

Gilpin County History

First Prospecting

The story of the first prospecting in Gilpin County is a thrilling chapter in the romance of mining. John H. Gregory blazed the path, and others followed. The first comers into the virgin wilderness endured privations; they braved hardships of weather; they ran risks of snowslides and of drowning in treacherous mountain streams; they faced dangers from grizzlies and redskins. The prospectors and miners of early days in Colorado met with many adventures, and saw the seamy side of frontier life. Only a few were successful in winning riches. Fortune was apparently capricious in distributing her gifts.

Gregory Finds Gold

While Jackson and others were washing out placer gold in Clear Creek County, Gregory, a Georgian miner, prospected for the yellow metal along a creek then known as Vasquez Fork (now Clear Creek). He had been over the ground before and found traces of float gold, but was obliged to return for lack of supplies. The man was about discouraged, for he was poor to the verge of destitution. At this crisis in his life he chanced to meet a Hoosier who had just come to Golden with a wagon load of provisions. David K. Wall "grubstaked" Gregory, and he set out with two companions for another prospecting tour in the hills. The stranger's confidence was not misplaced. John Gregory was an experienced miner, and his practiced eye told where to expect "colors." He found his way back to the spot where he had seen indications of gold the previous winter. He climbed the hill to a point about where the wash would naturally come. After shoveling off the snow, they scraped away the leaves and grass. Then Gregory dug up a panful of dirt. It washed out four dollars' worth of gold dust. The joy of the discovery overcame him, and he gave vent to his feelings in strong language. That night Gregory could not sleep – he was so dazed by his good luck. He realized better than his companions the extent of the treasure. "My wife shall be a lady," he repeated over and over to himself. The discovery of Gregory Lode occurred on May 6, 1859. The next day the three men panned out \$40. Then they staked out claims and returned for their friends in the valley. Ten days later Gregory was there again. During one week he worked 5 hands, taking \$972 out of the ground. Gregory was now a rich man. From poverty he had suddenly attained to affluence. He sold his claims for \$21,000 and engaged at prospecting for others at the munificent salary of \$200 a day. On the 8th of September he left Denver with dust valued at \$25,000, and he had previously forwarded \$5,000 to his family.

Russell Gulch

About the first of June, Green Russell arrived at Central with a company of 170 followers. Immediately he struck out for the neighboring hills, and soon he located the gulch that bears his name. At the end of the season he took back \$21,000 worth of free gold. Others made valuable finds. However, *the* discovery was that of the Gregory Lode, which afterward yielded millions of dollars. Was it chance, or superior judgment, that led Gregory through a maze of broken mountains to a ravine 2 or 3 miles in length? In this gulch and on its bordering hills he found the heart of one of the richest mining regions in the world.

Birthplace of Colorado

The discoveries of Jackson and Gregory settled the fate of the new commonwealth. The section of the eastern slope embracing Clear Creek and Gilpin Counties is called the birthplace of Colorado. Says Hall: "I have often wondered whether any permanent settlement would have been formed in our time, in the Rocky Mountains, had it not been for the discovery of rich gold-bearing placers and richer quartz lodes in and about Gregory Gulch. It will be comprehended by those of our readers who have followed the narrative thus far, that it was the national panic of 1857 that drove multitudes of the poverty-stricken from the border States out upon the plains, together with the frail promise of fortune held out by Green Russell's 'goose-quill findings' in the sands of Cherry Creek and neighboring streams. Russell made no discovery worth mentioning until after John Gregory led the way to the source of gold deposits in the mountains. The few strikes that occurred at Gold Hill above Boulder, and upon the gravel bars of South Clear Creek in 1859-1860, were worked out and mostly deserted before the close of 1861; those at Tarryall, Fairplay, in California and Georgia Gulches soon shared the same fate. The occupation of every placer in the country which had no rich fissure veins behind it to justify permanent settlement ceased as soon as the more valuable deposits had been gathered. Agriculture was chiefly limited to gardening until after the construction of our great systems of irrigating canals in the epoch between 1875 and 1890. For more than fifteen years the major part of our farm supplies was imported from Kansas and Nebraska. Denver and Pueblo were but straggling villages until after 1870. The permanency of the fissure veins of Gilpin County was the sheet anchor, the abiding hope, indeed the only influence which held the country together and preserved the autonomy of Colorado from 1861 until after the meager products of bullion from that source were supplemented by the products of silver mining at Georgetown, and the establishment of the Boston and Colorado Smelting Works at Black Hawk in 1867-1868. Gilpin County, by virtue of its inexhaustible and innumerable deposits of the yellow metal, became not only the keystone of the arch but the arch itself, for had it contained only ephemeral placers, it would have been deserted and abandoned like all its contemporaries. What then would have been left to build a State or even a Territory upon? It was the only section in

