A History of Gold Mining on the Yankee Fork River, Custer County, Idaho

George C. Stephens
Field Guides to the Quaternary Geology of Central Idaho:
Part C.
History of Gold Mining on the Yankee Fork River, Custer County

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LOCATION

Refer to Stop 9, Figure 1 of Evenson and others, this volume. The Yankee Fork placer mining area and the Yankee Fork dredge are reached by following Idaho Highway 75 east from Stanley for 13 miles, to Sunbeam. Turn left (north) at Sunbeam toward Bonanza and Custer. This gravel road parallels the Yankee Fork. Approximately 3.5 to 4.0 miles north of Sunbeam, dredge tailings are visible for the next 5 to 6 miles along the banks of the Yankee Fork. The Yankee Fork dredge is located on the left (west) side of the road approximately 8.8 miles north of Highway 75. The old mining town of Custer, now a museum and historical site, is located another 2.2 miles to the north (see Fig. 1 of Evenson and others, 1988, this volume).

HISTORY OF NINETEENTH CENTURY GOLD MINING IN IDAHO

Early settlement of the Idaho Territory (established in 1863) was greatly influenced by the influx of prospectors and miners searching largely for gold and silver in its rugged mountainous regions. Many of these miners were first involved in the great California gold rush of 1848, and in its aftermath they slowly migrated to other promising areas of Nevada, Colorado, British Columbia and Idaho.

In 1860, E. D. Pierce made the first significant gold discovery in what was to become the Idaho Territory, on Oro Fino Creek in Clearwater County (approximately 60 miles east of the present town of Lewiston, Idaho). Subsequently, the discovery of gold on the Salmon River in 1861 inspired a rush to the Salmon in 1862, involving upwards of 10,000 miners. Later that year, placer gold was discovered in the Boise Basin. Lode mining began in earnest, with discoveries near Atlanta, Rocky Bar and Silver City between 1864 and 1869. Placer gold was discovered on Loon Creek, approximately 25 miles northwest of the Yankee Fork, in mid-1869 (Fig. 1).

Discovery of the rich placer and lode deposits of the Yankee Fork region began in 1870 (Idaho State Historical Society, 1976). In the spring of 1871, claims were discovered that produced $8.00 per day. In 1873, placer mining began along Jordan Creek, a tributary to the Yankee Fork located between the future sites of Bonanza and Custer. Still, the Yankee Fork discoveries created little excitement and only modest placer mining took place in the area from 1871 to 1874.

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In 1875, a lode deposit was discovered which was the likely source of the Jordan Creek placer deposits. One 2-to-3-inch-wide seam within a gold-quartz vein from this property yielded $11,500 by hand-mortar separation methods in a single month. From 1876 to 1879, the mine produced approximately $133,000, mostly through hand-mortaring. The town of Bonanza sprang up in 1877, and Custer was founded a year or two later.

In the spring of 1879, the gold rush to the Yankee Fork finally began in earnest. By the summer of 1879, the settlement of Bonanza had grown to a population of some 2,000 persons. Gold mining in the Yankee Fork district lasted for some twenty years, and as the more easily mined placer and lode deposits were exhausted, mining activity and population slowly decreased. By 1911, Bonanza and Custer were ghost towns.

Placer Mining and Dredging on the Yankee Fork

The Yankee Fork River has been dredged northward from a point approximately 3.2 miles north of its junction with the Salmon River to its junction with Jordan Creek, about 0.5 mile north of Bonanza (Fig. 2).
The dredged area is approximately 5.2 miles long and 400 feet wide (Choate, 1962). Jordan Creek has likewise been dredged from its confluence with the Yankee Fork to a point approximately 1.2 miles upstream.

The gold-bearing channel of the Yankee Fork has been described by one of the dredge operators as follows:

The "pay streak" or "pay channel" extends in a meandering fashion, the entire distance from Jordan Creek to the mouth of Yankee Fork. The pay is a very-distinct-appearing, decomposed clay with gravel. The pay streak is approximately 6 inches above bedrock; 8-10 inches thick, and 150 feet wide. On the bends the gold was always on the inside. (Choate, 1962).

