



## Parked in the Past

### Parked in the Past - Boom and bust on Bross in the 19th century

When silver reigned: 1868-1893

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It was 144 years ago, on March 9, 1869, that Daniel Plummer and Joseph Myers, both of Alma, filed claim on the first silver mine on Mount Bross northwest of Alma. They called it the Dwight.

The adjoining property – the Moose Mine – on which Plummer and Myers filed two years later, was the most productive in Park County, according to an 1880 book by Frank Fossett, “Colorado, its Gold and Silver Mines, Farms and Stock Ranges and Health and Pleasure Resorts – Tourist’s Guide to the Rocky Mountains.”

Plummer first arrived in Park County in July 1865 and settled in Montgomery (near the top of Hoosier Pass, now covered by the waters of Montgomery Reservoir). He was superintendent of the Pioneer Mill there.

Myers was a native of Pennsylvania and an 1860s Park County pioneer. He lived in Montgomery and Buckskin before settling in Fairplay, according to his obituary in the June 4, 1897, Flume. He became a trustee on the Fairplay town board on April 2, 1880.

Both Myers and Plummer had been searching for a rich discovery; they found it at the Moose in 1871 on the 13,600-foot level of Mount Bross.

#### **Dolly Varden**

The Dolly Varden Mine, also on Mount Bross and discovered in 1872, “ranks next to the Moose in production and size of deposits and often surpasses that mine in richness of ore,” Fossett said.

It was discovered by George Bruck and Assyria “Cy” Hall in 1872. Before arriving in the Alma area, Bruck was working in Central City as a miner and teamster. When he heard about the Moose discovery, he moved his family to Park County. In July 1871 he teamed up with Hall.

Hall had been living in the Buckskin Joe area since 1860, the beginning of the gold rush days. He was an owner of other gold and silver mines in both Park and Pitkin counties. In 1870, he was Park County sheriff, according to the book “Mining Among the Clouds,” by Harvey N. Gardiner, and in April 1879 he was

elected to the Fairplay town board, as reported in the April 3, 1879, Flume.

The two discovered other mines on Bross, both separately and together, but it was their joint discovery of the Dolly Varden that made them rich, Gardiner said in his book.

### **Weather**

For a quarter century from 1868 to 1893, silver mining was king in the Colorado high country.

And to get to the silver, miners and mine owners weathered severe snow storms – in all months of the year. According to the May 17, 1888, Flume, that month a “jack train” (string of burros carrying mine equipment; a “jack” is a male burro) tried but failed to make the trip from Alma to the mines on Mount Lincoln and Mount Bross. “The trail between the Dolly Varden mine and Mount Lincoln was worse last week than at (any) time during the past winter,” it said.

Miners relied on their burros to bring supplies and equipment up the mountain and to carry ore down. When miners lost their burros, it was news. One freighter who was carrying all the heavy loads from the Moose and Dolly Varden “was out of luck last month,” the Flume of Aug. 7, 1879, reported. “He had three valuable mules die on his hands in rapid succession.”

September was also often a snowy month. The Sept. 6, 1883, Flume reported “heavy rains, thunder and lightning” in Alma. During the storm, Mount Bross received a “coating of snow.” But braving the weather was worth it, because “our Mount Bross bonanzas continue to yield ore of fine quality and increased quantity,” the same issue reported.

### **1868 silver value**

When silver was discovered on Mount Bross in 1868, the United States currency was based on a standard of both silver and gold and had been since 1837. One ounce of gold was equal in value to 16 ounces of silver.

During the Civil War years, very little silver was mined, and the open-market price went up, so silver miners sold to jewelry makers and other silver users instead of to the government.

Thus, when silver was discovered on Mount Bross in 1868, it was highly valued. And because silver ore on Bross ran horizontally and was covered by a only a thin layer of limestone not far under the ground’s surface, it was relatively easy and inexpensive to strip mine.

The problem was getting the silver to market.

### **Smelters in Colorado**

There was a smelter in Colorado in 1872, the Boston and Colorado Smelter in Black Hawk, which opened in 1868.

But in the days before railroads or even decent wagon roads between the Moose Mine near Alma and the smelter in Black Hawk, it was difficult to get the ore to the smelter. It could be hauled by burros over Hoosier Pass. Another route was over Handcart Pass (near Webster) and then over Argentine Pass to Black Hawk. Or the ore could be hauled to Denver and hauled from there back to Black Hawk.

Each way was expensive and long. Once ore was hauled to Denver, it was just as easy to ship it east on the railroad. In 1868, the first assay of ore from the Dwight was shipped to Newark, N.J., according to Gardiner.

