

Mosquito Pass Auto Tour

Mining Madness, The Lore and Legend

This series of auto tours crosses through National Forest lands and private landowners. Some of the historic mining sites may contain mine shafts and other dangerous mine workings, most of which are on private land. Visitors should exercise caution when leaving their vehicles.

From Fairplay, follow Highway 9 northwest for 4.5 miles to Mosquito Pass Road and turn left. The 9 ½-mile tour begins here.

CHRONOLOGY-MOSQUITO PASS
1849 - California gold rush
1858-59 - Depressed economy after Panic of 1857 sent gold-seekers west
1861- Gold discovered in Mosquito Gulch district
1860-63- Height of small placer claim prospecting
1861-65- Civil War
1870's- Beginning of Colorado silver rush
1874- First London Mine opened
1879- Mosquito Pass toll road opened; Park City came into existence
1879-89- \$82,000,000 in silver taken from Leadville mines
1880- First railroad link from Denver to Leadville
1882- Railroad spur reached Mosquito Gulch
1884- Railroad over Boreas Pass reached Leadville
1885- Peak coal production in South Park
1891 - Gold discovered in Cripple Creek
1892 - South Platte Forest Reserve created
1905 - U.S. Forest Service established
1907- Pike National Forest evolved from South Platte Forest Reserve
1920's- Dredge mining active on South Platte

1. TRANSPORTING ORE

A short distance south of Alma was a railroad terminus. A spur line brought ore down from the London Mine Mill to this point where it joined a larger branch of the Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad for the journey to Denver and east. Some remains of

cabins and other buildings can be seen here at Alma Junction. The grade of the old railroad wye ("Y" shaped turn-around) may still be seen between the river and the highway.

The lore and legend of area names provide a good example of the whimsical and spontaneous consensus-building that occurred in the early mining days. After a long meeting without deciding on what to call their town, area residents disbanded for the night. When they resumed their gathering the next day and reopened the ledger to record the discussions, a squashed mosquito marked the page. "Mosquito" seemed as good a name as any other, and a compromise was quickly reached.

1861 was a busy and profitable year in what became the Mosquito District. The first discovery, the Newland Lode, came in June and was followed by the Sterling Lode in July; later that summer the Lulu Lode and the Orphan Boy were started. By September, the town of Sterling was laid out in Mosquito District not far from the Orphan Boy Mine, which became one of the important gold producers in Park County. In its four decades of existence Sterling was alternately called Sterling City and Mosquito.

A Vermonter, Nathan Hurd, brought a 12-stamp mill into the District and built a wagon road to Sterling. John Smith, one of four discoverers of the Sterling Lode and owner of a quartz mill in Sterling, built a two-story mercantile which opened for business in 1862. The next year he opened a post office to serve the needs of the town's 250 residents. Samuel Leach, who came to Sterling from Denver to run the post office, wrote back of the peace and quiet of the town. Sterling had no lynchings, no murders, no gambling; a claim few other mining towns could make.

We may never know if the peacefulness and civility of Sterling led to its demise. By 1863, men were leaving for mines in Montana and Idaho, or heading east to fight in the Civil War. John Smith's store lingered until 1899. Sterling's population declined steadily; by the mid 1870's, fewer than 30 residents remained. The town was empty at the start of this century. Over the years the forest has reclaimed the area. Native plants and wildlife inhabit what once was Sterling. Little human trace remains.

2. Rest for the Weary Traveler

Three miles west of Alma, not far from the Orphan Boy Mine, a settlement that became Park City clustered around a stage stop on the route to Leadville via Mosquito Pass. Eventually railroad tracks reached this town which had a hotel, and at its peak, three hundred residents.

3. Searching in Veins

The stream placers along the Platte were known as "poor man's diggings," for little money or equipment was needed to test their value or put them into productive condition. "Fissure vein" or "lode" mining had different requirements. Not only were veins more elusive to find as they changed from inches to feet in width, they ran in unpredictable directions through layers of solid rock. Tunnels had to be driven into the mountainsides, then braced with timbers to stabilize the rocks. A keen eye can spot many mine openings hiding in the rocks above either side of the road.

Before veins of ore were ever reached, systems for removing waste rock had to be constructed. Rails, ore buckets, hoists and steam engines had to be assembled. Once located, a promising vein of ore needed milling, then smelting, to free its grip on the gold. No longer could an owner feel the weight of his findings at the end of the day. The Orphan Boy Mine, opened in the 1860's, brought a wave of prospectors into the district. Ownership of the mine passed through several different hands but operation continued well into the 1900's.

