

Back to the Mines

Old mining trails of the North Cascades are packed with history

WHATCOM MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART



The Gargett brothers and their families outside the cook shack at Gold Run Mine. You can still see evidence of the Gargetts' mining equipment near the shores of Tommyhoi Lake.

BY ERIK BURGE

The trail systems of Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and North Cascades National Park offer hikers, backpackers and stock packers nearly 2,000 miles of foot-powered fun amid the most rugged and scenic mountains in the Lower 48.

Although today we use, manage and maintain trails primarily for recreation, many of the routes to our favorite local lakes, meadows and peaks were originally built and maintained by miners between 1870 and 1930.

Native Americans were the first trailblazers in the North Cascades. Nooksacks, Upper Skagits, Frasers and their ancestors cleared paths in these mountains thousands of years before Europeans arrived. Fur trappers briefly utilized and improved some of the existing native trade routes as part of their trading post network during the late 1700s and early 1800s. However, it wasn't until the discovery of precious metals in the North Cascades beginning in 1870 that the trail system we know

today began to reach its current proportions.

Due to prohibitive transportation costs and a short supply of high-grade ore, the mining booms of the North Cascades were short lived. Although a handful of workings produced substantial fortunes, the majority of mining claims and trails reverted to public ownership by the 1950s.

As the century progressed, increasing numbers of hikers, backpackers and climbers began following the old miners' trails to meadows, lakes and peaks. Over the years many of the original North Cascades miners' trails have been re-routed, re-constructed or abandoned all together, but the right-of-ways they established and the remote wilderness destinations they reached have and will continue to provide special journeys into these wild, rugged mountains for generations to come.

Here's a look at just a few of our local mountain trails that were originally built by miners:

Damfino Lake

Mount Baker Ranger District
Length: 1 mile.

Prospectors coming up from Excelsior Pass explored Damfino Lake, beginning in the early 1890s. By 1900 a miner by the name of J. Conway had staked 12 claims.

Although neither Conway nor any of the other local miners struck it rich up here, they did manage to provide a fitting place-name for the lake. Legend has it that one day a lost horse packer stumbled into a prospector's camp and asked him where he was.

"Damn-if-I-know," the miner grumbled.

Gold Run Pass

Mount Baker Ranger District
Length: 2 miles

Sourdoughs had been prospecting and locating claims along the trail to Gold Run Pass since the early 1890s, but it wasn't until William Boyd, W.L. Martin and the Gargett brothers of

Sumas staked the Gold Run Claim high on the south face of Mount Larabee that any workings were developed in this area.

The Gold Run Mining & Milling Co. was formed in 1911 with \$1 million in capital. Over the next 20 years the Gargett boys and their partners lived at the mine site from early spring to mid-October, hauling tons of machinery and equipment up to the workings on pack strings from the old town of Shuksan some five miles away and 4,000 feet below.

It wasn't until 1938 that five tons of ore were finally sent to the Tacoma smelter — only to prove worthless.

No further ore shipments were made and the mine was closed at the outbreak of World War II. Although the mine tunnel caved in and all the buildings have collapsed, the old Buick engine that once powered a lumber mill sits near the shores of Tommyhoi Lake and remnants of a water-powered air compressor litter the mine site.

Hannegan Pass

Mount Baker Ranger District
Length: 5 miles

This low but spectacular pass through the mountains up along the border was first used by local native tribes from the Nooksack, Chilliwack and Fraser River valleys. They traveled to seasonal foraging sites, stone quarries, goat hunting grounds and trade routes for thousands of years before the United States and Canada were established.

During the Cariboo Gold Rush of 1858, miners arriving in Bellingham from California and other parts of the globe used and improved this path all the way down the Chilliwack River to diggings on the Fraser River.

Serious prospecting in the Ruth Creek valley continued throughout the late 1800s, and in 1896, local sourdough H.C. Wells located the Silvertip Claim (named in honor of a large grizzly bear who resided in the Hannegan Pass region) high on the east face of Goat Mountain.

Jack Post's bonanza strike at the nearby Lone Jack Claim the following year significantly slowed development of the Silver Tip. It wasn't until 1938 that Ray Block of Seattle established Silver Tip Mining Company.

Block spent \$108,000 to construct a 2,600-foot mine-to-mill tramway and a small flotation mill between 1943 and 1947 only to have both structures obliterated by a snowslide in the winter of 1949-50.

Ruby Creek

North Cascades National Park
Length: 2 miles

In 1872, a party of three prospectors including John Sutter, George Sanger and John Rowley panned up the Skagit River as far as present-day Ruby Creek.

Inspired by the sizable "ruby" (actually a garnet) he found in his pan, Rowley returned several times to the area, and by 1879 the Ruby Creek Rush was on.

Within the next few years some 2,500 miners washed nearly \$100,000 in gold dust out of the banks of this creek with their pans and hydraulic systems.

Although all tangible evidence from the first Ruby Creek Gold Rush was flooded when hydroelectric projects inundated the creek's mouth during the 1940s, today's hikers can find holes and trenches dug by George Holmes, "the old black miner of Ruby Creek." His

extraordinary lifelong efforts washed a meager reward in gold flakes from ancient alluvial deposits further up the creek.

Holmes hailed from Virginia, where he'd been born a slave in 1854. According to acquaintances, he first came to the North Cascades in the 1890s, working as a stable hand for the Skagit Queen Mining Company.

After a trip to Seattle's Skid Road left him infected with a painful venereal disease, he vowed that if he were cured he would return to the Upper Skagit and be a Christian example to the sinful miners of that wilderness. According to his peers, Holmes was a soft-spoken giant of a man, a pious backwoods loner who possessed remarkable strength and was always willing to help.

Although he never struck it rich, Holmes cherished the freedom of his mountain wilderness existence more than anything the world had to offer. In 1925, friends carried the dying old prospector from his cabin up on Ruby Creek some 15 miles to the railroad depot at Gorge Camp on a stretcher of jack pine poles. ♦

Erik Burge is a Bellingham-based trail builder and freelance writer. Send questions or comments to timdunke@yahoo.com.

For the latest trip reports on these and many other hikes, visit www.wta.org



The Gargett brothers haul gear over High Pass. Many trails in the North Cascades were first blazed by sourdough miners hoping to strike it rich.