



DOWN THE TREASURE TRAIL

Copper Mines of Southeastern Colorado

This column is reprinted in loving memory of Clyde W. Blackburn, 1917-1999 (Barbara Oringderff, Editor)

While the mountains of Colorado are noted for the mining of almost all types of metal, it never occurred to me one type was also found and mined in Southeastern Colorado. This was brought to my attention when I received a 1965 issue of the Lamar, CO *Tri-State Daily News*. In an article by staff writer C. V. Mills, with the heading "Famous Carrizo Creek a Copper Canyon," it told of the many copper mines that once dotted the area. This was a region I had criss-crossed many times in quest of treasure and history. Using an 1876 atlas as my guide, I wondered why Carrizo Creek had

been known as Sheridan's Canyon at that early date.

When you enter Southeastern Colorado following present-day highways and roads over the flatlands, one doesn't realize that a few miles to the south is an area like no other. The land drops off into numerous colorful canyons with names to match. I surveyed this remarkable region I noted the top of what is known as Potato, or "Tator" Butte, famous enough to have been noted on maps of the 1860s. At the time I explored this corner of Colorado, I wasn't aware I was passing copper mine country.

According to the above-mentioned newspaper story, and the Baca County History



book, copper mines were numerous in the region. First and foremost is the Independence mine with a tunnel of 1,000 feet and an entrance 30 feet wide and 20 feet high. Filing for the mine was done in 1899 and the price for the ore ran around \$200 a ton. Many other mines were opened in the early part of the century, with names such as Blue Boy, Silver King, Evening Star, Black Bear, Emma O, Silversite and Black Dragon. It would seem no one became rich from their mining operations, although a load of high grade ore hauled to Pueblo smelters contained \$175 in copper, \$26 in gold and \$9 in silver. With no railroad and having to haul the ore with wagons to Pueblo smelters, not enough money was made to continue operating. In 1901 a smelter was built at the Independence mine, but it was short-lived. Iron ore was needed for fluxing for which there was a long wait. Then their well went dry and there were other troubles. Finally it was sold to the Pueblo Mining Company.

Independence Mine, however, refused to die. Late in 1923 it was again filed on. Among the four men who filed was an A. C. Rogers. So much faith did he have that he would hit the copper "mother lode," that he boarded up a cave next to the mine and lived there for years. As time went by he became too feeble to continue and spent his last days in a rest home in Springfield, CO, with his dream of striking it rich shattered.

There is one question which remains about the copper mines . . . how did they become into being . . . and when? The original settlers who came into the region were ranchers and farmers, not miners looking for precious metals. I have questioned many about the mines'

origins but no one seems to know. It was some years ago when a study was made of the "Ogam" marks found in profusion throughout Southeast Colorado. Some of these were thought to be of Celtic origin, the name given to prehistoric people of England. The problem with this is no copper artifacts have ever been found which the Celts would surely have had. There is always the possibility there were some which, over the years, were discovered and taken by local residents or hunters due to their unique look. Or, as any treasure hunter would reason, are there copper artifacts covered over by a thousand or more years by the passage of time? While this is a remote possibility, it does not agree with my concept.

For over 30 years I have made a thorough study of Spanish explorations to the north and east of New Mexico from 1600 to 1800. They didn't explore just for the fun of it. New Mexico was almost devoid of metallic ores and along with their penchant for gold, searched for other metals as well. Evidence the Spanish were in the copper mine area is confirmed by the discovery of items of Spanish origin throughout the Colorado-Oklahoma state line region. Research in the archives of New Mexico in Santa Fe, along with the study of Spanish diaries, gives further proof. If they came upon an outcropping of copper they certainly would not have passed it by. More evidence that the copper mines were likely of Spanish origin, is the finding of a Spanish item near one of the mines. According to my informant it was lying on the ground when a vehicle backed over it, crushing and destroying it.

In its pure form, copper is a very malleable metal which can be made into all manner of objects. That a copper item

was found which shattered when run over does not surprise me. In the last 35 years I have dug up many manufactured copper items which deteriorated after being buried but a hundred and fifty years. Many were corroded to the point they fell apart when unearthed. That unrefined copper is more subject to decay over time is certain depending on the chemical make-up of the soil in which it is buried. Thirty years ago I visited a collector to view his Indian artifact collection. I no longer remember who it was, but among his finds was a projectile point pounded out of copper, the only one I had ever seen. It had been found during the Dust Storm days of the 1930s in Stanton County, KS. At that time I had no interest in copper mines, but now I wonder . . . where did the copper come from?

Over the years I have become acquainted with a dozen or more archaeologists whose time is spent trying to locate historic sites, or attempting to prove an ancient civilization existed. Since metallic items of some manner are usually a part of early sites, or areas of habitation by man, use of a metal detector made sense. But only by use of a metal detector can one see under the ground's surface. Perhaps if those who are trying to find copper items to prove the existence of Celtic occupation would use one, they would be more successful.

And as far as the copper mines of Southeast Colorado are concerned, with the use of modern day, highly sophisticated instruments, even the "Mother Lode," might yet be found.

(Credit is given to Baca County History Book and the Lamar, CO Tri-State Daily news for parts of the information in this article.)

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