The Historical Statistics of the Colorado Mining Industry

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Mining has played an important role in the history of Colorado, and its early economic development. From the first miners who sought the riches of the area's gold reserves to the more recent exploiters of Colorado's diverse natural resources, the mining industry has helped shape and sustain the economy and society of the centennial state for more than a century.

Long before the arrival of European Americans, Utes, Arapahoes, and Cheyennes inhabited Colorado. Early stories of gold and silver in the Rocky Mountains came from the days of Spanish control. Later, explorers and travelers from the United States such as Zebulon Pike brought news of potential gold strikes to the states. The Russell party left Indian Territory in 1858 for Colorado in search of gold, based on the accounts of a group of Cherokees headed for California. Gold brought back from the Great Plains military campaign by a Delaware Army scout encouraged another party to venture forth from Lawrence, Kansas, initiating the rush to the front range of the Rocky Mountains in 1859.

A significant discovery of gold still proved elusive for the flood of '59ers. Many became discouraged and lost interest in Colorado. A group of miners from Boulder did discover significant amounts of gold at Idaho Springs, Central City, and Gold Hill. They managed to keep their finds secret long enough to develop their mines before the news leaked out, and other prospectors entered the area.

But the placer deposits soon ran out. With this, the era of the Colorado prospector gave way to hard-rock mining to tap the deeper mineral veins. This method required capital and equipment not present in the area. Investors came from the East and the Midwest with big money interests which dominated the evolving mining industry. Because mining now required large amounts of capital, and the hard-rock mining often proved unprofitable, some disheartened prospectors turned to other occupations such as farming. Despite these changes other prospectors continued the search for gold, discovering a placer deposit in 1860 in California Gulch near the future site of Leadville.

During the early 1860s, the Civil War interrupted the mining industry but near the end of the war, eastern investors reacquainted themselves with the Colorado miners. In their eagerness to attract new capital, Coloradans often encouraged investment in questionable mines, emptying the pockets of absentee investors. In the mid-1860s, investments trailed off as investors became wary of Colorado prospects.

Silver discoveries near Georgetown and in the Snowy Range in the early 1870s failed to re-excite outside interest in the Colorado mine industry. Large silver strikes near Leadville in the late 1870s caused the investors' reluctance to wain. Despite substantial finds, national currency policies on silver limited the mining industry in Colorado. The federal government's enforcement of the gold standard kept the price of silver artificially low. The Bland-Allison Act of 1878, which called for the U.S. Treasury to purchase from $2 to $4 million of silver a month, placated the silver industry by setting a minimum government purchase of the metal. But increasing production and decreasing demand caused silver's price to drop even more.

In the 1880s, Colorado's silver industry recovered with the upswing in the national economy. Aspen soon surpassed Leadville in production of the "blue" metal. Congress further subsidized the industry through passage of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, which called for the federal government to buy 4.5 million ounces of silver each month. Along with Bland-Allison, the Sherman Act helped to placate the silver-producing states led by Colorado.

The economic Panic of 1893 reversed the upward trend, hitting Coloradans hard. Because the crash caused a drop in gold prices, the national treasury's gold supply dropped below $100 million. President Grover Cleveland blamed the Sherman Act for the economic crisis and called a special session of Congress to repeal it. The loss of federal support caused the silver industry to collapse, devastating Colorado's economy.

The Colorado economy began its road to recovery

with coal. The expanding railroad business in the West, in particular, increased the demand for the fossil fuel. Because railroads transported the coal, and used it as fuel, the railroad companies dominated the coal industry. Colorado had two main coal fields. The southern field lay in the area of Trinidad and Walsenberg, while the northern field was in Boulder and Weld counties. These mines prospered in the 1880s. After the Panic of 1893, the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I), owned by the Rockefellers, secured large tracts of coal mining land in southern Colorado. By 1913, CF&I had become the largest coal producer in the state with company holdings in Las Animas County providing the greatest output. In spite of occasional declines, coal mining would continue to be a major force in the Colorado mining industry throughout the twentieth century.

Another important mineral in Colorado has been molybdenum. Molybdenum mining started in earnest in the state during the late 1910s. The Climax Mine, owned by the Climax Molybdenum Company, soon became the world's largest producer of the steel-hardening agent. At the outbreak of World War II, the federal government placed molybdenum on the strategic minerals list. This incentive caused an increase in molybdenum production. Though production decreased following the war it remained in demand.

