

# FIRST DRAFT

## Gold fever led to erroneous stories of mineral discoveries

In April of 1882, The Gunnison Daily News-Democrat reported an exciting tale of a gold discovery near Grand Junction, a discovery lost when the prospectors — illegally mining on or near the Ute Indian Reservation — were allegedly killed by Utes.

This mining bonanza of “rich placer diggings” had recently been

rediscovered and was on the verge of being developed, the Gunnison paper said.

Although Grand Junction had been founded in 1881, there was no newspaper in the small community in April of 1882. Gunnison and Ouray offered the nearest printed news.

No matter where the news was printed, however, in the gold-crazy days of the 1880s, most of Colorado’s Western Slope was seen as a potential source of mineral wealth. The area near the fledgling town of Grand Junction was no exception.

More than a year before Grand Junction was founded, Gov. Frederick Pitkin extolled the mining future of the Grand Valley while testifying before Congress. He was explaining why the state wanted Ute Indians removed from western Colorado.

“The belief is general among the people of Colorado that there is mineral all through the western portion of the State and at the mouth of the Grand River, where it passes the line in Colorado running into Utah,” Pitkin told the House Committee on Indian Affairs in January of 1880.

Pitkin said he’d heard of one prospector who “had washed out as much as twenty-five cents to the pan of gold right there in Grand River.”

The story in the Gunnison newspaper suggested the recently rediscovered rich placer diggings were “somewhere west of Grand Junction.”

It added, however, that the site was 180 miles from the new town by horse trail, “but in a direct line it is only sixty miles.”

Exactly where that might be is at first hard to imagine, since anything 60 miles due west of Grand Junction would be in Utah.

But another article in the same Gunnison newspaper later in 1882 offers a clue.

“There is considerable talk of mining west of there (Grand Junction) in the La Salle (sic) mountains, or between that and the mouth of the Unaweep,” the news article said.

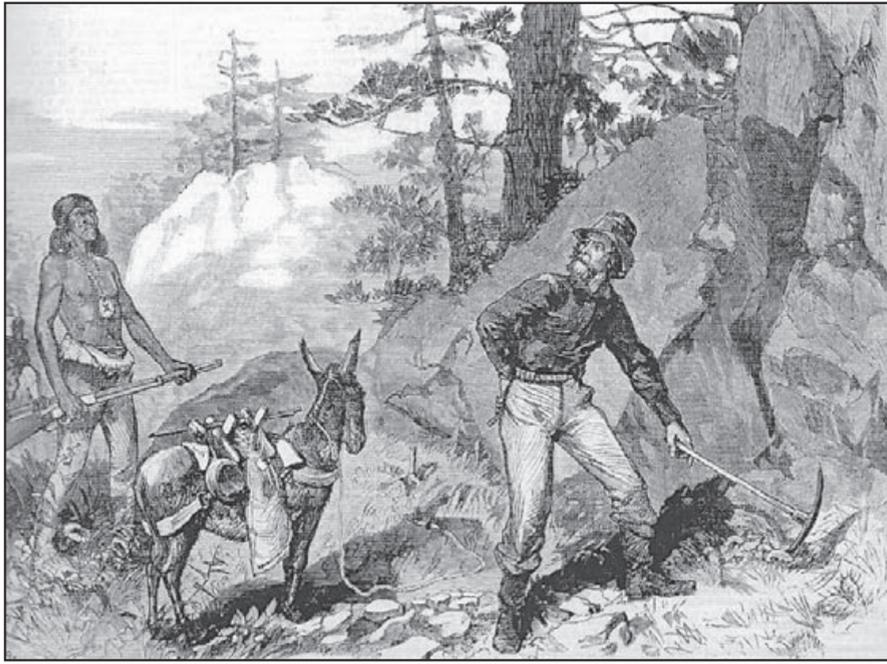
“Parties of miners and prospectors are constantly coming into Grand Junction from that region for supplies, but they refuse to say just where they are located or what they have found.”

On a modern map, the La Sal Mountains just west of the Colorado-Utah border are very close to 60 miles southwest of Grand Junction in a straight line. The tiny town of La Sal, Utah, is roughly 150 miles by modern road from Grand Junction.

The earlier news story in the Gunnison newspaper about the mineral discovery west of Grand Junction said a party of prospectors had found the rich placer nine years earlier, in 1873, “in a little gulch facing west.”

They began to develop their site with sluice boxes, picks and shovels, and established their headquarters in a nearby cave.

In 1873, the La Sal Mountains, although technically in Utah, were on the edge of the Ute Indian reservation in Col-



HARPER'S WEEKLY, OCT. 25, 1879

This drawing from Harper's Weekly in 1879 purports to show a confrontation between a Ute Indian and a prospector illegally working on the reservation.

orado. And the Utes weren't happy with intruders arriving there. It was near the La Sals that a party of Utes attacked members of the Hayden Survey party in 1875. The surveyors escaped without serious injury.

According to the 1882 story in the Gunnison paper, there was an even greater confrontation in the La Sals in 1873. The Utes “made war” on the prospectors, it said, and “before many weeks” all 13 prospectors had been killed.

