Mining in Utah, Past and Present

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Utah has one of the most diverse and rich mining histories in the West. Not only does it have one of the earliest records of mining, it is one of the most diverse in terms of minerals mined. From all four corners of the state, there is an abundance of precious and non-precious metals being harvested from the earth. Not only are metals being mined but also non-metals. Legend states the earliest people to have mined the Utah territory are the Indians and the Spanish explorers. The first record of the Spanish coming to Utah came from a Spanish Conquistador named Father Geronimo Salmeron. In 1847 the first actual record of mining in Utah came from the early Mormon settlers. In all, there are many “rags to riches” stories of people coming from everywhere to mine the rich landscapes of Utah.

The first Spanish prospectors came to Utah, creating the old Spanish trail. Though this trail sounds like a well-traveled high traffic path, it is quite the opposite. The trail was actually a generalized direction toward the northern Utah territories that zigzags across the desert’s, rich forests, and sandstone mountains. Each prospector would travel to what he thought was the more direct path to the rich ore deposits. As the trails reached into central Utah, they started branching off to various parts of the state.

The riches of Utah were well known among Spanish prospectors. As Father Salmeron reached the Wasatch mountain range he said “There are mines of silver, copper, lead and lodestone (magnetic iron). In all the ranges there are mineral deposits, where I discovered many, and which I claimed for His Majesty. I took eighteen arrobas (450 pounds) of ore, pieces of which I distributed at places I passed, so that all might see and recognize them.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Scattered all across Utah are signs of old Spanish mines that the Mormons took advantage of as early as 1847, but they were smart enough to keep records. In the beginning they only mined for minerals that would help them settle an area, minerals such as iron, lead, and coal. Brigham Young discouraged his members to mine precious metals because he feared that the Saints would get “yellow fever” and that it would prevent them from developing their settling interests. He also didn’t condone mining for precious metals for fear of bringing non-Mormons or “Gentiles” to the region[[2]](#footnote-2).

There was one man, however, that Brigham Young trusted with the mining of gold for the Church. Thomas Rhoades, a surveyor by trade, who became involved with the church early on. Rhoades and his family made the trek to the West, with the blessing of Brigham Young, a year before the rest of the Church made its exodus West. The Rhoades party was under the impression they were to meet up with the rest of the members in California, unaware they had stopped in Utah. It is unclear whether they made their way around the north end or south end of the Great Salt Lake, but they eventually found the Humboldt trail to the Sierras.[[3]](#footnote-3) An entry in Daniel Rhoades, Thomas Rhoades’ son, states:

We crossed the Truckee River twenty-seven times, on rocks from the size of a washboard to that of a kettle, so close together that neither oxen or wagon ever touched bottom. The nearer we got to California, the worse was the road. Our oxen could be trailed from bottom to top by the blood from their hooves. We all arrived safely in California, except for John Patterson, who died along the way and was buried on the plains of California. [[4]](#footnote-4)

While in California Rhoades and his family became very prosperous mining gold. Almost immediately after settling in their new home, they discovered gold. Actually, they managed to find enough gold to create for themselves a small fortune. Yet after their becoming comfortable in their new environment, word comes from Brigham Young that the Saints were to settle the Salt Lake Valley and Rhoades and his family were to head back there. Without question, Rhoades turned his back on the settlement that had made him a fortune and, taking his gold with him, headed east to Salt Lake, arriving on September 28, 1849.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In 1848 the Church established a mint and from 1848 to 1862 they minted their own gold coins. The gold came from, along with the gold brought by Thomas Rhoades, $17,000 worth of California placer gold church members donating their gold jewelry. But in time all that gold was used up. Subsequently, other sources of gold were needed to sustain the mint. So in 1851 Brigham Young directed Rhoades and Chief Wakara of the Ute tribe to go on a mission to a place known to the Utes as Carre Shin Ob. It is here where Chief Wakara had seen plentiful gold in a vision. Rhoades was to go there and start mining so the church could continue to supply its mint. However, the only way Chief Wakara would show them the gold was with the agreement that neither Rhoades or Brigham Young ever tell anyone where it was.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Interestingly, a record of how much gold the church received from that mine was never made, but it is rumored that there was enough gold there to supply the mint for the last 10 years of its operation. The “Lost Rhoades Mine” location was never revealed and has yet to be found.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Even with all of Brigham Young’s efforts to keep the Gentiles out of the Utah territory, they would eventually start learning of the riches found in Utah and start moving west. One of the first Gentiles to come to the Utah territory was Colonel Patrick E. Connor. Colonel Connor was ordered to go to Utah for two reasons: first to keep an eye on the overland mail and pony express lines and second to keep an eye on the Mormons. Many of the men that came with Colonel Connor were experienced prospectors and started to branch out in search of riches. These men filed the first formal mining claims in Utah. The first filed was in the Bingham Canyon district in 1863. Then in 1864 came claims in the districts of Stockton and Cottonwood.

Because Colonel Connor had a great dislike for the Brigham Young, mainly overthe power he had over the territory, he sought to overthrow him. One of his plans was to open a mine and spread the word that if an individual wanted to get rich all he had to do was come to Utah. The scheme behind this was to get Gentiles to flock to Utah and hopefully push the Mormons out of the territory.

