



Hart's Pass Area History

By Kjell Lester

Kjell Lester is the proprietor of the White Buck Trading Company in Winthrop Washington. This story was told to him by his grandfather Bill Lester and Dick Horn who both spent time working in the Hart's Pass area in the 1920s and 1930s. Kjell was kind enough to share this important piece of history with myself and to pass it on to others who are researching more about there past heritage of Northeastern Washington State.

The Hart's Pass area in 1895 was a booming gold mining town. From Hart's Pass to Chancellor is approximately 15 miles and during the peak-working era, there were 3,500 people working and living at the mines.

There were 3 hotels, a general store, a post office, a blacksmith shop, a sawmill, a power plant, and a saloon.

At Chancellor, a power plant was built in hopes that a railroad would eventually meet up with it. The power plant ran lines throughout the area and generated lights and the electricity was a DC current run by water going through a Pelton wheel. They used DC because the technology wasn't refined for AC and DC was much easier to work with. The hopes of huge deposits of gold and posterity diminished and the thoughts of a railroad were eventually forgotten.


The blacksmith shop was one of the busiest places in camp and could be compared today to a machinist and he would fix anything that broke down. He forged tools and the blacksmith sharpened the chisel-bitted steel that was used deep in the mines for making blasting holes. The blacksmith was usually a Norwegian or foreign person that had been taught as a child to be a smitty.

The general store had clothes for the miners plus groceries or anything else they might need. At the Bonita Mine (now known as the Western Gold) there was a butcher shop with fresh meat.

The sawmills were constructed to cut rough lumber to build all the buildings that so many people demanded. Lots of the buildings were made from logs on the outside with the rough lumber used on the inside and these sawmills were used several years later for the same purpose. The sawmills were run by water wheels and one now is on display at the Shafer Museum in Winthrop.

One of the hotels had rooms in the upper stories and the post office on the bottom floor. The saloon was the entertainment for the evenings and employed ladies to dance with the men and sit with them.

To imagine a Saturday in the life of one of those miners it might go something like this; Awakening at sun up he gets up and trudges up to the mine after fixing himself a hot



breakfast. He is helping dig a tunnel deep in the mountain to follow the ore vein. He gets off a couple hours early because it's Saturday. It's a nice hot day so there is a slim chance he might take a bath before he goes to the saloon but he might not too. Down at the saloon he goes to dance, drink, and share stories with miners from some of the other mines. He'd go home around midnight so he could get up early to go to work the next day in the mines.

To get to the Hart's Pass area the road was a narrow gauge wagon road so they would cut down wagons to make them narrower so they could carry supplies by wagons to the mine, and horses were used in pack strings also. In the 1890s a pack string was headed in with supplies and in a very narrow stretch of road that had planks over it one of the last horses pulled back not wanting to cross. Since the horses were all tied together the other horses lost their footing and the whole string went off the edge of the road and several hundred feet to the bottom of Rattlesnake Creek. This narrow stretch of road that still exists today is now called Dead Horse Point.

Some of the mines produced lots of gold the Bonita Mine gave up \$250,000 in one pocket. The Glory Hole was right above the Bonita and had gold right on the surface; these were called "float" veins. The Mammoth Mine was located near the saloon and part of the saloon building still stands today.

Around 1899 to 1900 people started hearing about gold being found in British Columbia and Alaska, most of the people there were followers of gold rushes. They had come from California to Washington and were now headed to Alaska, all of a sudden Hart's Pass area was vacant.

At the Bonita Mine the crew was skimming most of the gold found because the stockholders were all from back east and weren't there to oversee operations. Finally the stockholders figured out what was wrong and closed the mine down and the crew left for Alaska.


My grandfather Bill Lester worked for the Forest Service and started making treks into the Hart's Pass area in 1924. In 1926 he walked through one of the hotels that was vacant and picked up a mattress on one of the beds and found an older version of a \$1.00 bill, people had left everything right where it stood. Dick Horn in 1930 went into the Post Office and letters were laying all over the floor and counters, when the people left they didn't even bring the mail out to be forwarded. Food like macaroni and flour were still in the bins at the grocery store. Gold fever seemed to have a powerful calling.

