

Hamilton Mine and Mill History

During the late 1870s, the group of hills between French Gulch, to the south, and the Swan River, to the north, came under heavy scrutiny for hardrock gold veins. Probably due to concealment under heavy soils, prospectors discovered veins only over the course of the subsequent ten years. Ironically, French Gulch and the Swan River saw some of Summit County's first mining in the early 1860s when prospectors processed gravel for placer gold.

Prospectors found the gold and silver vein system that became the Hamilton Mine in 1887, staked the Weaver and Mc Mc claims, and drove a shallow prospect adit to prove the vein at depth. Charting the vein's course, the property owners then located the Gulch claim in 1889. The ore's value was enough to attract Edward W. Dee of Breckenridge, who probably attempted to bring the mine into production. Since he apparently lacked capital, he tried to obtain investors and finally found a party to bond and lease the property in 1892.¹

During the year the lessees drove development workings and erected a ten-stamp mill with the capacity to process nine tons of ore per day. Just as success seemed assured, the operation became mired with internal conflict, suspended work, and in so doing defaulted on the bond payments. The property reverted to Dee's ownership, and he was again faced with the problem of viable ore and no economic means of making it pay. The following year Dee interested a group of investors who formed the Summit Gulch Mining & Milling Company to bond and lease the mine. The investors were of varied backgrounds. Thomas McCann resided in New Jersey, and W.S. Devlin, Theodore Toensmeler, S.M. Vaughn, and D.L. Ezekiel were from Denver. Ezekiel was the only member of the party with appreciable mining experience and may have directed the group. He came to Colorado in 1875, began mining in Park County, and moved to Leadville with the boom there to act as a mine broker. During the next ten years he acquired a number of holdings in Park, Lake, Gilpin, and Clear Creek counties, and became a public figure in Leadville.²

The Summit Gulch company began production at once. A crew of 12, both underground and at the mill, kept the mill operating at capacity 24 hours per day. Possibly because the ore was difficult to treat, the Summit Gulch company quit work in 1894 without completing the sale, and the mine remained in the hands of Dee. Diverging from what was becoming a pattern, Dee did not try and bond and lease the mine in 1895, and instead solicited J.L. McDill and David P. Rose to back him in his own company, the Hamilton Gold Mining Company.³

Dee served as manager and brought the idle Hamilton Mine back into production in 1896. Dee probably personally experienced the mill's difficulties with the complex ore within the year and ordered it refitted in 1897 to improve metals recovery. The stamp battery was upgraded to include 900 pound stamps with a total of 88 drops per minute, which increased the capacity to 24 tons per day. The mill also featured equipment to concentrate the ore, rather than produce finished bullion. With the mill a success, Dee turned his attention to directing development of the mine. The original prospect adit

¹ Daugherty, 1980:12; Gilliland, 1999:118; Robinson, 1901.

² "Mining News" *EMJ* 2/24/94 p181; Griswold and Griswold, 1996:466; Harper, 1892:33; Robinson, 1901.

³ *Colorado Mining Directory*, 1896:246; Daugherty, 1980:12; Ransome, 1911:147; Robinson, 1901.

driven in 1887 was termed Level No.1, and a drift 50 feet below the adit, driven from within an internal shaft, was termed Level No.2. A haulageway driven upslope from the mill, which undercut the vein at some depth, became Level No.3. A simple aerial tramway was built from the Level No.3 tunnel's waste rock dump to the mill to ease shuttling ore. With this infrastructure and a crew of 15, the mine realized production of 80 to 100 tons of ore per month during 1898. Dee was rewarded for his perseverance, for the property produced a handsome \$125,000 by 1899, some of which certainly had gone to the two previous outfits.⁴

Production and activity at the Hamilton Mine only increased through 1899. Dee kept a crew of 20 employed bringing enough ore to daylight to yield 60 tons of concentrates per month from the little mill, which ran day and night. In all, during 1899 the Hamilton Mine netted 5,000 tons of concentrates over the course of seven months, when the mine apparently suspended work during winter.⁵

Operations continued at or near this capacity for another three years. During this time, miners underground drove development workings to access more ore, and Dee had miners drive a tunnel from a point near the mill to undercut the workings at greater depth. This tunnel, lower than the Level No.3 tunnel, served as a haulageway so miners could send the ore directly from the tunnel portal to the mill, rather than from the cumbersome, limiting aerial tramway. To differentiate between what was now three openings, the company recognized the original prospect adit (Level No.1) as the Tip Top Tunnel, the tunnel used up to that point (Level No.3) as the Homestake Tunnel, and the new haulageway as the Blacksmith Tunnel. In 1903, the Hamilton passed its prime and operations came to an abrupt halt. The reason remains unclear, although exhaustion of high-grade ore is likely.

