

FIRST DRAFT

BOOM AND BUST

Battle Mountain mining town of Gilman has unique history among Colorado ghost towns

When Jerry Craghead stepped on a mine grate called a grizzly, in a tunnel in the Eagle Mine at Gilman, Colorado, the grizzly gave way and Craghead nearly plunged down the deep shaft below. The miner who Craghead worked for saved him.

“Little Emilio Perez was only about five feet, six inches tall, but he was steel, inside and out,” Craghead recalled. “He reached out and grabbed me so fast and pulled me to safety. I don’t know how he did it.”

That occurred in the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, both the mine and town of Gilman, located halfway up Battle Mountain between Minturn and Leadville, were closed.

Battle Mountain was mined for nearly 100 years, with few interruptions. Now, the Eagle Mine is a federal Superfund site, having dumped a century’s worth of waste into the Eagle River.

When it operated, the Eagle Mine, owned by the New Jersey Zinc Co., had a solid safety record.

“We had very few injuries, and we won awards for safety,” said Ella Burnett, who worked as a nurse in the company hospital in Gilman from 1947 to 1977. “All the years I worked there we only had one death in the mine, and that was from a heart attack, not a mine accident.”

There were, however, plenty of close calls. Mayo W. Lanning, who served as safety engineer at the Eagle Mine in the 1940s, recalled watching workers cut timbers to support the walls and roof of a stope, an area where the ore had been removed.

But the roof started to collapse, so men scrambled up a ladder to the next level. “We no sooner got to the level than then whole stope caved in with a tremendous air blast,” Lanning wrote.

Lanning also said there were three fatalities in the mine during his years there, before Burnett joined the Gilman hospital.

Battle Mountain came to life during the 1870s silver boom, when Leadville was king. As Leadville grew crowded, prospectors sought other mining sites. About 35 miles north of Leadville was Battle Mountain, named for an 1840s fight between Ute and Arapaho Indians.

The first mine claim there was staked by Leadville men in early 1879, and they established a mining camp at Turkey Creek, today’s town of Red Cliff.

By late 1879, more than a dozen claims had been staked on Battle Mountain, and ore was carried to Leadville by pack mules. Then, a wagon toll road was constructed over Tennessee Pass to Leadville.

In late 1881, the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad reached Red Cliff, then Belden, a siding at the base of Battle Mountain. Belden sits 1,600 feet below the town of Gilman, which was named after early mine superintendent Henry M. Gilman.

Red Cliff was the major town for the mining district. It was the Eagle County seat until 1923, when the town of Eagle, 42 miles to the west, became the seat. But Eagle seemed distant.

“We didn’t know much about what was going on in Eagle,” said Burnett, who was born Red Cliff, and later moved to Minturn on the north side of Battle Mountain. “We had everything we needed up here.”

For most of the time Burnett worked at Gilman, it had the only hospital in Eagle County. That didn’t change until one was built in the new ski town at Vail.

And, while the Gilman hospital did deal with occasional injuries from the mines, Burnett said, other medical needs were more frequent. “We



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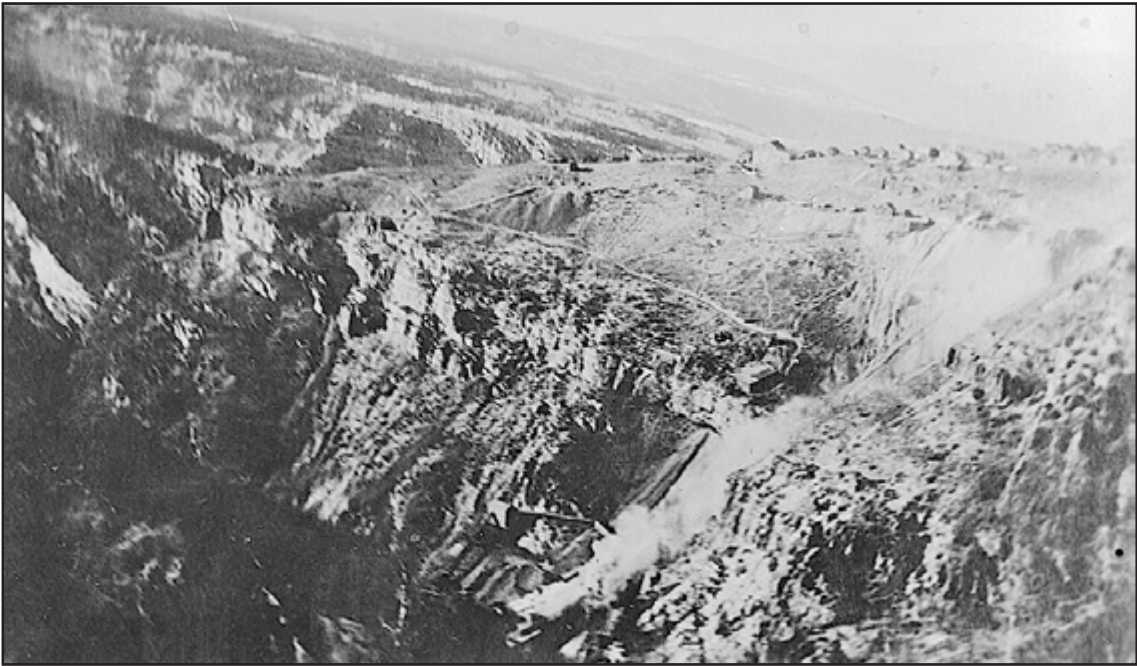
Gilman, as it appeared in 2025, from an angle similar to that of the 1918 photo.

