

Chapter 10

THE AUTOMOBILE GOLD RUSH IN 1930S ARIZONA

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Today the foremost image of the 1930s that remains in our national consciousness is undoubtedly the “down and out” lifestyle. Even those far too young to remember the times have this image from school textbooks, from documentary films patched from old newsreels, and from stories of grandparents. Scenes of bread lines, of makeshift shanty towns called “Hoovervilles,” of “Okies” crossing the country in broken down trucks, symbolize the era.

Surprisingly, many individuals who might have otherwise been in similar circumstances found a nominal job and a place to live through mining. The smallest operations accounted for less than 3% of total gold production. Nevertheless, they certainly enhanced the psychological state of their workers who could feel much more productive than many other victims of the Depression.

The very economic structure of the times contributed markedly to gold mining. Inflation had been the general condition of the early twentieth century through the 1920s. But in a deflationary economy, gold became more valuable relative to other commodities. The U.S. Mint insured this principle with automatic purchase of all gold for \$20.67 per ounce, advanced to \$35.00 by early 1934. John W. Finch, Director of the U.S. Bureau of Mines, summed up the principle most succinctly, “the time to mine gold is in hard times.” His quote became a standing proverb of mining.¹

Indeed, the mining community recognized the probability of such an event somewhat earlier in Arizona than in other gold regions. Though Arizona had several important newspapers in the 1930s, the *Arizona Republican* in Phoenix was the leader in reporting all developments relating to mining in any form. As early as May of 1930 the *Arizona Republican* (renamed the *Arizona Republic* a few months later) published articles which specifically linked lay offs then under way by the larger copper mines with the feasibility of small operations returning to placer gold locations at or near stream beds with small scale equipment.² The predicted event materialized in force within the next two

years in such manner that the most appropriate name is unquestionably “The Automobile Gold Rush,” while many participants can only be described as “amateurs.” California naturally led the movement, yet Arizona saw similar activity through much of its extent.

By August of 1930 an even more significant news story appeared which was indicative of the early stages of the overall movement. Near Globe, Arizona, a local youth, Jess Wolf, recovered nuggets in a gulch. He exhibited his find, totalling two ounces, in the town of Globe where copper miners were just then being discharged by the major mining firms. A local rush ensued. Significantly, Jess Wolf was age seven, and did not use any equipment at all. The story went out on through the United Press (UP) wire service so it circulated throughout the country. By the end of the 1930s an official federal report on the entire event specifically noted that widespread news stories of placer gold discoveries by children had helped set the stage for the “Automobile Gold Rush.” Thus Jess Wolf, along with several other children in California’s Mother Lode who received news coverage, had impacts on history far beyond their personal gold recovery.³

Another early development in Arizona forecast the overall pattern of the “Automobile Gold Rushes.” The town of Prescott in north central Arizona had originated in the 1860s from placer gold discoveries. With the realization that an “Automobile Gold Rush” was developing, attention naturally turned to locales of historic production. Prescott and surrounding streams and mountains in Yavapai County led Arizona’s list of places with potential.

As early as August of 1930 the proprietors of the Red Bank Placer Co. publically announced their intentions to use heavy equipment to develop several mining claims that they owned in south Yavapai County. However, they anticipated a lag of fully six months before they could bring on the necessary machinery. In the interim they encouraged the unemployed to work the same areas by simple pan-

ning, though they would have to provide their own equipment, food, and shelter. The owners, John B. Ehrnhart and Vernon E. Grove, went so far as to announce that a nugget worth \$195 had been recovered the week before.⁴

Throughout the West the owners of large deposits frequently allowed parties with small scale equipment to work areas of known potential prior to introduction of their own heavy machinery. Virtually all areas with placer potential on federal lands were well known and had long been claimed under the mining law of 1872. Indeed, many of these lands had gone on to private ownership as allowed under that law. The fact that the "Automobile Gold Rush" could occur at all shows the spirit of the times.⁵

So the basic economic conditions were evident, the story was circulating through modern communications, and there were even locales available for mining. The "Automobile Gold Rush" was ongoing in Arizona by the summer of 1930, an earlier date even than California. Yet Arizona had another advantage in promoting an early start to this major event.

Under Director G. M. Butler, the Arizona Bureau of Mines contributed to the "Automobile Gold Rush" as early as 1931 by issuing Bulletin 132 which was essentially a guidebook on locations and methods feasible for the average person. An amateur could learn simple gold panning in a few hours. With basic carpentry skills anyone could construct a cradle or rocker, as the '49ers had used, or larger devices known as long toms and sluice boxes. The Bureau sold some five-thousand copies of Bulletin 132 within a year, then issued an expanded edition, Bulletin 135, in mid 1933.⁶ A guidebook alone simply does not have the personal touch that an actual instructor can bring to any subject. In this area, too, the Arizona Bureau of Mines took an early initiative that led all the other Western States. The Bureau already employed a leading staff member, George Fansett, who had years of field experience along with background in public appearances throughout the state. Fansett had graduated from Yale University in his hometown of New Haven, Connecticut, in 1905. However, he had spent the next decade in various graduate studies interspersed with work as a field geologist for mining firms in the Western U.S. and Latin America. He joined the Arizona Bureau of Mines in 1916 just in time to embark on his first research and educational odyssey across the state as provoked by the national crisis of World War I.

