

The Nome Goldfields

by Ron Wendt



Introduction

Once the home of Wyatt Earp, Nome, Alaska, boasted a murder a day in its early years. It was truly a wild town.

Nome has a colorful history built on gold, where over 5 million ounces of the yellow metal has been dug up. Due to limited space, only a tiny fraction of this mining district can be touched upon. It would take volumes to cover all the information on the Nome goldfields.

History

Placer gold was first known about on the Seward Peninsula in about 1865. J.J. Brynteson, with two companions, Jafet Linderberg and Eric O. Lindblom, officially discovered gold on September 20, 1898, when they found rich placers on a stream that they called Anvil Creek, named 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.

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, 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 recently left.

Up to the middle of the summer of 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 from a soldier from a United States Army barracks, who is said to have found gold while digging a well, and by some prospectors in Nome.

One of the first reported to engage in beach diggings was an old prospector from Idaho by the name of John Hummel, who, it is said, was afflicted with scurvy and could not reach the gulches. Hummel prospected the beach, and finding that it yielded a fair return, went to work with a rocker and took out approximately 60 ounces gold in 20 days of work.

Albert Lowe bought a rocker box for \$20, made from soap and starch boxes, and rocked out approximately eight ounces his first day on the Nome beach.

A well-traveled prospector named William "Missouri Bill" Fee discovered gold on Deadwood Creek in the Circle District in 1894. He later went on to 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.

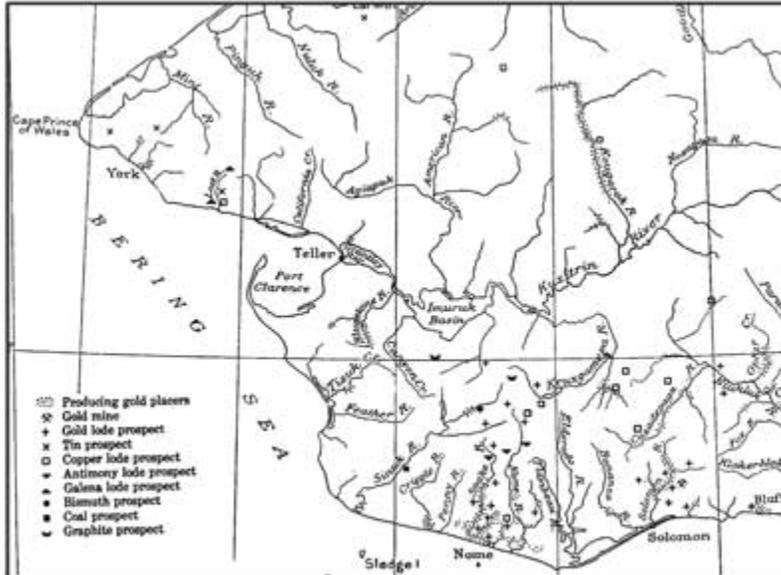
Of the first 1,500 men to start beach mining, most averaged 2 to 10 ounces per day. The prospectors had gone from "broke" to fairly wealthy in one day.

Needless to say, the Nome gold rush was legendary. The gold poured out of the creeks in such huge quantities, it was unfathomable when stories were told of Nome's richness.

Geology

Many gold-bearing veins and mineralized zones cutting the schist bedrock have been discovered, and on several of them development work was conducted for many years.

Other valuable metals and minerals, including bismuth, antimony, copper, graphite and scheelite are found in the Nome District.



Nome is located at the bottom center portion of this 1907 map that depicts early mining prospects.

Residual placers are produced by the decay of gold-bearing rock, and the removal by solution or by water and wind transportation of the lighter products of decomposition—the heavy minerals remaining in a natural concentrate. This process is common and is of economic importance where the residual minerals are valuable and occur in sufficient amount to return a profit in mining.

Such concentrated minerals, when compared to those found in streams or on the beach, are seen to have moved relatively short distances from their original bedrock positions, and the movement may be considered as downward rather than horizontal. It is evident that accumulations of this kind are favored by very long, continued weathering, and are the result of sub-aerial rather than stream activities.

Stream placers in the Nome region are of two kinds. Most important are those where gold seems to be a first

concentration resulting from weathering of gold-bearing rock and accumulation of the gold in the channels of streams that carry away the products of weathering.

