

EXPERIENCES OF A PACKER IN WASHINGTON
TERRITORY MINING CAMPS DURING
THE SIXTIES

Introduction

William S. Lewis, Historian of the Spokane County Pioneers' Association, through interviews and conferences with James W. Watt during the past two years, has secured this illuminating and helpful narrative of forceful and dramatic experiences during the placer mining days in Washington Territory, including those great areas later organized into Idaho and Montana. Mr. Watt was a very young "Forty-niner." He was born in Salem, Ohio, on May 31, 1843, and with his parents crossed the plains to California in the big year of the gold rush. After the vigorous experiences here related, Mr. Watt settled at his present home in the Lance Hills district, near Cheney, Spokane County, Washington. Mr. Lewis has welded together the various interviews and recorded the entire narrative in the language of Mr. Watt. Mr. Lewis says that Mr. Watt is the first pioneer he has encountered who actually saw the pack train of camels in the Northwest.

—EDITOR.

James W. Watt's Narrative

I came to Washington Territory for the first time in 1860. In the fall of 1859 and the spring of 1860 I brought up a herd of cattle over the old "Emigrant" (Barlow) road to Tie Valley, just south of The Dalles, Oregon. I was back in Yamhill County again when we got news of the discovery of the Pierce City gold mines. Many of the men in our neighborhood had been in the California mines and most of these, including several of my relatives, started at once for the new Eldorado. In July, 1861, I came up to the mines in company with a Scotchman named John McClaine, who had been working for my cousin, D. M. Jesse. Mr. Jesse had gone in to the mines with the first rush in the early spring of 1861 along with my brother, Alex Watt, and he was then engaged in conducting a general merchandise business at Oro Fino under the firm name of D. M. Jesse & Co.

At Walla Walla we joined the pack train of D. M. Jesse & Co., and went into the mines with it, via the site of Lewiston, Idaho. There was nothing there then but a camping ground. We

reached the mining town, Oro Fino, about July 20, 1861. I remained there until October, 1861. The Pierce City or Oro Fino placer mines were situated on the North fork of the Clearwater River, along Oro Fino Creek and its tributaries, and the "diggings" extended along Oro Fino Creek, and up the various gulches, for a distance of some twelve miles above Pierce City and for some ten miles, or more, down the creek below that town.

By the summer of 1861, when I went in, there had already been a large amount of work done on the trail from the mouth of the Clearwater (later the site of Lewiston) to Oro Fino and Pierce City, evidencing a determination on the part of the people to put it in the best possible condition. This work was done under the direction of a Mr. Athey from Oregon City, Oregon. After great effort some twelve or fifteen wagons were finally dragged up to Oro Fino. Mr. Mulkey from Washington County, Oregon, drove the first of those teams into Oro Fino. However, it was a mighty poor road for wagons, and much more time and money, than was then available, would have to be expended on the trail before it was feasible to haul supplies in over it by wagons. Consequently everything in the mines had to be transported into those remote mining regions on the backs of mules. All goods destined for Oro Fino, as well as for Florence in later years, were transported by pack trains in this manner. There were no practicable wagon roads then leading to these mines.

The miners estimated that there were all of twelve thousand people in the Pierce City or Oro Fino Mining camp by the end of July, 1861. Oro Fino itself was already quite a town when I arrived. The population in and about the town numbered around twelve hundred; Pierce City was as large or larger. About four hundred houses and tents had been erected in Oro Fino by August, 1861, and the place was improving fast. Most lines of business were already established. I had more or less contact with the business life of the town, and at one time or another I personally met most of the people then in business there.

I will try to describe the town as I knew it in 1861. There were some fifteen or sixteen different stores of various kinds; about eighteen or twenty saloons, six bakeries, four hotels, three meat markets, five laundries, two bankers, four doctors and two express offices,—Tracy & Co., and Mossman & Co. There were no lawyers as I remember, at least none attempting to practice, and no Chinamen as yet. As was customary in these mining towns, there were almost as many saloons as there were stores.