The demand for copper naturally had skyrocketed. A mass of prospectors scoured the West for indications of copper ores. Fansett himself made field investigations over much of Arizona and presented lectures on the topic at many locations. He also wrote a classic bulletin as published by the Bureau of Mines, "Field Tests for the Common Metals," which soon attained the unofficial title, "The Prospector's Bible." On one trip he even rescued a lost prospector who was in serious danger from dehydration. Even before the "Automobile Gold Rushes," Fansett was already widely known as "The Prospector's Best Friend."⁷

When a second great national crisis emerged in the Depression, Fansett again made dozens of research and educational trips. As early as September of 1930 he was again speaking on mineral identification for prospectors. And, once again, he rescued an unconscious prospector from death. This rescue, near Kingman, was on one more lecture tour.⁸

By early 1931, though, Fansett was focusing on placer mining and methods for the average person who had no experience at all rather than the rather technical mineral identification courses for professional prospectors. He presented these basic lessons in lectures as well as two-day short courses. Newspapers all over Arizona noted that Fansett would be coming, then followed-up after his presentations. In many cases several hundred people attended single lectures. *The Arizona Republic* published the full text of his lecture at Prescott in March 1931, just as it printed speeches of major political figures, thus showing the importance of the official promotion of "The Automobile Gold Rush."⁹

Fansett was the primary author of Bulletin 132 as well as the expanded version of 1933 when he added his experiences over the prior two years. He reported "thousands" of contacts under conditions ranging from desert to mountain streams. His courses continued through 1934. Director Butler gave several talks over radio stations in Phoenix and Tucson which further encouraged the "Automobile Gold Rush." Further, the Bureau's office at Tucson answered many letters and analyzed samples. The Bureau also conducted field tests and experiments to find the most profitable methods. A study of the Cherry Minnehaha placer mine near Waggoner was particularly notable since ore was transported by burro train back to the laboratory. Exhibits at county fairs as well as the annual State Fair also added to interest in mining. Awards often went to the largest nuggets, along with superior examples of crops or livestock.¹⁰

The basic impact of the Bureau's efforts can not be underestimated. Of those who took up placer mining during the Depression, only 10% had any prior experience. Fansett's courses and guidebooks inspired many more to make the attempt. Indeed, the only equivalent state agency which made a greater contribution was California. There State Mineralogist Walter W. Bradley obviously commanded a much wider forum, and was widely quoted throughout the nation. However, his agency did little until 1932.¹¹

Ironically, the federal government issued a guidebook, but offered little else until 1935. In fact, the US Bureau of Mines actually cut its staff at its office at the University of Arizona. Three of the six staff members, each with over a decade of federal experience, found themselves out of work just a few months after the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt had begun. Yet just a few months earlier the Arizona Bureau had hired two new professional staff members primarily to test samples. Further, Fansett taught many of his courses at camps of the federally sponsored Civilian Conservation Corps.¹² Elsewhere, Idaho had a fine state program which cooperated with that state's leading newspaper to encourage placer mining, but overall Arizona was the leader in officially promoting "The Automobile Gold Rush."

Most victims of the Depression possessed nothing but the ability to perform unskilled physical labor. This basic fact led to the infamous exploitation of the "Okie" farm laborers, as described in John Steinbeck's classic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The same principle applied in placer mining, but the fact that the worker was working for himself made it a different situation. A healthy adult male could shovel perhaps 10 cubic yards of material per day into a sluice box which could bring perhaps 1/10 oz. of gold or about \$2.00 but \$.25 per day was more realistic. A rocker could process four cubic yards while an average gold panner could work perhaps 50 pans in an eight hour day for only 1/4 cubic yard.¹³

So what was actually happening in the gold fields? E.J. Webster sent a story to the *New York Times* in mid-1932 which stated a rather remarkable revival of optimism [is evident] in Arizona. Just why is hard to explain on actual conditions.

Not only does the spirit of the old-time, ever hopeful prospector prevail, but there are an increasing number who are earning a fair living from placer mining...[with] a

recent invention whereby the present day miner can handle from 6 to 12 times the quantity of pay dirt that was possible with pick and pan...miners, often tenderfeet, are making \$3 to \$15 a day.¹⁴

In June of 1932, Sharlot Hall, a leading citizen of Prescott, wrote a less enthusiastic summary of her observations:

The closing of the copper mines has thrown thousands of people out of work and half the towns in Arizona are like abandoned places. All winter people went away if they could go and along the railroads and highways people from farther east struggled to get into California and the warmer regions of southern Arizona. They begged for food and for gasoline to keep going—many of them having cars of some sort—and the little local settlements were just swamped as with a retreating army in wartime. Now that it is warmer they are spreading out into the hills and mountains in the hope of placer mining and getting a few cents a day out of the gravel bars that were worked over fifty years ago. Sometimes they really do pan out a few cents—or once in a while get a dollar or more—but the old diggings are very lean of gold—having been worked over all these years.¹⁵

Ironically, Sharlot Hall's own family had done much heavy hydraulic mining of placer gold in the prior century that left little for the small operators of the Depression. However, local conditions could make big differences. In the Prescott area major concerns had long operated along Lynx Creek. Nearby Big Bug Creek had as much gold but had so many scattered large boulders in the stream that use of large equipment was unfeasible. So Big Bug Creek became the locale of many of the most marginal participants of the Automobile Gold Rushes. In 1932 some 60 amateurs were working there and recovered as much as \$300 per week total including some handsome nuggets of several ounces. The Hassayampa River also had considerable amateur activity, while Copper Basin had favorable conditions for large equipment which recovered \$5000 in April and May of 1932. Several other locales in Yavapai County had 25 to 50 amateurs working during this period.¹⁶

The typical participant was definitely not the single male adventurer of the earlier gold rushes, but was

usually a family member, often a woman or child. Sharlott Hall's description brings to mind the semi-fictional Joads of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The present writer interviewed a miner who had come from a rural area in Texas as a teenager with his family on the way to California. However, the family took up placer gold mining and subsequently stayed in Arizona as copper miners. So some did benefit from the event despite Sharlot Hall's observations.

