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THE LOON CREEK MINES

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In the rough country of the Salmon River mountains, which separated the 1866 Leesburg placers from the slightly older mines at Atlanta and Banner, gold miners prospected a number of remote streams in their constant search for new bonanzas. By 1868, a few miners were busy around Stanley and others were running a hydraulic giant at Robinson's Bar. The big excitement in the summer of 1869 was the rush to Loon Creek. Gold had been noticed on Loon Creek as early as 1864, and again in 1868. In May, 1869, Nathan Smith set out with a party from Leesburg to ascertain the extent and value of the potential placers along that slightly explored stream. At this time, it was named for a loon the men happened to encounter there.

Pleased with the prospects, Smith returned with sixty to seventy eager miners who stampeded out of Leesburg, July 19, to set up a new mining district. In their enthusiasm, in fact, they organized Loon Creek into three new mining districts. That way each miner was allowed to hold nine claims, three in each of the new districts. When news of the excitement reached Boise Basin, Idaho City saw a rush to Loon Creek, August 14. Next the commotion spread to Montana. During August, some five hundred men reached the new mines, and by fall, Loon Creek's population had risen to about one thousand. With no new claims available for most of the newcomers, and no houses in the new town of Oro Grande during the summer of 1869, only two hundred men spent the winter in that camp. Since mining on any scale was impossible for lack of water during the fall, deep snow during the winter, and high water during the next spring, the miners had plenty of time to get their claims ready and to build a town handsome by remote mountain standards. Even by the end of September, 1869, Oro Grande boasted seven stores, seven saloons, three boarding houses, and two express offices; by the next season, two hotels and a large number of new houses sheltered the permanent population. Two sawmills produced eleven thousand board feet daily by the spring of 1870.

Even before the snow had melted over much of the trail from Idaho City to Loon Creek, five different pack strings brought in supplies enough to take care of the needs of the permanent camp in the spring of 1870. Packing supplies through the snow belt section of the trail to Loon Creek had to be done mostly at night; during the spring thaw, snow was too soft during the day

for horses to get through. In spite of such obstacles, the population of Oro Grande rose to three hundred before high water of the spring run-off cut off travel all together. When the streams went down and mining could begin in earnest, all of Loon Creek was diverted into a long flume and used for placering a high bar near Oro Grande where most of the mining production was concentrated. Wages in that remote country were high for those days--six to seven dollars a day.

But by July even Loon Creek had a surplus of labor. Some of the better placers paid well in 1869 and 1870, but others were regarded as suitable only for Chinese, for whom low-grade, poor paying claims were reserved. After the 1870 mining season, Oro Grande went through another winter with a population of about two hundred--this time including some sixty to seventy Chinese. Another season's mining really began to deplete the better placers and by the spring of 1872, Oro Grande's population of seventy-two was half Chinese. Only five (three whites and two Chinese) were women. Two express companies still served Loon Creek, although the indefatigable messenger for one of them was smart enough to work on his claim over on Yankee Fork until March, while the other company's expressman spent forty-six days at the beginning of 1872 wandering in deep snow trying to reach Oro Grande from Idaho City just after Christmas. When the snow melted and high water went down, some work still remained for white miners. Soon after 1872, Loon Creek passed entirely into the hands of the orientals. Chinese mining around Oro Grande came to an abrupt halt, February 12, 1879. Loon Creek, in fact, was taken back by the Indians.

During that final winter, once proud Oro Grande housed only five Chinese. Located not far from some popular Sheepeater winter camps on the middle fork of the Salmon, Oro Grande had provided the local Indians with a convenient source of supply. White miners in particular abandoned property that the Sheepeaters found useful. The Chinese were less careless. They also were less able to help provision the Indians during the long winters. The way the Yankee Fork Herald had it, when "the Chinese were snugly in their warm cabins, with plenty of provisions on hand, Mr. Sheepeater made a call, and not meeting with that hospitality he thought due him on his own land, and his stomach calling loudly for that which he had not to give it, he resolved to do something desperate. After dark the Indians got together, and while most of the Chinese were sitting around a table in one of the largest cabins, engaged in the primitive and fascinating game of 'one-cent ante,' the Sheepeaters came down like a wolf on the fold, and the heathen, Oro Grande and all, were swept away as by a cyclone, while the victors returned to the bosom of their families on the Middle Fork to make glad the hearts of the little Sheepeaters with the spoils of the heathen."

(The way the Sheepeaters later explained it, they had no connection whatever with the disaster that befell the Chinese.)

Out of the Loon Creek Chinese massacre came a summer military campaign in which most of the Sheepeaters were rounded up--an affair known somewhat grandiloquently as The Sheepeater War. After that, Chinese miners declined to work any more around Oro Grande. More than twenty years went by before mining revived on Loon Creek. Then the 1902 gold rush to Thunder Mountain thirty miles north and slightly to the west brought in prospectors by the thousand. Rich float found in the early days "account of" which remained a folk lore of the region for years afterwards," at last was traced to a vein which lacked prominence on the surface but which soon showed great promise.

This lode--The Lost Packer, discovered by Clarence Eddy in July of 1902--led to another round of excitement. (Eddy was particularly gratified at his luck, since he at last was able to afford to publish a book of his poems and to start a newspaper in nearby Thunder Mountain and Custer.) Mules packed out five carloads of rich ore in the summer of 1903, and several more in 1904. This kind of cumbersome shipment was subordinated to road construction in 1904, so that the two-year job of hauling in a modern smelter (with a capacity of one hundred tons) could be completed the next summer. An accident at the start of operations in 1906 delayed production another year, but the smelter ran profitably for thirty-four days in 1907. By 1914 some half-million dollars' worth of production of copper, gold, and silver had been realized. The Loon Creek Road, moreover, enabled another company to rework the old placers with methods less crude than operations of the early days. High cost of mining in a district so difficult of access limited production greatly; lodes such as The Lost Packer simply could not be worked on a large scale during the short seasons that the high mountain road to Loon Creek could be kept open. Only the richest ore could be processed, and much of the original expectation for Loon Creek simply could not be realized.

Exploration of some Lost Packer veins in 1980 brought a prospect for revival of that property before price declines set back silver mining again. This is one of a substantial number of Idaho mining properties which a more advanced twentieth-century technology might be able to revive.