers that had moved in to grow foodstuffs for the communities. By 1865, placer mines were being worked in nearly all the districts of prominence. As a point of reference, the first commercial settlement in Oregon was in 1811, the first Oregon Trail wagon train was in 1843, and Oregon became a state in 1859.

The mining camps of SW Oregon were supplied by pack trains that originated at Scottsburg on the Umpqua River, as it was the headwaters of navigation on the Umpqua, and traveled to the gold fields of Northern California. This route took in Jacksonville, Oregon, which by 1856 had become the largest town between San Francisco and Portland.

Lee Creek

In 1911, with a capital stock of $100,000, the Casteel Mines Company began a hydraulic mining operation 12 miles east of Myrtle Creek along Lee Creek. By 1915 the company had removed enough gold to pay all expenses including digging ditches and making flood dams. The mine was equipped with two hydraulic nozzles, 1,200 feet of pipe and all necessary mining tools. Two men were employed year-round. In addition to some large gold nuggets, many shells, large bones and tusks of animals were reported to have been washed from the mountainside. Hydraulic mining continued in the Myrtle Creek area at least until 1917 and probably until as late as 1940.
China Ditch

In the late 1800s, numerous tributaries of the South Umpqua River were known for their promising deposits of placer gold. Miners worked the placers, diverting water for their hydraulic water nozzles, known as "giants", and for processing the minerals in sluices.

Water just starting to flow through nozzle of hydraulic "giant" at Lee Creek in 1913

In 1890, the Myrtle Creek Consolidated Hydraulic Gold Mining and Manufacturing Company, with Dr. L. W. Brown as president, began acquiring mining property and water rights. The Myrtle Creek placers attracted hardworking Chinese laborers who constructed the monumental "China Ditch" to carry water for miles along sidehills, through tunnels, and in flumes to the gravels they washed on North Myrtle. By the end of 1890, a crew of 89 men had constructed seven miles of ditch, and other crews had built sluice boxes, headgates, and installed pipe for the hydraulic giants. Two of the giants began washing the hillsides in January, 1891. As gold was found, sale of stock in the company boomed.

At the height of construction in the summer of 1891, as many as 200 Chinese laborers worked on the project, thus the name "China Ditch". By the end of 1891 three mining shifts working 24 hours a day were operating three hydraulic giants to wash hillsides containing gold.

Victory placer mine near Glendale ca. 1906 with by-pass flume used during clean-up of sluice box

The primary ditch is about 26 miles long, from Tuttle Creek in the North Umpqua River drainage to a point near the confluence of Lee Creek and North Myrtle Creek in the South Umpqua River drainage.

The plan for the China Ditch called for diverting water from Little River and transporting it 33 miles along ridges to the placer deposits of North Myrtle Creek. Little River was chosen because it would provide a consistent and reliable source of water. Surveyors said the project was feasible based on elevation differences. Project promoters added that the ditch would help irrigate prune orchards and carry logs to the saw and door factories in the town of Myrtle Creek.

The ditch was widened in the summer of 1891 and extended eastward, tapping into four new creeks that became water sources. In 1892, another six miles of ditch were constructed. Flumes were built to carry the water along rocky hillsides. By the end of 1892, the ditch was still three miles short of Little River, the target water source.

Disaster struck when a writ of attachments was issued against the company for overdue wages and other claims. Some stockholders accused Dr. Brown of "salting" the mine and giving the appearance of mining success by employing a crew to operate the giants.

A sheriff's sale in 1894 sold the assets of the company for about $8,000. Dr. Brown survived the legal problems, continued to practice medicine in Eugene, invested in the Bohemia Mines, and served as a principal in the Eugene Theater Company, which built a $30,000 opera house at the turn of the century.

Portions of the China Ditch probably continued in use into the 20th century.

Gold mine owner J.M. Martin operating nozzle of hydraulic "giant" at Lee Creek in 1913
1. Ben Hur prospect
2. Chieftain-Continental-Hall mines
3. Buck Fork placer
3a. Casteel mines placer
4. Bull Run placers
5. Curtis prospect
6. Coffee Creek placers
7. Diamond Bar placer
8. Douglas (Baker) mine
9. Olalla placers
10. Olalla placers
11. Flying Squirrel prospect
12. Forget-Me-Not prospect
13. Forest Creek prospect
14. Gold Bluff mine
15. Gold Cut prospect
16. Grayback prospect
17. Hackler Height placer
18. Hogum placers
19. Huckleberry mine
20. Hummingbird placer
21. Last Chance prospect
22. Levan's Ledge mine
23. Mildred's mine
24. Miser (Starvout) placer
25. Oregon Mining & Power placer
26. Oregon Whitehorse placer
27. Puzzler mine
28. Quartzmill mine
29. Red Hill prospect
30. Silver Peak mine
31. Sweetbrier prospect
32. Tennessee Gulch placers
33. Tuller Creek placer
34. Van Norman prospect
35. Victory placer
36. Willis mine
37. Miller mine
38. Loughs mine
39. Stroubs mine
Other Gold Mining Districts

Hydraulic mining was once widespread in other mining districts. In the Excelsior District, located on the South Umpqua, there were at one time 11 hydraulic mines and numerous other mines operating on a smaller scale. The Cow Creek District had nine active mining operations, including the Hackler Mine, located on the top of a butte at the mouth of Cow Creek. Several mines existed in the Green Mountain District, 20 miles above Glendale on a tributary of Cow Creek, where there was said to be untapped potential because the gold had not been washed far from the mother lode. Some mining activity took place in the Olalla District, located 18 miles west of Roseburg, where rich placer deposits were said to exist. The Brushy Butte District was not prospected as heavily as other areas. Although several shafts were sunk, the value of the ore was assayed at only $100 per ton. Quartz ledges around Mount Dodson were assayed to be high in gold content. Rich veins were also found on Sharps and Martin creeks, and on Horsehaven Creek, a tributary of Steamboat Creek. Placer mining (and later hydraulic mining) was done along Steamboat Creek.

Today

The "China Ditch" was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991. The portion listed for protection (11 miles) is mostly on BLM-administered land, with a small portion within the Umpqua National Forest. The Bureau of Land Management has erected interpretive signs off North Myrtle Road on BLM Roads 28-4-13.2 and 28-4-28.0 to direct and inform visitors to this area. Contact the Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Forest Service for more information.

A self-guided auto tour of Lee Creek is planned for installation in the Fall of 1994. Signs explaining the ditch, placer mining and a short "walk-the-ditch" trail will be included. Those persons who want to pursue mining today on Federal lands should contact the local office of the Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Forest Service.

Credits

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