Two years ago I walked into the Mammoth Mine, the buildings were being slowly destroyed by termites; small piles of sawdust were everywhere. Someday the buildings will be completely gone.

When my grandpa Lester helped build the Pasayten cabin for the Forest Service in 1924, he found a tree that had been engraved by a French-Canadian who was working at clearing a 40 foot line representing the border separating the U.S. and Canada. The engraving read:

"I have roamed in foreign parts my boy and many lands I've seen but Columbia is my idol yet of all lands she is Queen. Parson Smith, June 6, 1886."

The tree became a monument and when it started to rot the Forest Service cut the section of the inscription out and brought that portion of the tree to the Early Winters Information Center a few years ago.



My grandfather worked for \$3.25 a day and had to furnish 2 horses. In the country back there he watched bands of sheep roam the hills for food in the summers and a band consisted of 2,600 sheep, he spotted 21 bands in one day. He helped build bridges, maintain trails, and build lookouts for the Forest Service.

In 1930, Dick Horn came to Winthrop from Spokane as a young man, he helped widen the Hart's Pass narrow gauge road in places. He worked for Charlie Ballard who was the President of the stockholders of the Azurite Mine. The road still was not wide enough for a regular car to travel on it. Charlie Ballard had bought a few Fords and cut 10 inches off the axles to make them narrow enough to drive to and from the mine. To freight large amounts a 15 horsepower caterpillar tractor hauled the supplies and the cat had special cleats for the wintertime.

Charlie Ballard and stockholders ran the mine from 1930 to 1934. They built the Tinson Tunnel to intercept the vein that ran from the surface at the top of the mountain, the Tinson Tunnel was about 500 feet deep. 600 feet below the Tinson a second tunnel was built called the Wenatchee it was 1,200 feet deep. The vein went up at a 60-degree angle and a skip bucket on a cable and wench helped carry the miners up to the vein because it was so steep. At the top where the vein was it measured 68 feet wide and the ore assayed at \$60 a ton. From the Discovery Hole to the Wenatchee Tunnel was approximately 800 feet so that's how deep the vein was. Gold was \$35 an ounce at that time.

To process this ore a Mace Smelter was built, it had a 30-ton capacity every 24 hours, which was considered fairly small. Dick Horn helped build a $\frac{3}{4}$ mile road to a quarts quarry from the Azurite Mine, quarts was used in the smelter process.

Here's a sample of how the smelter would have worked: A couple of shovels full of ore was put in the fire, then a shovel full of coke, lime and quartz, the coke was hauled in from an outside area, the lime came from a deposit near Chancellor and the quartz from $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away. The coke created heat, a blower circulated the air and the heat melted the ore until it ran like milk. Then it was poured into steel and firebrick lined crucible (ore car). There were two spouts on the side of the car, one 8 inches above the other. A clay plug on a crowbar was hammered into the car and the ore would come out the holes. The lower hole is where the valuable "matt" would come out. The higher hole is where the non-valuable "slag" came out. They were both put in molds, left to cool and then dumped out of the molds. The slag was normally dumped over the hill where it still lies today and the matt was hauled by a caterpillar to Robinson Creek then trucked to Pateros and put on a railroad car to the Tacoma Smelter. The assay of the matt was worth \$300 a ton.

Dick Horn was foreman of the Azurite Mine from 1932 to 1933. In 1934 they leased the mine to the American Smelting and Refining Company and at that time the vein was 68 feet wide. As they went lower the vein suddenly narrowed, it would vary from 2 feet to 4 feet wide. Because of that in 1938 the American Smelting closed down production. They had a cyanide-processing mill that made 99% gold so all the transportation expenses were just for gold and not ore. When American Smelting left they tore the mill down and brought out most of the material that was used to build the mill. Today it's too expensive to build another mill to process any gold that still remains there to this day.

The gold veins in the high Cascades aren't the usual "fissure" veins, this means the vein comes from an upheaval from below. Those veins get more valuable the deeper they go, the float veins that are found on top get poorer in quality the deeper they go. At one time the Cascades must have had earthquakes that moved the hills and mountains,



pinched the vein down or off and moved the rest of the vein somewhere else.

