

015001

92H/3W

British Columbia's Frustrating "GOLD HOLE"

"True -
- Treasure"
February
1974

By GERRY ERBERICH

In the Cariboo District of British Columbia, about a quarter of a mile past the Barkerville intersection on the Quesnel-Bowron Lake road, there can be seen a large, water-filled pit. Surrounded by heaps of gravel and rusting scraps of iron machinery, it is the remains of one endeavor by men whose dreams of golden treasure were confounded by the simple, though effective forces of nature.

At the bottom of this pit, a very rich deposit of placer gold is believed to lie.

During British Columbia's gold rush era, as in other locales, alluvial gold in incredible proportions was often found on top of bedrock. This was common knowledge to the group of enterprising men who organized and pooled their resources in the early 1940's. They planned a mechanized effort to remove the gold they felt certain was somewhere below ground near the confluence of Williams Creek and Willow River. This probability was not mere hopeful guesswork.

A half mile away, toward Barkerville, an early mining operation on the east bank of Williams Creek had revealed evidence of an ancient river bed. It had paralleled the present direction of Williams Creek before its course was lost when it veered north-northeast and down into the swampy valley where Williams Creek and Willow River join. Despite the fact that many thousands of dollars worth of gold was mined from the prehistoric river bed, no practical method was available to continue mining beyond the higher ground during those early days.

By the 1940's, things were different. Modern mining equipment was available, and early one spring morning a mechanized shovel was put into operation. It dug huge chunks of dirt and gravel from the selected site and piled an enlarging breastwork around the pit, barricading the nearby surface water from the deepening hole. Then, at a depth of some 60 feet, the shovel bit through a layer of very heavy gravel and the miners saw some-



This now-flooded pit yielded \$400,000 in gold during a short period in the 1940's. Another \$4,000,000 may await the man who devises a practical means of recovering the remaining gold.

thing that excited them. Here was bluish clay, identical to that which had yielded gold in earlier mines along Williams Creek.

Impatiently, they assembled their separator. It consisted of a large hopper and sluice device which was designed to break up the clay by water pressure pumped through nozzles that were aimed in different directions within the hopper. From the hopper ran a sluice of steel rails over perforated sheet-iron. A small pump provided a flow of water to flush the material from the hopper down the sluice. The much heavier gold, in the course of its travel, would fall through the perforations and drop into a trough below.

The men watched anxiously as cubic yards of clay and rocks flooded through the sluice. Finally, they removed the trough and saw irrefutable, glittering proof that there was indeed gold at the site. Now they cut ever deepening, stairstep levels into the pit. Each successive

cleaning of the sluice produced larger and larger quantities of gold. But a harbinger of disaster had already begun.

From the southeast wall of the excavation, at a depth of nearly 70 feet, a persistent trickle of water had developed. Then, suddenly, with an audible sloughing rush of mud, water and gravel, an underground spring broke through where the trickle had been. By the following morning, the mine was a lake.

Having moved their equipment to higher ground, the group next purchased a much bigger pump with a capacity of several hundred gallons of water per minute. After running it at full capacity for 24 hours, they succeeded in lowering the water only about an inch. Realizing that a dozen pumps could at best lower the water no more than a foot a day, they wrote off the possibility of pumping the pit dry.