The second kind of stream placers comprise those where gold is concentrated from gravels of a previous period of deposition. Such placers are well represented on those streams that arise within the coastal plain, and on the lower portions of streams that cross the coastal plain. The gold of this concentration is not derived directly from the bedrock source, but from a supply disseminated throughout the gravels in which the stream is cutting.

Mining Methods

Several mining methods were employed over the years including hydraulic and open-cut mining. In earlier days, miners drifted on claims in the Nome area. Beaches were worked by hand methods using rocker boxes and long toms.

By 1921, about 65% of the gold recovered was by dredges and large hydraulic elevators. In 1922, there were 22 bucketline gold dredges operating on the Seward Peninsula.

Gold Producing Creeks

Anvil Creek. Anvil Creek gold, as a rule, is chunky rather than flat.

Jafet Lindeberg found a 97-ounce nugget on Anvil Creek in the early 1900s. The nugget was found while a posthole was being sunk on the west side of his mining claim. A pile of tailings had been covering the spot for a year and had been removed the day before. The nugget was circular in shape, about 6½ inches in diameter and 2½ inches at the widest part. There was some quartz in it, and the surface was corrugated in some places and worn in others. Nome's largest nugget, 182 troy ounces and the largest found in Alaska and the Yukon, was found on the property of the Pioneer Mining Company in 1901. A four-pound nugget was found nearby in the same area, recovered from a sluice box.

The average for all the gravels mined along the creek cannot have been less than a 1/4-ounce per cubic yard in the early days. In the richer spots, much of the gravel contained more than 2½ ounces of gold to the cubic yard.

Gold-bearing gravel of unusual richness was discovered in the bench. The thickness of the gravel ranged from 4 inches to 4 or 5 feet, and the greatest concentration of gold was in its lower part. Gold was also present in the bedrock. The gravel was overlain by 12 to 14 feet of yellowish clay, which contrasts sharply with the more usual covering of about 3 feet of peat muck. The bedrock at this location is graphitic schist with an irregular surface, but is not cut by any well-defined channel.

The richest gravel of Anvil Creek was that on Discovery claim and in its vicinity, where the coarsest gold was found. From that locality, the average size of the placer gold decreased downstream, as would be expected, for the lighter particles would be transported further by the water.

With the gold were a number of concentrated heavy minerals—magnetite, garnet and scheelite were most common.

Specimen and Nekula Gulches. These are two small tributaries of Anvil Creek. Nekula Gulch is one-third of a mile long and heads near the saddle of Dexter station. The bedrock is graphitic and chloritic schist, calcareous schist, and limestone. The stream gravel averages about three feet in thickness and consists of schist, quartz and some limestone.

A short distance north of Nekula Gulch, and about 50 feet lower than the saddle between it and Deer Gulch, very rich gravels were discovered in a hole, which seems to be a cavern or sink in the limestone bedrock. The pit made in the gravel was about 30 by 50 feet in area and 20 feet deep. This auriferous deposit was probably a part of the high-bench deposit.

Calcareous schist, enclosing a bed of limestone, forms the country rock. The hole contained gravel consisting of rounded schist fragments, and limestone in yellow clay most likely carried into it by running water. The gold mined here was coarse and angular, and appeared to have traveled only a short distance from its bedrock source. The gravel was remarkably rich; its gold content was estimated as close to 55 ounces a cubic yard in the early 1900s.



Just south of downtown Nome, across the street from the beach, lies the historic Swanberg Dredge. The dredge operated until the 1950s.

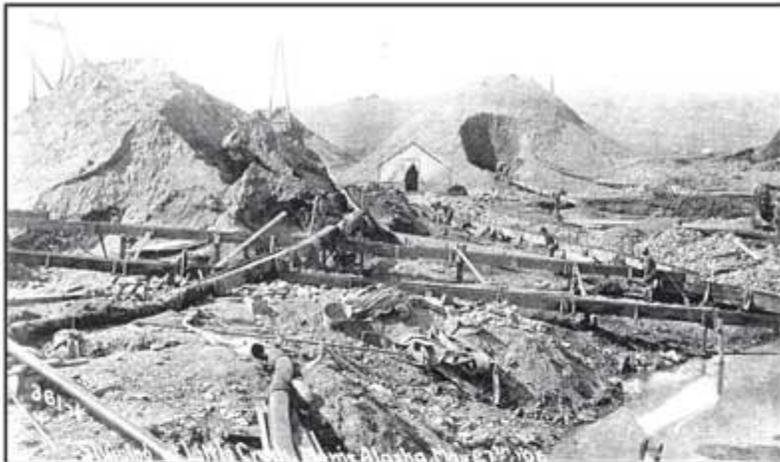
Glacier Creek. One of Nome's richest gold mines, if not the richest in Alaska, was the Hot Air Bench on the right limit of Glacier Creek.