Another reporter for the *New York Times*, Tom White, inspected the living quarters and conditions of many families in the gold fields across the West and described their foods as generally adequate and wholesome, though cooked in a Dutch oven over an open fire. Most families seem to "make do as well as when they had a refrigerator, gas range, and radio." He described a typical campsite and other dwellings

A canvas awning is spread between the tent and the jacked up automobile. When it rains, this protected space serves as the living-dining room. The car with a cutaway front seat, provides comfortable sleeping quarters...Cabins and shacks, unoccupied for decades, whose ancient roofs have long ago collapsed, have [with repairs] responded nobly to the needs of the miner of 1933.¹⁷

Fully one-third of Arizona's gold came from Yavapai County alone. Commercial operations naturally accounted for the largest volume but the accomplishment of one amateur miner, Austin Flores, bears repeating. In the Bradshaw Mountains south of Prescott, Flores used simple methods. Even so, the total for the summer of 1931 that he sent to the San Francisco Mint was \$450 but that was in grain sized gold only. He held on to several nuggets.¹⁸

The city of Prescott made the most of available resources to fight the Depression. An association that owned 160 acres of placer claims allowed the unemployed to keep whatever they could recover. The City, County, and Chamber of Commerce cooperated in providing equipment. A "practical placer miner," managed the enterprise. The first 107 shifts produced gold valued at \$54 for an average of 50 cents per shift.¹⁹

However, the amateur miners could provide local benefits as well. In June of 1932 two serious forest fires broke out near Lynx Creek, one of the main

placer areas near Prescott. Two groups of miners successfully suppressed both fires.²⁰

A number of areas outside Yavapai County also had notable developments. In the spring of 1932 the Superintendent of Schools at Willcox, a gentleman with the incongruous name of Tom Sawyer, made a personal survey of placer activity in south central Arizona. He delivered a major speech at the famed Copper Queen Hotel in Bisbee and noted activity especially at Gleeson and throughout the Dos Cabezas region. He estimated 60 active workers evident in the latter area, three times the number as just the year earlier. Several of these miners had been local policemen in the copper town of Miami, Arizona, but the collapse of the red metal had forced the local government to lay them off. Some miners in the Turquoise and Tevis Mining Districts averaged \$3 per day.²¹

By the end of 1932 placer activity had picked up around Douglas in southeast Arizona near the border with Mexico. Chuck Nation found a nugget there which contained 63 ounces of gold.²²

One family operation was particularly interesting. Joseph Turner shoveled materials into a simple rocker at Aguajito camp in the Papago District on the Indian Reservation of that name west of Tucson. His daughters, Annie and Hester, both students at the University of Arizona, rocked the device. Over the summer of 1932 they made enough to pay tuition. They were fortunate. Near the end of the year the Registrar of the District Land Office rescinded a 1915 order by President Woodrow Wilson which had opened the Reservation to mining. A total of 1000 small miners and prospectors were affected, as well as the tribe which sold permits for mining there (in contrast to public domain which was "free and open" to all). However, by mid-1934 a special Act of Congress reopened the Reservation and even compensated the Papago tribe for the loss of fees during the shut down.²³

In far western Arizona placer materials are present in a number of places with no reliable water sources nearby in a harsh desert environment. Even so, human ingenuity made some use of these deposits, especially in Yuma County around the town of Quartzsite, and in Mojave County around Oatman and Kingman.

During the Depression a number of successful operations used wind instead of water to separate lighter materials from heavier gold particles, using a device consisting of a screened hopper and feed box

and an inclined tray with cross riffles and cloth bottom. Beneath these parts is a bellows. Two men generally operate the device, one working the bellows while the second fills the hopper and examines the materials moving by gravity down the inclined tray. One inventive individual used an electric fan instead of a bellows to separate the lighter materials, then panned the residue with what little water was available.²⁴

Unfortunately, overall gold recovery is substantially less with dry placers than water methods. These locales returned to production later than most others in the Automobile Gold Rush. Further, there is a tendency to lose nugget sized gold since the method works best for only grain sized materials. Several cases were recorded of nuggets thrown out with the waste. Dry placer devices could process only two or three cubic-yards per day. It is no wonder that Fansett specifically recommended water placer methods by "hook or crook" when possible, even if earthenwork dams and ditches were only filled for brief periods during the annual rainy season. Many deposits would have been valuable had any water at all been available.²⁵

An individual operator in Mohave Co., Arizona, A.E. Lewis, proved this point by recovering \$1000 in the fall of 1933, or \$10 per day, a most substantial sum for the time. Lewis, working alone, used two sluices and an amalgamation plate and pumped water from a well 1/2 mile away. An area of two by four miles near Oatman, Arizona, had many scattered areas of placer gold but not enough water to prove profitable. Mrs. "Tap" Duncan prospected the area for many years and found many promising samples but never located a source vein which could have been workable with larger recovery methods.²⁶