Miners first discovered uranium in Colorado during the 1880s. Yet metallurgical knowledge of the radioactive mineral was limited. The dramatic impact of uranium took root at the end World War II when its use in atomic weapons ended the war and helped to remold postward geopolitics. As the principal component of the A-bomb, uranium found a market with the advent of the Cold War causing a boom in its production in the late 1940s and 1950s. The Colorado Plateau in the western part of the state became the focal point for mining the radioactive metal; Grand Junction, in fact, became a major distribution center for the Atomic Energy Commission in the postwar period. The uranium boom in Colorado, like that in other western states, came to a halt in the 1960s, with production rapidly declining thereafter.

Colorado's oil industry started modestly in the 1880s with the production a few hundred thousand barrels annually. Production steadily dropped, however, after the turn of the century, and through the post-World War I recession; in 1922 and 1923, oil production fell below 100,000 barrels. Production rose to more than a million barrels in 1925 and, with the exception of 1933, stayed above that level until World War II. Development of the Rangely and Denver-Julesburg oil fields caused Colorado's production to boom in the postwar era, peaking at 58.4 million barrels in 1956. By 1960, oil production had declined, but not dramatically, Colorado averaging more than 33 million barrels annually even during the 1970s oil crisis, and into 1990.

The energy crisis reintroduced an interest in oil shale which had been considered a possible supplemental source of crude oil as early as 1890. After 1900, President Theodore Roosevelt predicted an impending oil shortage and encouraged technological experimentation with this new fossil fuel. In the 1920s, the Standard Oil Company, later Exxon, and the Union Oil Company bought rich oil shale lands in Colorado, but could not develop an efficient processing technique. In the 1960s, still having failed to produce shale oil, Exxon sold its holdings. The 1973 oil embargo rejuvenated talk of oil shale development. Millions of dollars, rumors said possibly billions, were spent on researching ways to extract oil from shale. Exxon reemerged on the scene in 1980, purchasing the Colony oil shale project near Parachute. The expense of the project and declining oil prices caused Exxon to once again drop out of oil shale research, and the company canceled the project in May 1982.

By the 1890s, mining in Colorado had become a big business and ceased being financially viable for small-time prospectors who could not endure the boom-and-bust cycles. It was a corporate world, and the mine laborers found themselves working to profit others. In an effort to counter corporate exploitation, Colorado miners founded state locals within the Western Federation of Miners, and later the United Mine Workers, Industrial Workers of the World, and the American Federation of Labor. The labor organizations forced the companies' hands as early as the 1890s which ushered in two decades of strife.

Prior to the turn of the century the largest labor pool of southern Colorado came from the Hispanic population. Anglo Americans and immigrants soon flooded into the area with the development of the coal mines. Colorado Fuel & Iron reported the miners were composed of thirty-two nationalities, speaking twenty-seven different languages. Hispanics soon became outnumbered in the area as large numbers of Italians and smaller groups of Slavs, Poles, Greeks, Irish, Scots, English, and others moved in to work the mines. Most of these early twentieth-century miners lived in mining camps or company towns.

Colorado Fuel & Iron controlled most of these working-class communities in the state. The labor-management conflicts consequently arose most often in the coal industry which experienced a series of

strikes early in the twentieth century. The strike of 1913, in particular, illustrates the gulf between the workers and their employers. Because of low wages and long hours, the United Mine Workers union went on strike in August 1913. The coal company responded by expelling the strikers from the camps. The unionists countered by setting up thirteen tent colonies that gave them strategic control of the entrances to the mines. Acting in support of CF&I, National Guardsmen moved into the district. The intervention of the National Guard culminated in the Ludlow massacre of April 20, 1914, in which troops opened fire on the workers. Eleven children, five miners, two women, and one Guardsman died during the violent encounter.

The 1913 coal miners strike coincided with widespread anti-union sentiment and poor working conditions and wages. The strike also came at the time when Colorado had its largest population of miners prior to 1980. Most of the state's miners worked in the coal industry by this time.

