
My Personal Reflections on Fifty Years of Mining History

(An address to the Twelfth Annual Convention of the
Mining History Association, Butte, Montana, 14 June 2001.)

by Clark C. Spence
University of Illinois

For me, it all began in 1949, in one of Bob Athearn's seminars at the University of Colorado. Little did I realize then that more than half a century later I would still be puttering around with mining history. My good wife swears I've been tinkering with gold dredging for most of those years and why not get on with it? I hope you'll forgive me tonight if I reminisce a bit about the researching and writing of mining history in that period, as reflected in a few of my own experiences, none of them earth-shaking. Bob Spude says I can use the upright pronoun as much as I want, and a guy rarely gets such an opportunity.

When I started out, Harry Truman was president, the New York Yankees were World Series champions, and *All the King's Men* won an Oscar for the best picture of the year. A new Ford V-8 cost a whopping \$1,800, bread was a dime a loaf, and a student on the G.I. Bill got \$65 a month. Engineers still relied on slide rules; hand-held calculators, personal computers, and cell phones were yet in the future. Libraries didn't have Xerox machines but some of them could provide photostatic copies at about \$1.20 a page. And as for me, I still had a full head of bright red hair and weighed 135 pounds.

Fifty years ago, the field of mining history was small. It was not coeducational. It tended to focus narrowly, with a propensity to emphasize the gaudy and the sensational—lost mines, ghost-towns, and rowdy, root-hog-or-die mining camps. Over the years, all that would gradually change, with historians like Russell Elliot, Rodman Paul, Turpy Jackson, Bill Greever, and Otis

Young leading the way. Duane Smith was still in junior high school. The new mining history became much broader and multifaceted: it focused on the mineral industry, with all its complexities and implications—legal, financial, technological, environmental, and international—and the reaction—cultural, social, political, and economic—of workers and communities to it. The number of historians in the field vastly expanded, and it attracted bright young scholars of both sexes. Men still predominate in number, but a surprising number of women have made substantial contributions in recent years; witness the writings of Mary Murphy, Betsy Jameson, and Sally Zanjani, for example—the latter, of course, a past-president of the MHA. I take no credit for the new mining history; I was simply a part of a generation who found the subject fascinating and relatively untouched and was carried along with the current.

As many of you know, researching and writing mining history is tough work. You may spend years digging out the raw materials, mastering the intricacies of your topic and smelting everything together into deathless prose. Then you find a press that agrees to accept it, often with a no-royalty contract—few books on mining are best-sellers—and the copy editor then proceeds to shred it to bits. Once it is resurrected and published, reviewers can be even more relentless. Indelibly engraved in my mind is the flat statement one Colorado newspaper critic made about my mining engineers study: "This book is so bad that I couldn't read beyond Chapter One." For all that, I can honestly say that I have

very much enjoyed researching and writing mining history. Despite what the reviewers say—what do they know?—a completed book or an article on a previously unexplored topic or a re-interpretation of an old one, brings to the writer a real sense of self-satisfaction, and the hope that at least a small contribution has been made to understanding what has gone on before. At the same time, during the process itself, in my case at least, I think I have learned a little bit about human nature, warts and all, and my own outlook has been shaped accordingly.

Let me cite two small incidents at the beginning of my career. When I heard that Professor X had been involved in a microfilm project in London to copy official corporate records in the Companies Registration Office for the University of California, I wrote him about my dissertation project on British Investment in Western mines and asked for suggestions. His response was blunt. Don't do it, he said. He had already completed precisely what I intended to do. In fact, his manuscript was ready to be sent to a press, he told me. On the advice of my mentor at Minnesota, who knew the man, I went ahead anyway. Five years later, after my study had been completed and the book version was being advertised, Professor X wrote again, although this time his memory seemed a little fuzzy. "Goodness!" he said in effect, "it looks like we are doing the same thing. Why don't we collaborate?" At about the same time as my first contact with Professor X, I had written to Professor Elmer Ellis, biographer of Colorado Senator Henry Teller, asking if he had further information, not included in his book, on Teller's law partner, Hiram Johnson, who was active in mine promotion in the 1870s. Ellis combed through his file boxes and wrote back a four-page letter, answering my query in great detail, with some splendid suggestions. I was much impressed, the more so when I learned that he was the busiest of academics—the president of the University of Missouri. And I decided at that point, that should I

ever have queries from others seeking help, I would try to follow his example rather than that of Professor X. As a result, over the years I have been through my various mining notes many times. Checking back over my e-mail for the past thirty-six months, I find that I have received sixteen inquiries about mining topics from complete strangers, including a junior high teacher in Cascade, Idaho, who wanted help in devising a project for her class. In many of these cases, I struck out, but occasionally I got a base hit.