In 1873, a smelter was built at Dudley, near the foot of Mount Bross, and a Boston and Colorado Smelter was built in Alma.

### **Rich ore**

The highest yield of any carload of silver ore in Colorado came from the Moose Mine in the summer of 1872, according to a story first printed in the South Park-based Mount Lincoln Sentinel and reprinted in the Denver Daily Times on May 31, 1873.

That summer eight men worked 120 days at the two-year-old Moose Mine. They produced 570 tons of ore and sorted it into three grades. The highest grade was shipped to Europe for smelting (use of heat to extract minerals from ore).

The shipment sent to Europe was worth \$5,200 per ton; or in 2012 dollars, \$100,000 per ton. To put that value into perspective, during the silver boom, ore was considered unproductive if it contained 200 ounces of silver or less per ton. Ore containing 400 ounces of silver per ton was considered quite profitable.

The price of silver in 1872 was \$1.325 per ounce according to a story in the Nov. 11, 1919, New York Times titled, "Silver at highest price since 1872." A ton of ore containing 200 ounces of silver was worth \$265 in 1872, a ton containing 400 ounces was worth \$530. To be worth \$5,200 per ton, the 1872 European ore shipment would have to have contained 3,924.5 ounces of silver per ton.

The European shipment probably went to Swansea, Wales, one of the "most advanced metallurgical centers in the world," according to Gardiner's book. It was where most of the Colorado ore bound for European smelters was shipped.

According to the same story, the ore in the shipments was not mined. It was taken from "drifts, shafts and cuts which were run to develop the mine" and "not one single pound of ore has been stoped (deliberately mined) out." ("Stopes," or "rooms," are the openings made in the process of extracting ore.)

The ore yet to be mined was "a continuous vein of solid mineral 200 feet in length," with an estimated value in 1872 dollars of \$2 million, the Mount Lincoln Sentinel reported.

The miners were sorting only the very best specimens into the shipment bound for Europe; it was not a realistic sample of average ore value from the Moose. A more realistic estimate of the value of ore from the Moose is given in a story in the Pueblo-based Colorado Daily Chieftain of June 8, 1876. It said ore from the Moose assayed at between \$150 and \$600 per ton, and ore from the Dolly Varden typically assayed at \$360 per ton. The Russia Mine on Mount Lincoln had the highest value of all in Park County, according to the Chieftain, at \$700 per ton.

But the Mount Bross mines were no match when comparing them to Horace Tabor's Matchless Mine in Leadville. According to [www.matchlessmine.com](http://www.matchlessmine.com), assays of that mine contained up to 1,000 ounces of silver per ton of ore, or \$1,325 per ton in 1872 dollars.

The mines on both sides of the Mosquito Range were making their owners rich, and then silver values took a massive dive in 1873.

### **Panic of 1873**

In 1873, Congress demonetized silver; meaning gold was then the only metal backing the nation's currency. Following

that governmental decision, the country went into a depression.

But from reading Colorado newspapers of the day, one might not know of silver's devaluation. A story in the Georgetown-based Daily Colorado Miner of Jan. 2, 1874, reported the Moose was mining a body of ore worth \$400 per ton, with 18 men working the mine.

The April 7, 1877, Colorado Springs Gazette reported that the Moose Mine was actively shipping ore each week to smelters in Michigan, Boston and St. Louis.

And Moose Mine owners were spending money on employee gifts. Mine Superintendent Chas. Aill was reported to have received a \$250 gold watch and chain on New Year's Day (Jan. 17, 1878, Georgetown Courier). That watch would be worth \$5,700 today.

To increase the price of silver, stocks were manipulated at the New York Stock Exchange "through newspaper stories about shipments of rich ore and rumors of valuable new strikes," said Gardiner's book.

A story in the Jun. 27, 1877, Golden-based Colorado Transcript seems to verify Gardiner's statement: "Within ten days after the Moose mine was placed upon the New York stock boards, 19,000 shares were sold."

Despite what was reported (or not reported) in newspapers of the day, the economy was suffering. The government decided to take action to restore the bimetallism (silver and gold) base of the U.S. currency.

### **Partial bimetallism**

In 1878, silver was restored as legal tender, and the government started

buying a minimal amount of silver each month. True bimetallism was not restored, however; no value was set on silver like the 16:1 ratio in place between the years 1837 and 1873.

The change contributed to returned prosperity for the nation and to the Park County mines in the 1880s.

The June 5, 1879, Flume was already reporting increased mining activity. The Dolly Varden was producing "splendid material," and the labor force was "larger than usual."

