

Brownstone Mine

Scheelite-bearing tactite was discovered in the steep cliffs between Pine and Myrtle Creeks in 1942, by F.L. Murphy, A.L. Covington, and R.F. Witter. This discovery resulted in the staking of the Brownstone and Myrtle claim groups. The outcrops lay along the southern extension of the same rocks that hosted the massive ore bodies controlled by the U.S. Vanadium Corporation. The name Brownstone was used in reference to the brown-colored, garnet-rich ore. Brownstone proved to be a rather difficult setting for prospecting and mining operations. Ore was exposed for 800 vertical feet in a cliff face on the south side of Pine Creek. Surface access to the ore was difficult unless one had mountain climbing skills. George Brown, a horse packer in the area, had carved a rough pack trail up the steep headwall of Pine Creek in the 1930s. This trail passed near the base of the ore-bearing cliff face and was used for early access to the property.

In 1943, the claims were leased to the El Diablo Mining Company which later purchased them. El Diablo developed and mined the property in 1946 to 1947 and again from 1952 to 1953. Mine openings were cut into the cliff face on several levels and long ladders used to access some of them; however, the base of the cliff was a precarious spot for surface facilities. Underground blasts would shake rocks loose from the cliff above that pelted everything below. This hazard, along with fear of avalanches during the winter, forced operators to move all the surface facilities into rooms excavated out of the rock. These rooms provided protection against the cannonades from above.

The tactite ore body was cut by numerous aplite and pegmatite dikes which at times caused severe dilution of the ore. Mining was done using the open-stope method and ore was brought down the mountain via a 2,400 foot gravity tramway constructed in 1945. Mules were used to transport all the tramway construction materials up the mountain. Like the other mining equipment, the upper tramway station was located in a chamber blasted out of the rock at the base of the cliff for protection.

When completed the tramway could transport ore at the rate of 10 tons per hour in three-quarter ton buckets. Three air compressors for powering rock drills were dismantled, transported via the tramway, and reassembled at the mine site. The tram was an integral part of the mine, though periodically a bucket would lose its grip on the tramway cable and come sliding back down the mountain at breakneck speed. This sent workers fleeing as the bucket came crashing into the lower tramway house near the Pine Creek Mill. This same building was damaged by numerous avalanches bearing down from the steep slopes above and required rebuilding several times during the life of the operation. The mine closed in 1947 due to a postwar drop in tungsten prices. During this period approximately 4,400 tons of ore were mined, averaging 0.6% WO_3 .

The government stockpile program of the early 1950s brought lucrative tungsten prices and rekindled interest in the mine. Bill Skinner and partner Jack Cathey worked on the property for a short while, but the partnership dissolved. Afterward Skinner

undertook to mine the property himself with new partner Gus Voget. Voget had inherited a partnership in the mine due to a previous investment in the company, and it seemed the only way for Voget to regain his money was to mine the property himself. Voget had no experience in the mining business, but being mechanically inclined learned quickly. He and Skinner leased the claims from El Diablo and formed the Brownstone Mining Company. They had the property producing ore by the summer of 1953.

Up to 25 men at a time were hired to work the Brownstone operation. As there were minimal living facilities up at the mine workers were daily forced to walk the steep one and a half mile trail up the mountain. Due to the strenuous climb they were paid \$2.50 per hour, somewhat above the going rate. Horses were later used for transport. Workers would ride the horses up the hill and release them just below the mine. The horses would then follow the trail back down the trail on their own to the corral at the foot of the hill. The miners would descend on foot at the end of their shift.

The mine operated year-round, shutting down only when deep snow blocked the ore buckets from going through the tramway towers. Negotiating the trail during winter had its hazards. Once a horse lost its footing on the icy ground and began to slip off the trail. Luckily the rider was able to dismount and save himself before the horse plunged to its death. In winter the snow-covered ground allowed some miners to make quick trips down the hill using their shovels as sleds.

Voget and Skinner worked the property for two years producing 48,000 tons of ore, averaging 0.63% WO_3 . The ore was purchased by U.S.V. and processed at the Pine Creek Mill. The partners closed the operation in late 1955 even though 1,000 tons of broken ore still lay in the stopes. Termination of the government stockpile program had made the operation unprofitable. That year a road was built to the site, but was used only to retrieve mining equipment. This road proved much safer than the old trail and the Forest Service later adapted it as part of the Pine Creek Pass route. El Diablo Mining later sold the claims to the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation.

Drilling by Voget and Skinner showed that the ore-bearing rock extended below the level mined during the 1950s. Union Carbide explored this ground in the late 1970s via a 2,400 foot drift and raise from the Easy Go portal level. Some small ore bodies were encountered, but none large enough to warrant mining.

Hikers walking up Pine Creek today use the old Brownstone road as part of the route into the lake-dotted basin above. The trail passes by the wood towers left from the tramway and beneath the old mine workings cut into the cliffs above. These stand as monuments to a bygone era when men traveled up the mountain daily to extract its wealth.