

The Nugget

Gilpin History

September 2015

Never Trust a Fat Ghost

It's hard to find a more superstitious group of people than miners. At times it seems as if everything was a sign of bad luck to them. If a miner's light went out while he was working, it was a sign that his wife was having an affair. If a woman entered a mine, it was a sign that something bad was going to happen. If a miner dropped his tools while he was working, it was another sign something bad would happen. If his changes of clothes fell off their hook, it was a sign he was going to fall. Meeting a black cat or a howling dog while on the way to work, or having a bad dream the night before, would force a miner to stay home from work that day. It should come as now surprise, then, that the miners were also firm believers in ghosts.

In 1889, miners encountered a ghost with a blown-off arm in the Stevens Mine just over the hill in Clear Creek County. At his first appearance he walked into a charged shot as a group of miners stared in disbelief. When the dust from the explosion settled, he walked back out, covered in blood and gore and holding his severed arm over his shoulder. The men watched in shock as he calmly walked to the bucket hoist, rang the bell, and was pulled to the surface. The man running the hoist was a bit surprised when he saw nothing but an empty bucket arrived at the top. And he was quite puzzled when the other miners asked him in which direction the man with the blown-off arm had gone. That very same ghost was later seen at the Chippewa Number Six Mine in Leadville and the Mamie R. in Cripple Creek.

Many ghostly miners seemed doomed to relieve their deaths over and over. Miners frequently reported seeing a fellow miner crushed to death or blown up, only to find upon further investigation that there was no one there. After seeing the scenes repeated over and over, many living miners decided that the dead were trying to warn them of impending doom. One particular miner killed at the Morning Star Mine in Leadville returned for years to relive his gruesome death until the shaft where he died was sealed.

Central City has not been immune to mine ghosts. Perhaps the two most famous are Sebastian Zang and William Vine. These two men drowned in the Bates Hunter Mine, which is on the way to Black Hawk, on August 7, 1885, after a poorly planned explosion caused the shaft they were in to fill with water. They returned to the mine as ghosts and saved one man from an explosion and another from an accidental fall. Their most famous appearance, however, was when they saved several men from a cave-in at the Bates Hunter. After escaping from the mine, all of the men said that they had seen Zang and Vine holding back the crumbling wall and roof of the tunnel while the men escaped.

Perhaps the earliest appearance of ghost miners in Central City, however, was in 1868. That year a miner by the name of Mr. Conice was working the Saratoga Mine with two ghosts stopped by for a visit. The first seemed to be fairly ordinary looking miner except for the fact that he was missing his head. Conice did not seem to be bothered by a

site that would disturb most people, and the headless ghost greeted him very politely and asked if he would mind if a friend of his joined them. Conice said that he did not mind at all, and the headless man introduced his ghostly friend, who was an exceptionally fat man. If the fat ghost had been flesh and blood, Conice said, "he would have easily taken the grand prize at a hog show." Displaying remarkable calm under the circumstances, Conice talked with the two ghosts and even invited them to share his lunch. The two ghosts, apparently hungry, agreed, and the three started up the ladder to the top of the shaft. Why the ghosts chose to climb a ladder remains a mystery, although there was some speculation that the fat one feared he might not be able to float to the surface of the mine. In any case, when Conice was on the upper part of the ladder the fat one stepped on same rung and broke it, sending Conice to the bottom. His fellow miners found him with a few broken bones, and Conice vowed that he would never trust a fat ghost again.