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At 8,000 Feet, California ‘Mine in the Sky’ Is About to Enter Valhalla

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BISHOP, Calif. —

Tom Crosby kicks the gravel at the entrance to the last tungsten mine in America, mining memories of the men who came before him.

There was his grandfather, who hauled the ore that would be used to make weapons for war, and then his father, who helped chart the location of the rock.

Crosby followed their footsteps to the “mine in the sky” that sits at 8,000 feet in the eastern Sierra Nevada, nestled into a glacial valley of rising rock and falling stones.

But Crosby came not to mine it. He came to close it, marking the end of an era for this town of 3,900.

“It’s more than just a mine. People just didn’t work here. They lived around here. They had families around here,” said 49-year-old Crosby, an environmental engineer and geologist. “Now it’s all but gone. People moved away. The families have grown up. The only thing left, really, is the memories.”

Once the largest tungsten producer in the United States, the mine, which opened in 1916, produced millions of tons of the metal that revolutionized the high-speed-tool industry because of its resistance to corrosion. It also was used in light bulb filaments.

During World War II it became critical to the war effort when it was used to make armor plating on tanks and the tips of armor-piercing bullets because of its durability and resistance to high temperatures.

Today the mine has fallen victim to cheap labor in China, the world’s leading producer of tungsten, which mines and sells it at less than half the cost of the California mine.

“We just can’t compete with that,” said Jonathan Henry, general manager of the mine owned by Avocet Tungsten Inc. of Canada, which also owns mines in Peru.

The mine has been closed temporarily twice. In 1982, Union Carbide closed it after tungsten prices fell. The mine was reopened in 1983 when it was bought by Umetco. It then closed again in 1990 and was partially reopened when Avocet bought 50% of it in 1993.

The mine, which stopped production in April, is expected to close forever by the end of the year. The environmental cleanup is scheduled to be completed by November 2001.

“I think we saw it coming. No mine lasts forever,” said 72-year-old Ray Gray, who worked at the mine from 1954 to 1982. “It had a good run.”

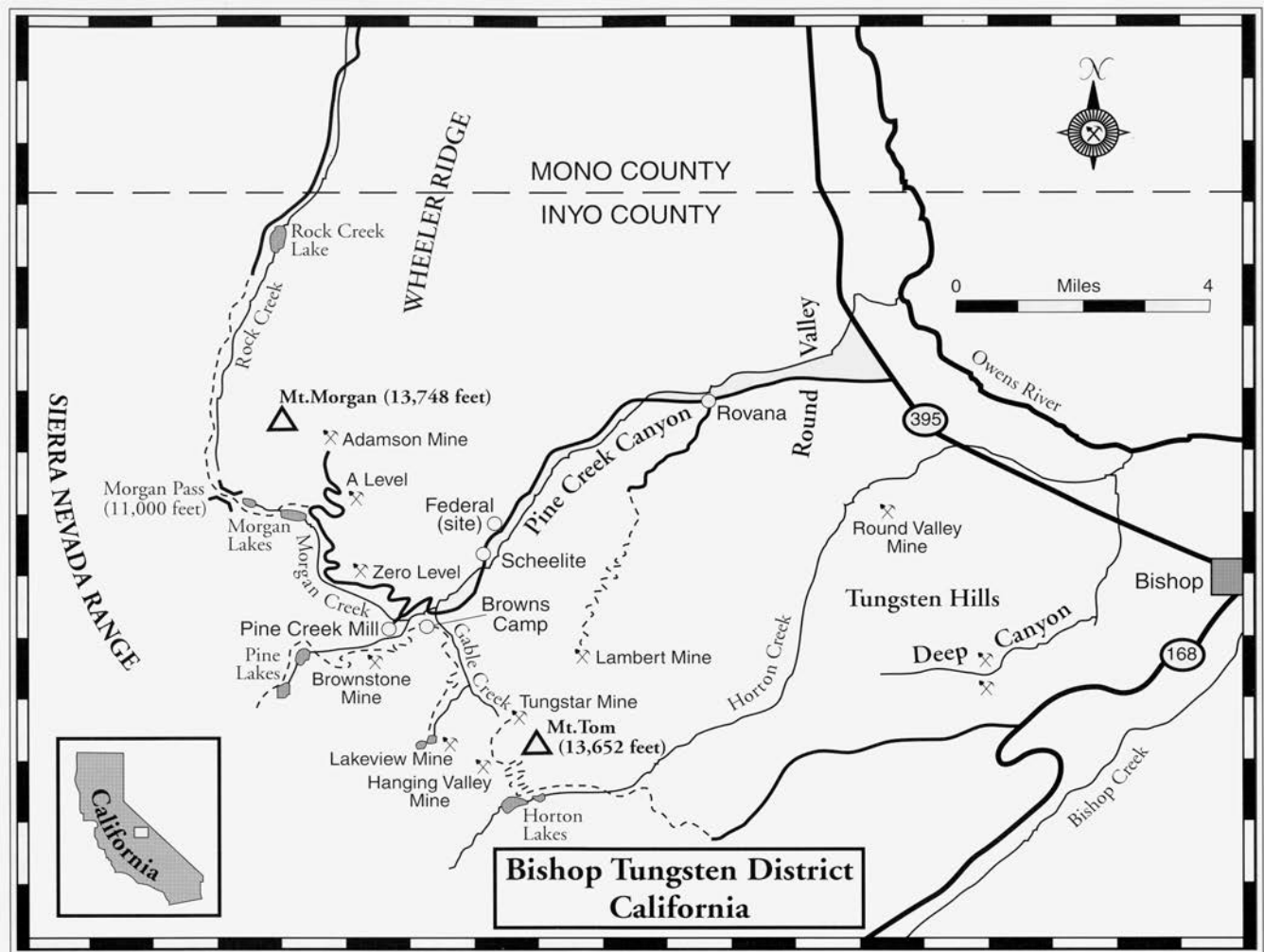


For the residents of Bishop, known better these days as a destination for rock climbers and hikers, the closure of the mine brings to an end a unique story of a mine known for both its natural beauty and brutality.

