

**Wire Patch Mine**  
**Site 5ST367**

During the 1880s and 1890s, the Wire Patch Mine commanded the interest of geologists and investors alike for its unique and rich deposits of wire gold. The property was originally worked with hydraulic methods, and then once the veins of wire gold were discovered, miners pursued them underground.

The site occupies the entire west flank of Farncomb Hill on the north side of French Gulch, in the Bevin Mining District. The site's foot, at around 10,360 feet elevation, features gravel outwash fans typical of hydraulic mining. French Creek, lined with arctic willows, flows past the site's foot, and French Gulch Road parallels the creek. The site's head is approximately 11,000 feet in elevation and features a combination of bulldozed roads, waste rock from the Ontario Mine, and ground made bare by hydraulic mining. Between the head and the foot, the site is extremely steep and furrowed from hydraulic mining.

Because the site's main portion is landscape in scale and possesses few well-preserved features, it was not recorded in detail. Instead, a summary has been provided below. The most sensitive area, which was a residential complex and mill site, was recorded in detail, however, because of its importance. The complex lies on a natural bench on the west edge of the workings.

Wire Patch Mine History

During the late 1870s, Henry Farncomb and Francis T. Ebert operated a highly profitable hydraulic mine on the west flank of Farncomb Hill in French Gulch. Farncomb was intimate with the gulch because he was among the first to prospect the drainage during the early 1860s. He noticed that some of the placer gold being mined in the upper portion of the gulch was crystalline and not heavily weathered by eons of stream action. This suggested to Farncomb that the gold had traveled little from its source, which he surmised was nearby. Farncomb then turned his attention to the gulch sides and found an extremely rich placer deposit on the west flank of Farncomb Hill, which he then staked as a placer claim.

During the late 1870s, Farncomb and Francis T. Ebert worked the steep tract of ground with hydraulic methods, which easily stripped away loose soil and scree. In 1879, to the partners' delight, the hydraulic action exposed the true source of the placer deposit, which was several extremely rich veins of wire, crystal, and free gold. Farncomb and Ebert then filed the Elephant and Wire Patch claims to obtain legal title to the vein. Once Farncomb's strike became common knowledge, other prospectors staked claims including the Ontario, Boss, Little Morgan, Queen of the Forest, Triangle, Emperor, and Frederick the Great. The quilt work of claims extended from Farncomb Hill's southwest flank northeast over the summit to the heads of Georgia and American gulches. Many if not all the claims featured gold veins, some of which offered rare deposits of wire gold. Based on these formations, the area became known as the Wire Patch.<sup>1</sup>

The veins proved to be a bonanza almost from ground-surface, which attracted the attention of mining capitalists who purchased some of the claims in entirety or in part. At this point, trouble began. Henry J. Litton, Patrick McCarty, Timothy Murphy, and L.B. Smart acquired the Ontario and American mines during or before 1882. All lived in Lincoln, operated several placer and hardrock mines, and ran the Lincoln City Quartz Mill to treat ore. When they

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<sup>1</sup> Dougherty, 1980:103, 162; "Upper French Gulch" *EMJ* 11/10/77 p350; Wolle, 1995:80.

discovered that the gold veins extended beyond the Ontario and American mines onto adjoining claims, they were adamant that the extensions were theirs. Around the same time, James M. Strickler acquired a share in Farncomb's Elephant Mine, probably from Farncomb's partner Ebert. Strickler was cashier of the Exchange Bank of Denver and had served in various government administrations in Denver since 1867.<sup>2</sup>

Litton et al. immediately challenged Farncomb and Strickler both legally and physically. According to popular historical accounts, Litton et al. sued Farncomb and Strickler on grounds that Farncomb's original claims, which took in portions of the veins in question, applied to surface rights and not mineral rights. Of course, Farncomb and Strickler countered that their claims included mineral rights and that since Farncomb's claims were the first staked, they possessed discovery rights under common mining law. As the legal battles developed, both parties pursued the conventional strategy of trying to extract as much ore as possible in minimal time in case they lost the suit. Several years passed with no resolution, and in impatience, Litton et al. dispatched gunmen to seize at least some of Farncomb's property, probably including the Elephant. A battle ensued in which three were killed. Popular historical sources also claim that Strickler brought the Exchange Bank's weight to bear in the suit, which ruined the bank. In 1885 or 1886, the court ordered the involved claims sold to a third party to resolve the dispute, and through manipulation, the Elephant and Ontario fell back into the hands of Strickler, Farncomb, Murphy, McCarty, and Litton, who formed uncomfortable partnerships and combinations to exchange their shares.