Certainly, water could make a big difference, but a number of families survived only with "dry washers." The King Tut placers in Mohave County were rich enough to support commercial dry washing. A device in use there in 1933 processed 25 tons per hour for a return of 69 cents per yard. Nearby Mr. S.C. Searles used a similar plant to process 20 cubic yards per hour at the Gold Basin Placers. A colony described as "100 former Mexican miners" operated dry washers near Ajo, Arizona. They also reclaimed old automobiles from a dump and repaired them at the camp.²⁷

By law, the miners had to sell gold directly to the U.S. Mint or to licensed buyers in local areas who held a required permit from the Mint. It was gener-

ally to the miners' advantage to sell directly to the Mint but a sale had to be at least two ounces (which had been lowered from five ounces in mid-1931). Many miners simply could not wait until they had accumulated two ounces so they sold smaller amounts to licensed buyers at about 80% of the Mint price. However, most licensed buyers also owned country stores and gave regular miners a better buy.

The present writer personally interviewed Robert Lenon, an "oldtimer" who had lived in Yuma, Arizona, where substantial placer activity had developed. Lenon recalled that the owner of a local store, Eugene Sanguinetti, used a set of balances to weigh gold dust. This practice had been common through the West in the last century but had fallen out of use in the early 20th century.²⁸

Other accounts of licensed buyers of interest include W.J. Martin, storekeeper at Bumblebee, Arizona, in Yavapai County. In 1932 he reported monthly purchases of \$80 with a similar total going to other buyers in that area. In Yuma County, E.H. Rhodes purchased \$2,296 total for 1932 from miners in Gila City and Muggins. At Nogales the average price was \$19 per oz., certainly more favorable than Tucson prices of \$14 to \$16. One miner sold a two-ounce lump of gilded lead to a "greedy" Tucson buyer, "And it served him right," according to the seller.²⁹

In 1935 some 1,184 different individuals made sales to licensed buyers in Arizona. Thus Arizona stood fourth among the states in these small sales. California led with nearly 20,000 while Oregon's total stood at 3,229, but Arizona compared quite favorably with Idaho at 1,314 and Colorado at 1,047. Each sale usually represented the work of an entire family or group of partners. The average person who made any sales at all did so two or three times during the year for an annual total of \$72.30

With the price advance of 1934, larger commercial firms returned to mining. However, even business oriented production took many forms. Small concerns could purchase mechanical gold processors for a few hundred dollars. The best-known of these devices became known as the Denver Gold Saver after the firm which produced it, though several other firms built similar models. Many such devices operated in the Prescott area. The manufacturers of one typical model, the G.B. Portable Placer Mining Machine of the Mine Smelter and Supply Co., advertised 95% recovery. Their device could process two cubic yards per hour and could run six

hours on one gallon of gasoline. With a weight of 510 lbs., it could be broken down and transported on two mules.³¹

Further, some mechanically minded individuals constructed devices of their own. As early as 1931, a Phoenix inventor, W.E. Mendenhall, demonstrated a device which processed eight cubic yards of placer materials in one hour and 45 minutes. Clearly his device was better than many commercially manufactured models but the average person did not have his means; Mendenhall owned 620 acres of placer claims. Another home made device on Lynx Creek near Prescott was the handiwork of George Wilson and his sons, Robert and Bronson. It weighed 300 lbs. and used a Maytag washing machine engine.³²

A.E. White of Chandler, formerly a welder, put together a wide range of used parts from cars, washing machines, sewing machines, and other items. However, his process reused water many times, certainly a consideration in Arizona. An invention by J.F. Gibson of Tucson was recognized as functional and original enough to draw recognition from the U.S. Patent Office. Less realistic was the work of George Kettle who attempted to recover very fine gold from split cabbages placed in a drum along with placer sands. The gold would presumably adhere to the cabbages and could be recovered when the drum was drained. *The Arizona Republic* reported this effort with a "tongue-in-cheek" style. However, the overall efforts by purported inventors are a further testament to the movement.³³

Perhaps the most spectacular outcome in utilizing home made equipment was the work of Dominic Maffeo. Maffeo leased the Smuggler placer mine on the San Francisco River, five miles downstream from Clifton. By himself, Maffeo built pumps, a hoist from an old Dodge for a dragline, and a large sluice box and grizzly. He could process 1000 cubic yards of gravel per day, probably a record for any individual. With that volume, a recovery of 15 cents per yard represented a substantial return.³⁴

Also in the area of unusual adaptations of equipment, Gus Williams's mine near Nogales still employed an arrastra. This was a circular area used to crush large chunks of ore into smaller ones which could then be processed. Draft animals continuously walked in a circle around the arrastra dragging a huge stone attached to a central column to crush the ore. The arrastra, known from ancient times, became commonly used in Latin America but was obviously outdated by 19th century, when stamp

mills replaced it. However, it required very little capital. In mid-1932 Williams replaced the mules on his arrastra with an old auto which did the work of 10 mules. He was fortunate enough to have discovered a shallow vein which produced \$50 to \$100 per ton, one of the few small miners able to work this type of ore.³⁵

Prescott and areas near Safford, Arizona, were at high enough elevation that sufficient water and placer gold were present to justify even larger equipment, namely dredges. Other areas had enough gold and water for some heavy equipment though not quite large enough to be termed dredges. At least three rather substantial firms operated gold dredges in Arizona during the Depression, employing perhaps two dozen workers each.³⁶

Places long believed to be nothing more than ghost towns suddenly returned to the boomtown status that had built them generations before. In mid-1932 George Fansett, who was travelling all over Arizona anyway, made a survey of locales where he found any activity. His summary of locations became part of the revised edition of *Arizona Gold Placers and Placering* (Bulletin 135).