With the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, the mining industry exploded. Small mines became large mines, and fresh mines popped up all over the state, creating eight major mining regions. The eight regions are Iron County, Bingham Canyon, Silver Reef in Southwestern Utah, Park City, Tintic Mining District, San Francisco Mining District, Uinta Basin, and Alta District and the Cottonwoods and American Fork District. Each region has its dominant mineral.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The name Iron County suits the area well. Iron County has the richest bodies of iron ore in the Western United States. In 1850 a group of missionaries, led by George A. Smith, was organized by Brigham Young to head down to Coal Creek, located in modern day Cedar City, and establish a settlement for the mining of iron. It took only a month for considerable progress to be made.[[9]](#footnote-9) Henry Lunt made this report after that month:

“The fire bricks for the furnace were ready for laying and have proved to be of the best quality. The timber which was needed for the framing of the machinery was hauled from a canyon five miles south of Coal Creek….an ery was progressing rapidly. The iron for this purpose was mostly obtained by taking tires from their wagons, expecting to replace them from the Iron works, as the settlers felt very hopeful that they, in a few weeks, would have been working out their taxes in making a road up Coal Creek Canyon during the past week. The road is made within one mile of the coal.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

With the newly found ore came the establishment of the Deseret Iron Company in April of 1852. Unfortunately from 1852 through the end of 1857 many problems arose which hampered the mining process of the iron ore. Everything from flooding, famine and drought kept the mine from successful continual operation. At the end of 1857 word came down from Salt Lake to cease all mining operations and shift to the farming of grain in preparation for incoming federal troops.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Today the original mine has been closed, but a new one has now opened up about a mile north where it produces some of the highest grades of iron ore in the world.

Bingham Canyon was one of the biggest mining hot spots in the state and today is home to one of the largest copper mines in the world. There are a few stories of how the discovery of ore in Bingham Canyon came about. The most widely believed comes from George B. Ogilvie After taking his cattle up Bingham Canyon, he set out to cut some timber when he noticed some rocks that had loosened in the dragways. Not knowing what it was, he took the sample to Colonel Patrick E. Connor, knowing that a lot of his men were experienced prospectors and miners. Basically he hoped to find out if it was a valuable mineral. After the results came back, Ogilvie and twelve others met at the Jordan Ward House on September 17, 1963, and that’s where the bylaws of the West Quartz Mining District were passed and the the Jordan Silver Mining Company was formed. [[12]](#footnote-12)

Unfortunately, they found the cost of transporting mining supplies to Bingham Canyon was too high to economically mine the area. But when the transcontinental railroad was finished, that all changed. It would become known as “the hill” and become the focal point for the largest mining enterprise in the nation.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Today Bingham Canyon is being mined by Kennecott Utah Copper which is owned by Rio Tinto. Rio Tinto is a world-wide leader in mining and Kennecott is their largest producer of copper at an average of 300,000 tons of copper per year, but the fact is Kennecott’s major profits come from the quantities of Molybdenum, silver and gold mined as byproducts of the copper ore.[[14]](#footnote-14)

There are many tales of “lost riches” and old lost Spanish mines in the Uintah Basin. Arguably the most famous of these tales is the lost Rhoades mine mentioned earlier. But if we were to go strictly from what history and current reports say about the Basin, we have to believe that it is starved for valuable minerals and rich in organic fuels. There have only been a few mining operations in the Uintah’s that have been profitable. The most successful was the Dyer Mine, north of Vernal where it produced mainly copper and lead with trace amounts of silver and gold. It was in operation from 1889-1904 but was mined intermittently until 1941.[[15]](#footnote-15)

With the Uintah mountain range to the north, the Wasatch Mountains to the West, the Colorado Rockies to the East and the Tavaputs Plateau to the south, they form a Basin that is 125 miles long and forty to sixty miles wide. One hundred fifty million years ago the Basin used to be the lake bed for Lake Uinta. As the lake drained, it left swamplands. This created the perfect environment for oil, natural gas, and coal to form. The biggest natural resource in the region is oil shale and tar sands. Though it is still not cost effective to extract the oil at current market prices, it could present a great and expansive reserve for future exploration. “…it is estimated the Uintah Basin alone can produce some 100 billion barrels of oil once extractive processes have been perfected and their production costs become competitive with traditional drilling.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The largest deposits of coal in Utah are found in Carbon County in central eastern Utah. In 1854 coal was found on the western slope of the San Pete valley. Although Utah’s coal industry was started by the Mormon Church, the Union Pacific Railroad Company soon took over and monopolized Utah’s coal industry after it entered the territory in 1869. In 1881 came the competing Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. This made the members of the LDS Church very excited because now the Union Pacific had competition.[[17]](#footnote-17) Coal production remained high until the nationwide mining depression in the 1920’s. As if that wasn’t enough? Times got tougher when trains switched to diesel power. And then people in the 50s and 60s started resorting to natural gas to heat their homes, creating another economic setback for the coal-mining industry. It took until the 1980’s to finally see some relief. “…the combination of the Arab oil embargo and the original Clear Air Act in the seventies resulted in coal mine acquisition by energy companies which use coal to generate electricity.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Since the boom of the 1980s, coal production has been severely scaled back nation-wide with the onset of “Global Warming” panic. With environmentalists working to push renewable energy sources and our government implementing laws making it extremely difficult and costly for coal power plants to operate, the coal industry is looking grim.

The list is long for mines that have come and gone. For any historian, studying the mining past of Utah is an adventure. There is always something exciting about discovering things from the past that not many people know about and few people understand. It’s easy to overlook the importance mining had on the development of Utah. As small mining towns popped up across the state, it ushered in a new meaning for a diverse culture. By the time the mining boom reached its peak there were myriads of different cultures being represented across the state. Although mining might not play as big a role in bringing people to Utah as it once did, the diversity it did bring has had lasting effects.

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2. Ibid., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Whitley, Colleen, From the Ground Up: The History of Mining in Utah (Logan, Ut: Utah State University Press, 2006) Part III. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 221-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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16. Ibid., 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Nancy J. Taniguchi, “History of Coal Mining in Utah,” November 15, 2012. http://www.onlineutah.com/miningcoal.shtml [↑](#footnote-ref-18)