

The Great Gold Rush of Nome, Alaska

by Ron Wendt



Wyatt Earp made it to the big Nome Gold Rush, along with Tex Rickard and dozens of other post wild west cronies. They all came to the bleak Seward Peninsula in search of one thing—GOLD!

Placer gold had been known on the Seward Peninsula since about 1865. Gold was mined in the Council Region several years before it was known at Nome, and from this vicinity the prospectors set out and made the Nome placers familiar to the world.

Placer gold was discovered on Snake River in 1898 by a party that started from Golovin Bay to prospect the gravels of the Sinuk River. It is said that this party included N.C. Hultberg, J.J. Brynteson, H.L. Blake, and J.L. Haggalin. They worked their way westward along the coast in a small boat, but were storm bound for several



Nome City was young in this picture, taken in 1900.

—Library of Congress photo

days near the present site of Nome and spent the time prospecting the gravels of the Snake River. The results were not encouraging to a majority of the men, and they pushed on to their original destination. But, not having success on the Sinuk River, finally returned to Golovin Bay.

One member of the party, Brynteson, was sufficiently impressed with the prospects on Snake River to make another visit to the region. With two companions, Jafet Linderberg and Eric O. Lindblom, he returned to Snake River. They found rich placers on a stream they named Anvil Creek from a peculiarly shaped rock on a neighboring hill. They also prospected and located claims on Snow Gulch, Glacier Creek, Rock Creek, and Dry Creek. These streams have since proved to be the greatest producers of the region.

A rush to the region took place immediately after the news reached the miners about Golofin Bay, the Cape Nome mining precinct was formed, and Dr. A.R. Kittleson was elected recorder. It was then too late in the year for mining, but claims on some 7,000 acres were filed by about 40 men.

By the spring of 1899 rumors of the new gold field reached the outside world and started a movement in the Nome direction, which progressed during the summer until the population of the camp, then called Anvil City, was increased to nearly 3,000. A great proportion of this number was composed of disappointed gold seekers from the Yukon country. They found on arriving at Nome that most of the region had already been staked and that their opportunities for sudden wealth were as poor in the new camp as they had been in the camps they had recently left. An attempt was made by the newcomers to have all the claims staked up to that time invalidated so as to permit a general restaking of the creeks. This was defeated through the intervention of the military authorities, yet there was scarcely a claim that was not jumped—many of them several times.

One of the important events of the season—not only because it made known a new source of gold to the camp, but also because it helped a great measure to relieve the unrest and dissatisfaction felt by disappointed late comers—was the discovery of the gold at Nome beach. It was free to anyone who had the means to dig up the sand and wash it, and the shore was soon lined with a great crowd, each one at work on his little patch of ground. Although only the most primitive means were employed, over a million dollars was taken out in a



The Cape Nome Roadhouse. —Library of Congress photo

period of about two months, and the richest deposits of the beach were practically exhausted.

During this year the first newspaper was started, a mayor and town council were elected, a post office was established, and a United States commissioner was appointed.

The great rush of Nome took place in 1900. At the end of the previous summer many of the miners returned to the states, and the reports concerning the wealth of Nome were confirmed. A stampede comparable to that of the Klondike set in, and by the middle of summer it's estimated more than 20,000 people had arrived at Nome beach. Jumping of claims and litigation over mining properties continued during the year. One of the most important events was the discovery of deep gravels at the head of Dexter Creek, leading to the beginning of winter mining. Another event having a significant bearing on the future of the region was the construction of a short railroad, from Nome to Anvil Creek.

In the following year (1901) the Miocene ditch was begun. This ditch, the first of the system now bringing water from the upper Nome River to the placer ground near Nome, was originated by two experienced placer miners—W.L. Leland and J.M. Davidson. They were quick to recognize the importance of such a project and lost no time in carrying it out. Important extensions of the ditch were made in 1902 and 1903. The year 1901 also witnessed the installation of the first pumping plants for hydraulic mining.

Hydraulic elevators were introduced in 1903, and since that time improvements in mining methods have consisted chiefly in a reduction of costs by the use of labor-saving machinery.

A third beach, 3 miles north of Nome, was discovered late in the fall of 1904, and although there had been mining on the second beach for two of three years, the discovery turned the attention of most of the mining men toward the possibilities of the Nome tundra.