Most of my career has been spent at the University of Illinois, the most scenic aspect of which is the 9.2 million volumes in its library, the largest state university library in the country, with especially fine holdings in technical periodicals. It collects literary manuscripts, but little in the way of other types of letters and records, certainly not those pertaining to mining. The latter are scattered in a thousand directions, a fact which not merely invites, but requires, considerable travel—another aspect of historical research that I have enjoyed very much. My most memorable research trip came in the fall of 1953. Mary Lee Nance and I were married one hot September day in Texas, jumped on a train for New York the next day, and soon were aboard the *S.S. United States* headed for England. The Fulbright Commission—which provided the \$1,300 stipend to keep us alive for the year—had at first booked me in one end of the ship and my bride in the other, but that was sorted out before we sailed. The second most unforgettable work trip was to New Zealand nearly thirty years ago to try to figure out the process by which gold dredge technology, first successful in that country, was transferred to the United States. These were the high points. One night not too long ago when I could not sleep, I started counting sheep, but the critters were too fast for me to keep up with, so I switched to counting places where I had done research on mining. The total came to 101 and ranged from numerous universities in England, the United States, and New Zealand, to a score

of state historical societies and half a dozen county courthouses, plus the London Stock Exchange, the Library of Congress, and the town library of Nome, among others. My favorites are the Huntington Library, the Idaho and the Montana historical societies, and the American Heritage Center of the University of Wyoming.

Thanks to the efforts of Gene Gressley, collector par excellence, Wyoming's holdings are truly exceptional. It is one of the most, if not *the* most important collections of mining manuscripts in the world today, including fifty-two tons of Anaconda Copper records. In the old days, researchers there worked in a charming reading room with six Alfred Jacob Miller paintings looking down from one wall, a Thomas Moran on another, with one of Frederic Remington's original sculptures nearby on a pedestal, and the Cisco Kid's (Ramon Navarro) fancy saddle on display. Alas, the old has given way to a new building "The Wigwam," as some call it—again thanks to Gressley, who raised most of the money. The magnificent collections are well-housed, but some of the magic is gone.

I have always found public and private repositories generally quite cooperative with historians—that is their business. But there are occasional exceptions. For example, one state archivist of Colorado kept telling me once: "Yep! I've got everything you need right here in these files. But I can't let you see them." And he didn't, either. Another time, I was denied permission to use materials in the LDS Historian's office in Utah. I discovered subsequently from Leonard Arrington, who later held the same position, that it was because William Godbe, the Utah promoter who interested me, had been at odds with Brigham Young's policies on mining. Godbe wanted to open things up; Young would keep the lid on. In London, I was for a time blocked from using the rich resources of the London Stock Exchange, but it was my own fault: I made my request to a clerk at a low level. After he sent me on my way, I made the same

pitch again—this time to the top official of the Exchange. Soon I found myself with a key to the room in the Share and Loan Department housing all the old prospectuses, annual company reports, special resolutions, and what-not, some of them going back to the late eighteenth century—a real treasure trove. There were only two problems. One was the threat of blindness. The room had no windows and the only light was a 40-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling. The other was that I always felt conspicuous walking into the Stock Exchange. I was the only person not wearing a bowler hat and striped pants. But I learned a valuable lesson: when seeking access to materials, go to the top.

One of the joys of research is the hunt for manuscripts still in private hands—in offices or stashed away in attics. (I found a fellow in Tucson who had a garage full of mining records.) By experience, I learned to expect disappointment. Leads, like veins of ore, often pinched out. On one occasion, I visited the offices of John Taylor & Sons, a London mining engineering firm, which for nearly a century had been involved in mine inspection, management, and ownership on a global scale. Here I was shown what was left of their records after the war—half a dozen index ledgers that had been housed in a heavy safe and which listed all the great records the company had lost in the Blitz. I was reminded of Bill Mauldin's famous World War II cartoon showing the two GI's, Willie and Joe, viewing the results of German artillery fire on a French winery. Willie said it all: "Them dirty, atrocity commitin' Huns!"

For several years, I worked on President and later Chairman of the Board Donald McLaughlin, a University of California regent, to get access to the early papers of the Homestake Mining Company going back to 1876, and the role of the California triumvirate, George Hearst, Lloyd Tevis, and James Ben Ali Haggin. After many letters—his franked with the words "return to the gold standard"—he invited me to

look at the company's papers in the San Francisco office. When I did so, I found almost nothing from the nineteenth century and was told by Mr. McLaughlin that "the girls had been put to work weeding out all that old stuff." And for at least a decade and a half, off and on, I sought vainly to find the papers of Thomas A. Rickard, stormy petrel and one of the deans of the mining engineering world. I came close once; but the Victoria newspaperman who thought he knew where the papers were and offered to help me, died suddenly before he had a chance to do so. Later, Henry May, a history professor at Berkeley and a nephew of Rickard, went out of his way with the Rickard family to aid me, but to no avail.

Chance often plays a role. In trying to find the descendents of Rossiter W. Raymond, one of the best-known American mining experts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I found myself at a dead end, unable to trace a grandson, Alfred Bellinger, until I taught summer school at Yale University. The first thing I saw as I walked into my first class was a photograph labeled: "Alfred Bellinger, Dean of the College." His current address was easily available from the University and I contacted him, but chance had taken me as far as it could. Cordial though he was, he had to tell me that all of the papers had been destroyed when the family home had burned to the ground years earlier. Nearly thirty years later, Jay Fell unearthed a collection of Ross Raymond letters in the hands of a collateral branch of the family.