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Annual Mineral Production (A)

Year	Gold (ounces)	Silver (thousand ounces)	Copper (thousand pounds)	Lead (thousand pounds)	Zinc (thousand pounds)
1868	97,300	200	50		
1869	153,800	475	102	150	
1870	145,800	496	182	250	
1871	175,700	776	183	555	
1872	128,000	1,524	204	1,150	
1873	97,500	1,543	379	1,236	
1874	104,200	2,348	475	1,277	
1875	107,700	2,330	280	1,636	
1876	132,000	2,564	333	1,334	
1877	152,300	2,882	493	4,286	
1878	157,000	4,672	536	13,722	
1879	154,700	11,899	704	47,348	
1880	157,500	14,397	859	71,348	
1881	159,800	13,272	884	81,094	
1882	162,600	12,761	1,494	110,000	
1883	198,600	13,434	1,152	141,114	
1884	204,000	12,375	2,013	126,330	
1885	203,600	12,220	1,146	106,692	100
1886	215,200	12,375	1,146	118,000	100
1887	193,600	11,601	2,012	126,000	100
1888	181,700	14,695	1,621	128,404	300
1889	187,900	18,375	1,170	133,940	300
1890	200,950	18,800	3,585	109,102	300
1891	222,500	21,160	6,336	126,256	300
1892	256,400	24,000	7,593	120,000	1,125
1893	364,151	25,838	7,695	110,000	1,650
1894	454,000	23,281	6,481	101,226	1,500
1895	644,000	23,398	6,079	93,968	1,671
1896	721,000	22,573	6,022	89,606	1,292
1897	947,249	21,278	9,149	80,794	2,683
1898	1,138,584	23,502	10,870	113,416	3,900
1899	1,282,471	23,114	7,356	138,048	11,300
1900	1,391,487	20,336	7,826	164,274	16,282
1901	1,339,112	18,492	7,872	148,111	26,843
1902	1,380,000	15,941	8,463	106,296	52,582
1903	1,045,252	13,245	7,809	101,513	80,616
1904	1,172,000	12,960	9,412	107,498	66,771
1905	1,224,000	12,339	9,661	115,746	83,561
1906	1,110,000	12,339	6,618	106,646	86,012
1907	982,500	11,599	8,826	89,065	85,048
1908	1,092,500	9,002	10,201	61,645	30,130
1909	1,063,000	8,904	10,916	72,162	51,210
1910	991,500	8,508	8,359	76,058	77,089
1911	920,000	7,330	8,024	69,679	94,607
1912	900,000	8,212	7,107	75,242	132,222
1913	878,000	9,325	7,227	87,897	119,346
1914	962,000	8,796	6,639	74,211	96,774
1915	1,084,323	7,027	7,112	68,810	104,594
1916	926,566	7,656	8,624	70,914	134,285
1917	760,901	7,304	8,122	67,990	120,315
1918	616,864	7,063	6,560	37,070	37,220
1920	366,504	5,409	4,277	65,960	89,133
1919	478,265	5,758	3,043	46,629	48,790
1921	330,659	5,631	4,153	19,660	2,360
1922	308,314	5,855	3,373	23,477	23,258
1923	318,870	5,334	4,248	45,693	54,152
1924	415,692	3,254	2,713	47,557	56,727
1925	349,607	4,506	2,360	62,966	61,621
1926	342,400	4,704	3,403	68,987	65,000
1927	255,400	3,784	5,670	66,772	71,729
1928	256,644	4,052	8,594	53,501	71,462
1929	213,708	4,397	8,905	48,889	58,861
1930	218,540	4,382	10,514	44,260	72,518