Since 1906, the important events include the discovery of several other buried beaches, notably the "intermediate" and "submarine" beaches, and the increased use of dredges in exploiting the coastal plain



Beach mining at Nome (circa 1899.)

—Ron Wendt Collection

gravels. The successful application of dredges had allowed gold to be extracted economically from low-grade gravels in the Nome region.

Until mid-summer 1899, the attention of the prospectors was entirely confined to the creeks and gulches, but late in

July the first discoveries of beach gold were reported almost simultaneously by Nome prospectors and by a US Army soldier who was digging a well.

One of the first to engage in beach diggings was an old prospector from Idaho by the name of John Hummel. It is said he was afflicted with scurvy and, therefore, could not reach the gulches. Hummel prospected the beach, and finding that it yielded a fair return, went to work with a rocker, taking out \$1200 in 20 days of work.

Albert Lowe bought a rocker box for \$20 made from soap and starch boxes and rocked out \$140 his first day on the Nome beach. He said he saw spots where the bedrock was literally covered with gold.

The commander of the United States Army post enforced a regulation that no claims could be staked within a strip of ground running along the beach, 60 feet in width, measured from the high tide water line. Within the reserved area all had an equal right to dig and wash the gravels.

The first big money was taken out by a well traveled prospector named William "Missouri Bill" Fee. Fee had discovered gold on Deadwood Creek in the Circle district in 1894. He later went onto Siberia to prospect after striking it rich on the Nome Beach.

Fee's biggest day came when he rocked out 129 ounces in one day. Of the first 1,500 men to start beach mining, most averaged 2-10 ounces per day. The prospectors had gone from "broke" to fairly wealthy in one day. Some miners took out \$30,000 to \$40,000 in just four months of work on the beach.

Every man in Nome, be he physician, carpenter, lawyer or barkeeper, dropped his usual vocation and went to work with a shovel and a rocker. Men who had been employed in the gulches at good wages flocked to the beach as well, and went to work for themselves. No capital for development was required, and anyone owning a shovel and rocker had an equal opportunity.

Anvil Creek gold, as a rule, is chunky rather than flat. Two nuggets worth approximately \$1,500 and \$1,700 were found on the Discovery claim. Many smaller nuggets were found, and pieces worth several dollars were common.

A 97-ounce nugget was found on Anvil Creek by Jafet Lindeberg. He found the nugget while digging a post hole on the west side of his mining claim. A pile of tailings had been covering the spot for a year and was removed



Beach mining at Nome (circa 1899.)

—Candy Waugaman Collection

the day before. This nugget was circular in shape, about 6 1/2 inches in diameter and 2 1/2 inches at the widest part.

Nome's largest nugget weighed 182 ounces, and was found on the property of the Pioneer Mining Company. A four pound nugget was also found in the same area.

Farther out of Nome, on Dome Creek off the Pilgrim River, a 35-ounce nugget was found on bare bedrock on the No. 2 claim of Crabtree & Waskey. It measured out at 5+ inches long by 2 inches wide. Crabtree found numerous nuggets valued at over \$100.

On Little Creek near Nome, a prospector mined 200 pounds of gold with a rocker box in 7 hours. Some places on Little Creek averaged an ounce per handful of paydirt. It proved to be the richest ground in the north for that time period.

On the Portland bench near Little Creek, Peterson, Johnson & Anderson had a quarter-inch paylayer of almost pure gold lying on bedrock. The miners could pick up clods of paydirt from the dump runs and visibly see gold nuggets with the naked eye, shot throughout the dirt. The gold was fine and resembled beach gold, and further investigation showed the claim to be an ancient beach line.

One of Nome's richest gold mines, if not the richest in Alaska, was the Hot Air Bench on the right limit of Glacier Creek.

Originally the claim sold for \$500. The claim produced \$75,000 from 100 square feet of bedrock. Sixty hours of sluicing yielded \$13,000.

The prospectors fanned out into the hills. One by one the strikes were made on the Seward Peninsula. Names like Kougarak, Candle Creek, Port Clarence, Solomon, became big money goldfields. The Bluestone River near Port Clarence began producing paydirt that was valued at an ounce of gold per seven gold pans of dirt. Over 90 pounds of gold were brought in from the Bluestone valued at \$20,000 with \$2,000 being coarse nuggets.

