

GHOST TOWNS – TARRYALL AND HAMILTON

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A mining rush often gives birth to mushroom towns that disappear almost as quickly as they rose. Placer mines are short lived almost without exception; settlements built on placer gravel soon become ghost towns. Such was the fate of the two camps whose story is recounted briefly.

Gold discoveries along the Tarryall Creek in the summer of 1859 brought a rush to the northwest portion of South Park. The rich lodes that had been discovered in the Central City region, following the initial find of John H. GREGORY on May 6, 1859, had already been taken up and gold seekers had scattered in all directions to search for other rich deposits.

Among the first prospectors to Enter South Park were W. M. SLAUGHTER, J. B. KENNEDY and Dr. J. L. SHANK. This little party was set upon by Indians on June 26, 1859, and KENNEDY and SHANK were killed. ¹ A party of miners from Gregory diggings organized a punitive expedition, went to the scene of the tragedy, and hunted for the offenders, but they did not succeed in locating the murderers. Indian dangers, however, did not keep other gold seekers from prospecting the region.

Under the title, "History of the Tarryall Mines," the *Miner's Record*, published at the Tarryall diggings in 1861, gives the following account of the first gold discovery in that district:

"On the 13th day of July 1859, fourteen men, W. J. HOLMAN, E. HAMILTON, W. J. CURTICE, M. N. H. SPILLIARD, Thomas CASSADY, A. D. BARNES, Wm. MITCHEM, WM. HORSEMAN, John WILLIAMS, James MERRILL, C. DALE, T. JENKINS, John ALDRICH, and C. CHAMBERS, set out from the Gregory mines to look for others. Following up Chicago creek, they crossed the Snowy Range at its head, and passing through the Buffalo Park, reached the Bayou Salado – now called Tarryall Creek, on the 19th of July, and pitched their camp on the bank of the stream, just below where the main portion of Tarryall creek now stands. Thus far no satisfactory prospects had been found, but near the camp mentioned, a hole was sunk and good 'color' obtained. Many of the party had become discouraged, and wished to turn back, but the new discoveries inspired confidence, and on the following day they followed up the stream and sunk a second hole just below the junction of the two main branches, in the middle of the gulch, on what is now known as the Bowers Claim. Good pay was struck, 'and the company made preparations to tarry-all.' The different branches of the stream were prospected with varying success, and Tarryall soon began to make a noise in the world. At Gregory and Denver, it was reported that 'pound diggings' had been found 'on the head waters of the Colorado,' and it being the year of

'stampedes' a tremendous rush immediately commenced for the New El Dorado, and thousands entertained the belief that if they could only get here, in a few days their fortunes would be made."

The *Rocky Mountain News* at Denver thus reported the gold discoveries on Tarryall Creek in its issue of August 13, 1859: "About two weeks ago reports came in of rich discoveries in the South Park on the head waters of the Platte. Day after day, other and similar reports came of fabulous strikes . . . Five days ago the rush began for the South park; ever since a continual stream of miners have passed through our streets. Wagons, carts, pack animals and footmen – all heading one way; all bound for the same destination – the head waters of the Platte." Mr. CAMPBELL, one of the discoverers, thus described the gold found: "It is in scales nearly as large as watermelon seed, smooth, and very bright yellow, worth from 25 cents to \$1.30 each." ²

The diggings were worked actively during the summer, and fall of 1859 and favorable reports continued to appear in Denver newspapers.³ The principal complaint was that the discoverers had staked all the good claims and none of value remained for the late comers. These latter dubbed the district "Graball."

In September, 1859, the miners got up a petition asking for the establishment of a mail route and a post office at "Tally All." ⁴ About 150 men spent the first winter in the camp, according to W. N. BYERS, who continues: "Some did well but a majority did nothing. A pit in the richest part of the gulch, on a claim the owner of which had gone east – was the bank of deposit, from which the hard-up drew their means of subsistence. Long before spring it had received the euphonious name of 'whiskey hole' and the locality is so called to this day." ⁵

With the spring of 1860 mining again flourished on Tarryall Creek. The new town of Hamilton, probably named for E. HAMILTON, one of the original discoverers of the diggings, came into existence. We read in the *Rocky Mountain News* of June 13th: "This young city {Hamilton}, laid out on the nearest suitable ground to the Tallyall mines, is growing beyond all precedent. It already has one wholesale provision store – that of ST. VERAINE and EASTERDAY, one drug store, six groceries, three boarding houses, one meat market, two physicians, one lawyer, one hotel, two blacksmiths shops, five stock ranches, one recorder's office, one justice of the peace, thirty-five buildings finished and thirty more under way. A saw mill is very much needed. This is fast work; when we passed over the site in April there was not a house up and a town had not even been thought of, or at least spoken of."

In late June , 1860, young Irving HOWBERT accompanied his father, Reverend HOWBERT, to the Tarryall mines. He writes: "Monday afternoon our party drove into Hamilton, which then was the principal town of the South Park region. It was located on the western side of the Park along the north bank of the Tarryall branch of the South Platte River, just below Tarryall Gulch. This gulch is about six miles east of the Continental Divide. Hamilton, Tarryall, and the adjacent country, at that time had a population of about five thousand people . . . A day or two after our arrival, father started out seeking members of his denomination with the view of establishing a mission at that point, as he had been instructed to do. He was so successful in his efforts that within a week or two he had found enough Methodists to make a fairly strong organization. Soon after this was perfected, it was decided to erect a church building which, necessarily, had to be made of logs, the only building material at hand. Subscription papers were circulated and sufficient money was secured in a few day to warrant beginning work on this primitive structure. . . .

"Hamilton, a long narrow town with one principal street, was located on the edge of a pine forest and as it grew extended back into the timber. Our lot was on the edge of this forest, and on and around it were numerous tall white pine trees. It was from those that we cut logs with which to erect our house. . . .