Rather than allow the rich gold to remain in the ground and spend money on lawyers, the conflicted claim owners finally came to an agreement in 1888. Probably in accord with court orders, they sold shares in the claims to a group of investors primarily from St. Louis, who formed the Wire Patch Gold Mining & Milling Company. Early in 1888, the company prepared the consolidated group of claims for organized production. The tunnels on the Wire Patch, Elephant, and Ontario claims were connected, a mill was built in French Gulch, and a tramway linked the mine workings with the mill. At first, the mill was simple and consisted of two devices known as Huntington mills, which simultaneously ground the ore and amalgamated the gold content. A crew of 20 miners produced more ore than the mill could treat and, in response, the company added four more Huntington devices.<sup>3</sup>

In 1889, the company continued to overwhelm the mill with ore. Looking to the future, the company drove additional tunnels on the various claims to expose more sections of the rich veins. In total, the mine featured five tunnels and six levels of workings. For two years, production remained at high levels then tapered because miners began to exhaust the developed portions of the veins. By 1891, the company was willing to lease the property to Farncomb who worked it on a reduced scale through 1893. When Farncomb relinquished his lease, the obvious ore was gone, which discouraged further interest in the property for several years.<sup>4</sup>

William Stouffer, who leased various mines around Breckenridge, suspected that the Wire Patch ground still offered small veins that the previous operators had missed. In 1897, he leased the property and proved his theory, which then drew renewed attention. For the next ten years, the Wire Patch saw a succession of short-term lessees. In 1899, James Strickler worked the mine with a small crew and was followed the next year by the August Mining Company. Between 1901 and 1902, the Wire Patch Company, which still existed, employed several miners, and it then leased out the property again until 1906. During this time, the mill was idle.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Colorado Mining Directory*, 1883:742, 750, 814; Dougherty, 1980:77; Smiley, 1901:586, 822.

<sup>3</sup> "Mining News" *Mining Industry* 4/6/88 p12; "Mining News" *EMJ* 4/21/88 p293; "Mining News" *EMJ* 9/8/88 p200; Ransome, 1911:150;

"Summit County, Colorado" *MIT* 8/20/91 p90.

<sup>4</sup> "General Mining News" *MIT* 8/6/91 p69; "Mining News" *EMJ* 8/8/91 p171; "Summit County, Colorado" *MIT* 8/20/91 p90.

<sup>5</sup> Callbreath, 12/28/99; *Colorado Mining Directory*, 1901:121; Dougherty, 1980:104; "Mining News" *EMJ* 7/21/00, p78.

J.C. Putner held the same assumptions as Stouffer about the potential for hidden ore. In 1906, he assumed the property and interested Mark G. Evans for capital. Together, the partners rehabilitated the mill, drove new exploratory workings, and found enough small veins to maintain production through 1907.<sup>6</sup>

Of the various lessees, the Pitt Ores Company of Pennsylvania had the greatest success in the Wire Patch's waning years. The company leased the property in 1908 and pursued a sound strategy for long-term production. Miners drove more exploratory workings but maintained production from known veins to provide the company with income. Electric motors were installed to power the mill, and the company treated its own ore and custom batches from other mines. Unfortunately, the electrical system was poorly designed and set fire to the mill, which burned in 1908. While the loss of the mill interfered with the company's plan, several rich strikes encouraged the company to continue with the lease. Miners made one last discovery in 1911, and after they extracted the ore by the end of the following year, Pitt Ores abandoned the property.<sup>7</sup>