Nearly everyone drank to some extent then. There were plenty of gamblers, a dance hall or two, and the usual women of a camp. I recall in particular two of the larger saloons where gambling was extensively carried on, and all sorts of devices were resorted to for the purpose of enticing men into these places. There was much drinking and gambling and many drunken rows. Shooting scrapes were of rather frequent occurrence.

The buildings were mostly frames covered with canvas, or log shacks. Lumber was very scarce and expensive, as it all had to be whipsawed by hand. Much of it sold as high as \$1.25 per foot. Of the four general merchandise stores in Oro Fino in 1861, that of my cousin, D. M. Jesse & Co's., was one of the larger. Most of our business was done on Sunday, and on that day we used to take in lots of money—gold dust. Occasionally a miner was broke, and bought "on bedrock"; that is, he was given credit until he got down to pay dirt and could take the gold out of his claim. At first the miners, principally from Oregon and California were pretty honest, but later on we had a more tricky bunch to deal with, and merchants had to watch out for such things as brass filings in gold dust, and had to refuse credit to strangers.

It was customary for miners of these camps to make "their clean-up" on Saturday afternoons—that is clean out their sluice boxes and gather the gold dust and nuggets that had collected in the riffles. Some of this gold was so fine that it had to be caught with quicksilver. Sunday was the miner's day off and the busy day for all those in the mining towns. No store, shop, restaurant, saloon, dance hall, gambling place or other business establishment closed its doors on Sunday. On that day the regular town population was doubled and trebled by the influx of miners who trooped in from all the various gulches and diggings up and down the creek to get their mail, to purchase supplies, and to enjoy themselves in social greetings with friends, and the diversions of the saloons, gambling tables, dance halls and other pastimes and dissipations offered by the town.

For nearly four months I remained in the camp. During much of this time I was engaged in delivering goods from D. M. Jesse & Co's. store at Oro Fino to the miners in neighboring diggings who came into town on Sundays and bought their supplies. My business thus took me into all the various gulches and diggings in the neighborhood from a point about three miles above Oro Fino to a short distance below the town; the stores

at Pierce City took care of the trade from there down. There was an abundance of provisions packed in the Oro Fino camp by the summer of 1861, and prices were very reasonable considering the high cost of freight. Flour for a time was sold for only 16 to 18 cents a pound, bacon was down to 35 to 40 cents, beef at 12 to 15 cents, sugar at about 30 cents and tea around \$2.00 a pound. Everything else was in proportion.

During the summer and fall of 1861, when I was there, all of 2500 practical miners were actually at work on claims along Oro Fino creek and the gulches within a distance of twenty miles up and down Oro Fino Creek. There were hundreds—yes, thousands of other men employed at digging ditches, whipsawing lumber, clearing off claims, and prospecting about the country. The principal gulches in the camp were Rhodes Gulch, Canal Gulch and French Creek. My own personal knowledge and observation, while general, was particularly directed to Oro Fino Flat and Rhodes Gulch by my more frequent visits to these diggings.

On Oro Fino Flat some poor claims only produced from \$6.00 to \$10.00 per day to the man, but on Rhodes Creek, which empties into Oro Fino Creek above Pierce City, the claims produced from \$20.00 to \$60.00 or more per day to the man. Some exceptional ground there produced even \$75.00 to \$100.00 per man per day; the average however was much lower.

I recently read a contemporary statement, concerning the production from these mines, made by C. C. Robbins of Portland, Oregon, in August 1861, and published in the *Oregonian* of August 26, 1861. This reads as follows:—