had babies, lots of babies,” she said, children born to the wives of mine workers.

In addition to the hospital, Gilman had a company store and a recreation center with a bowling alley and events held for the benefit of townspeople and company employees.

“They took care of us,” Burnett said. Her sentiment was echoed by many who lived or worked there. Burnett and her husband Pete never lived in Gilman, but spent much of their time there.

Silver mining collapsed on Battle Mountain in 1893, when U.S. government policies caused the price of silver to plummet. For the next 20 years, mining on Battle Mountain was



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A 1918 photo of the town of Gilman, labeled “one of the uttermost parts of the earth,” in this photo. The mill at Belden, the railroad tracks and the Eagle River are hidden in shadow at the bottom of the canyon on the left.

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BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to The Daily Sentinel

Abandoned employee houses at Gilman.



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This building, called a headframe, was where mine workers entered the Eagle Mine to descend to the drifts, shafts and stopes as far as 2,000 feet below. Belden and the Eagle River are about 1,600 feet. The headframe building also contained showers, lockers and some mine offices.

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nearly dormant, but it never ceased entirely. During that time, several large corporations began buying up mine claims for something other than silver.

In 1900, zinc — used in steel and other alloys — was shipped from Battle Mountain for the first time, foreshadowing the boom to come.

By 1915, the Empire Zinc Co., a subsidiary of the New Jersey Zinc Co., had acquired Battle Mountain mining claims and consolidated them under the name of the Eagle Mine.

Houses were built in Gilman by the company, primarily for people in supervisory jobs, then later for regular mine workers.

A mill built near the bottom of the mine at Belden was frequently damaged by landslides. So, in 1929, the company built a new mill in a large cavern just inside the mountain at Belden, the largest underground mill in the world.

The first miners at Gilman were mostly northern Europeans. But in the 1940s, Hispanics began to join the crews, attracted by good wages and benefits. However, discrimination often stymied Hispanics' promotion in their early years.

The company survived two employee strikes, in 1954 and 1959. The second one, led by the United Steel Workers of America, produced better wages and an arbitration system.

Inside the mine, work continued, where miners like Emilio Perez and muckers such as Jerry Craghead learned to depend heavily on each other as they drilled holes in the rock faces, placed explosives in the holes, pulled the floor boards from over the grizzlies and set off the charges.

Afterward, muckers cleaned up the rock that had fallen. Ore was broken into manageable chunks, placed in mine carts and sent down steep tracks in the drifts to the mill. There, through a series of crushers and rollers, it was reduced further in size, then treated with chemicals such as cyanide to release the zinc.

The refined zinc and other minerals were then loaded onto railroad cars at Belden and shipped to buyers.

Although relatively safe, the Eagle Mine was, like most mines, dark and wet, and the air was stagnant. Water had to be pumped out continuously and air pushed in constantly. Electric lights were strung in some spaces, but mostly miners depended on their helmet lights.

After several years at the mine, and rarely seeing the sun, Craghead reassessed his situation.

"I came out of the mine one time and just stood gazing at the night sky and the stars, and I realized my time was running short," he recalled. He quit the mine shortly afterward.

Sources: "The Model Company Town and the Orange Stain: Gilman Colorado's Place in Western American History," by Gregory Brill; "The History of Belden Colorado and a Biography of Judge David Douglas Belden," by Malcolm J. Osborn; "Autobiography of Mayo W. Lanning," by Mayo Lanning; "The Eagle on Battle Mountain at Gilman, Colorado," by William W. Burnett; "EAGLE MINE," Superfund Site Profile, U.S. EPA; Eagle County Historical Society, author interviews with Jerry Craghead and Ella Burnett.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.