

# Discover

## Stories on the Land

### Excerpt 7

*Below is another excerpt (from pages 26 - 29) from the unpublished 1996 book, Stories on the Land: An Environmental History of the Applegate and Upper Illinois Valley, by George McKinley and Doug Frank. The Applegate Valley Community Newspaper, Inc, plans to publish the book in its entirety in 2019.*

#### **Mining's reach**

Within a year or two of the strikes on Jackson and Josephine creeks, the mining community understood, fairly precisely, the range of gold-bearing grounds in southern Oregon: north to the North Umpqua, east to Bear Creek, south into northern California, and west across the Rogue basin. By the spring of 1855 miners had carried out at least a cursory examination of virtually the entire Applegate and Illinois watersheds in their search for "color." In effect, by the end of the earliest era of mining, all sub-watersheds of the study area had experienced concentrated activity except Williams Creek, where activity started just a bit later, and the higher elevations of the Upper Applegate drainage, where, for instance, the Steamboat (Carberry Creek) strikes awaited.

Initial mining sites were close to streams, at low gradient and low elevation. Although miners did explore the higher elevation country, fueling tales of hermit-like mountain miners hidden away in the farther reaches of the study area, these remote regions did not see concentrated activity till a later date.

We've lingered over the first years of gold mining in the Applegate and Illinois

country to allow the reader's imagination to begin forming a picture of the explosive entrance and stunningly swift probing of these two isolated by a new type of human, the seeker after gold. New Year's Day, 1852, found several dozen Euro-American adventurers, and hopeful settlers, coexisting tentatively with a regional native population of perhaps several thousand. New Year's Day, 1853, found the several dozen multiplied into several thousand, and not just Euro Americans, but Hawaiians, Chinese, and Mexicans as well, scrutinizing the farthest reaches of the tiniest streams and remote gulches of the Siskiyou ranges, fondling the dirt with an exaggerated tenderness, scraping back the topsoil, digging pits ten and fifteen feet deep in every vacant stretch of alluvial flat, scarring the streambanks and hillsides, moving dirt toward water and water toward dirt and mixing them together, aided by a score of seat-of-the-pants, jerry-rigged technologies. A new presence on the land—and a new land—was taking shape.

Gold mining in the first decade in southern Oregon was placer mining. Placer deposits refer to gold held in suspension in sand or gravel deposits laid down by rivers or glaciers. These contrast with lode deposits, where gold is embedded in fissures or other gaps within surrounding rock. Placer deposits in the study area were generally in riparian bottoms or in alluvial deposits along river terraces or lower slopes and occurred most commonly at lower elevations.

The placer miner's task is simple to describe, backbreaking to perform:

sift through dirt to find the specks or nuggets of gold hidden in it. The logic of efficiency requires that you constantly ask, how can I move more of this dirt, sift through more of it, more and more quickly, with a greater and greater recovery rate?

Innovations were frequent. Over time, what began as almost a gentle fondling of the earth ended as a violent and disruptive assault on the landscape, surpassing what even the turbulent floodwaters, of the scale recorded in historic times, can do to the contours of a mountain stream.

Entry-level miners panned for gold. They filled their shallow, slope-sided pans with dirt, dipped one edge into the water, and swirled the water and dirt, allowing the lighter, finer dirt to wash over the sides. The heavier stuff settled to the bottom; some of the heavier stuff was gold. A miner who spent a day doing this could move a yard of dirt by sundown.

An early innovation was a cradle or rocker, a rectangular box, open at the lower end, mounted on rockers. The miner shovels dirt into a screen suspended above the upper end of the box, separating out the biggest particles and dumping them to the side. The finer gravel sifts through. The miner dips water into the upper end of the box, rocking it with his other hand, washing the gravel down the length of the box, across the cleats or "riffles" built into the box's floor. The riffles catch the gold as the rest of the sand and gravel washes out the lower end.

*Note: Excerpted by Diana Coogle.*