“The yield of the mines is as follows—Jarvis & Co., four men, \$10. per day to the man; James & Co., five men, \$10. per day to the man; McCarty & Co., four men \$10. each; Vesay & Co., eight men, \$7. to \$8.; Hook & Co., six men, \$10. to \$12.; Jones & Co., four men, \$10. to \$12.; Dunbar & Asar, \$10. to \$12.; Shaffer & Co., fourteen men, \$60.; Paine & Co., twenty men, \$70.; Mortimer & Co., twenty-four men, \$70 to \$80.; Hatch & Co., five men, \$16. to \$20.; Thomas & Co., fourteen men, \$16.; Boon & Co., eight men, \$16.; California Co., nine men, \$16.; Newland & Co., six men, \$16.; Hickox & Co., five men, \$16. to \$20; Let 'Er Rip Co., eleven men, \$16. to \$20.; Hoyt & Co., eight men, \$12.; Felton & Co., \$16.; Sparks & Co., \$15.; Rossi & Co., \$15.; Rhodes & Co., eleven men 300 ounces per day to

the company. On French Creek, Antoine Pillir, T. Lepoint, M. Guinon, John Lesot, Markum & Quirk were making each \$10. to \$12 per day."

I did business with many of these people, and I consider Mr. Robbins' statement a fairly accurate statement of the actual gold production per man in the Oro Fino camps at the time stated, August, 1861. I was there at that time. It would be hard for me to make any independent estimate of the gold actually mined in the Oro Fino and Pierce City districts during the time I was there in camp. The average production per man in the months of July, August, September and October, 1861, when one considers the large production by companies and from exceptionally rich ground, at a most conservative estimate was certainly over \$10.00 per day. Even at that very conservative figure the total production probably passed \$25,000. or more, a day, in the four months I was there in the camp.

Most of the miners, who had claims and worked them, did pretty well, and the claims in the district that were opened, take them all, so far as I could see averaged at least \$10. a day to the man. There were some big strikes say from \$50. to \$75. or more per day to the man. This was principally on Rhodes Creek. All the 2500 or more practical miners then working claims in the district appeared to me to be doing well and were in a fair way to "make their pile," as the Californians used to say. During the latter part of the summer and early fall there was some little excitement and talk among us about discoveries on the south fork of the Clearwater. There were supposed to be at least two thousand men down there by that time and for some weeks we heard of good ground being struck about Elk City, but we didn't pay much attention to the South Fork country until the Florence diggings were discovered on the Salmon River later that fall.

As I have said, all of us in Pierce City and Oro Fino were pretty well satisfied and doing well when all of a sudden news of the rich Salmon River strikes came in. Everyone who could set out for the new diggings and immediately the Oro Fino camp was pretty nearly deserted.

The "Salmon River mines" was a name we applied to a considerable stretch of country including Miller's strike at Millersburg on Miller Creek, and the later strike at Florence—some 30 miles away. Later we generally referred to the whole district

as the Florence district, or Florence mines, and I use the word Florence in that general sense.

Many of those who went couldn't get good ground at Florence and finally came back to their old claims at Oro Fino. We, at D. M. Jesse & Co's store, had advance news of the discovery from friends in the new diggings. This news was whispered around among a favored few and we went in on the first excitement, before the general rush which was about October 15, 1861. I set out for Florence with Colonel Althouse, an old school teacher from Yamhill County, Oregon, who was then employed as a clerk in my cousin's store at Oro Fino. He lived neighbor to D. M. Jesse whose home was two miles south of Lafayette, Yamhill County, Oregon. During the summer of 1861, Mr. Jesse had returned home to Oregon for a visit and had left Col. Althouse in charge of the pack trains and freight.

On the first news of the Florence discovery two pack trains of supplies were sent out for the new camp by enterprising merchants. One from Lewistown, owned by Bledsoe and Creighton, consisting of 85 animals, and the other from Oro Fino, consisting of 35 animals, and owned by Jesse and Thompson. This latter train, under charge of Colonel Althouse, was the one I accompanied. The Florence Mines were 85 miles by trail from Oro Fino and it took us about six days to make the trip. The Bledsoe and Creighton pack train came up from Lewistown over the Lewiston trail (about 100 miles from Florence) and we intercepted it on the road and all went in to Florence together.

We arrived at Florence about October 25, 1861. There had been an early cold spell, and there was then about 15 inches of snow on the ground. Only 200 or 300 people were there when we arrived but more kept coming in rapidly and soon there were thousands. As a consequence of this great influx of people, many of whom brought little if any thing in the way of supplies, the prices of goods rose tremendously. Flour was soon \$100 to \$125 for each hundred pounds, and other goods in proportion.