The Wire Patch saw only two brief periods of activity afterward. During the early 1920s, the Royal Tiger Mines Company purchased the idle property and conducted minor exploration. The mine then went idle for more than ten years. In 1937, an outfit realized that the placer tailings near the floor of French Gulch still possessed disseminated gold and then signed a lease. For several years, the outfit employed a power shovel, which scooped the tailings into a small system of sluices that recovered the gold. When the returns began to decline, the outfit abandoned the property, and the Wire Patch saw no further operation of significance.<sup>8</sup>

### Wire Patch Mine Description

As a historic resource, the Wire Patch Mine manifests primarily as a landscape created both by the Wire Patch Company's hydraulic mining and the 1937 power-shovel operation. The site also includes a complex of workers' housing features and remnants of the mill, which the Wire Patch Company erected in 1888.

The hydraulic workings sprawl across an approximate 600 by 1,050 foot area. The Wire Patch Company stripped the steep mountainside bare of soil and fine scree, leaving a course surface of decayed slate bedrock. After stripping away the ground-surface with monitors, the company focused on two areas where the gold extended into friable bedrock. Probably by focusing high-pressure water jets, workers created two deep and roughly parallel incisions that extend northeast up the mountainside. The western incision cuts through what was originally the Elephant Mine, which was a shallow, underground operation midway up the mountainside. Several mounds of waste rock currently remain from the mine and possess little integrity. A second incision occupies the eastern portion of the workings.

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<sup>6</sup> "Mining News" *EMJ* 6/16/06 p1166; "Mining News" *EMJ* 10/20/06 p755; "Mining News" *MSP* 9/22/06 p343.

<sup>7</sup> "Current News" *Mining Science* 2/20/08 p209; Dougherty, 1980:104; *Mineral Resources*, 1911:562; "Mining News" *MSP* 5/30/08 p723; "Mining News" *MSP* 10/10/08 p478.

<sup>8</sup> *Mineral Resources*, 1938:277; Weed, 1926:700.

