Placer Prospect Shaft
Site 5ST1174

Either the Victoria Mining Company or the Wapiti Mining Company sank a prospect shaft at the confluence of American and Monitor gulches. The purpose of the shaft was to explore the lower reaches of the area's gravel beds and determine whether their contact with bedrock featured placer gold. Currently, archaeological features represent the exploratory operation. The site lies at 10,200 feet elevation in American Gulch (5ST1170), which was recorded as a placer mining landscape. The surrounding ground slopes gently north and features a thick forest of young lodgepole pines. The site retains archaeological integrity.

Placer Prospect Shaft Site Description

Prospectors sank the shaft through layers of gravel and into friable slate bedrock. To prevent such loose material from slumping into the shaft (F1), the prospectors lined the walls with hewn log closed-cribbing. After the shaft was abandoned, the timbering decayed and allowed the collar to collapse, creating an area of subsidence twelve feet in diameter. The remnants of the timbering are visible below the subsidence. When the prospectors sank the shaft, they dumped waste rock around the collar, forming a mound 20 feet in diameter and 3 feet high.

The shaft featured a formally engineered, steam-powered hoisting system, which was dismantled. Currently, a foundation (F3) represents the hoisting system's headframe. Mostly decayed, the foundation currently consists of an assemblage of partially intact timbers and impressions left by more timbers that have rotted away. The foundation was 8 feet wide and 30 feet long, and was limited to parallel footers joined by two cross-members. The hoist was probably anchored to the foundation's end.

An upright boiler provided the hoist with steam. The boiler is gone, but its 4-by- 4-foot foundation (F4) currently remains. The foundation consists of two rows of rocks that flank a depressed, circular platform. The boiler's bedplate rested on the rocks, and the depression allowed ashes to drop out of the boiler for removal.