This Florence camp was generally regarded as one of the richest placer gold strikes ever made in this part of the country, although the gold dust itself was not as valuable as the finer gold obtained from some of the other camps. Florence gold was worth about \$14. an ounce in trade. Pay dirt was struck about two feet deep, with two or three feet of loam and top soil on top; bed rock was reached at five to six feet.

My brother Alex Watt and his partner Billy Morris already had three good claims at Oro Fino; they abandoned these to go to Florence; even Bill Rhodes left his rich claims on Rhodes Gulch and joined the stampede. To show the richness of these new diggings at Florence, my wife's uncle, John Monroe, bought a claim on Summit Flat; this he worked with a rocker and but 3 or 4 men. He had a buckskin poke or purse that would hold about \$2,000 in gold dust and he would have this filled every day with gold from the claim. Such production was about the average on Summit Flat or prairie while I was there.

Quite a few notorious characters came into the Florence camp that fall and there was considerable trouble. I'll tell you of an incident I witnessed. Early in the rush three parties located a claim on lower Baboon gulch, about a mile and a half below Florence. Two of these men were brothers, whose names I've forgotten, the other man was named Lyons. Like nearly everyone else in camp they were short of provisions so it was agreed between them that Lyons should take a horse and go down to Lewistown for supplies while the two brothers remained in camp to protect and work the claim. Lyons got back from Lewistown with the supplies about the time we arrived. Everyone was then getting ready for winter; there was already some twelve to fifteen inches of snow on the ground, and some enterprising individual had just driven in a band of cattle to be slaughtered for winter meat.

Well to get back to Lyons:—when he returned to the claim he found that the two brothers had “frozen him out.” He stuck around and insisted on being taken in. They had a heated quarrel. Finally one of the brothers shot and killed Lyons while he had an axe in his hands clearing some dead timber on the claim. Colonel Althouse and I were in our camp eating our dinner when we heard the shot. We finished eating and then saw a crowd of miners gathering at the head of the gulch a few yards away. I went over there and saw the dead man, Lyons, lying on the blood stained snow. The sight made me sick. Lyons was the first man I ever saw that was killed in cold blood. Since then I've seen many similar sights and have to some extent become hardened to such things.

The assembled miners held a mass meeting right away and chose Bill (William) Mayfield, whose brother was a Baptist minister back in Oregon, as sheriff. They gave Bill \$200. to

arrest the murderers and everyone thought it would be a dangerous undertaking. Bill Mayfield was a man somewhat noted for his bravery; he just walked over to their cabin, which stood in the middle of the gulch, and hollered out to them that he wanted them to come out and "to give up." They came out at once and surrendered to Bill without resistance and stood trial. A hearing was had that night. The brothers claimed that Lyons had been shot in self defense, and that he had threatened one of them with the axe, so the miners agreed to let them off, and had Bill release his prisoners. William Mayfield was killed in Bannock City a few years later.

The next morning Colonel Althouse and I were out and at work by daylight and got an early start with our pack animals. We camped for the day early, over at the head of Slate creek. We were just making our camp when these two brothers came along the trail with their blankets and packs on their backs, headed out of the country. They must have had a premonition or warning to get out of Florence and to get out quick. Some time later a party of about twenty-five armed men came along and inquired of us for the two men. Later this same party of men came back by our camp. They weren't talkative, but one of them remarked that the two men "wouldn't fleece any more partners." We inferred they had lynched the men. This was my first encounter with the miners' law.

This murdered man, Lyons, had been a Mason, and after his death the Masons at Florence held a meeting and appointed a committee to look after Lyons' claim. Among the personal effects in Lyons' pockets were some letters giving the name and address of a niece living somewhere in California. The committee wrote to her that they had taken charge of Lyons' claim and that they were offered \$16,000. for it, and inquired what his heirs wished to be done. The reply came back to sell the claim, and they did, sending the money back to Lyons' relatives in California. This Colonel Althouse, who was with me, was rather prominent among the Masons in the early Idaho mines.

JAMES W. WATT.

(To be continued.)