In 1930 to 1932 Dick Horn in the winter carried the mail into the Azurite Mine. His main place to stay was the cabin at Robinson Creek, which since then the Forest Service has burned down. One day Dick would snowshoe 9 miles south to Mazama and pick up the mail for the approximately 5 too as high as 10 men working at the mine. He would go back to his cabin to spend the night, next morning he would snowshoe 24 miles north to the Azurite. If the weather was bad he'd get 12 miles and stay at the cabin at Horse Heaven and go the other 12 miles the next day and he usually always made it out in one day. He would repeat this every 10 days unless there was an emergency that he needed to get word to someone sooner. Dick was the only link to civilization for these men in the winter.

In the winter of 1934-35 Dick spent the whole winter working at the Azurite Mine. Charlie Graves was cooking in the cookhouse and out the north end and 30 feet out on the hill was a spring that was their water supply. He went to fill two buckets and just as he stood up he saw a "dry" snow-slide cover him. A dry slide is a large new snowfall that's on top of a crust from older snow and just the new snow slides, It's noiseless but creates a terrific wind in front of it and can be very dangerous because of no warning. Dick and three other men figured the slide had covered Charlie and they guessed about where the spring might be and started digging. They heard Charlie yelling and would dig in one spot and then another trying to locate him. Finally, Charlie quit yelling but the four men kept digging and suddenly one shovel hit Charlie's hard hat. All four got on their hands and knees to dig like badgers and when they got to his face he wasn't quite unconscious but almost. It took about 20 minutes to find him. Charlie was four or five feet under the snow when they dug him out still standing with the buckets in his hands. The late Charlie Graves was my step-great grandfather.

Dick Horn was caught in a snow-slide in 1931 and was carried $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile, he was buried up to his shoulder on one side and to his armpit on the other. He was with another man but he was only taken a few feet. Dick ended up with broken ribs and a sprained ankle, he was beat against the rocks and was black and blue all over his stomach and down his lower leg and foot. One of his snowshoes was broken but he managed to hike three miles to the mine. He's sure if he hadn't had a strong will to live he could have easily given up and died. His thoughts while being carried away were "This is a hell of a place for my folks to find me." Luckily his folks didn't have to find him.

In 1935 the road to Hart's Pass was widened enough to have a normal car travel it, and then the ore and gold was freighted out by trucks.

In the winter of 1935 there was a heavy snowfall, one night it snowed 4 feet. Dick Horn was at the Azurite Mine and decided for him and another friend to check on the prospector Johnny Young who lived two miles south of the mine. They were afraid that a snow-slide may occur in the canyon where the prospector lived. When Dick and the other guy got over there they saw a snow-slide had gone through one side of the cabin. It had swung one wall around and inside the house, the logs stopped on the miners table. Still on the table was a plate with eggs and bacon on it. Dick found ski tracks leading away from the cabin and towards another cabin at Cedar Crossing on Canyon Creek where the prospector owned another cabin several miles towards Chancellor.

The two followed the tracks of the skis and came to where the snow-slide covered the ski tracks, in a tree near by was Johnny's pack sack but it had little food in it. They walked over the snow-slide and on the other side were the ski tracks but up ahead was the body of Johnny Young. He had a liniment smell on him, which leads to believe the logs at his

cabin that had fallen in might have hurt him fatally. Dick made a toboggan out of the prospectors' skis and they pulled him as close to his other cabin as they could before night came and left him there and headed back to the mine. They sent word out with the mail carrier Gene Albin that Johnny had died. Gene Albin got Ralph Kenison the coroner and Doc Dibble to snowshoe in to examine the body. Dick and Gene dug a grave behind his cabin and laid him to rest. The cabin was washed away in the flood of 1948. Ralph Kenison was my great uncle he died in 1954.

At this time there are some mines that are being worked in the summer months like the Brown Bear Mine, which is at the top of Hart's Pass and the Western Gold is still producing. Today people use new portable dredges in the streams.

The road is under study to decide whether to close it or improve it for others to use. It would be terrible to close this history of the past to people like others and me. The only way I can learn what my ancestors did and where they went is to see this history first hand. Hart's Pass is a nice place to camp and hike, the land is rugged and beautiful and full of memories of the past.



The Parson Smith tree originally was located near the Canadian border in the Pasayten Wilderness area. More recently, in order to better preserve the tree, its trunk has been moved to the Early Winters Information Center