the mountains that was not drained to a mere insignificant fraction of its people between 1861 and 1866, and had not its neighbor, Clear Creek, come to the rescue with millions of silver, there would have been no State organization in 1876. At no time prior to 1871 did the entire yearly production of precious metals in Colorado exceed \$3,500,000, and in 1866-1867 it fell to less than \$1,800,000, more than two-thirds from the stamp mills in and about Black Hawk."

Gilpin

Gilpin County was one of the original 17 counties of Colorado Territory, formed in 1861: It was named in honor of William Gilpin, the first governor of Colorado Territory. It is bounded on the south by Clear Creek County, on the west by Grand County, on the north by Boulder County, and on the east by Jefferson County.

Area

Gilpin is the smallest county in the State, save that of Denver. Its area is 130 square miles, of which only 3,000 acres are cultivated. The surface is mountainous. The mean annual rainfall is 15 inches, and the average temperature 40° to 45°. In 1900 Gilpin County had 6,690 inhabitants; the population in 1910 was 4,131. Although a little county, less than 12 miles square, Gilpin has played a prominent part in Colorado's history.

Central City

The county seat is Central City, founded in 1859. At one time, in the '60's, it was a rival of Denver, having between 2,000 and 3,000 people. It boasted the first stone schoolhouse built in Colorado; it was erected in 1870, at a cost of \$20,000. Central City is situated on the Colorado and Southern Railway, 40 miles west of Denver. Its altitude is 8,516 feet. In 1900 it had 3,114 souls; the population in 1910 was 1,782.

Black Hawk

Black Hawk, on the Colorado and Southern Railway, is an important town. It was started in 1859, and named after the noted Indian chief of Illinois. In the early '60's it had a population of 2,000 or more. The census gave it 1,200 in 1900; the population in 1910 was 668. The first Colorado smelter was opened at Black Hawk in 1868. This was the beginning of a new era in the mining industry. The old Colorado Central Railway was completed from Denver to Golden in 1870. It was extended to Black Hawk in 1872, and to Central City in 1878. The line is now a part of the Colorado and Southern system.

Mines

During the twenty years, 1859-1878, the placers and mines of Gilpin County yielded more than \$28,000,000 of the precious metals, chiefly gold. In the past half century they are credited with a production of \$90,000,000.

Fissure Veins

The geological structure of the Gilpin mining region is primarily metamorphic granite. The veins or lodes are of the class known as "fissures." Near the surface the ores are highly oxidized, and yield readily to treatment by stamp mills. At lower depths gold is found in sulphide ores, mixed with lead, zinc, and copper. The deepest vertical shaft is 2,220 feet, in the California Mine on Quartz Hill. There are hundreds of shafts in the county varying from 100 to 1,600 feet in depth.

Output of 1908

Gilpin County mines are still producing. Their output in 1908 was: Gold, \$1,099,000; silver, \$140,000; copper, \$82,000; zinc, \$37,000; lead, \$24,000. Men are to-day making rich strikes in the historic gulches first trod by the Fifty-niners. The discoveries made in 1908 in the 1,400-foot levels of the Bobtail and Fisk Mine opened the eyes of outsiders to the permanency of Gilpin's fissure veins. The completion of the Newhouse Tunnel (in 1910) means the discovery and development of veins and ore bodies for a long time to come.

Tolland

Tolland, 47 miles northwest of Denver on the Moffat Road, is a noted summer resort. It is favored in situation, having a refreshing air and wild surroundings. It nestles on the eastern slope of the Continental Divide at an elevation of 8,889 feet. A summer school is held here by professors of the State University. Courses are offered by specialists in mountain field biology, botany, and other subjects.

Eugene Parsons, *A Guide Book to Colorado* (Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1911) 128-133.