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Hammer and Drill

A gold mine recalls the grueling work of dangerous jobs.

by Emily Fritchman

Pearl, Idaho, sits abandoned in the hilly barrens between Emmett and Horseshoe Bend. What was in 1900 a 4-hour trip by horse-drawn wagon is now a 45-minute drive from Boise. West of State Highway 55, the route to Pearl is 5 miles down a dusty washboard road. A heavy rod-iron fence surrounds the first home to appear. Large signs declare, “This Area Is Monitored by Security Cameras.” A property-owner nameplate hangs above the entrance to the ranch. Continuing down the gravel road, the entire area is fenced off and marked with “No Trespassing” signs and electric fences. It becomes clear that aside from the gravel road, what used to be the town of Pearl is now privately owned property.

A tiny metal gate surrounds an old mine shaft. The back end of a rusty vehicle juts out from the top of the entrance. Algae-filled water oozes beneath the fence onto the road. The deep run-off ditches were most likely a means of draining the mines. Directly above a cliff-sized mineral deposit, two large, flat pieces of wood jammed into the edge of the hill mark the remains of a collapsed mine shaft.

Willow Creek, the main source of water and gold and the reason for Pearl’s earlier existence, has since dried up in certain locations and is overrun with willow trees in other places. As the town of Pearl began to grow and develop during the peak of the gold rush, buildings were erected on both sides of the creek. Whereas in other mining towns abandoned buildings and structures are tourist attractions, the last of Pearl’s original buildings were demolished in 2004. All that is left are remnants of old, wooden structures scattered alongside the northern half of Willow Creek. Something that resembles an old piece of bridge leans against the edge of the former waterline, facing the southern half of the creek. It’s hard to imagine that this deserted landscape was once a thriving mining town with more than 200 residents, general stores, saloons, boarding houses and hotels, a meat market, and a barber shop.



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With the mines and miners came the businesses to support them.

Mining in Pearl, Idaho

In December 1867, a proprietor of a small stage route in Idaho discovered two veins of gold in Willow Creek, a spot close to Idaho's capital city between the Payette and Boise rivers. Although these findings were relatively minor in comparison to the abundance of minerals in California, this discovery caused a flurry of excitement. "Gold fever" struck both the people of Idaho and those in the easternmost regions of the United States. By the 1890s, additional mineral deposits had been located in this area and capital investment gradually increased. More mines developed and the town of Pearl, Idaho, grew and prospered. Miners removed deposits of lead, zinc, gold, and silver, making the area even more valuable. The Pearl district mines that produced the greatest output include the Checkmate, Lincoln, and Black Pearl mines. In total, the Pearl mines produced nearly a million dollars in profit, much of which came from gold and zinc extraction.

At the peak of activity between 1900 and 1907, the Pearl mines employed about 200 men, 50 of whom were Chinese. The pay rate depended on the position. Whether a timber man, miner, car man, or general laborer, each earned between \$3 and \$4 a day. According to the 1907 Idaho Mining Industry Report, the average wage for a miner working in Idaho was \$3.50 per 8-hour work day, which in 21st-century dollars is approximately \$87.58 a day, or between \$10 and \$11 per hour. Despite the fact that work in the mines was physically demanding, this pay matches that of most contemporary minimum-wage jobs in the United States. Miners worked to support families, labored under miserable environmental



Neil Macaskill tramping ore at the Lincoln Mine

conditions, and received very little financial compensation for the physical and psychological damage sustained under such grueling work conditions.

As exciting an opportunity as mining and the potential for striking gold was for most of these Idaho miners and laborers, the work was difficult, dangerous, and painstaking. Most workers rose early in the morning, around 5 a.m. They spent most of the day with no sunlight, in damp, cramped mining shafts up to 600 feet deep.