I could find no evidence that any such mass killing occurred in 1873 in the La Sals or anywhere in the region. But in the early 1880s, claims of random Ute attacks on whites were commonplace.

In his testimony before Congress, Gov. Pitkin claimed that 50 white miners and settlers had been killed in Colorado by Utes in the 20 years from 1859 to 1879.

But that figure included a number of people whose bodies had never been found, and others whose bodies were found but the cause of death was not known.

Pitkin relied on third-hand reports and speculation to attribute all of these killings to the Utes.

Similarly, it was claimed in 1880 that two white men who illegally homesteaded on the Ute Reservation near today's town of Rangely were murdered by Utes.

But when the U.S. Army investigated the claim, it determined that one of the men “was killed not by Indians on the White River — but most probably by his partner, Lee, who has fled the country.”

In any event, the placer mine west of Grand Junction that had been abandoned in 1873 was rediscovered in 1882, the Gunnison newspaper reported.

A Grand Junction settler allegedly found the rotting sluice boxes and cave with mining tools. He traveled to Gunnison, where he obtained financial backing, tools and a partner to work the potential mine claim.

Meanwhile, prospectors from Utah had also learned of the rediscovery, and were reportedly also on their way to the site, the Gunnison paper said.

But there is little evidence that anything came of these efforts.

No significant mining activity developed in the La Sal Mountains or in Unaweep Canyon until the late 1890s, when there was a brief copper boom.

The famed hanging flume



MUSEUM OF WESTERN COLORADO

The hanging flume, in operation in the Dolores River Canyon circa 1891, proved to be an unsuccessful attempt to wring gold and silver from the region.

in Dolores Canyon southwest of Gateway was the result of an early 1890s attempt to wring gold and silver from the region.

But it failed after only a year of partial operation, because the amount of gold recovered was not sufficient to cover costs.

In the 20th century, uranium provided another mining boom and uranium mines were scattered throughout the region.

Those eager to find gold and silver in the region near Grand Junction, including Gov. Pitkin, should have read the reports of the Hayden Survey, which were available to the public in 1880.

“The greater portion of our district is covered with sedimentary formations in which mineral deposits, with the exception of coal, are rare,” wrote A.C. Peale, geologist and head of the Grand River District of the Hayden Survey in his 1875 report.

“In Unaweep cañon ... there are some indistinct mineral veins with quartz, carbonate of copper and hematite,” he added.

And, in a sentence that would prove Peale knew his

business, he also said, “Coal is more widely distributed in the district than either gold or silver.”

Although gold, and especially silver, became important commodities in the mines of the San Juan Mountains, for nearly 140 years, coal has been constantly mined in this region, and later, uranium and small amounts of copper.

But in the early 1880s, gold-hungry settlers believed every small stream and every major river held a secret lode of precious metals just waiting to be discovered.

Sources: *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection*; “*Testimony in Relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak Taken before the Committee on Indian Affairs of the House of Representatives*,” 1880; *Letter of Gen. John Pope, October 13, 1881, National Archives*; “*Ninth Annual Report of the United States Geological and Geographical Survey*,” by F.V. Hayden; “*Historic Adventures on the Colorado Plateau*,” by Robert Silbernagel.

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## Pine Gulch Fire now 7% contained; evacuations in GarCo

By SENTINEL STAFF

The Pine Gulch Fire continues to burn north of Grand Junction in Mesa and Garfield counties and is now 7% contained.

The fire remains “very active,” according to a news release from the incident management team.

As of Sunday afternoon, the fire had burned 23,882 acres, and there were 472 fire personnel fighting the blaze.

An evacuation order issued by Garfield County was given for residences on County Road 202 and a pre-evacuation order for all residences on county roads 204, 207, 209, and Clear Creek Road.

On Saturday, the fire front worked its way down the north side of Cow Ridge but was largely sheltered from afternoon winds. Crews continued work on fire lines constructed in the preceding days and utilizing firing operations where possible to secure the fire's edge.

Fire crews in Division A, at the south end of the fire, held and improved lines along the O 9/10 road and were successful in completing a firing operation to tie the road into the southwest corner of the fire perimeter.

In Division D, to the west, crews completed lines connecting the northwest corner of the fire perimeter to the west end of the North Dry Fork Road (CR 200). In Divi-

sion G, to the northwest, firefighters completed structure assessments along the Kimball Creek drainage CR 202 and monitored lines along CR 200 south of High Lonesome Ranch.

Division Z, to the east, completed line prep along Mesa County X 1/2 Road/Garfield County CR 222 to connect with Division G's indirect lines and structure protection along the 200 road.

On Sunday, Division A crews evaluated the containment line and hold fire lines constructed Saturday. Division D work continued on the west end of CR 200. Crews in Division G and Z worked together looking for opportunities to secure the fire between the X 1/2 road/CR 222 and the dozer lines constructed along the east end of CR200.

Crews also worked in the Kimball Creek drainage (CR 202) to get structure protection in place and engage with the fire if it moves from Cow Ridge into Kimball drainage.

Aerial resources will be used again today to assist efforts on the ground.

Hot weather is expected to continue today with high temperatures forecast in the upper 90s.

An air quality health alert will be in place until later today in northern Mesa and southwestern Garfield counties.

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