A few days later a nugget valued at \$360 was found on Bluestone.

Up in the Kougarak, one miner found more mammoth tusks than gold on his claims.

It was Carl Anderson, Nels Peterson and John Johnson, who shoveled out \$413,000 in sixty days from their Nome claim. Anderson had mined in the Rampart area for two years, and did his time in the Klondike goldfields. Nels Peterson had made a fortune already in the Klondike when his partner and he discovered Gold Hill. Peterson's partner, Nathan Kresge, had peeled back the moss on top of the hill exposing a half ounce



A handful of large Nome nuggets from the gold rush.
—Ron Wendt Collection

nugget. In eight days the two cleaned up \$6,375. Two days after they made the strike, a thousand prospectors joined them on the hill. They sold out their claim that winter for \$40,000. John Johnson, a top dog musher nicknamed "Iron Man," dug six shafts with his partners averaging 30-50 feet each near Little Creek. The success of these three men was summed up like this by fellow Nomeites; "The successful prospector must attain to success by the same method by which success is achieved in any other line of business. This method may be summed up in one little word which possesses a great deal of significance—work."

Jerry Gelvin was prospecting on Dahl Creek, picking apart frozen dirt and placing it into his gold pan. He washed out \$225.

Now success didn't all come by pick and shovel—it was being in the right place at the right time.

Robert Park went to the Klondike in 1898 and did not have any luck there, so eventually made his way to Nome. He partnered with a couple other destitutes like himself and they pitched a tent on seven feet of snow where the town of Nome would eventually stand. He made friends with the grounds owner, a Mr. Hoxsie, and agreed to buy the ground for \$200, which measured 50x300 feet.

Park arranged with the Alaska Commercial Company to buy a striped tent and a stock of liquor and cigars. Seventy days after he started he sold one-quarter of his venture for \$22,000. This enabled him to acquire other property. By 1905, Park had \$70,000 cash and \$100,000 in property.

In Nome's colorful past were a few zany individuals, such as the prank-ster who used to make red candles with dynamite fuses and roll them lit into the saloons to give patrons a scare.

Captain Storey, a well-known man from Nome, was accused of stealing a polar bear hide. He made his defense in court before a drunk judge. At the beginning of the case the court clerk reminded the judge there were only five jury members present. He said to go ahead anyway and that five is as good as six! As the case went on the jury decided the bear skin didn't belong to anyone in particular, and they agreed to keep it for ten days. If at the end of ten days the real owner didn't show up, the judge and jury would play cards for it and whoever won got the skin!

A body once washed ashore in Nome, but no one who gathered could identify him. Apparently the dead individual had floated in from a shipwreck off the coast. The body was secured to the beach with a stake until an authority arrived for proper procedure. Soon the commissioner and marshal arrived and the body was examined. A large frontier revolver was found strapped to the corpse. A small court session went into action and the case was tried. The dead man was fined \$75 for carrying a concealed weapon, and strange as it might seem, this was the exact amount of money found on the body. The gun was confiscated!

In 1899, Nome was described as a town having 20 saloons, 4 churches, 6 bakers, 5 laundries, 4 hotels, 6 lodging houses, 2 paper hangers, 2 tinshops, 2 photographers, 3 watchmakers, 2 meat markets, 1 book/stationary store, 2 dentists, 16 lawyers, 2 surveyors, 1 massage artist, 2 printing offices, 1 blacksmith shop, 2 contractors builders, 4 barber shops, 12 general stores, 3 second-hand stores, 4 wholesale liquor stores, 6 restaurants, 4 real estate offices, 3 packers & forwarders, 11 physicians, 1 bank, 1 confectionary store, 2 hospitals, 3 fruit and cigar stores, 4 drug stores, 1 brewery, 2 sign painters, 1 boot and shoe store, 1 mining engineer, 4 bath houses, 1 assay office, and 2 clubs. During its heydey, it was not uncommon for Nome to register a murder a day. It was a lawless town that boasted nearly 20,000 people, where the gold flowed free like the whisky in the saloons, along with a city full of con men and hucksters. 