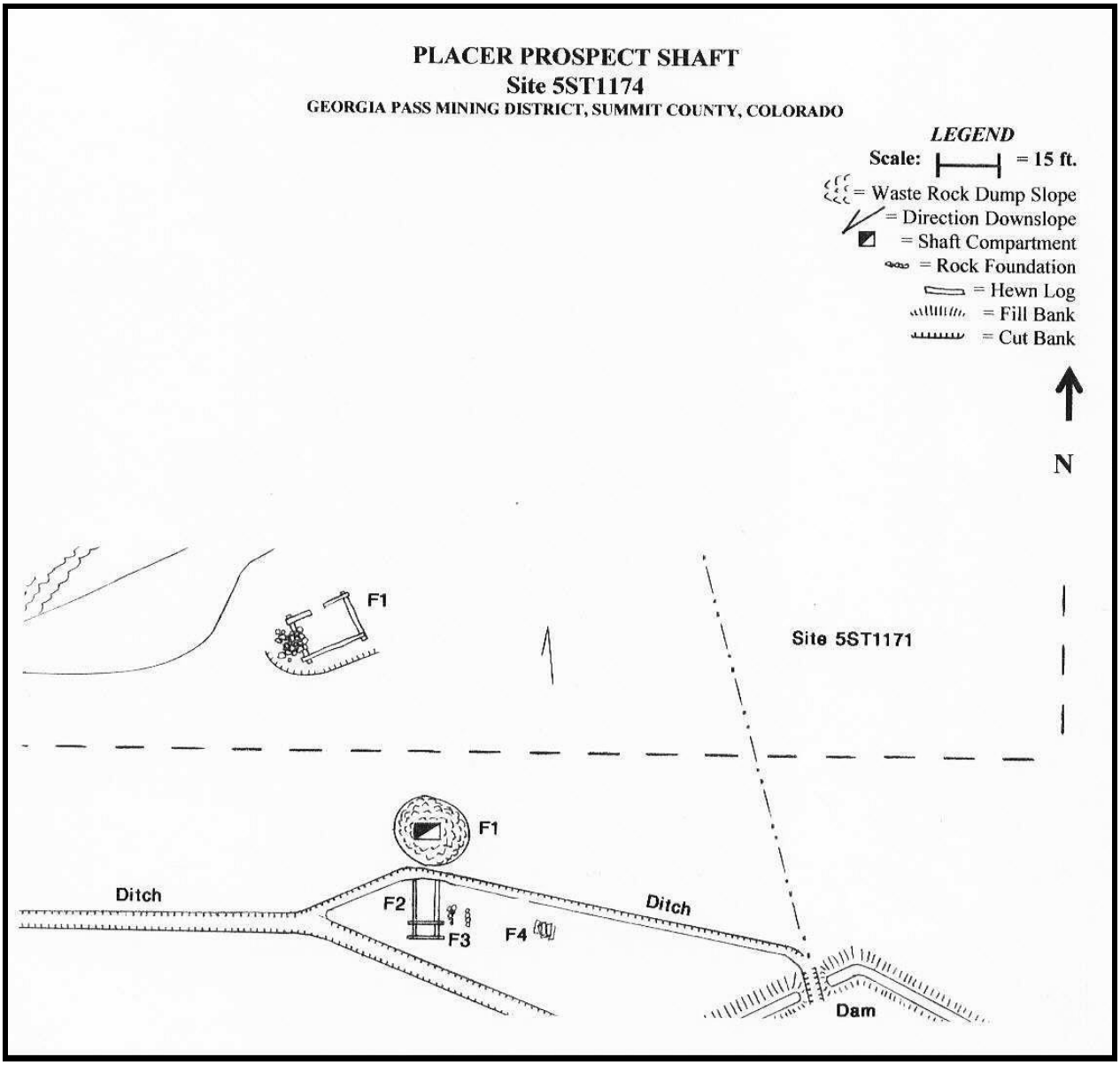

Figure 2.69: Plan view of Miner's Cabin Ruin site

Miners used cordwood as fuel for the boiler and stacked the material to the east of the boiler foundation. Portions of a stack (F5) currently remain, and they originally rested on cross-logs to keep the wood dry.

The site possesses an austere artifact assemblage limited to structural debris and a few industrial items. Despite the small amount of artifacts, the assemblage appears to be relatively complete because the exploratory operation was short-lived. No clearly dateable items were obvious.

Placer Prospect Shaft Site Interpretation

The site exemplifies the type of prospect shaft that substantial placer mining companies sank in search of gold-bearing gravel. Even though the site lacks dateable artifacts, the shaft was most likely sunk by the Wapiti Mining Company between 1894 and 1897. During this timeframe, Ben Stanley Revett was company manager, and he made great use of shafts to sample gravel beds for placer gold.

In accord with this function, the site's shaft was shallow, evident by the small waste rock dump. Despite the shaft's shallow nature, the exploratory operation was formally engineered and equipped. Ordinarily, when prospectors sank exploratory shafts, they used hand windlasses as hoists because of their low cost and simplicity. The site's hoisting system, however, was steam-powered and featured a headframe. In general, only well-capitalized companies were able to afford such hoisting systems. The company used steam power for two reasons. One was to expedite shaft sinking and the other was that a pump was necessary to keep the shaft unwatered, and steam pumps were far superior to hand-powered units.

Several aspects of the site reflect its formal engineering. First, the shaft and hoisting system were oriented north-south. This is a contrast to the haphazard arrangement of most prospect shafts and reflects planning and the involvement of a trained engineer. Second, the operation was sited over an active placer ditch so that water pumped out of the shaft was shunted into American Gulch, where it could be used.

The fact that the shaft still exists today indicates that it was a failure. If miners had encountered economic volumes of gold at the bottom, then the entire gravel bed would have been developed as a placer mine, destroying the shaft.

Placer Prospect Shaft Site Significance

The site features the archaeological remnants of a shallow prospect shaft most likely sunk by the Wapiti Mining Company between 1893 and 1896. The shaft was an effort to determine whether American Gulch offered placer gold in deep gravel and how far down the gravel extended. The shaft featured a steam hoisting system that was oriented north-south. Both the steam equipment and its orientation reflect formal engineering and a level of capital typical of large mining companies such as Wapiti. The site currently retains archaeological integrity and lies in a setting of placer mining, which includes ditches, tailings, and a reservoir. Because of the type of exploratory operation that the site represents, the site is recommended eligible for the NRHP and the SRHP under Criterion C.

In terms of Criterion C, the site is a sound archaeological example of a placer prospect shaft, which is both a rare and important site type. In general, sinking prospect shafts was one of the most common methods that mining outfits employed for locating economic hardrock ore formations. This method, however, was not commonly used to probe the depths of river gravel because of its high cost. Shafts required formal timbering to retain unstable gravel and powerful pumps to draw down the water table. These characteristics limited placer prospect shafts to companies with capital. By exploring the depths of gravel beds through shafts, the companies were able to calculate the extent of gold-bearing ground and plan effective mining strategies. Ultimately, the shafts allowed companies to develop and work deep placer deposits, which extended the timeframe of gold production in areas where the surface deposits were exhausted.

Placer Prospect Shaft Site Management Recommendations

Management recommendations suggest several actions. First, the site should be stabilized. The Division of Mining, Reclamation and Safety can be consulted regarding the shaft's stability. If the shaft is unstable, subsidence will impact adjacent features and possibly compromise the site's integrity.

Second, the site should be protected. Motorized recreation has a record of accelerating the decline of the area's historic resources. Given this, off-road vehicle traffic must be barred from the area around the site.

Third, the site can be developed as a heritage resource. Signage can be employed to educate the public regarding the history of the site, prospecting for placer deposits, and the history of the Wapiti company's operations. Signage will offer the added benefit of informing the public that the site is important and hence worthy of stewardship.