A particularly dramatic example was the town of Ruby in south central Arizona which today makes a good tourist stop. Its redevelopment in the 1930s helped preserve it for the long term. By 1935, activity was great enough to justify construction of a new road into the town, 32 miles from Nogales, Arizona. Construction would provide employment for transients, however the mines were already employing 300 so the town had a total population of 1000, quite a reversal from virtual ghost town status.³⁷

A smaller example was more typical. Also in the south central part of the state, a placer camp at Greaterville became active. There gold flowed off the nearby Santa Rita Mountains and had led early prospectors to name a stream the Ophir after King Solomon's mine in the Bible. Greaterville had produced a nugget of 37 ounces in the early days but Fansett found only 10 to 20 working there at the time of his 1932 survey. Other Arizona ghost towns which saw revivals in the 1930s included Congress, Cleator, Goldroad, and Red Rover, but they returned to ghost town status with World War II.³⁸

Areas that had histories of gold production naturally attracted the "Automobile Gold Rushers," but at least one entirely new placer camp developed on Castle Creek several miles from Congress Junction.

Harry Spangle, an "oldtimer," displayed a nugget 2 1/2" by 1" which was worth far more as a collectable item than its value by weight at \$130. Soon W.O. Wills of Wickenburg was commercially developing the area and had employed a crew of 15 by mid-1933. The remoteness of the discovery from any existing mines qualified this as an entirely new mining district.³⁹

Professional prospectors could still find new mines and were present in numbers, thus forming an integral part of "The Automobile Gold Rushes." George Fansett still interspersed some of his lectures on simple methods with the more advanced materials on mineral identification. By 1934 he had updated the classic publication, "Field Tests for Common Metals," which was released as Bulletin 136 in 1934. Some 7,500 copies quickly disappeared into the hills thus confirming that it still was the unquestioned "Prospector's Bible."⁴⁰

In early 1932 several discoveries near Yuma drew national publicity. The discoverer gave them the name the Santa Claus claims, thus adding to their news interest. United Verde Extension, one of the leading firms in the region, paid \$30,000 for them. The development prompted still another reporter for the *New York Times* to view the event in much the same way that his colleagues had when reporting amateur placer mining. Edwin J. Wheeler wrote:

Old and young prospectors have again loaded the patient burros...The spirit of the pioneers, which above all is one of hope, still rules in Arizona. For in gold prospecting the real lure is not what you get, but what you expect to get tomorrow, the next day, in the near future. Hundreds of prospectors roamed the area; on just one day, April 14, 1932, they filed over one hundred mining claims.⁴¹

Similarly, at Quartzsite, Arizona, in the far western part of the state, a number of amateurs lived in tents in early 1933, while one small professional firm dug a shaft. The firm was able to sell one pound of gold per week, for a weekly gross profit of \$330.⁴²

One woman prospector's quest provided enough "human interest" to merit a story in the *Arizona Republic*. Mrs. Betsy O'Reilly Gamble began a trek across remote western Arizona. Two "Indian guides" accompanied her.⁴³

Still another "human interest" story involved an "oldtimer" who had lived at the Arizona Pioneers

Home in Prescott [which is an important landmark there and is still in operation]. Even though he could only walk with a cane, his memories of prospecting in the last century forced him to leave the home in the spring of 1933 on a quest for gold. He sent letters to friends still in the home which were postmarked from Congress Junction, Arizona. Unfortunately, his handwriting was illegible but the recipients naturally let their imaginations carry forth the discovery of a new Comstock by a friend who had sat reminiscing with them.⁴⁴

By mid-1932 even Yavapai County, so thoroughly prospected since the 1860s, saw a major new discovery and resultant rush of several hundred. Two prospectors, Bob Wormbacher and Linn Derrick, discovered a vein which assayed \$10,000 to the ton near Cherry Creek. They named their claim the Lucky Bird. Significantly, the father of one of the prospectors, L.M. Wormbacher, worked a long-standing claim only one mile away. Pristine riches could still be located in the 1930s and these could still be found at the surface rather than deep in existing mines. In the spring of 1933 the Director of the Arizona Bureau of Mines, G.M. Butler, stated that 3,000 gold prospectors were active in the State. He emphasized that these were legitimate prospectors, attempting to locate undiscovered ore deposits for ultimate commercial development; in other words they were not the amateur placer miners.⁴⁵

So how did it all end? With the guaranteed gold price raised to \$35 by the Mint in early 1934, and a silver subsidy that same year, the event might have been expected to continue indefinitely.