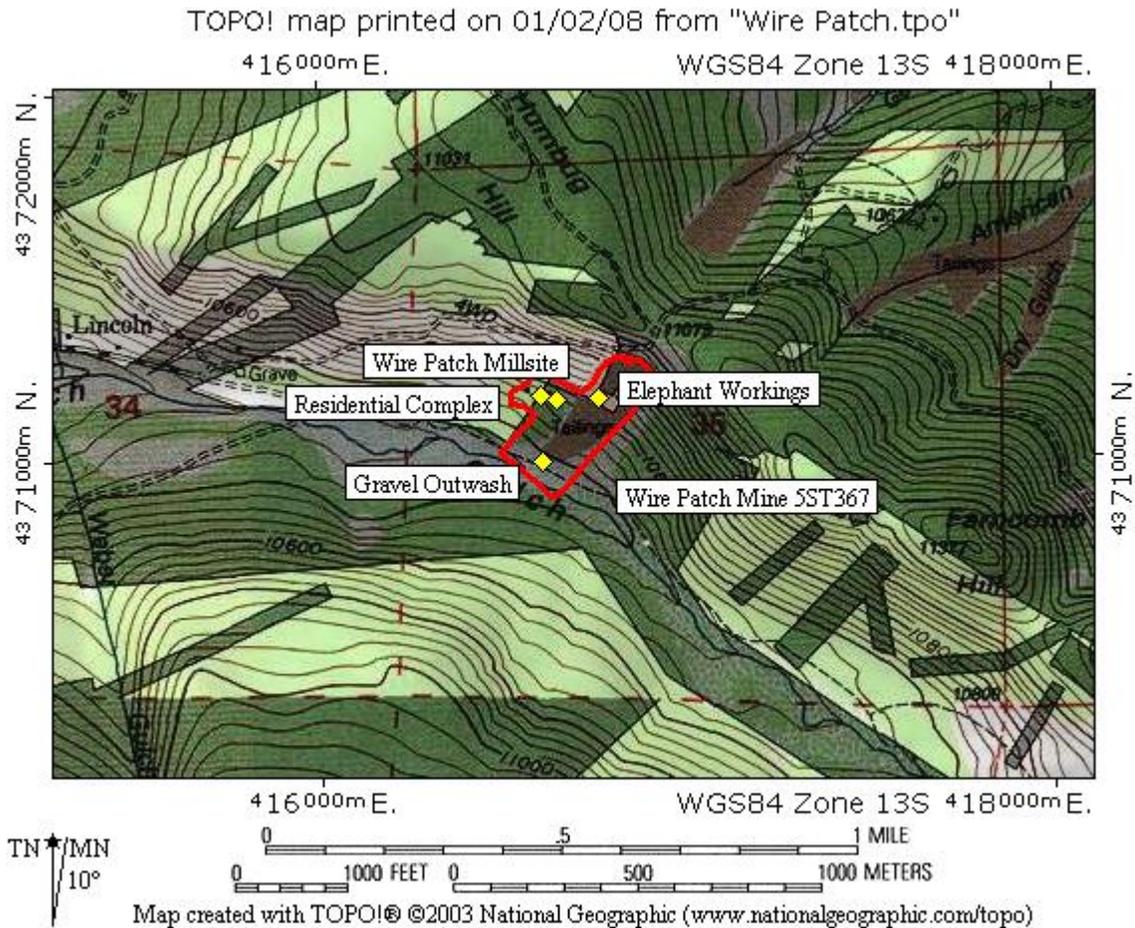


Figure 2.26: The map illustrates the boundaries and general content of the Wire Patch Mine site. The residential complex and millsite were mapped in detail and presented below.

An extensive outwash fan of colluvial gravel around 300 feet long and 660 feet wide sprawls out from the hydraulic workings. These tailings came from two sources. One was runoff from the mountainside during hydraulic operations, and the other was the end-product of the placer gold recovery process. Specifically, liquefied soil was funneled through sluices to recover the gold, and the tailings were simply ejected onto the ground. Currently, the outwash fan features braided channels, bulldozed areas, and excavations created in 1937 by the power shovel.

Today, the hydraulic workings and gravel outwash fan are eroded, unconsolidated, and offer few clearly identifiable features. One series of cobble stacks on the southwest base of the fan appears to have supported a segment of a sluice.

The residential complex and mill were located on the western edge of the hydraulic workings approximately midway up the mountainside. The residential features retain a high degree of archaeological integrity but the mill remnants do not.

The mill remnant consists of a steam engine foundation, debris, and a portion of the facility's platform. It appears that, during the 1930s, someone undermined the platform for loose gold left over from milling operations. Such invasive action destroyed important features and artifacts, leaving the mill incompletely represented and rendering an interpretation impossible.

