

From Cornwall to Russell Gulch in 163 Years and One Day

by Gaye Buzbee Jacobs

Amid the harsh winds and intense cold of the southwestern Wisconsin lead mines, where he and many other Cornishmen had arrived in 1846, the gold discoveries in distant Colorado are calling to Josiah. He doesn't say much, but he hears everything:

He hears the growing rumbles and reports about jobs and new opportunities far out west.

He hears fellow hard-rock miners talking late into the night about leaving the lead mines.

He hears their certainty about better pay and conditions. ("Imagine being paid \$2 per day and only working ten hours!")

He hears their excitement as they make plans for departure.

His decision is made.

However, he also hears Rosina and his children say "No!" Even his favorite sister and the in-laws all refuse to leave, but Josiah and his cousins finally convince them that Colorado is the best place for their families and their dreams. Eight Cornish families decide to travel together between 1876 and 1878, arriving in Gilpin County, Colorado, where they are celebrated with Celtic music and dancing, hot pasties, "niceys" (sweets) and drink. Warmly greeted in their native Cornish language, "*Dynnargh dhis!*" (Welcome, everyone!) they are immediately offered work in the many local mines.

As the men cling to the heavy steel bucket, they are lowered into the depths of the mines by the 'donkey engines' and they whisper about long-held Cornish superstitions, warning of impending disaster and even death:

"Watch out for cave-ins and mind your step."

"Watch out for signs of bad luck, like candles suddenly burning out, or dropping tools."

"Watch out for anyone whistling underground."

"Watch out for the rats and canaries far below who warn of deadly gases, floods and explosions."

"Watch out for each other, for these mines are dark and dank."

But mostly, they watch out for the Tommyknockers, who have followed them from the mines of Cornwall, the small ghost-creatures believed to be the spirits of dead miners. With long beards, wrinkled faces, and large heads, they tap on the walls of mines to warn of danger ... or more often, lead miners toward a rich vein of ore. It's common for miners to toss them crusts of meat pies from their dinner buckets. However, they can also be spiteful or play tricks on the men, so they must be respected and never teased! These tales are told and retold, holding fast to age-old folklore and traditions.

Today, 163 years after our great-great grandparents came to America, Ginny and I decide to explore a little of Gilpin County, reputed to be "the richest square mile on earth." We are Cornish Cousins, sharing stories of our ancestors who arrived in Colorado, full of dreams for a better life, and we think about the families who left St. Breage Parish, Penzance, Mouse Hole and Poldark, where everyone worked in the ancient tin mines. We've even visited their homeland where they left everything behind, with high hopes, determination and sweeping courage.

Now, it's a sunshiny summer day and the mountains are calling us ... or is it the spirit of Josiah? We decide to explore the historic mining country around Russell Gulch. We know that our families were here, but where? Few old homes still stand, mines have collapsed, and ruined buildings haunt the hillsides of Gilpin County. We open the rusty gate at the peaceful old cemetery in the forest, and discover many family members to honor and remember, although our Josiah and Rosina eventually were laid to rest in the Golden Pioneer Cemetery down the hill.

Family stories have survived but records are sparse. Over the years we have collected, searched and imagined the lives of our Cornish immigrants. We've been lucky enough to find other cousins and friends who encourage our curiosity, and we continue to update our records and resources via modern media. But today, in the old school house high on the hill above Central City, we discover something entirely new! We find proof that our fourth-great-grandparents actually lived right here on Eureka Street and Josiah sent three of his children up these steep flagstone steps to this very school! We laugh and think it may be a "double-Eureka-moment" which we genealogists treasure when it happens.

Wandering into a Central City casino, we're kindly offered a surprise, complimentary lunch! As we leave, we stop for a few minutes in front of a fancy slot machine to play a few dollars. Suddenly, music swells, lights flash, and we have another unexpected Eureka! Ginny excitedly wins 86 cents and I win a little more.

Hmmm. We're starting to suspect that maybe old Josiah and his Tommyknockers are watching out for us, too? It's surely been a perfect end to our fun day in the mountains, paying tribute to our immigrants, Josiah and Rosina Meagor Allen, plus our Burges, Richards, Trebilcocks, and all the Cornish pioneers.

They haven't lead us to any great riches today, and we haven't come away with the promised wealth of Russell Gulch, but we have found that our ancestors left tracks for us to uncover and we are much the richer because of them.

