

Is there still gold in these hills?

By Alan Hodge

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Long before the great California gold rush of 1849, our area was part of the top gold producing region in America. In fact, from 1860 until the Civil War, gold mining was along with farming one of the primary occupations not only in Gaston and Cleveland counties, but across the North Carolina Piedmont in general.

So much gold was found in our local area that a branch of the U.S. Mint was set up in Charlotte in 1836 to handle it.

As early as the 1700s there were a number of gold producing mines in Belmont, Mount Holly, Stanley, Cherryville, and Kings Mountain.

Belmont's gold mining story includes a number of mines including one operation that dredged the shores of the Catawba River. In his book "Early History of Belmont and Gaston County, Robert Lee Stowe, Sr., gave a glimpse at local prospecting.

"There was considerable gold mining going on in this country before the Civil War and some years afterwards," Stowe wrote in 1951. "The Leeper mine was worked more than a hundred years ago and was considered a rich mine. The Wells mine was located just north of Sterling Mill and was worked extensively during the 1870s. Before the Civil War there was a place about two miles south of the Southern Railway bridge where a gold vein crossed the river. The people of the neighborhood would get a flat boat in the summertime and use a long handle and scoop up the sand and gravel from the river bottom and wash it for gold. This was a tedious process but I understand they made good wages. Sometime in the late 1890s a man built a dredge boat and had a steam shovel affair with which he scooped up the sand. He was said to have gotten a considerable amount of gold but could not handle the dredge when there was a rise in the river which was pretty often. There came a freshet in the river and washed the boat away



Photo by Alan Hodge

Jack Page shows some of the equipment he uses in his search for local gold. The green pan in the box contains gold he found near an abandoned mine south of Belmont.

and the scheme was abandoned."

In Catawba Heights, a small gold mine was operated on the Smith farm around the turn of the 20th century. The site was located near Fite Creek and was a large depression in the ground with crude machinery for sifting rocks. As the story goes, gold was found, but a cave-in nearly cost one miner his life and the digging was halted.

Down the South Point Road near Belmont a gold mine was operated as early as the American Revolution. The first owner of the mine was Matthew Leeper who later sold the land to C.T. Stowe. It was later passed down to historian and author Minnie Stowe Puett. Miners from as far away as Georgia worked the digs said to have produced gold in great amounts until it closed at an undetermined date.

In Mount Holly, an Italian named Chevalier Riva de Finola set up gold mines west of Tuckaseege Ford around 1830 and had them worked by several families of Irish Catholic immigrants. These families would eventually found St. Joseph's Church, the fourth oldest Catholic house of worship in North Carolina. The church still stands on NC 273 just outside of town and a NC

Highway Historical Marker mentions the miners.

Stanley was a good place to look for gold in days gone by. Author Joyce Handsel wrote a report on early 1800s gold mining in Stanley for the Brevard Station Museum there. She described the conditions for miners and their families as "crude and primitive" with poor to non-existent job training and rough living conditions.

One Stanley area mine named "Duffey's" was located on the South Fork River close to Spencer Mountain near present-day Lowell. An ad Handsel cited in the Feb. 17, 1847 "Mecklenburg Jeffersonian" newspaper showed the mine as part of a 175 acre tract for sale and declared "a large quantity of ore had been raised". The mine was still operating in 1878.

Handsel also mentions another Stanley dig called Moore gold mine in her work. This mine was on land southwest of town owned by Alexander Moore. It was first worked by the Moore family, then by a William Folger, then sold in 1832 to Cabarrus Gold Mining Co. of North Carolina.

Other Stanley area gold mines were owned by folks such as Samuel Rankin, Thomas Rhyne, and Peter Smith, whose

occupation in the 1850 U.S. Census had him pegged as a "miner".

In the Cherryville area, a news story in the Nov. 15, 1917 edition of "The Cherryville Eagle" had a story about sale of land containing the Long Creek gold mine for \$35,000. The mine was eight miles northwest of Gastonia and had three gold veins - the Asbury, the Dixon, and the McCarter Hill.

