

From the ground up: Stories of Arizona's mines and early mineral discoveries

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By Arizona Governor Jack Williams (1967 – 1975)

A Lynx & Gold Fever

Walker Party, Lynx Creek, Hassayampa, Yavapai County

“There’s gold in those mountains,” an Indian told Joseph Walker in 1882. His words ignited a passion that drove a party of thirty-four men across desert, forest, and mountains, and into the most dangerous Apache territory in Arizona.

So anxious were the prospectors that they disregarded the usual packing instructions. They stored their flour and gunpowder in waterproof boxes, but everything else was subjected to desert heat and mountain storms.

Within a month, the party’s clothes were in shreds. They skinned deer and wore the hides; and after winning a skirmish with Indians, they scavenged their enemies’ garments. But before they could wear the garments, they had to bury them in ant hills to get rid of the lice. To make matters worse, they had to cut the hides off their backs when they shrank after a rain.

Men driven crazy by the scorching desert heat were tied in their saddles by the others. Nothing was going to make the party turn back, not even the fierce Apaches who preyed on all travelers. In fact, Captain Walker decided to take the Apache leader, Mangas Coloradas, as a hostage. With the help of a U.S. Army detachment, they not only captured but killed the chief.

His death put the Apaches on the warpath and made travel more difficult. But the Walker party relentlessly made its way up the Hassaampa River to a gold-filled creek where they camped. When Sam Miller, a member of the party, found a lynx lying in the water, he thought it was dead and leaned down to pick it up; it “came to life” and clawed Sam, who kicked the animal to death. Ever since, the creek has been known as Lynx Creek.

The party found gold everywhere they panned in the creek bed. Numerous placer mines were opened up and down the creek. Men worked in teams, one with a pick and the other with a gun, because Apaches were a constant threat.

With the Indian raids becoming more frequent, the group’s biggest worry was that their source of supplies would be cut off. They decided on a daring venture. They buried all of their belongings in a fresh mound, built a fire over it to conceal the location, and made a

ten-day journey across the desert to the villages of the friendly Pimas. There, they bought food, sent out letters telling of their discovery and hightailed it back to camp. Everything was exactly as they had left it. Their conning plan had paid off!

By 1886, a two-mile stretch along the creek held some 20 houses with at least 60 men panning gold. Mills and smelters were built, and schools and a post office proved that this was a community of people who planned to stay.

They did...until the gold ran out. A few prospectors returned to Lynx Creek during the 1930s, but found little gold of real consequence. Although the creek yielded more than \$2 million, the largest amount of any stream bed in the state, most of it was found during the first years of activity when the gold-choked river attracted an army of men who had traveled hundreds of miles for a dream such as this.