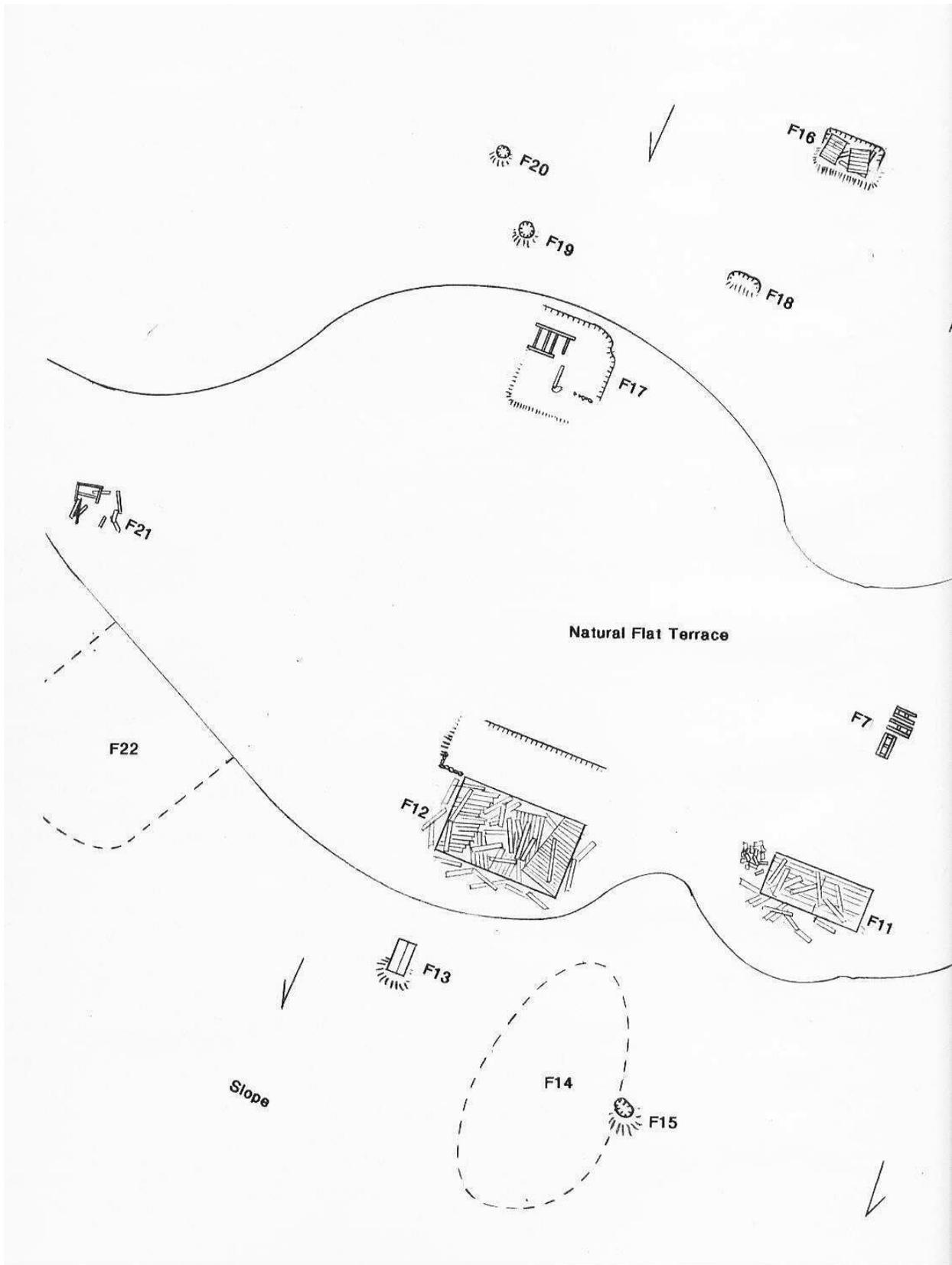


Figure 2.27: Plan view of the western portion of the Wire Patch Mine's residential complex. The eastern portion is continued below.



Figure 2.27: Plan view of the eastern portion of the Wire Patch Mine's residential complex. Remnants of the mill are at right.

Two intact features associated with the mill remain intact, and they lie amid the residential complex. Specifically, workers left two collections of appliance parts on the ground. The western collection (F7) consists of three partially disassembled Huntington mill foundations, and the second consists of amalgamation tables (F6) and more appliance foundation members. It appears that workers saved the materials as replacement parts.

The residential complex featured housing for the workers as well as support facilities for the mining operation. In terms of residences, the complex included three boardinghouses and two other types of quarters. Two of the boardinghouses were located in the complex's eastern portion.

One of these boardinghouses currently remains partially standing, and it was 16 by 19 feet in area. Workers constructed the building (F9) with V-notched log walls and used cut nails to fasten the primary woodwork, which differed from the complex's other buildings. In contrast, the other buildings were of frame construction and assembled with wire nails. The heavy use of cut nails strongly suggests that the boardinghouse was built during the 1880s probably by Farncomb and Ebert's miners. In later years, workers employed by other operators repaired the boardinghouse with wire nails. Currently, portions of the walls remain standing, a light density of artifacts extends in all directions, and meaningful buried deposits are unlikely.

The complex's other boardinghouse stood on the shoulder of the area's natural, flat terrace. The building (F8) was side-gabled, 12 by 32 feet in area, 9 feet high at the roof eaves, and 16 feet high overall. The building had no formal support system. Instead, workers nailed 4x6 stringers to corner posts, added 2x6 cross-braces, and fastened down plank siding. The foundation consisted of 2x10 floor joists, 4x6 wall footers, and posts over a cut-and-fill platform. Artifacts extend downslope, and meaningful buried deposits are unlikely.