Obviously, the overall field of mining became a great career choice, especially considering the general state of the economy. As early as the fall of 1933 Dr. Thomas Chapman of the Department of Mining Engineering at the University of Arizona reported that every graduate from his department who had finished just the prior spring had already found a professional job.⁴⁶

And that was the difference. Professionals with major mining firms essentially took over a movement that amateurs had clearly initiated and maintained for the first few years. The higher prices justified the return of heavy copper mining since gold and silver were important by products that gave many mines just enough profit margin to reopen. By 1937 copper production was almost up to levels of the 1920s. The "Automobile Gold Rush" continued but large firms increasingly dominated the field as the 1930s wore on. Placer mining tapered off

with depletion of deposits recoverable with small methods.

A letter from an independent placer miner named Wyatt Smith to Sharlott Hall is most revealing. Smith had mined around Prescott, but moved to a placer area in Oregon where he had made enough to support three sons. However, the owners of the lands had contracted a major firm to bring in a heavy dredge. Smith planned to continue on other good placer lands that he had located in Oregon or to return to Arizona where he also had mining contacts. His letter was dated December 1, 1941.⁴⁷ Within less than a week the Depression would be over and the federal government would soon eliminate gold mining but subsidize industrial metals. The "Automobile Gold Rush" was history. Inflation has essentially kept it from recurring, aside from the late 1970s when gold prices reached near \$900, but then simple survival was not the motivation. Thus the "Automobile Gold Rushes" in Arizona and elsewhere were a recurrence of events even then totally unexpected. Most news reports stressed a theme of an ironic replay of the great rushes of the 19th century. Clearly, the participants themselves sought adventure as well as income, much as did the stam-peders through the 19th century. There is a marked psychological dimension to the entire event as historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who died in 1932, would have observed.

The Western region of the U.S. was the least affected by the Depression, after the initial years, largely because of the "Automobile Gold Rushes," though such federal programs as construction of the great dams also aided the West. The government officially estimated that 10% of the population of California, attempted placer mining at some time in the 1930s.⁴⁸ Certainly, Arizona's total was similar if not larger.

Tragically, the government which ostensibly bought all the gold for currency backing simply buried it at Ft. Knox; in fact the Treasury built this famous facility because of the "Automobile Gold Rushes." Instead, more circulating money could have ended the Depression within six months at any time the government had determined to issue additional currency on a sufficient scale. The "Automobile Gold Rushes" had the potential to rescue the entire nation from Depression but World War II finally forced the government to do so by issuing the additional currency under the threat of a powerful hostile foreign military.

Notes

AR is the *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix)

E & MJ is the *Engineering and Mining Journal*

NYT is the *New York Times*

DP is the *Denver Post*

CC is the *Cripple Creek Times Record* (Colorado)

PC is the *Prescott Evening Courier* (Arizona)

1. Walter W. Bradley, "An Echo of the Days of '49," E & MJ, vol. 135, no. 11, pp. 494-496. L.H. Robbins, "'Off Gold' the Nations Still Feverishly Seek the Metal," NYT, May 28, 1933, Sect. VIII, p. 2.

2. "Urge 'Sniping' at Placers in Yavapai Area," AR, May 25, 1930, Sect. 4, p. 10.

3. "Youth at Globe Finds Nuggets in Lost Gulch," AR, Aug. 10, 1930, Sect. 2, p. 6. Robinson Newcomb, Charles White Merrill, and R.L. Kiessling, *Employment and Income from Gold Placering by Hand Methods*, 1935-1937, Report E-14, (Philadelphia: U.S. Bureau of Mines and U.S. Works Projects Administration, June 1940), pp. vi-vii, 13.

4. "Miners Given Opportunity to Work Red Bank Placer Claims," AR, Aug. 14, 1930, Sect. 2, p. 6.

5. The present writer addressed the mining law of 1872 in depth in *Stake Your Claim! The Tale of America's Enduring Mining Law* (Tucson: Westernlore Press, 1991), with chapter 11, pp. 193-210 specifically focusing on the Great Depression.

6. Arizona Bureau of Geology and Mineral Technology [Eldred D. Wilson], *Gold Placers and Placering in Arizona*, Bulletin 168, (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona, 1961), pp. 9-10.