During the next five years Dee tried to interest various interests in either leasing or buying the Hamilton, which only resulted in a succession of brief operations. In 1904 S.C. Huntington, A.A. Pike, William E. Stouffer, and J. Bernatchie took a lease on the property and ran the mill for a year or two, then quit. In 1906, Dee finally interested William McFarlane in the Hamilton. The fact that McFarlane considered the Hamilton as a serious proposition spoke of the mine's remaining potential. McFarlane had a lengthy history with gold mining in Colorado and ran McFarlane & Company with his brother Peter, which was one the most prolific mining machinery manufacturers in the world. McFarlane came to Central City in 1869 to join his brother, where they at first worked as miners then established the manufacturing firm. Through the firm's success and their own ventures in mines across Colorado, they learned a great deal and became public figures.⁶

McFarlane pursued a conservative course and at first leased the Hamilton to ascertain its worth. By 1907, convinced that the mine would continue to pay, McFarlane purchased the property, hired R.R. Kirk as manager, and began production. Kirk had great potential as manager and had already proven himself successful with mines around Breckenridge. He was a founding interest in the Gold Dust Mines Company, which leased the rich Puzzle and Gold Dust mines southeast of Breckenridge in 1905. Under

⁴ *Colorado Mining Directory*, 1898:301; Daugherty, 1980:12; "Mining News *EMJ* 5/21/98 p620; Hamilton Site Form; Robinson, 1901.

⁵ "Mining News *EMJ* 11/11/99 p586; Mine Managers' Reports: Hamilton Gold M&M Co; Robinson, 1901.

⁶ Axford, 1976:5, 7, 45, 77, 93-94; "Mining News" *EMJ* 4/28/06 p829; "Mining News" *MSP* 10/1/04 p230; "Mining News" *MSP* 5/12/06 p319.

Kirk, the Hamilton produced more ore through 1908, then McFarlane put the property up for lease.⁷

Within less than a year, McFarlane found a company to lease the mine, probably because McFarlane's sound reputation instilled a sense of confidence in the Hamilton. In 1909, the White Cloud Mining Company assumed the property, with L. Simon as manager and A.A. Pike, one of the 1904 lessees, as superintendent. Pike and Simon made arrangements to erect a new, efficient mill, powered by motors, with 20 stamps, to concentrate the remaining low-grade ore. White Cloud contracted with the Central Colorado Power Company to install electrical lines to the mill, and the mill was operational within the year. By 1910 White Cloud brought the Hamilton back into production and contracted with Andrew and Bert Acton to drive development drifts. Despite the substantial investments in the property, the Hamilton did not remain profitable for long and within several years White Cloud suspended operations.⁸

It remains unknown whether White Cloud retained its lease after it stopped work. In 1916, a company, possibly White Cloud, prepared to re-open the mine, which came to fruition briefly in the summer. Plans were made to add equipment to the mill, but Hamilton saw its last activity and closed by the end of the year. In total, the Hamilton yielded over \$400,000, most of which was produced under Dee's watch.⁹

⁷ Daugherty, 1980:12; "Mining News" *EMJ* 4/28/06 p829; "Mining News" *MSP* 4/1/05 p208; "Mining News" *MSP* 5/12/06 p319; "Mining News" *MSP* 9/21/07 p352.

⁸ Daugherty, 1980:12; "Mining News" *MSP* 7/10/09 p43; "Mining News" *MSP* 8/28/09 p277; "Mining News" *MSP* 11/26/10 p724; Ransome, 1911:147.

⁹ Daugherty, 1980:12; "Mining News" *EMJ* 6/3/16 p1006; "Mining News" *EMJ* 6/17/16 p1093 ; Ransome, 1911:147.