The main boardinghouse stood on the shoulder of the area's natural, flat terrace in the complex's central portion. Prior to collapse, the building (F12) was 24 by 40 feet in area, one-and-one-half stories high, and stood on 12x12 posts over a crudely graded platform. The subframe consisted of 2x8 wall footers, stringers, and floor joists, and the floor boards were nailed diagonally to the subframe to lend support. The walls consisted of a 2x4 post-and-girt frame sided with two layers of planks, and the roof was supported by common 2x6 rafters. Workers used a combination of cut- and wire nails to fasten the woodwork, reflecting construction around 1890. Artifacts currently surround the ruin, a deposit of stove ash lies to the east, and a scatter of cans extends west. Duff conceals some small items, and the ruin's north side and the ash deposit both probably offer shallow, buried deposits.

The residents disposed of their waste in the manner common to western mining camps. Specifically, they relied on a privy for their personal use and threw solid refuse downslope. The solid refuse accumulated as two dumps (F14, F22) of mostly cans.

The privy building (F13) currently stands, and it was moved to its present location from a pit (F15) that workers backfilled when full. The privy is a well-built, side-gabled building 5 by 10 feet in area, 7 feet high at the roof eaves, and 8½ feet high overall. The walls consist of board-and-batten siding nailed to a 2x4 post-and-girt frame. Common 2x4 rafters support a roof of planks clad with corrugated sheet iron. The building's subframe consists of three 2x8 joists oriented lengthwise, and it stood on 4x4 posts. Workers added a plank skirt around the base to conceal the underlying pit, which is 3½ by 8 feet in area, 5 feet deep, and lined with planks. The privy currently stands in poor condition. The building shifted west off its foundation, the toilet seats have been removed, and siding was stripped off the east and south sides. Buried deposits are likely.

A few workers lived in a building in the complex's north portion, and the building combined residential quarters with other functions. The building is gone and the platform (F17)

currently remains. The building was L-shaped, and the main portion was 12 by 14 feet in area and had a western extension 7 feet wide and 12 feet long. A lightning rod ground projects out of the crotch of the L, and two water pipes extend out of the ground at the northeast corner. The building also stood in a chicken-wire enclosure. Artifacts lie scattered around, and shallow, buried deposits are likely on all sides.

The residents relied on a privy upslope for their personal use. Two pits (F19, F20) currently remain and manifest as relatively shallow depressions. Artifacts are scattered around, duff conceals additional items, and buried deposits are possible.

A detached frame residence stood on the complex's west edge. The building is gone, and structural debris (F21) now lies scattered over a 25 by 25 foot area. Possible floor joist impressions are visible, and a water pipe extends out of the north edge. While thick duff conceals some artifacts, others are visible along the east edge. Shallow, buried deposits are likely on all sides.

The complex possessed two facilities that supported the mining operation. One was an assay shop (F11) that stood between boardinghouses. The building was 12 by 30 feet in area, side-gabled, and featured a 2x4 post-and-girt frame and common rafter roof, both of which were sided with planks. Underneath the west end, where the assay furnace and equipment were, the foundation consisted of 3x6 joists laid on a cut-and-fill platform. The rest of the joists were 2x6s, and all supported a plank floor. Currently, a small section of the south wall remains standing, the furnace chimney collapsed into a pile of bricks, and a mound of rock chips from dressing ore samples lies along the north edge. Buried deposits are possible along the west and north edges, but they probably mirror the surface artifact assemblage.

What was apparently a stable stood northwest and away from the rest of the complex. The building (F16) was front-gabled, 8 by 10 feet in area, 7 feet high at the roof eaves, and 9 feet high overall. The building had no formal frame. Instead, workers erected 2x4 corner posts, nailed on 2x4 girts and cross-braces, fastened on plank siding, and added tarpaper cladding. The foundation consisted of wall footers, which workers laid on a cut-and-fill platform slightly larger than the building. The building completely collapsed, a few artifacts lie scattered around, and buried deposits are unlikely.