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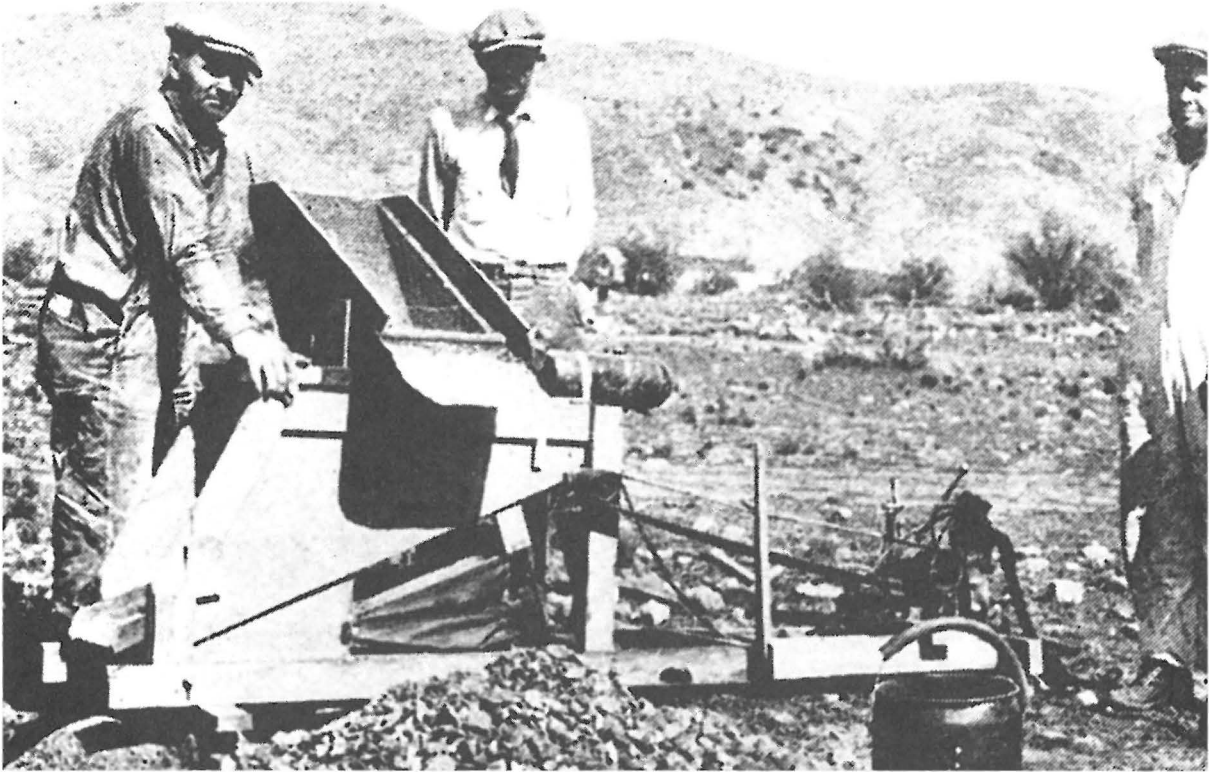
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Dry placering, 1932. Courtesy *Engineering & Mining Journal*. Reprinted by permission.



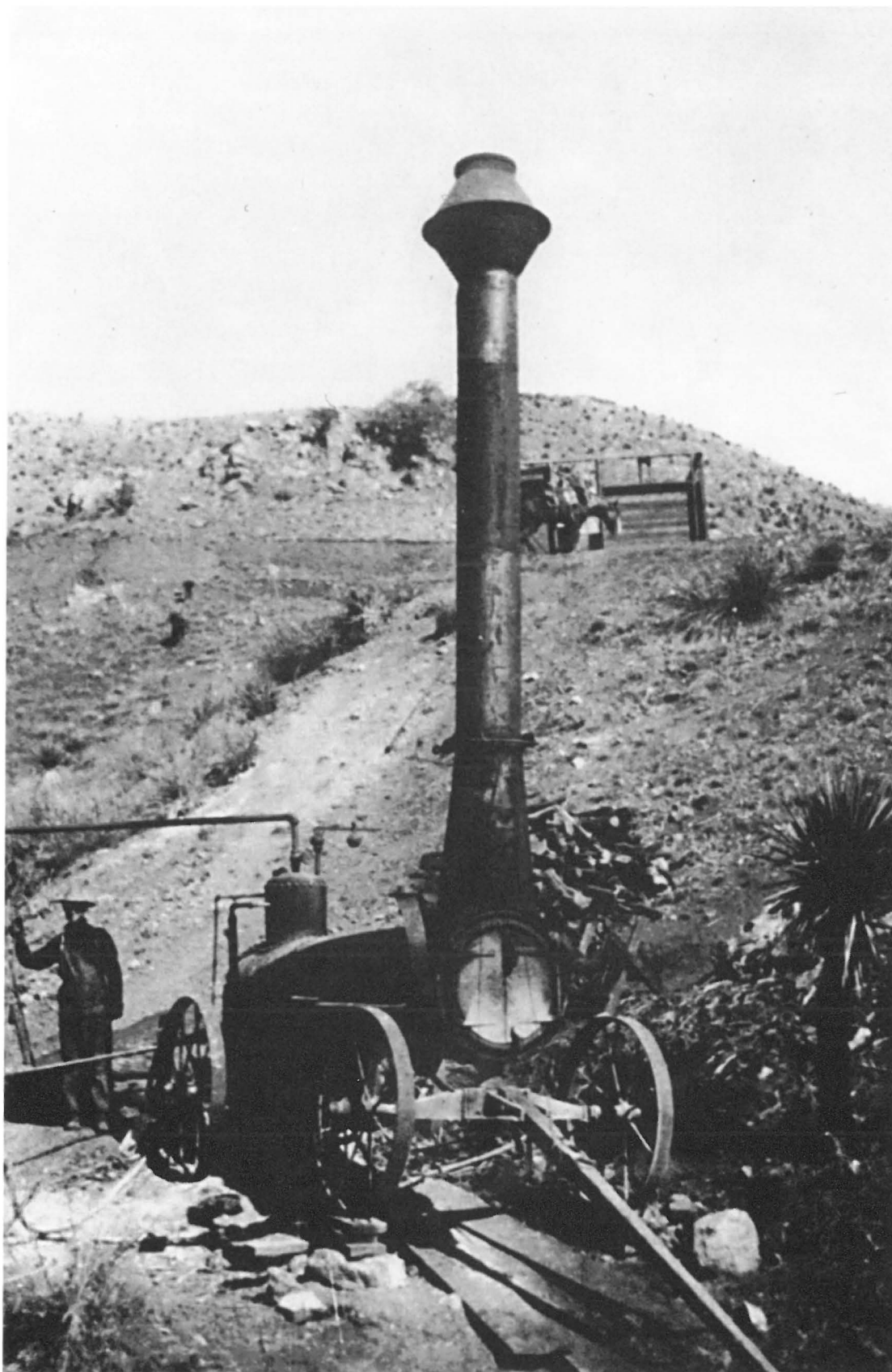
A portable sluice box, 1932. Courtesy *Engineering & Mining Journal*. Reprinted by permission.