Also, it said: "The Russia [Mine] never looked so promising as at this time. There are newly opened courses of ore of the richest quality and in quantities that will last for years." The story reported the new Russia discoveries alone had an estimated value of "nearly half a million."

And prosperity kept growing. The Sept. 18, 1879, Flume reported 115 men working at the Moose Mine.

The Leadville Democrat of Feb. 18, 1881, said: "The beginning of a new era is about to dawn (on Alma) if the present indications are anything to judge from." It said some important new strikes had been made, and the Moose Mine sent down "over \$2,000 worth of ore last month."

Prosperity didn't last long. Nationwide in 1887, hard times were back. It hit the mining industry in Alma even earlier.

The Dolly Varden was sold in February 1881 to the Boston Gold and Silver Mining Company (Leadville Daily Herald, Feb. 22, 1881) and the Moose was having problems by that summer.

"It is wrecked, but not exhausted," said the Flume of July 28, 1881, in a story about the Moose Mine. It said that the

Dolly Varden was in worse shape in the three months previous than the Moose was then and the Dolly Varden pulled out and was “at the very head of Park County mines.” The Flume was hopeful the Moose would pull out as well.

But silver mining was on a downhill spiral. In February 1883, the Moose ownership was transferred in foreclosure to the Union Trust Company of New York (Flume, Feb. 8, 1883), the Alma smelter shut down in 1884 (Flume, Jan. 24, 1884), and the mine dumps at the Moose and Dolly Varden were leased out (Flume, July 5, 1888).

And then the government stepped in again.

### **Sherman Silver Purchase Act**

In 1890 the Sherman Silver Purchase Act was instituted. It obligateded the government to buy almost all of the nation’s silver mined each month, and to buy it at market rates.

There were other factors, but the Sherman Act and its drain on the nation’s gold supply may have contributed to the depression of 1893, according to [www.u-s-history.com](http://www.u-s-history.com).

One result of the action was the continuous decline in silver value. In 1890, the price of an ounce of silver dipped to \$1.16 (Aug. 16, 1890, Aspen Daily Chronicle), the price dropped to 69 cents in December 1893 (Dec. 7, 1893, Flume), and to 60 cents in December 1894 (Dec. 13, 1894, Flume).

The Sherman Act was repealed in 1893 although that decision was debated in Congress until 1900. On Nov. 1, 1895, U.S. mints stopped producing silver coins, and the New Orleans mint was closed. Silver dollars were shunned by

banks, said the Nov. 8, 1895, Aspen Daily Times.

Colorado Senator Henry Teller said in August 1897 that he still believed in the need for silver backing of the treasury. He said that silver adds more money to the economy. “The more money there is, the more industry there will be. There is not enough money as matters stand,” he said (Aug. 13, 1897, Flume).

But after seven years of debate, the Gold Standard Act was passed in 1900. It established gold as the sole standard for U. S. currency.

In 1902, there was optimism that “gold mining, farming and fruit growing, the cattle industry, coal and iron production, manufacturing and other sources of wealth” will make the loss of silver values “less injurious as it would have been a few years ago,” said the Nov. 28, 1902, Flume in a reprint from the Denver News. The story concluded: “Yet it is a pity that adverse influences should be able to cripple the silver mining industry.”

The price of silver in November 1902 was 48 cents per ounce. As of March 3, 2013, an ounce of silver was valued at \$28.57, or about \$1.09 in 1902 dollars.

**Images on the following page**



## Assyria hall

His nickname was Cy. He was half-owner of the Dolly Varden Mine and, along with George Bruck, discovered it in 1872. Cy Hall was elected to the Fairplay town board in 1879 and was Park County sheriff in the late 1880s. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, Hulbertson Family Collection)



## Packed and ready

A common sight on the streets of Alma about 1900 were burros packed with provisions and equipment to take to the mines or with ore taken

from the mines. Mount Bross is in the background. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, Wadley Family Collection)



## Hall home

The former home of the Assyria Hall family is on Clark Street in Fairplay. It was built in 1876. (Flume file photo by Laura Van Dusen)



## Moose

A group of about 25 miners pose at the Moose Mine on Mount Bross circa 1880. The highest yield of any carload of ore in Park County, valued at \$5,200 per ton, was taken from the Moose in the summer of 1872. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, Ed & Nancy Bathke Collection)



## Dolly Varden

One of the top silver-producing mines in Park County during the boom years ending about 1893, the Dolly Varden was discovered in 1871. Mount Bross is private property and has several hazards, including deep holes left from the mining days. This photo was taken on July 4, 2011, with permission of the owner, who accompanied the photographer. (Photo by Christie Wright/The Flume)