

Prospectors!

An introduction to the contributions of prospectors in the opening of the New World with special emphasis on the American West from the 14th century to the 20th century.

Transparent and intangible as sunlight, yet always and everywhere present, [the desert] lures a man on and on, from the red-walled canyons to the smoke-blue ranges beyond, in a futile but fascinating quest for the great, unimaginable treasure which the desert seems to promise. Once caught by this golden lure you become a prospector for life.

- Ed Abbey

The New World's first prospectors came from all over Europe to board ships and cross the ocean for a chance to explore a new continent for "God, Glory and Gold!" Some, like Hernan Cortez and Francisco Pizarro, came looking for "Cities of Gold". Cortez and Pizarro were just the most famous of dozens of leaders of expeditions who came from the permanent settlements of Hispaniola and Cuba to search for gold.

Some of these explorers may have said they were searching for a shorter route to India, that they were looking for a short cut to the Pacific, or they were spreading the word of the Lord, but what they were really doing was prospecting for gold and silver. Conquistador spelled backwards is *Prospector*.

It was recorded that Cortez told Montezuma, “We have a disease of the heart which is only cured by gold.”

Balboa was looking for gold when he crossed the Isthmus of Panama and became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean from the New World.

When Coronado came North from Mexico in 1539 with three hundred men and over five hundred horses he was prospecting. He spent three years exploring the southwest looking for the Seven Cities of Gold called Cibola.

On August 3, 1492 Christopher Columbus wrote in his journal:

“I cannot believe that I am the captain of my own voyage to find spices, gold, and precious jewels. I plan to sail to the Canary Islands and then make a long jump across the Ocean Sea to the gold treasures of the Indies.”

Those are names that we all recognize but there were dozens of others who came to the New World seeking gold who didn't make it into the history books.

Prospectors also led the way in the opening of the American West, not mountain men or cowboys – prospectors! The gold rush of 1849 sent hundreds of thousands of gold seekers across the West. In 1860 Montana had a population of zero White people, three years later there were over 30,000 White people in the territory as a result of prospectors finding gold.

Prospectors also drove the founding of many cities in the West, for example: Denver and Aspen, Colorado, Rapid City and Deadwood, South Dakota, Silver City and Cerrillos, New Mexico, and Wickenburg and Tombstone, Arizona to name just

a few. There are also dozens of ghost towns in the West and most of them were originally mining camps.

When Arizona's first territorial governor came to central Arizona's Granite Creek in 1863 to select a site for a capital city that would be called Prescott, prospectors had already staked dozens of claims on the creek.

Western movies and television programs from the 1920's until the 1960's were often stories about gold. In media, prospectors are usually represented as old men, and there were and are many older men who prospect. However, not many old men could have withstood the rigors of life in the open back when prospectors were roaming the West going from one mineral strike to another. In the 1800's most men who left the east to seek mineral wealth in the West were young men; men who could live off the land and walk from one strike to another. They were mostly young optimists who could survive on a dream. There were no cynics among them, they weren't grumpy old men. They were positive, upbeat, optimists, happy and excited to be doing what they were doing.

Prospectors also love those adventure stories about lost treasure, and yes... they're all true. Some people don't believe them because the treasure hasn't been found yet, or at least no one has come forward (for tax reasons) and said they have found it, but treasure is being found every day. Lost, stolen, buried, sunken... treasure of one kind or another is being found every day. There are salvage companies pulling gold coins from the ocean floor every day, there are people with metal detectors digging up treasure every day, and there are prospectors who make a living prospecting for gold, the ultimate treasure. Fortunately, most people do not believe in lost treasures or lost mines.

For anyone who doubts that there is hidden treasure in the West they can research Forrest Finn and learn about the million-dollar treasure chest he has hidden somewhere north of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Gold is not as easy to find today as it was in 1900 when Howard Harlan was prospecting ten miles south of Prescott, Arizona. Harlan found a vein outcropping that looked good, so he drilled a hole and put some dynamite in it. He lit the fuse, then ran a few yards and crouched behind a Pine tree. After the blast, pieces of rock came raining down through the branches of the tree. Howard picked one up and saw that it was about fifty-percent gold. By the end of the day he had picked up \$45,000 worth of gold.

Another easy find was made by John Thomas Moss (1839-1880) who in 1863 near Oatman, Arizona discovered what would become the Moss Mine on the east side of the Colorado River. It was a surface strike, gold bearing rocks covered the ground, and he picked up over \$200,000 worth of gold ore.

From the 1830's to the 1930's gold was valued at about \$20.00 an ounce, and men of a certain character spent their lives prospecting for it. Now that gold is valued at over \$1300 an ounce, and an ounce of gold will sometimes fit in a thimble, everybody and their brother are out prospecting. Today people are panning, sluicing, dry washing, metal detecting and digging for gold in Russia, India, Australia, South Africa, Canada, Mexico, Bolivia, America, and...

In the 1800's prospectors often joined together for protection from the hostiles because Indians killed hundreds of prospectors in the American West. At times known mineral deposits were not worked for years while prospectors waited for

the local Indians to be subdued. The gold and silver in the Cerbat Mountains near Kingman, Arizona is just one example. When Indians were not a problem, prospectors often preferred to go it alone.

He was a prospector for gold, a hunter of solitude, a lover of the drear, rock-ribbed infinitude, because he wanted to be alone to remember.

From *Desert Gold* by Zane Grey

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