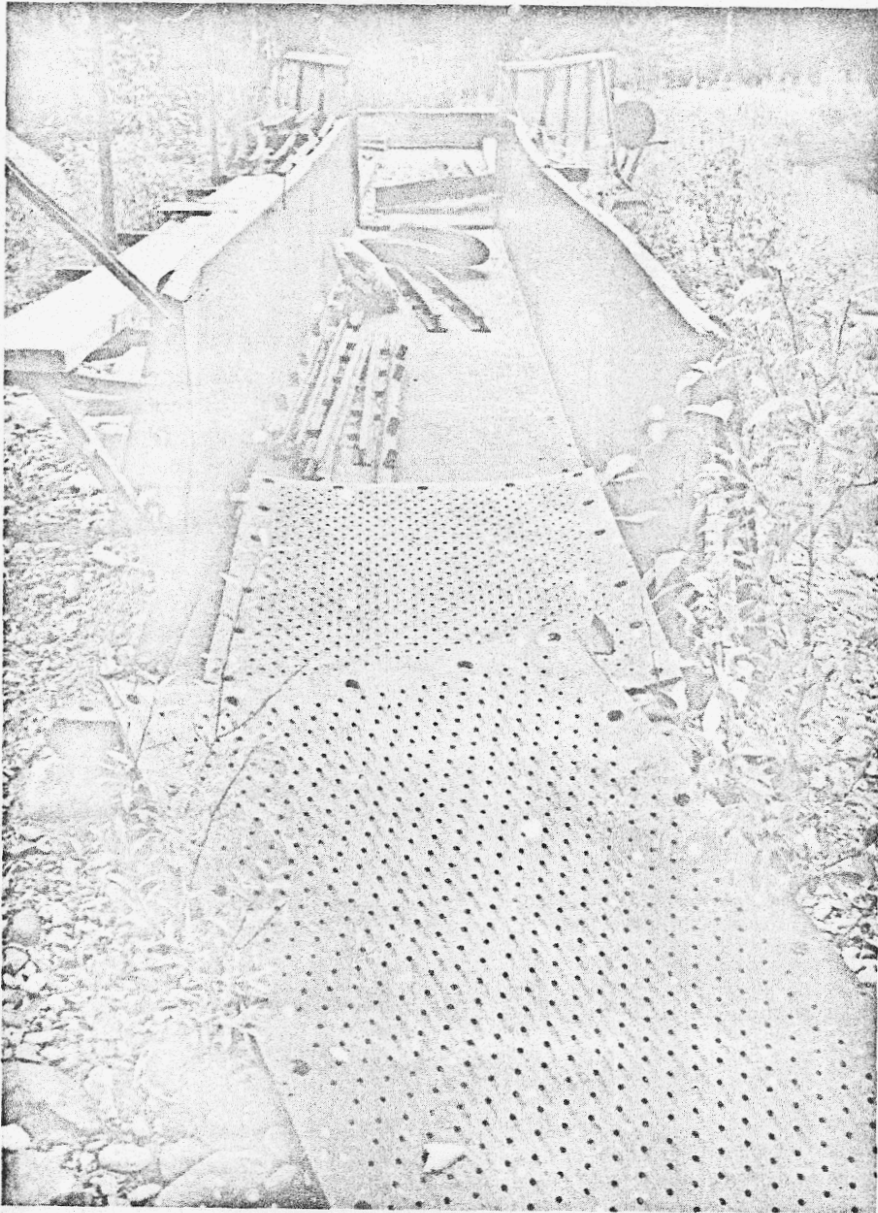
But after experimenting, they

There may be as much as \$4,000,000 in gold at the bottom of the pit, under only 80 to 100 feet of water. The question is, how do you recover it?

January-February, 1974

41

PROPERTY FILE
93H119-04



Perforated iron sheets lined the bottom of this sluice, allowing the heavy gold to drop through. During recovery operations, half of a four-inch long nugget stuck in one of the holes. Incredibly, the other half of the nugget was recovered from the tailings.



The "Gold Hole," above, looking east from near the separator and sluice. Deep water and an extremely rough, serrated

"Gold Hole" continued

found that by connecting long cables to their huge scoop and dropping it into the water, they could draw it across the bottom of the pit, then raise it and dump its watery contents into the hopper. Though a much slower procedure, they were at least continuing to extract quantities of gold. And the increasing richness of the take more than made up for the slower process of recovery.

