

Gunnison Country - Early Mining & Ranching

1861 - 1878

Early Mining
The Spanish were the first to prospect and do limited mining in the Gunnison Country in the 1700s. The area was sporadically prospected during 1849 as miners headed to California. Miners began filtering into the area in significant numbers during the Colorado Fifty-Niner (1859) gold rush. An early mining boom occurred in 1860 and 1861, despite the hazards of trespassing on Ute lands. In 1861, Father Dyer traveled over Lake Pass from Leadville to preach and noted 100 miners in Taylor Park. Continuing west he found the bodies of six miners killed by Utes in Deadman Gulch near Spring Creek. He then came across 200 miners in Minersville (near Elkton) and another 200 miners in the surrounding area. In 1862, Minersville was home to 1000 miners and extracted a million dollars in placer gold, which is gold washed from veins into old or current streambeds. Soon thereafter the area quickly became deserted after 12 people were killed by Utes and the placer gold ran out. In the Quartz Creek area, the various gulches around Ohio City were said to contain 2500 people in 1861. Constant threat of Ute attack and the lack of wagon roads and other infrastructure limited mining to placers rather than digging into lode bearing veins. After several treaties which removed Utes from rich mining areas, lode mining started to boom - Silverton in 1874, Lake City in 1875, Leadville 1878, and the Gunnison basin in 1879.

Ute Indians
To facilitate mining and settlement, the Utes were pushed out of Colorado over the course of 24 years. A treaty in 1863 removed them from the San Luis Valley. In 1868, the first Ute Reservation was created west of -107° longitude (a few miles west of the City of Gunnison). This treaty called for an Indian Agency near Meeker and one along the Los Pinos River east of Durango. During relocation of the Tabeguache Utes, they refused to go farther west than the Cochetopa valley and out of their historic lands in the Gunnison basin. To avoid conflict, the first Los Pinos Indian Agency was located along a creek in the Cochetopa valley and the creek was renamed Los Pinos. Discovery of major mineral veins near Silverton spurred the 1873 Brunot Treaty, which opened up that area. As mining interest grew and conflict increased, the Los Pinos agency was relocated in 1875 to the Uncompahgre Valley, 12 miles south of Montrose. The Tabeguache Utes were then moved to their final reservation in northeast Utah in 1881. Each agreement failed in large part due to unenforceable boundaries that included lands attractive to miners and to settlers for agriculture.

Toll Roads
Existing trails often required extensive work to be made passable by wagons and stagecoaches. Entrepreneurs filled the need, building private roads and charging tolls. Otto Mears constructed a wagon road in 1869 from Saguache to Los Pinos Indian Agency to provide supplies. In 1874, he and Enos Hotchkiss improved and extended the road to Lake City, creating the basin's first toll wagon road. The road was known as the Saguache and San Juan Toll Road (later called "The Old '74 Road") and established Saguache as a supply center. Soon thereafter, also in 1874, a toll road was built from Del Norte to Antelope Park and then extended to Lake City in 1875. While this route was shorter than the one from Saguache, it included two high passes. In 1878, Otto Mears built the Lake Fork and Uncompahgre Toll Road to access the new Indian Agency on the Uncompahgre River and Ouray. Otto Mears continued to build toll roads (and later railroads) all over southwestern Colorado.

Alferd Packer
In February of 1874, Alferd Packer and five others left Chief Ouray's camp near Delta heading to Breckenridge. Their likely intended route was via the Dos Rios cattle camp in the Gunnison Valley, then to Los Pinos Agency, and then over Cochetopa Pass to Saguache. Traveling on established trails as best they could, it appears they incorrectly assumed the Lake Fork (probably at Gateview) was the Gunnison River and followed it upstream with the false hope that it would turn east. Only Packer arrived at the Los Pinos Agency in April of 1874, claiming that the others were dead from starvation and gunplay, with him killing another in self-defense. He mentioned the survivors were forced to eat the flesh of the dead. His story changed several times, and he was arrested in Saguache, but escaped. He was captured in Cheyenne, WY in 1883 and was brought to trial in Lake City, CO. He served a long sentence in the state penitentiary until pardoned in 1901.



Think About It

Most of the mining during this time period was called "placer mining". A large operation is shown above showing a high pressure jet to dislodge rock material. Using a gold pan, prospectors would travel up a creek, looking for gold. Once they found a location with a significant amount, they used sluice boxes to recover the gold. Water was run through the box, dirt from the river was shoveled into one end, and the heavy gold would be trapped behind wooden riffles in the box.

In 1861, the Colorado Territory was formed out of the Utah, Nebraska, Kansas, and New Mexico territories. In 1876, Colorado became a state with Lake, Conejos and Costilla counties covering the Gunnison Country. Today's counties were then split out as follows:
1866 - Saguache, Crawford
1874 - Hinsdale and Rio Grande,
1876 - San Juan, and
1877 - Ouray and Gunnison.

Gunnison County originally contained all of Pitkin, Montrose, Delta, and Mesa counties, which are shown on the map for reference.

The area between the Lake Fork and Uncompahgre Valley was a favored summer hunting area of the Tabeguache Utes. Their ancestral relatives, the Ute Mountain Tribe, now own the non-sovereign fee land shown here.

A Ute trail turns south here to Weminuche Pass into headwaters of Los Pinos River and toward first proposed Indian Agency location.

