

# Old mines, old legends in the Rockies

by Allen Jernigan  
Tar Heel Contributor

In late 1858, a Georgian named William Green Russell discovered gold on a tributary of the South Platte River in Colorado. The Rocky Mountains have yet to recover.

Like those that came before them, the miners found snow-capped alpine peaks, icy trout-filled streams, vicious winters, and spruce and fir forests teeming with moose, elk, and grizzlies. The miners founded towns with picturesque names like Silverton, Eureka, Ouray, Animas Forks, and Howardsville, and left legends of fast money, fast guns, and fast women. And they left something else: trash.

Silverton sits at over 9,000 feet in the heart of the rugged San Juan and Uncompahgre mountains in Northwest Colorado. Bob Ford bushwhacked his friend Jesse James for the reward there back in 1882. Almost a century later, I drove east from Silverton along a dirt road that winds along the Animas River into what was one of Colorado's richest gold and silver mining districts.

Now years after all but the most extensive lodes have been dug to exhaustion, an intrepid and well-shod traveller could hike the very route I drove, a distance of several miles and an ascent of some three thousand feet, and step solely upon mine tailings, slag, garbage, and assorted debris.

Some of the most scenic mountains in North America tower above the churning snow-fed waters of the Animas River. Mine dumps, ruined buildings, and the



Staff photo by Allen Jernigan

## Rubbish and slag— the legacy of mining at Shenandoah Dives

skeletons of ore mills dot the mountains' slopes, and trees grow wherever they can find a toehold among the boulders of countless landslides. The slides are the result of the continual denuding of the slopes by miners who desperately needed timber to shore up mine shafts and build cabins and fires. Mudslides and snowslides have carried many a miner to his death, and summer thaws have been known to reveal the bodies of men lost months before, as well as the wrecks of buildings that originally stood a thousand or more feet up the mountainside.

Most of the mines along the Animas valley have been extinct since the turn of the century, but just east of Silverton the Shenandoah Dives property is a notable exception. The approach to the Dives mill is akin to a set out of a Lawrence of Arabia film. Mine tailings rise like sand dunes along the road, and when the wind blows—by no means a rare occurrence—the hapless pedestrian is hard-pressed to tell whether it's snowing or what, until he gets a mouthful of the stuff. A 10,000-foot-long tramway carries ore above the highway to the mill from the mines, which are hidden high in the mountains on the right.

Beyond the Shenandoah Dives, is the ghost town of Howardsville, where a few scattered and ravaged buildings mark the site of a once-thriving community. In Howardsville is the hundred-ton mill of The Pride of the West company, whose mines have been sending ore east over Stony Pass since Silverton was founded.

A right turn on the jeep trail at

Howardsville takes you into ore-rich Cunningham Gulch, a valley that rises 2,300 feet in two miles climb to scenic Stony Pass. Here the ride parallels Cunningham Creek, where trout still inhabit a wonderland of slag, trash, and the rusted remains of buildings that have been swept into the cold, clear water by slides.

The mines are a thousand feet up the mountainside from the floor of the Gulch. The steep climb up to the shafts is across a loose confederation of rocks of all shapes and sizes. Any attempt to reach the mines loses a torrent of stone that threatens anything left below unawares.

The mine shafts themselves are dull, dark, and dangerous affairs. Wood solid enough to support the walls and roof of a tunnel a hundred years ago may look sound, but crumbles at the touch of finger. Vertical shafts, called whinnies, drop unannounced from the passageway floor and lead down to deep water or a hard bottom.

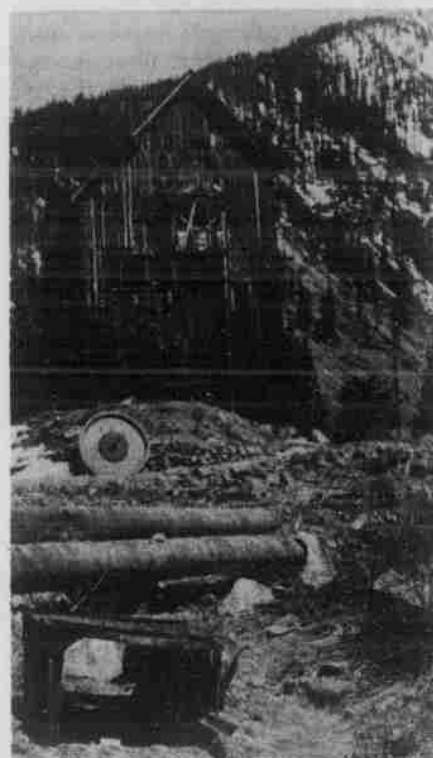
A good ole boy at a local bar told the tale of his three-story tumble down a whinny which had been boarded over and covered

with dirt. The boards thus concealed had rotted for 75 years, until he had the misfortune to tread on them. He reached the bottom with a broken leg, and found himself in the company of an earlier visitor, whose skeletal remains were bound at the arms and legs by ancient, rusted wire.

The good ole boy admitted he was lucky to be around to tell his tale. He had a friend with him who went for help. Also, the whinny that ambushed him was not deep, went straight down, and had a dry bottom.

The hazards of the Rocky Mountain junkyard have replaced those of the Rocky Mountain wilderness. The transformation has taken but a century.

Like most of Colorado's gold and silver lodes, the miners are gone. Rusted and rotten, the debris of their mining remains. Rubbish seemingly unlimited in volume and variety joins with eroded mountainsides, abandoned mines and tumbled-down towns to mark the passage of Colorado's mining boom. But snow-capped and serene, the mountains tower above the ravaged land.



Staff photo by Allen Jernigan  
Cunningham Gulch

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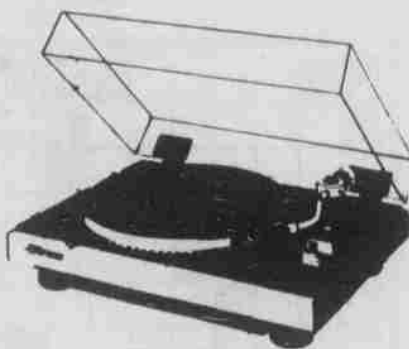
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