Sluicing in Slaughter House Gulch, Stanton, AZ 1913. Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson.



Dan B. Genung using rocker to look for gold, base of Rich Hill, 1913. Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson.



Man with steam engine near Heletia, ca. 1900-1902 Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson.



Panning gold, 1936, Greaterville. Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson.



Automobiles at Mining camp of Cobabi Mine, owned by S.G. McWade, ca. 1910. Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson.



Automobile stuck in Big Bug Creek, June 1911 Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson.



Unidentified mine, Yavapai County, August 1937. Courtesy of Sharlot Hall Collection.



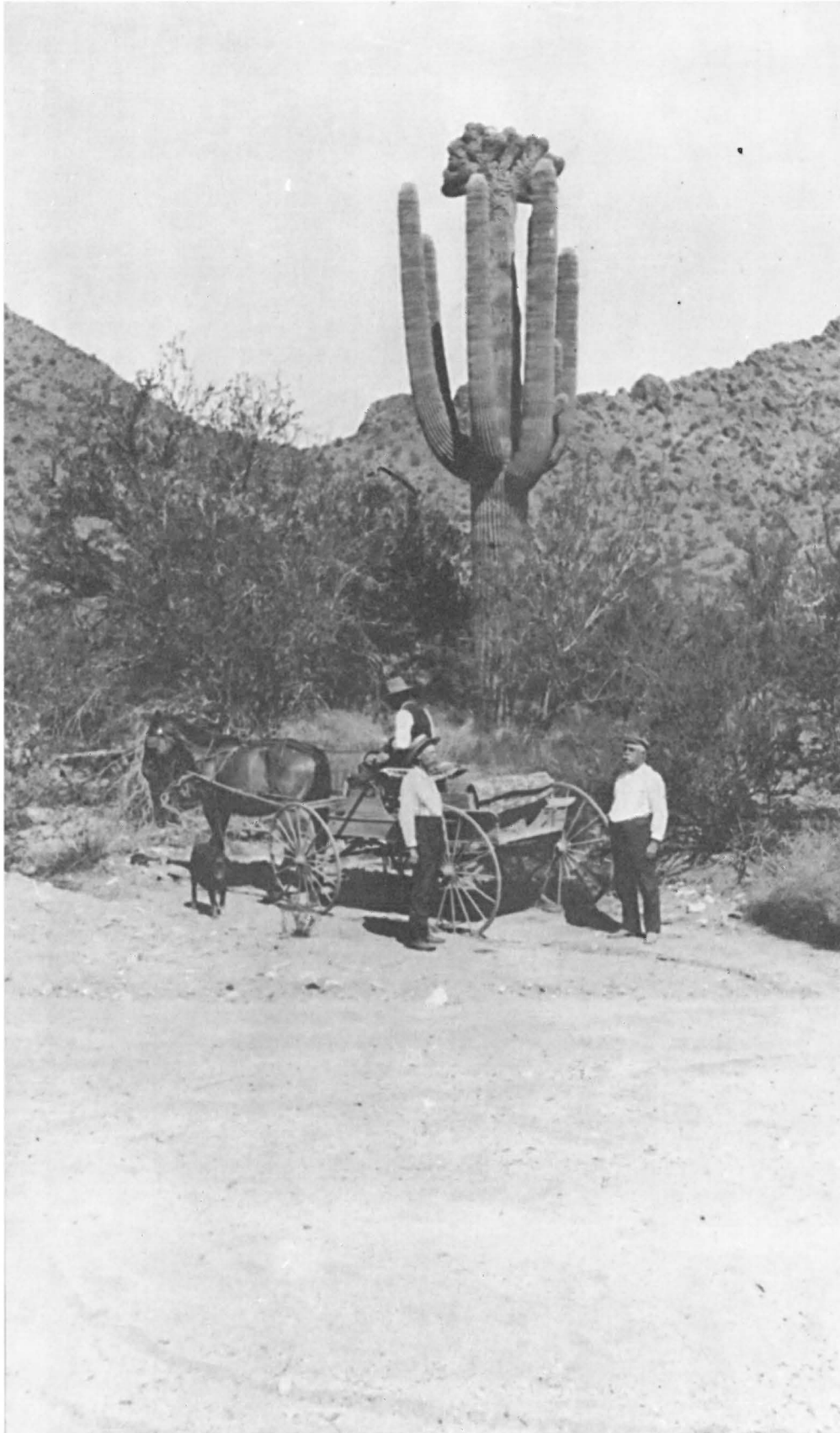
Dredge - Lynx Creek, c. 1930. Harp Bros. and McGuire Operation. Courtesy of Sharlot Hall Collection.

BURRO-CREEK--1940. CYANIDE-GOLD-RECOVERY.



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Giant cactus, c. 1908. A.L. Flagg Collection. ADMMR



"Stuck" in Arizona. Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson.

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J. Michael Canty
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Michael N. Greeley

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