In more recent years, while researching county records in Virginia City (Montana), as a result of a chance conversation with a woman in a drug store—about the only business open there in early April—I was directed to a family near Alder, who lived down the gulch a little way, and who owned part of the old Conrey Placer mining company holdings, including the assay office and a superb collection of photographs which depicted every phase of constructing,

operating and repairing the company's six dredges over a quarter of a century. Eventually, the Montana Historical Society was able to acquire copies, and my own book on the Conrey would be illustrated from them exclusively.

Once again, chance played a significant role in the unearthing of historical materials crucial to my study of gold dredging in Alaska. The most important dredge operator in that region between the early 1920s and the mid-1960s was the United States Smelting, Refining, and Mining Company, which through its subsidiary, Hammon Consolidated, ran half a dozen dredges at Nome. Through another subsidiary, Fairbanks Exploration, it operated as many as eight elsewhere in Alaska, mainly around Fairbanks. Unable to locate the corporate records of U.S.S.R.&M. Co., I commenced writing anyway. Meanwhile, I became involved with a number of other consultants in updating a little mining museum in Bisbee, among them mining geologist Dick Graeme, a Bisbee native who had spent a year in charge of a U.S.S.R.&M. Co. dredge in Nome. "Nome was no place for a bald-headed Arizonian," he said.

Dick had an idea where the records might be, and a month or so later reported that they were in Fairbanks in the hands of the Alaska Gold Company, which in turn was controlled by Sharon Steel. But he told me that access was not available, and that I should finish my book without them. At the next meeting, when I saw him again, Graeme said: "You are now looking at the new vice president of Sharon Steel. The door is open." And indeed it was. I spent a big chunk of another summer in Fairbanks working through the old Fairbanks Exploration files. I was given the run of the old records and correspondence in Sharon Steel's Denver office, and Dick took me personally to the warehouse complex at Midvale, Utah, where we sifted through a substantial amount of old Alaska dredge material. Much of this was in the old powder magazine, which had no windows and no lights and

no heat—the electricity had been turned off. I did my work there wearing a winter overcoat and using a miner's lamp. Dick Graeme was subsequently responsible for Chip Hughes's work in running a broad inventory of all these records, both in Utah and in Fairbanks. How fitting that he should be selected as the Mining History Association president for the year 2000.

I must say that mining companies—or indeed companies in general—are usually loath to open their corporate records to historical researchers. Some are concerned about what might be written about them—about corporate policy, labor relations, or environmental impact or other sensitive topics—by wild-eyed academics. And an outsider in the middle of things can be a bother and a disruption. Moreover, mining corporations that have been in business for long periods of time amass an incredible amount of records, and may not even know what they have. So tons, sometime hundreds of tons, of deactivated paper are stored—which takes considerable space—or are simply destroyed—in the case of one southwestern copper company by dumping them by the truckload, then piling tailings over them. I found the holders of private manuscripts to be an interesting and very human lot. The octogenarian son of a Colorado mine promoter admitted that he had a private diary of his father's, but only after I had visited him half a dozen times and softened him up with bottles of wine. He let me use the diary, but he put restrictions on it. He put a rubber band around one section, and admonished me not to look at that part: there was nothing wrong, but it dealt with his father's courtship of his mother, and he thought it should be limited to family. He did agree to tell me if anything thing in the forbidden pages dealt with mine promotion. In another instance, an Oakland resident had fifty-seven volumes of his mining-engineer father's pocket diaries, which he gladly let me use, but only with him sitting of the sofa beside me—and a lumpy sofa, at that. These two old gentle-

men were both lonely and loquacious and wanted to talk, which they certainly did, albeit with some slight delay to scholarly historical research.

Quite different was the University of California geologist, a man with an eye to the value of mining history, who had salvaged some Bunker Hill & Sullivan letters from a San Francisco warehouse. He was receptive to my using them and invited me to his house early one morning. Because he did not know me, he said, he couldn't let me take any of the materials away, but I was free to use them on his dining room table, which I did. In a few minutes he came in and said "I have to go into the city for the day." Half an hour later, his wife stopped by: "I'll be out until late afternoon. The house is yours. Click the lock when you leave."

Yes, most of those I came in contact with while seeking out manuscripts were pleasant and congenial people. I was never met at the door by a housewife wearing a flimsy negligee, like Gene Gressley swears he was, but I was served some excellent sherry by a charming old lady in Oakland, who was the daughter of one mining man and the granddaughter of another. A counterpart in Santa Barbara was quite the opposite: she refused to answer letters, and when phoned, she told me that, yes, she had a trunk full of papers of the Hoffman brothers (mining engineers), but that I would never see them—and slammed down the receiver. Actually, I did get to see them later. Eventually I sent Gene Gressley a list of nine names and addresses of people with family mining papers I had been unable to see. He succeeded in getting all of them at Wyoming, and the lady who banged down the receiver paid to have hers air-freighted to Laramie. The real professional collector at work.

I would say that I have enjoyed my half century of doing mining history. It has not been a spectacular nor especially lucrative pursuit, but certainly it has been challenging, interesting, and satisfying. ■