It is estimated that the paystreak carried nearly 3 ounces gold to the cubic yard. The gold is believed to have originated from the mineralized schist and quartz veins found in the immediate vicinity.

Little Creek. A miner once recovered 200 pounds of gold with a rocker box in 7 hours time on Little Creek. On No. 1 Little Creek, some places averaged an ounce of gold per handful of paydirt.

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 evidence showed the claim to be an ancient beach line.

Carl Anderson, Nels Peterson and John Johnson shoveled out over 15,000 ounces gold in sixty days from their Nome claim. Peterson's partner, Nathan Kresge, had peeled back the moss on top of the hill exposing a half-ounce nugget. In eight days, the two recovered over 300 ounces gold. 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 averaging 30-50 feet each with his partners near Little Creek.



(Above) A sluicing operation on Little Creek in 1906. (Below) Another view of the mining operation on Little Creek in 1908.



Pioneer Gulch. Residual gold deposits are mined at Pioneer Gulch, on the west side of the Snake River just below the forks. The bedrock is schist, cut by small veins of quartz containing iron pyrite, and stained with the oxide resulting from decomposition of the pyrite.

Part of the gold and part of the fragmental material, although it is not rounded nor waterworn, has probably moved some distance down the slopes, but some of it appears to be almost in place. The free gold is coarse and angular.

Snow Gulch. Considering its size, Snow Gulch was one of the richest streams discovered in the Nome region, with more than 48,000 ounces recovered from 3/4 of a mile in 1913. Most of the gold was fine and rounded, but it is not believed to have traveled a great distance; part of it at least, was probably derived from gold-bearing veins in the immediate vicinity.

Bourbon Creek. At the head of Bourbon Creek, gravel mined in winter and piled in a dump yielded over 1/2 ounce per cubic yard when washed in the Spring in the early 1900s. Other ground consistently yielded 1/4 ounce per cubic yard.

Dry Creek and Newton Gulch. About a mile north of the present beach, auriferous gravels from 3 to 5 feet thick

were found resting on a slightly undulating clay bed. This paystreak was said to be 150 feet wide, and was mined with an average value of about 1/4 ounce per cubic yard. The gold is chunky. The pay gravel rested on the clay and was not found in or below it. Hematite, scheelite, and pyrite accompany the gold, with magnetite present in the

concentrates on the upper part of the creek. Many of the larger pieces of gold contain fragments of quartz. Besides gold, the concentrates contain magnetite, ilmenite, scheelite, and garnet.

Dexter Creek. Gold was found near the mouth of Dexter Creek, at a depth of 5 feet below the surface, resting on a false bedrock of blue clay that continued up the stream half a mile. The paystreak had a thickness of 3 feet and consisted of schist, quartz, limestone and a small amount of greenstone. The gold was also comparatively fine. Half a mile above this point the gravel reached a thickness of 6 feet.

Large boulders of limestone occur in the deposits, and sticky yellow clay is abundant. A 4-ounce and 1¼-ounce nugget were discovered on Dexter Creek.

Grass Gulch. In general, the gold is well worn and shows the effects of travel. Several nuggets of considerable size were discovered in the early 1900s, the largest of which was 22 ounces.

Current Status

Mining continues today across the Seward Peninsula. There are the usual prospectors that mine the beaches. A large suction dredge operation has been mining off the coast, working the ocean floor. Backhoe, bulldozer, washplant and sluice operations can be found on Nome area creeks.

Other Notable Finds

Farther out of Nome, on Dome Creek off the Pilgrim River, a 35-ounce nugget was found on the bare bedrock on No. 2 claim of Crabtree & Waskey in the early 1900s. It measured out at 5½ inches long by 2 inches wide.

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

Billy Banta found much coarse gold on the Kougarok River, and found a 2¼-ounce nugget in the tailings with quartz adhering to it.

The best reported returns on beach mining in Nome were secured from an exceptionally rich spot about seven miles west of Nome. Three men using one rocker, in forty days time, took out over 1,500 ounces. From a hole twelve feet square and four feet deep, they rocked out over 430 ounces in three days.

Sources

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