"The main street of Hamilton was without sidewalks, although by common consent a space next to the row of houses was used for that purpose. It was not an uncommon sight to see a horseman ride up to the front of a store and give his order through the open door without dismounting. Along this street there were many saloons, but very few stores. . . . I remember that one day while out on this street I saw a procession of forty or fifty burros coming from the south, driven by three Mexicans. Each burro had a sack of flour strapped on its back.

"Food supplies were fairly plentiful in Hamilton all that summer; moderately good beef was obtainable, and deer and antelope meat was abundant. ⁶

"In the summer of '60 a number of very rich claims were opened, and the miners began to learn the locality, and eccentric windings of the 'pay streak' which is nothing more nor less than the old creek channel, and pursues a course irrespective of present elevation and depressions, running under hills and hollows, table lands and ancient forests of timber." ⁷

United States mail service was brought to Hamilton and Tarryall in July. 1860, and a tri-weekly, four-horse stagecoach made regular trips to the towns. ⁸

The mines continued to pay well in 1861. In fact, the outlook was so promising that W. N. BYERS, founder of the *Rocky Mountain News*, brought a printing press to the district and established a newspaper, the *Miner's Record*. Here, as had been the case in Auraria-Denver, two rival towns faced each other across a creek. In Auraria-Denver BYERS had demonstrated his fairness by building his printing office on Stilts in the bed of Cherry Creek—for which neutrality he was later to suffer the loss of his establishment in the Cherry Creek flood of 1864. For the South Park venture he headed his paper "Tarryall Mines" and tried to laugh the rival towns out of their jealousies. In His first issues July 4, 1861, he writes:

"Hamilton and Tarryall are ambitious rivals cities, upon opposite sides of a brawling little river – nabout a rod wide – down which flows muddy water from the washing of some hundreds of miners in the gulches above. This river is not yet spanned by a submarine cable, or regular communication kept up by reliable steam ferries, as is the case between some points of our acquaintance East, whose pretensions are hardly greater. Consequently an 'irrepressible conflict' has arisen, and the interests of these cities would seem to a casual observer, to be as diverse and distinct, as are those of London and New York.

"Unfortunately the location of the *Miner's Record* is the bone of contention, and we are the unlucky atom threatened to be crushed between the 'nether millstones'. (Excuse us for mildly expressing the opinion that '*that little thing can't be did*'.)" Byers then goes on with a clever dissertation about the rivalry and asserts that if the quarrel continues he will move his paper to the summit of the continental divide and draw everything up to it.

As reporter and newsgatherer [sic], Mr BYERS made trips to Oro City (near present day Leadville), Breckenridge, and all the surrounding mining districts, and reported his findings. These articles have become exceedingly valuable source material for the early history of the region.

Of mining on the Tarryall in 1861, The *Miner's Record* reports on July 27, 1861: "About three hundred men are now employed in the main gulch and its tributaries, and the hills and banks adjacent. The yield of gold runs all the way from two and a half to twenty-five dollars per day to the man. Thirteen hydraulics are in operation, and a great number of large and long sluices. Many of the claims are worked by ground sluicing. Some miners are still drifting, which was the faorite plan of working until this year, but is necessarily imperfect. It is nothing unusual to find from one to five dollars to the pan, on the bed rock, but it lies deep, and a great deal of labor is required to reach it."

Even a private mint was established at the Tarryall mines in 1861. This was operated by John PARSON (or PARSONS) and manufactured gold

coins in \$5 and \$2.50 denominations. An image of a quartz stamp mill was shown in relief on one side of the PARSON coins.”⁹

The *Miner's Register*, a complete file of which is in possession of the State Historical Society of Colorado, contained advertisements of various business houses in the twin towns, but these were comparatively few, and the editor had to rely upon support from establishments in Denver. The placer mines were already passing their heyday, the newspaper venture did not pay, and on Sep 14, 1861, the paper suspended publication.

During the years immediately following mining, mining declined in the district. By 1867, O. J. HOLLISTER is writing of the prosperous first years: “in 1859 (the Tarryall diggings) were crowded with people. All the affluents of the creek were staked and claimed to their extreme sources. A plot was made of the town of Hamilton, which may be seen at the Hamilton post office, and is a right pretty map. A huge gambler's booth, running 20 tables, occupied the roomy plaza, and 500 people walked the streets seeking whom or what they might devour. All this has departed, and the town is dead to the waist, its seeming early promise having been broken to the hope.”¹⁰

Some miners continued to work on the Tarryall for many years, and indeed, placers are being worked there today; but the towns have long since disappeared. When the railroad was built into South Park in 1879, what little was left of Hamilton and Tarryall City moved to the railroad station of Como. Today it is with difficulty that one finds the sites of the vanished towns. Perhaps the most impressive present feature reminiscent of early mining in the district is the extensive piles of sluice tailings out of which now grows a thriving forest of tall firs and pines.

END NOTES

1. Rocky Mountain News, July 9, 1859

2. Ibid., Sept. 10, 1859

3. Ibid., Aug. 20, Sep 10, 17, 1859

4. Ibid., Sept. 29, 1859

5. Miner's Record, July 27, 1861

6. Irving HOWBERT, Memories of a Lifetime in the Pike's Peak region, 23-34. Mr. HOWBERT was fourteen years old when he came to Hamilton in 1860. He lives in Colorado Springs today, an honored citizen and pioneer.

7. Miner's Record, July 27, 1861

8. Rocky Mountain News, July 4-25, 1860

9. L. R. HAFEN, "Currency, Coinage and Banking in Pioneer Colorado,"
In Colorado Magazine, X, 85

10. O. J. HOLLISTER, The Mines of Colorado, 290

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