Unlike open-pit mining, the work at the Bishop mine took place inside the mountain, leaving the outside surroundings virtually intact except for a few buildings and switchback roads.

Tungsten does not exist naturally in metal form. The ore had to be hauled out, first by hand and later on rail cars, then milled into metal.

Because of the elevation of the mine, supplies and workers were brought in on mule carts, then in cars and buses that traversed miles of narrow, winding roads.



At first, small mining camps were opened at the mine's base camp at 8,000 feet and at elevations of 12,000 feet. But heavy snow and rain caused avalanches and rockslides that either trapped the workers for months or buried the camps in debris.

With mine workers bringing their families with them, the mining camp was moved to Round Valley, sandwiched between two mountain ranges.

A miner's wife named the settlement Rovana--an acronym for Round Valley and Vanadium Mining Co., the company that owned the mine at the time. It is a six-street village that exists today as a microscopic suburb of Bishop.

Sitting inside the mining office recently, a handful of men representing three mining generations recalled the mine's history with the laughter and nods that exist only between those who have shared a common experience.

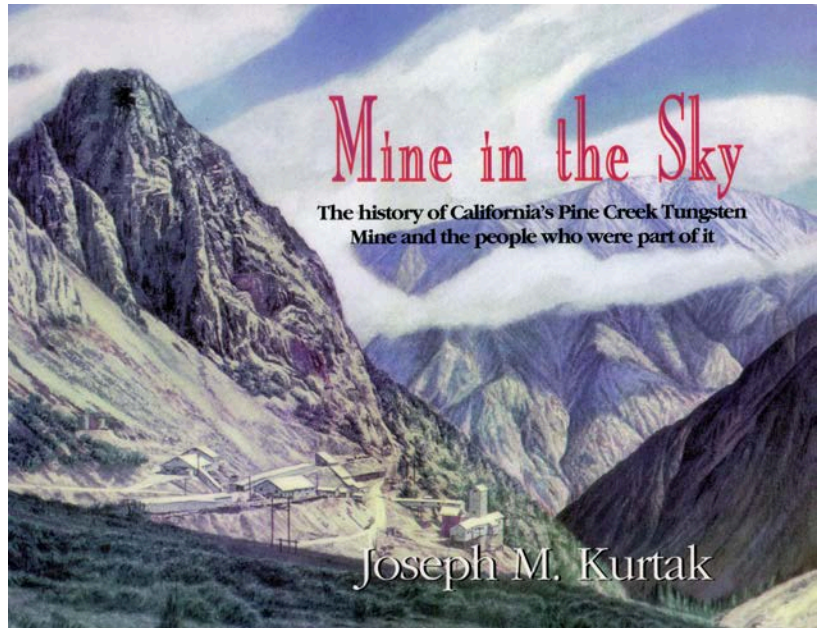
"Do you remember riding up those roads in the snow?" asked 80-year-old Ray Kurtak, who worked at the mine's mill from 1954 to 1982.

The men laughed. Buses, they explained, were the preferred transportation to get workers back and forth to the mine, and the trips were harrowing in the snow.

"One guy sat at the back of the bus with his hand on the emergency exit handle so everybody could jump out if the bus started to slide on the ice," Gray said.

The emergency escape was actually used in the 1950s when a bus began to slide off the road. Everyone escaped uninjured.

Many of their stories are chronicled in the book "Mine in the Sky," written by Kurtak's son, Joe Kurtak, who grew up in the mining village.



One of the most endearing stories of mine life is that of Mitzie the mascot, a fawn found by the side of the road in the 1930s.

As the story goes, Art Pomeroy, the mine's cook, found the young mule deer and named it Mitzie. The deer became so loved by the miners that during hunting season red ribbons were tied to its antlers so hunters would recognize it as a pet.

Then there was the story of the avalanche in 1952 that swept over the mine's base camp and several homes, burying two dogs and then-15-month-old Mike Holmes.

After digging through 15 feet of snow, rescuers found the dogs and baby alive--together.

But it was their personal stories of friendship and family that the men recalled most.

Paul Prange, 53, an electrician, recalled how he began at the mine in 1967, then was drafted into the Army and sent to Vietnam.

After he was done, he returned to his family and the mine.

"My life was here," he said.

When the mine offices close later this year, Prange plans to take early retirement.

"I'll tell my grandkids about this place. I'll tell them that it was my life. I'll share pictures with them," he said. "There's talk some of it might become a museum. If that happens, maybe I'll bring them up here and show them."

Standing in front of the mine's cavernous entrance, Crosby enjoyed a cold wind generated by the miles of tunnels.

"The quiet is kind of eerie," Crosby said. "I can still remember all the noise. Now it's kind of like a ghost town."