The complex features a full and rich artifact assemblage. As can be expected, most of the domestic refuse is associated with the residential features while the assay shop and stable possess relatively few items. Hole-in-cap cans assembled with lapped side seams, bottle bases with makers' marks, and cut nails reflect occupation during the late 1880s and early 1890s. Most of the dateable artifacts consisted of hole-in-cap cans assembled with inner-rolled and soldered side seams, early sanitary cans, tobacco tins, hand-finished bottles, and more bottle bases with makers' marks. They indicate that the greatest period of occupation occurred during the 1890s. Workers lived in the complex one last time during the late 1930s according to sanitary cans, sardine tins, vent-hole cans, church-key beverage cans, and selenium bottle glass.

### Wire Patch Mine Site Interpretation

Few detailed conclusions can be drawn regarding the mining and milling operations due to a lack of intact feature assemblages. The features and artifacts associated with the residential complex, however, reflect several trends. For example, the numbers of workers can be estimated from the floor space offered by the boardinghouses. In general, unmarried workers required at least 60 square feet for bedding and personal possessions. Married couples usually had more space, and self-contained households had common areas dedicated to communal activities. The log boardinghouse featured around 300 square feet and could have accommodated three to four

workers. The other eastern boardinghouse had 384 square feet and could have housed five to six workers. The main boardinghouse offered 960 square feet in the loft and half as much for sleeping quarters on the ground floor. Such space could have accommodated twenty-four workers. Four more workers lived in the complex's other two residential buildings. In total, the crew included around thirty-eight members between 1889 and 1891, which was the mine's period of peak production.

While workers lived in all the complex's buildings during peak production, some of the buildings were vacant afterward. Specifically, the log boardinghouse and the main boardinghouse were inhabited during all the mine's periods of activity, including the late 1930s operation. The L-shaped building and the eastern boardinghouse (F8) were occupied from the 1890s until 1912, when the last major operation ceased. The western residence was inhabited during the 1890s only.

Most, but not all, the residents were men who belonged to a working-class socioeconomic status. A woman lived among the crew, evident by a boot sole near the assay shop ruin, and she may have been employed as the hostler. Steak bones and a decorative leather gauntlet piece indicate that at least one individual who belonged to a high socioeconomic status lived in the eastern boardinghouse.

The crew consumed a high-quality Victorian diet rich with fresh food. Numerous cans reflect an emphasis on preserved foods including soups, stews, vegetables, fruit, meat, fish, and preserves. Baking powder cans and baking pans indicate that the crew also ate baked goods. The crew consumed a wide variety of fresh meat according to a high number of butchered bones. As was common, beef was favored, and cuts included ribs, roasts, stews, and steak. Pork dishes were also consumed.

The workers openly enjoyed alcohol, but the quantity per person is questionable. The site's artifact assemblage includes 107 fragmented liquor bottles, 23 beer vessels, 10 wine bottles, and a number of liquor jugs. When averaged over the course of the mine's lifespan, the totals suggest substantial consumption. In terms of health, a total of eleven medicine bottles suggest that some workers suffered temporary ailments.

### Wire Patch Mine Site Significance

The Wire Patch Mine played an important role in the Breckenridge area because it was a large and highly profitable gold producer. The site was also significant for several other reasons. First, the veins offered a form of gold ore so novel that they became a focus of geologists and the greater mining industry. Second, the site was the scene of a major conflict that contributed to the field of mining litigation. The site currently possesses mixed integrity relative to the period spanning 1888 and 1893, which was its principal timeframe of production. The mine workings retain integrity on a landscape scale, and the residential complex is an excellent archaeological example of workers' housing. In addition, the residential complex possesses buried deposits that can contribute meaningful information. For these reasons, the site is recommended eligible for the NRHP under Criteria A, C, and D, and for the SRHP under Criteria A, C, and E.

In terms of NRHP and SRHP Criterion A, the site is associated with trends important on local, state, and national levels. On a local level, the Wire Patch was one of the Breckenridge area's important producers, employers, and consumers of goods and services. In this capacity, the mine directly supported the local economy. As a major gold producer, the Wire Patch stimulated confidence in the mining industry, contributed to its overall production figures, and interested investors in the area.