Much of the gold in the Yankee Fork presumably came from Estes Mountain, down Jordan Creek which enters the Yankee Fork from the north between Bonanza and Custer. Drilling records indicate that the Yankee Fork above Jordan Creek contains only $0.16 gold value per cubic yard (at $35.00 per ounce) whereas Jordan Creek contains $1.00 to $3.00 per cubic yard (Choate, 1962).

In addition to these two major creeks that have been worked by dredges, Adair Creek, a tributary to the Yankee Fork near Custer, and Rankin Creek, a tributary near the southern end of the dredge workings have been either hand-placered or worked by bulldozer during the past century. They are too shallow to work by dredges.

Twentieth Century Placer Mining and Dredging on the Yankee Fork

During the 1930s, State Senator R. E. Whitten assembled options on a group of inactive placer claims along the Yankee Fork. These claims covered a strip of river bottom approximately five miles long. In 1932, the Yankee Fork Placer Mining Company acquired these options, bought in a small dredge and began mining. The operations ceased before any significant production because of unexpectedly large boulders and the tightly cemented gravels in the Yankee Fork riverbed.

A few years later, in 1939, the Silas Mason Company began a program of systematic rotary drilling on 100-foot centers to test the dredging potential of the Yankee Fork. Successful drilling results led to the formation of the Snake River Mining Company. An amusing account of the naming of this company is given in Packard (1983).

Showing little knowledge of the geography of the State of Idaho, and knowing only that the Snake River drained a large part of the state, the eastern-bound financiers casually adopted the name of the largest river for their company.

Early in 1940, a contract was signed with the Bucyrus-Erie Company to construct the Yankee Fork dredge. Assembly of the dredge took place in the Yankee Fork valley near the present-day Pocelcamp Flat Camp.

The hull of the Yankee Fork dredge (Fig. 3) is 112.5 feet long and 54 feet wide; it floats on 324 (10 x 10 x 27 foot) pontoons. The highest point on the dredge is the 64-foot-high stern gangway which supports the spud and the 105-foot-long stacker (Packard, 1983). The 17.5-ton
Table 1. Production figures for the Yankee Fork dredge from 1940 to 1952. (from Choate, 1952).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gold</th>
<th>Silver</th>
<th>Cubic Months Worked</th>
<th>Recovery Yards per Yard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>$31,745</td>
<td>$416</td>
<td>214,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>262,500</td>
<td>2,077</td>
<td>1,248,000</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>169,267</td>
<td>2,195</td>
<td>1,428,000</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>183,120</td>
<td>2,512</td>
<td>1,099,000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>99,440</td>
<td>1,359</td>
<td>715,000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>(42,315)</td>
<td>(1,064)</td>
<td>(631,000)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>(19,516)</td>
<td>(3,010)</td>
<td>(806,000)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>64,120</td>
<td>1,065</td>
<td>195,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>$1,023,025</td>
<td>$14,298</td>
<td>6,350,000</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Total gold & silver dredged by the Yankee Fork dredge ($1,073,323.00)
Total cost of digging 6,350,000 cu. yds. per $ 0.17 ($1,076,100.00)
Average gold and silver per cubic yard ($ 0.16)
Estimated cost of digging a cubic yard ($ 0.17)

The spud is attached vertically to the stern of the dredge, and during dredging operations its point rested on the river bottom, providing a pivot point for the dredge as it swung and loaded from side to side in the channel. The bucket line on the bow of the dredge contains 71, eight-cubic-foot capacity, buckets weighing over a ton each (Packard, 1983). The buckets would load and dump at a rate of 26 per minute and could reach to a maximum depth of 37 feet below the water surface. The gold-bearing gravel was then sized by screening and washed through sluice boxes where the ore was caught by a system of riffles and mercury traps. The coarser, non-gold-bearing gravels and cobbles were passed through the dredge to the stacker on the stern, which built the crescent-shaped dredge-tailings piles commonly seen at most places along the Yankee Fork. A schematic illustration of the Yankee Fork dredge in operation is shown in Figure 4.

REFERENCE