- Toll Roads**
1874 - Del Norte & Antelope Park
1874 - Saguache and San Juan
1875 - Antelope Park & Lake City
1875 - Silverton and Animas Forks
1876 - Richardson
1878 - Lake Fork and Uncompahgre
1879 - Poncha, Marshall and Gunnison
- Wagon Roads
Early Main Trails
County Boundaries in 1877
Alferd Packer Party - 1874
Early Mining Camps
Early mines
Stagecoach Stop
Early ranches
Thermal Spring (not all are hot)
Hayden Survey - Triangulation Points

Twin Lakes as mapped by the Hayden Survey before dams built in 1948 increased their capacity to the dark blue area.

In 1861, the bones of six miners lay near here bleaching in the sun, hence the name "Deadman's Gulch".

The original trail/wagon road was replaced by the new improved toll road from Poncha Springs.

The Government cow camp for the Los Pinos Agency was located at the west end of the airport.

In 1869, the 60 mile "road" from Saguache to Los Pinos took wagons 11 hard days, thus prompting the creation of the cow camp southwest of Gunnison in 1871.

The 61 mile stagecoach ride from Poncha Springs to Gunnison over Marshall Pass was an all day ordeal of being incessantly shaken, sometimes arriving at midnight.

Sydney Jocknick, an early cowboy at the Los Pinos Agency cow camp, stated that Indian trails often took the shortest distance between two points. A good example of this is shown above. Utes and other travelers on horseback or foot used this route, saving two miles versus following Saguache Creek. The first toll road took this same route, as early toll roads were not too concerned with steep grades. Later, a wagon road was built in the valley, the route of the current highway today.

Mapping
In the mid-1800s, the Gunnison Basin was poorly mapped. Early American explorers in 1853 had mapped only a narrow swath along their paths through the basin. The public demanded scientific surveys to map the virtues of the region. In response, the US Congress funded the Hayden and Wheeler survey parties. In 1873 the Hayden Survey entered the Gunnison Country via Lake Pass into Taylor Park, continuing on to Gothic and Marble. In 1874 and 1875, they returned to survey the Gunnison Basin in detail. Climbing various peaks, they measured angles between them in order to triangulate distances. Meanwhile, William Marshall led a subset of the military Wheeler Survey into the Gunnison Country in 1873. In late fall, he contracted a horrendous toothache forcing him to eat only thin gruel. Needing to reach a dentist and losing weight fast, he searched for a more direct route to Denver than Cochetopa Pass, discovering Marshall Pass.



Early Ranching
In 1862, ten cattlemen from Denver brought several hundred cattle into the Tomichi Valley to test the area for grazing. Early snows in November forced their quick retreat. Upon returning in the spring, all of the cattle had perished; only one mule had survived. In 1871, a government cow camp was established at the junction of the Gunnison and Tomichi rivers to raise livestock for the Los Pinos Indian Agency. The camp was called "Dos Rios" (two rivers). By 1872, when Alonzo Hartman took the job of managing the camp, it contained 2000 head of sheep, 3000 head of cattle, and ranch hands Jim Kelly and Sydney Jocknick. Homesteaders gradually began moving into the area but were greeted with an infestation of grasshoppers in 1877 and 1878, threatening grain crops. Chief Ouray said that it was the first grasshopper invasion he had seen in eleven years. Despite being at the center of the mining boom, it was the ranchers who established the new county seat in Gunnison and filled most of the elected offices.

Gunnison Country's Hub
The valley in which the Gunnison and Tomichi rivers join provides a central hub for the basin. In 1874 Sylvester Richardson tried attracting settlers to the site but many went south to Lake City or north to the area near Washington Gulch, closer to active mining. The townsite's prospects were dampened when probably the only bridge over the Gunnison river washed out in 1875. Also, the leaders of the town of Saguache exaggerated snowfall and cold weather stories about Gunnison to prevent it from competing as a supply center for the booming San Juan region. The future brightened in mid-1876 with the building of a good road from Richardson's coal bank (E) on Carbon Creek to White Earth (Powderhorn), which connected with the road to Lake City. Wagons shipped coal 65 miles to a Lake City smelter, but it closed after only a few months. However, the road provided a means for supplying the Lake City region with Gunnison valley hay and other staples. In May of 1877, the "town" of Gunnison was designated as the county seat, even though it had only one cabin. Perhaps it is the one shown below. By October, county taxes were assessed on 114 residents.



Hot Springs
Not all of life was tough in the Gunnison Country. Many hot springs are found in the area and were often used by the Utes. Legend says that Waunita Hot Springs was named for a Ute maiden who died of a broken heart after her warrior lover died in a battle. It was also called Tomichi Hot springs, which is Ute for "hot". Early pioneers began developing it as a healing resort in 1879. Beginning in 1884, its restorative powers were marketed all over the country and the resort remains in operation today. Of equal quality, the Ceboilla Hot Springs in Powderhorn was never marketed as widely. However, the Ceboilla Hotel was built to serve the hot spring's guests in the early 1890s. Less than a mile to the northwest, a sodic and bicarbonate springs provided water that was mixed with lemon and sugar and sold as lemonade in Gunnison.

Mapping sources include a variety of historic maps, expedition journals, and written accounts, relying heavily on Government Land Office maps and surveys by Hayden and Wheeler. Mapping and historical research provided by Mike Pelletier & David Primus.