The Wire Patch participated in several statewide trends. First, the mine contributed to Colorado's economy through its voluminous gold production and consumption of goods and services. Because most of the mine owners lived in Colorado, much of the Wire Patch's profits remained in the state. Further, the various operators purchased much of their equipment from manufacturers in Denver, which hosted one of the most important mine supply industries in the United States. In so doing, the operators helped Denver's mine supply industry maintain its status.

Second, as noted above, the Wire Patch was a major gold producer. During the late 1880s and early 1890s, Breckenridge was recognized as one of Colorado's most important sources of gold, and the success of the Wire Patch reinforced this perception.

Third, the Wire Patch was the physical result of an important mining litigation case. Specifically, during the mid-1880s, Farncomb Hill featured a number of claims owned by separate and hostile parties. In their attempt to wrest control of the rich gold veins, these parties brought suit against each other and even came to armed conflict in which three men were killed. The principal suit went to court, and the final decision required the owners to cooperate and include a third party to operate the property. The third party organized the Wire Patch Gold Mining & Milling Company and developed the property into its current form. The suit was important because it contributed to Colorado's body of legal solutions that were applied to similar litigation cases.

The Wire Patch participated in several national trends. First, because of its productivity, the Wire Patch was tied to national commercial and banking systems. In terms of commercial systems, the Wire Patch Company consumed goods and services from outside of Colorado and hence contributed to distant economies. In so doing, the company also contributed to distant industries. In terms of banking, the company contributed to the development of interstate systems because some of the investors were located outside of Colorado, mostly in St. Louis. These individuals provided financing, accepted profits, and distributed company stocks to buyers.

Second, the Wire Patch property featured unique veins rich with wire and crystalline gold. These forms of gold were so rare that samples were used for display in various museums. The unique nature of the veins also drew the interest of nationally prominent geologists such as Frederick Leslie Ransome who personally conducted investigations on gold type, vein structure, and mode of deposition. The findings ultimately contributed both to geology as a science and to the understanding of economic geology.

In terms of NRHP and SRHP Criterion C, the Wire Patch Mine is an important representation of two aspects of mining. First, the site constitutes a landscape that clearly embodies a massive, advanced hydraulic mining operation. The landscape reflects the scope, scale, and impact of hydraulic mining, which was important to both Colorado and the mountainous West.

Second, the site possesses a residential complex that featured an assay office, stable, single residence, and three boardinghouses. These features and their associated artifacts represent mining industry living conditions and the workers' demography, diet, health, and levels of substance abuse.

In terms of NRHP Criterion D, and the SRHP Criterion E, the residential complex will yield information important to the current understanding of workers on the mining frontier. Specifically, the privy pits and building platforms possess buried archaeological deposits that range in age from the late 1880s to 1912. Testing and excavation will reveal information regarding gender, ethnicity, demography, diet, health, levels of substance abuse, and other

matters. These topics are poorly understood at present because relatively little information has been quantified to date.

### Wire Patch Mine Site Management Recommendations

Management recommendations suggest several actions. First, the Wire Patch Mine is an important stop for recreationists on the heavily used French Gulch Road. Numerous cyclists, hikers, and off-road vehicles use the site for various purposes. Off-road vehicles in particular use the hydraulic workings as a terrain park, and motorcycles have created destructive trails through the residential complex. The lower reaches of the hydraulic workings can continue to serve as a terrain park because they possess few important features. However, traffic should be aggressively blockaded from the rest of the site, and especially the residential complex.

Second, the site's recreational role offers great potential for public interpretation. Signage or pamphlets can explain the history of the site, placer mining, French Gulch, and the area's placer mining industry. Further, an interpretive trail can be graded up through the residential complex, where the public can be educated regarding living conditions at mines, the lifestyles of miners, and aspects of their demography.

Third, the standing privy is in immediate danger of collapse and should be stabilized. The building should be righted and placed on a new timber foundation and the missing siding replaced. Interpretive signage would enhance the privy's protection from vandalism and bottle collecting. The building even can be used as a rain shelter if the floor is repaired.

Last, the buried archaeological deposits amid the residential complex provide an excellent opportunity for studies of mine workers. Testing and excavation should be carried out.