"Years ago this property was successfully mined and the settlers tell wonderful stories about the great quantities of gold that has been taken from this property," the piece said.

Cleveland County got on the gold map in 1827 when Dr. Elisha Mitchell, a professor of science at the University of North Carolina, and the man for whom Mt. Mitchell is named, was traveling through Lincoln and Cleveland counties and noticed gold in a creek near Kings Mountain.

Mitchell's diary dated July 19-21, 1827, describes what he saw near Kings Mountain and gives

a good idea of where he saw the gold.

"I rode down the county line to Jacob Fullenwider's where I was hospitably entertained," his diary reads. "After examining his forge on Friday morning started with him for his ore bank or rather for Fall's Lime kiln on Kings Creek where William Wilson was engaged to meet me. Did not find Wilson, examined the ore bank then started on foot for Kings Mountain about five or six miles below, toward this I traveled for four miles and understanding I was within the limits of SC I returned. I did however discover a gold region along the creek. I started for Wilson's house but he overtook me and told me the gold had actually been found on this formation."

Wilson went on to become a partner and secretary-treasurer in the Kings Mountain gold mine located between Kings Mountain and Crowders Mountain that operated for many years. In 1840, he reported to the U.S.

Mint that \$60,000 in gold had been gleaned from its shafts. By 1860, the mine had reached the water table and some of its machinery was taken to California, only to bring it back at a later date.

These days, gold is still likely lying in the ground and creeks in Gaston and Cleveland counties just waiting on modern-day prospectors to root it out. Jack Page of Belmont tried his hand at gold prospecting near the former Puett mine, and though he didn't strike it rich, found some of the precious metal. A pan with some of the actual gold Page discovered is on display at the Belmont Historical Society Museum.

"I went to the site of the Puett mine in the 1960s and got some gold from the tailings," Page said. "All that was left of the mine was a large depression in the ground surrounded by barbed wire off Bowen Drive."

Page offered this bit of advice for would-be prospectors.

"It's not a job for sissies," he said. "Also, do it in the winter when there aren't so many ticks, mosquitoes, and snakes."

Gold is not the only thing Page has found in his gold pan. Besides lots of bird shot and spent .22 rifle bullets, he also dredged up a 1900 silver half-dollar.

For anyone interested in giving gold prospecting a go in Gaston or Cleveland counties, there are resource materials available at the main libraries in Gastonia, Kings Mountain, or Shelby. Also, the US Geological survey has maps available. Finally, there are many sources online for equipment such as pans and sluice boxes. Armed with the proper information and tools, all a person needs is a strong back and plenty of luck to start their own personal gold rush.

Police say 'no bomb'

DAVE BLANTON

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Police and bomb squad technicians were investigating what appeared to be four old canisters of fuel found in a Waco St. backyard Tuesday afternoon.

"The product hasn't been on the market for years," said Police Chief Melvin Proctor. "It wasn't a bomb."

James Jackson said he was working on clearing the backyard of the property next to his resident about 2 p.m. when he uncovered the large buried tubes that he said were about 18 inches long and 4 inches wide. The vessels, which appeared to be sealed, were marked as "hazardous" and "explosive," he said.

He immediately called the police. The town's police called in the help of Gaston County Bomb Squad. The Kings Mountain Fire Department also responded. The commotion attracted the attention of at least one Charlotte television news station, which sent a helicopter to the scene.

"They brought a big bomb truck in, and they escorted them out," Jackson said. "The way I look at it, I probably saved a lot of lives."

According to Jackson, the houses on both sides of the property where the suspicious containers were found were evacuated for a little over an hour while the authorities conducted their investigation. The white one story house that sits on the property where Jackson was working is currently vacant.



BALLOON RELEASE - The Cleveland Child Development Center sponsored a memorial and balloon release April 30, in honor and memory of children who have suffered and passed from abuse and neglect. Everyone was encouraged to wear blue in honor or memory of abuse and neglect victims. Included was the tell-tell-tell program about "who" to tell, "how" to tell, and "why" to tell.

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