Law in the early mining settlements became a practice of primitive democracy, a code of common consent. Claim holders would form a mining district and adopt regulations for operating in that area. As individual operators gave way to corporate entities with numerous financial backers, the need to clarify ownership and standardize practices throughout the industry and nation became apparent. In 1866 the United States Congress focused its legislative efforts on the lode mining industry and passed the Mining Act of 1866, granting free access to the mineral lands on public domain to any group or individual following the prescribed claim registration procedures. A placer mining act followed four years later. In 1872 Congress combined the two laws into "The General Mining Law." It affirmed the public right to explore, occupy and claim mineral rights on public property for a \$5.00 lode fee or a \$2.50 placer fee. Ownership of the land could pass to the claimant after minimal improvements to the site occurred. Reclamation of abandoned sites was not stipulated. The Forest Service, in cooperation with the modern miner, has now implemented regulations that help to provide for environmental protection and reclamation.

4. Mining Becomes Big Business

The London Mine, named for the mountain it burrowed into, opened in 1874. By 1880 it had become an important producer of gold, silver and lead. The arrival in 1882 of the Denver, South Park and Leadville Railroad spur up Mosquito Gulch reduced the cost and time needed to transport ore to smelting operations. Some of the waste rock from the South London complex may be seen up South Mosquito Creek.

The necessary investment in equipment and infrastructure outpaced the ability of individuals to finance lode mines. Many operations consolidated into corporate entities financed by eastern investors. The day of the single individual with a grubstake, burro and pan had largely passed.

5. The Scale of Mining

A 1930's cable tramway once allowed the transfer of ore from the rich American Mine to the mill. Wooden tram towers are still visible among the trees on the slope to your left. London Mountain has been opened and worked from many directions. Over 100 miles of tunnels wind through the mountain, yielding millions of dollars worth of precious ores.

6. An Aerial Link

A simple chute could not span the 3300' distance between the North London Mine and its mill, nor did a mill at the 12,280' source of ore make sense when the railroad could only travel the valley floor. A rope cable-way, the first constructed in Colorado, became the solution, linking the mine, mill and ore train. Remnants of the tramway remain on the slope above. An equally innovative structure, an enormous windmill with 60' arms, which first supplied power to the mill, was blown down in 1880.

7. The Shortest Route between Two Places

By 1879 a group of investors that included Horace Tabor had formed the Mosquito Pass Wagon Road company. They extended the road past the London Mine over the pass to Leadville. The discovery of silver there had spurred the rush over the mountain. The fever to reach Leadville was so great that the road construction was carried on throughout the winter of 1878-79. Though narrow, steep and treacherous, this road became the preferred route between Fairplay and Leadville because it was the shortest, only 22 miles compared to 40 miles via Weston Pass or 72 miles along Trout Creek. Passengers from Denver would lodge in Fairplay, then ticket with one of several stage companies for passage through the mountains. John Nugent operated Half Way House, a stage stop in north Mosquito Gulch, which served dinners for fifty cents and met other needs in an adjacent saloon, stables and store. The Half Way House building met a sudden end in an 1890 snow slide. When the railroad reached Leadville in 1880, the stage companies and service providers along Mosquito Gulch passed into history.

8. North Meets South

Opening a mine and securing a return from it frequently did not coincide. Excavations, strikes and profits took labor, luck and years. Optimists began tunneling into the north side of London Mountain in 1874. By 1880, they had found enough gold, silver and lead in their borrowings to make a handsome return on their investment. Subsequent mines dug into the south side of the mountain proved even more profitable in the long run.

By the late 1890's directional names and several miles of rocky road separated the entryways of North London and South London Mines. Beneath the shoulders and rugged exterior of London Mountain, however, the two mines merged via a single tunnel dug between them.

9. Battling the Elements

Through this stark, wind-swept saddle in a crest of rocks cast up from the bed of an ancestral ocean, the forces of change howl. Wind, water and ice have altered and will eventually tame these mountains. Native Americans were the first to climb through Mosquito Pass and encounter this battle of the elements. Fur trappers may also have braved these heights, but the discovery of silver in Leadville turned a seasonal foot path trod by few to a passageway traversed by many.

The stampede for wealth shunned the rigors of travel. Steep cliffs and storms did not quell the appetite for gain but did extinguish prematurely the cravings of some. In the early 1860's, Father John Dyer leaned into the slopes and winds of this mountain to carry his message of salvation to those blinded by dreams of earthly self-indulgence. Later, as a mail carrier, he skied through this pass regularly, carrying messages from relatives and reminders of redemption. The stone memorial reminds us of his travels and tenacity.

In 1873, the Hayden survey party calculated this pass at 13,438 feet, noting it as a tortuous route for pack animals. Modern calculations put the summit at 13,182 feet.

By the summer of 1879 more than a hundred wagons, freighters and coaches traveled the pass daily. Traffic jams on the steep switchbacks, travelers lost in blinding storms and the summit's spectacular vistas passed into the parlance of memory when the railroad lines reached Leadville by other routes in the summer of 1880. Mosquito Pass was abandoned to the ravages of wind and erosion. After World War 11, local residents reopened the road, the highest in the nation, for a burro race from Fairplay to Leadville. That tradition survives as an annual event to this day.

For more information, contact:

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