

MINERS OF COLORADO

OVERVIEW

The mining of precious metals played a central role in the economic development of Colorado. The cycles of boom and bust characteristic of Colorado's 19th century economy were driven largely by the fortunes of the mining industry. The discovery of gold in 1859 and the mining activities that followed brought the first influx of settlers from the east. Colorado recovered from an economic slump in the 1870s largely as a result of a silver mining boom in the Leadville area. The last surge of prosperity associated with hard-rock mining occurred in the early 1890s, with the opening of Cripple Creek's gold mines.

Coal mining also became an important industry. Coal was used to power locomotives, to run steam engines in factories, and in smelters. The latter used coke or partly burned coal to in their blast furnaces. Coke burned much hotter than ordinary coal. Coal also was used for home heating. This industry was centered in the coal fields located along the front range from Erie to Walsenburg. Coal mining remained an important industry in Colorado through the 1950s.

FOOD, CLOTHING AND SHELTER

The people who came to Colorado hoping to strike it rich experienced little change in diet. The first adventurers who crossed the plains brought most of their food with them. Nonperishable items, such as salt pork, dried beans, and potatoes were the mainstay of their diet. Once they had arrived in Colorado, they added freshly-killed deer and elk to their menu. After the first year or so, Colorado's gardens, farms, and ranches produced a still more varied menu. By the 1880s, miners relied heavily on canned vegetables and fruit to provide a varied diet even during the winter.

The clothing men and women wore depended largely on their occupation and economic status. Prospectors and men who worked in the mines wore the everyday work clothes of that time. Their pants, shirts, and coats were made of cotton, wool or a combination of wool and linen. Working women and housewives typically wore print dresses and aprons. Businessmen wore white cotton shirts and three-piece woolen suits. Their wives' formal wear included dresses made of velvet, silk and satin.

Mining settlements included various types of shelters. In first months, most settlers lived in tents and log cabins. As a mining camp matured, saw mills were built and structures made of sawn boards were common. The more affluent townspeople eventually built large, two- or three-story, frame or brick houses. While tents were only temporary structures, log houses often remained in use for years.

FAMILIES, CHILDREN, AND SCHOOLS

Single, young men made up a disproportionate number of the population of early mining camps. Many were unmarried men who had few responsibilities back home. Others were married men who probably considered the likelihood of success in Colorado too risky to warrant uprooting their family. As mining camps grew into prosperous towns, the gender ratio became less lopsided. The prospect of finding steady work encouraged men to bring their families with them. The arrival of women and children, in turn, led to the building of schools. The size of schools varied from one-room log structures of small mining communities to the substantial brick and stone buildings of Leadville, Georgetown, and Central City.

WORK AND TOOLS

The kind of work that miners did also changed as mining camps matured. Many of the first discoveries were made by individuals panning for gold in a stream. In rich gold strikes such as Gregory's Diggings (Central City), miners found they could work more efficiently in small groups using sluices. A sluice was a long wooden trough with slats nailed to the bottom through which water flowed. Men shoveled dirt and gravel into the sluice, letting the water carry away the coarse material while the gold settled to the bottom. They later panned the fine sand caught behind the slats to remove the flakes of gold. When they had mined all the gold they could in this manner, miners looked for the gold-bearing quartz vein that had produced the "color" they had found in the bed and banks of the stream.

Quartz mining required more complex tools and methods. To recover the gold, the ore had to be blasted out of the rock and hauled to crushers and ore smelters. This kind of mining required investment capital, large work crews, and, eventually, a corporate form of organization. In other words, mining for precious metals in each successful region evolved from men working individually or in small groups to an industrial form of organization. On the other hand, coal mines began as a large-scale activity requiring investment capital, dozens if not hundreds of miners, and a corporate form of organization.

COMMUNITY LIFE

The people who migrated to Colorado brought with them institutions and customs from the places they left behind. These provided many occasions during the year for people to come together for social events. Religion played a conspicuous role in the community life of mining camps. Sunday church services were popular community events. Miners celebrated the Fourth of July with patriotic speeches and parades, just as they had back home. Sporting events also brought them together, including baseball games and firemen's races against contestants from rival towns, as did band concerts.

MINING TOWNS

The mining frontier was an urban frontier from the outset. Unlike fur trappers, farmers or ranchers, miners lived close together to be near the placer sites, quartz mines and smelters at which they worked. The first men who rushed to a new gold discovery pitched their tents along the creek banks and up the ravines or built log cabins on the adjacent hillsides. These crowds attracted grocers, tavern keepers, hotel operators, hardware dealers, and other merchants, who at first sold their wares from their own tents and log cabins. In time, they built frame and brick buildings along Main Street, turning the sprawling mining camps into prosperous towns. The richest mining regions also produced cities of several thousand population. By 1890, the mining town of Leadville had become the second largest city in Colorado. The wealth derived from mining also trickled down the mountain to bring prosperity to supply towns, such as Boulder, Denver, Colorado Springs, and Pueblo.

TRANSPORTATION

The mining industry in Colorado was highly dependent on reliable means of transportation. Keeping the mining towns supplied year-round with food and equipment was a critical necessity. By the 1870s, railroads connected the larger mining communities to the supply towns on the plains. Teamsters driving horse- and mule-drawn wagons also brought in supplies and hauled ore to local smelters. Pack trains of burros carried supplies to the more remote mines.