Then, one day, the scoop snagged. Raising the cables, they eventual-

ly freed it, only to have it snag again in the murky depths. Perplexed, the miners tried dragging the scoop from different sides of the pit, always with the same result. A miner named Hickman, supervisor of the project, began to have a foreboding inkling of the cause of the trouble. He had his men sound the depths of the dredged pit from a raft. His suspicions were soon confirmed. They had reached bedrock, where the long-sought mass of placer gold was believed to lie.

Unfortunately, this bedrock lay in a saw-toothed, criss-cross pattern with deep crevasses between up-thrusting pinnacles of rock. Some of the fissures were 100 feet underwa-

ter, some peaks of the bedrock only 80 feet. The extreme depth of the pit itself was now a problem. Cables kinked and snarled. Because of the steep angle from pit-edge to bottom, the scoop could be drawn only a short distance before the ragged bedrock was encountered, stopping it completely.

Elsewhere, a global war was erupting. Gold mining was declared a nonessential industry. Confronted by all this, the men cleaned their sluice a last time. Among the ordinary nuggets was found a very curious one. It was unusually long, about the length of a man's thumb to the first joint. It was almost pointed at one end and strangely flat at the other. After examining it, the manager ran to the pile of tailings at the end of the sluice and began digging frantically. At last he found what he was looking for—the rest of the nugget!

Measuring nearly four inches long when whole, the nugget had apparently stuck end up in one of the sheet-iron perforations before rushing rocks sheared it off. The smaller end had remained in the sluice while the larger portion was carried away to the tailings.

Records indicate more than \$400,000 worth of placer gold was removed from this perplexing pit before the operation ended. At least \$4,000,000 more has been estimated to remain, tightly wedged in the

see. An. Rept. 1952. 236
1953. 175

Kumbhila Expl. Co. at Devlin
Bench.

*this picture was not taken at
Devlin Bench*



rock bottom badly hampered dragline operations, and finally the project had to be abandoned.



This mechanized shovel was used to dig through 60 feet of overburden to the blue clay. Below that depth each scoop of blue clay yielded gold—until an underground spring broke through and flooded the huge pit. By the following morning, the mine was a lake.

countless cracks and crevasses of the upthrust bedrock below. But unless someone comes up with an inexpensive method of removing this potential bonanza, the price of its recovery will be high.

"Not until the price of gold reaches a hundred an ounce," a long-time Cariboo mining engineer told me recently, "will it be worth the cost of getting it out."

"But for a \$4,000,000 take!" I exclaimed incredulously.

He smiled.

"You figure out a cheap way of doing the job, then cut me in. The Cariboo miners around here have been scratching their heads over that damn pit for 30 years now!"

One cannot help wondering how many more large nuggets like the

last one still remain in that watery hole, as well as who eventually may have the good fortune of finding out. And someone eventually will beat fate, just as sure as there's still gold in the Cariboo. Will that someone be you?

Any reader who thinks he or she may have a solution to the Gold Hole's riddle should first write R.H. McCrimmon, Department of Mines and Petroleum Resources, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and ask for a copy of the province's mining regulations and claim procedures. With that in hand, you should then take your next vacation in British Columbia, if at all possible, and visit the site personally. It is practically alongside the road to Bowron Lake, just beyond Wells, where all manner of things await the Th'er, ghost own buff and wilderness enthusiast.

Once you have seen the place, you may decide (like so many others before you) that your armchair scheme is impractical. But you won't find any trespassing restrictions, unless a claim has been filed since this writing, and kids splash around in the waters of the pit during the region's few warm summer days. No assessment work has been done at the site since the original frustrated efforts.

To file on this old claim, one has only to go to the Mining Claims Office, Government House, Quesnel, British Columbia (about 55 miles east of Wells), and fill out the necessary forms. Otherwise, tentative ownership remains with the original claimant, so far as I am personally aware. And, if all this sounds relatively simple, just remember it's that matter of getting out the gold that separates the men from the boys!—Gerry Erberich



"A curse on it? Don't be silly!"