The Pearl district mines operated years before technological advances in the 1920s and 1930s made mining safer. Dangerous mining conditions in the early 1900s contributed to a multitude of accidents, sickness, and death among laborers. The frequent use of toxic chemicals for Idaho mining in the early 1900s, including the use of cyanide leaching and nitroglycerine for gold extraction, presented a number of severe health risks, including suffocation, lung disease, and even death. In 1905, approximately 6,000 men were reported as being employed by Idaho mines. Out of these 6,000 employees, at least 20 fatal accidents occurred—an average of 3.33 deaths per 1,000 workers. Men died from the explosion of blasting compounds, rock falls, falling down chutes, contact with trolley wires, collision with a moving cage or car, ground caving, or gasoline tank explosions. These statistics account only for those companies who reported their employment and fatality numbers to the Idaho Mining Industry; it is likely that the death toll was higher, since many men worked for independent prospectors and mining operations.

The frequent application of nitroglycerine blasting compounds that were used for extracting gold contributed to a large number of mining fatalities in the early 20th century. Nitroglycerine compounds used in mining must be heated and cooled at precise temperatures. If handled improperly, the smallest amount of nitro powder can burn and emit significant amounts of carbon monoxide, poisoning miners who inhale it. Over the course of about 30 years in Idaho, the number of mechanical- and chemical-related mining accidents in Idaho claimed the lives of hundreds of working men in the mining



A catalog illustrating mining equipment for processing ore using cyanide



Saloon token, Pearl, 1904

industry, many of whom are lost to history as a result of poor documentation and poor recordkeeping.

One of the many men who lost his life in the mining industry of Pearl, Idaho, was William Albert Ferdinand Kloth. The child of German immigrants, Kloth was born in 1893 in Chicago. As a young adult, he worked as a Western Union telegraph operator until 1910, when he decided to move west and begin a new life for himself in Idaho. In 1915 in Boise, he married Edith M. Franklin, who bore their first child, Virginia Ida, the following year in Pearl.

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The streets of Pearl, Idaho, near the Diamond and Checkmate mines

Kloth began working for the mines in Pearl in 1921. His career as a miner was short-lived. According to the *Idaho Statesman*, Kloth was in the process of blasting holes in one of the Pearl mines when he was severely injured by what physicians claimed to be a premature explosion. The blast lacerated Kloth's skin, embedding a rock the size of a fist in his leg and shooting his body full of small rocks. He died 3 days later, on August 17, 1921, at Lewiston Hospital in Emmett. He was 28 years old. The *Idaho Statesman* reported that William Kloth was buried in a Riverside Cemetery in Emmett, Idaho, but his headstone is untraceable.

Decline of a Mining Camp

Over time, the mines in Pearl began to sink as a result of the settling of overlying rock and other material, and the town

shrank as economic profits dwindled. By the 1970s, mining operations had completely ceased in Pearl, and the area fell into a state of abandonment. Throughout the 20th century, ownership of the town and the mines contained therein transferred frequently.

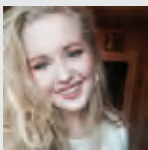
In October 2003, the State of Idaho's Department of Environmental Quality submitted a preliminary assessment report to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) investigating possible contamination at the Lincoln Mine site in Pearl. The ore deposits at the Lincoln Mine contained small amounts of sulfide minerals, such as iron pyrite and arsenopyrite, types of fool's gold that contain trace amounts of metal (e.g., arsenic). Over time, these minerals can weather, releasing metals to the environment that can be harmful to people and animals. Because this phenomenon is common among old mining camps in the United States, the EPA regularly investigates these sites and evaluates threats to human health and the environment. By February 2004, the EPA had determined that the risks at the Lincoln Mine site were not high enough to warrant extensive clean-up. This meant that the area did not contain a high enough level of toxicity to be considered a U.S. Superfund site.

The story of Pearl, Idaho, replicates other boom-and-bust mining town stories but is unique in that most of what is left has been destroyed, is privately owned, or is possibly contaminated. The countless "No Trespassing" signs, security cameras, and electric fences prevent the curious from learning about the rich history of this area. What hides below the surface and in the riparian brush of all of this private property may reveal clues critical to understanding this place of hard circumstances.



NCFORSTRANGER

Today a rusted car guard guards the entrance to an old mine shaft.



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