1931	233,300	2,195	8,165	13,768	32,373
1932	317,928	1,860	7,398	4,299	218
1933	242,828	2,186	9,667	4,803	2,569
1934	324,923	3,475	11,294	8,435	1,544
1935	349,281	4,696	14,654	11,345	2,403
1936	366,607	5,902	17,730	14,534	2,344
1937	368,905	6,260	21,868	19,572	8,494
1938	367,468	7,932	28,342	18,910	9,106
1939	366,852	8,496	26,430	16,444	3,660
1940	367,468	9,710	24,304	22,952	10,120
1941	380,029	7,301	13,496	25,148	31,444
1942	268,627	3,096	2,204	30,362	64,430
1943	137,558	2,664	2,056	36,064	88,188
1944	111,455	2,248	2,096	35,396	79,910
1945	100,935	2,226	2,970	34,088	71,546
1946	142,613	2,240	3,508	34,072	72,294
1947	168,279	2,557	4,300	37,392	77,490
1948	154,802	3,011	4,596	50,286	90,328
1949	102,618	2,894	4,806	53,706	95,406
1950	130,390	3,492	6,282	54,014	91,552
1951	116,503	2,787	6,424	60,672	111,428
1952	124,594	2,813	7,212	60,132	106,406
1953	119,218	2,200	5,882	43,508	75,618
1954	96,146	3,147	9,046	35,646	70,300
1955	88,577	2,772	8,646	31,610	70,700
1956	97,668	2,284	8,456	39,712	80,492
1957	88,000	2,788	10,000	42,000	94,000
				(short tons)	(short tons
1958	79,539	2,056	8,386	14,112	37,132
				(short tons)	
1959	61,097	1,341	2,940	12,907	35,388
1960	61,269	1,659	3,247	18,080	31,278
1961	67,515	1,965	4,141	17,755	42,647
1962	48,882	2,088	4,534	17,411	43,351
1963	33,605	2,307	4,169	19,918	48,109
1964	42,122	2,626	4,653	20,563	53,682
1965	37,228	2,051	3,828	22,495	53,870
1966	31,915	2,085	4,237	23,082	54,822
1967	21,181	1,818	3,993	21,923	52,442
1968	22,638	1,646	3,451	19,778	50,258
1969	25,777	2,599	3,598	21,767	53,715
1970	56,694	2,933	3,749	21,855	56,694
1971	42,031	3,390	3,938	25,746	61,181
1972	61,100	3,664	3,944	31,346	63,801
1973	63,422	3,598	3,123	28,112	58,339
1974	52,083	2,784	3,012	24,609	49,489
1975	55,483	3,366	3,560	27,088	48,460
1976	50,764	4,083	2,431	26,749	50,621
			(metric tons)	(metric tons)	(metric tons)
1977	2,668	4,663	1,720	20,860	36,529
1978	32,094	4,217	1,191	15,151	22,208
1979	13,850	2,809	362	7,554	9,910
1980	24,164	2,987	461	10,272	13,823
1981	51,069	3,009	W	11,431	W
1982	64,584	1,934	575	W	n/a
1983	63,063	2,146	W	n/a	n/a
1984	60,010	2,200	n/a	n/a	n/a
1985	43,301	549	n/a	n/a	n/a
1986	120,437	645	n/a	n/a	n/a
	(kilos)	(metric tons)			
1987	5,561	27	W	n/a	n/a
1988	5,126	27	898	n/a	n/a
1989	3,448	W	W	n/a	n/a
1990	2,357	23	n/a	n/a	n/a
1991	3,181	20	n/a	n/a	n/a
1992	3,763	W	n/a	n/a	n/a

W: Withheld to avoid disclosing company proprietary data.

Annual Mineral Production (B)

Year	Coal (thousand short tons	Petroleum (thousand barrels)	Natural Gas (million cubic feet	Molybdenum* (thousand pounds)
1873	69			
1874	87			
1875	93			
1876	117			
1877	160			
1878	200			
1879	322			
1880	375			
1881	706			
1882	1,161			
1883	1,220			
1884	1,130			
1885	1,398			
1886	1,436			
1887	1,791	154		
1888	2,185	298		
1889	2,400	317		
1890	3,075	369		
1891	3,512	666		
1892	3,771	824		
1893	3,947	594		
1894	3,021	516		
1895	3,339	438		
1896	3,371	361		
1897	3,565	385		
1898	4,174	444		
1899	4,826	390		
1900	5,495	317		
1901	6,021	461		
1902	7,522	397		
1903	7,775	484		
1904	6,776	501		
1905	8,989	376		
1906	10,308	328		
1907	10,965	332		
1908	9,773	380		
1909	10,772	311		
1910	12,104	240		
1911	10,197	227		
1912	11,016	206		
1913	9,268	189		
1914	8,201	223		
1915	8,715	208		
1916	10,522	197		
1917	12,515	121		
1918	12,658	143		342
1919	10,406	121		152
1920	12,514	111		**
1921	9,141	108		**
1922	10,003	97		**
1923	10,336	86		**
1924	10,501	445		156
1925	10,440	1,164		821
1926	10,616	2,692		1,057
1927	9,781	2,722		1,858
1928	9,921	2,750		2,957
1929	9,920	2,273		3,529
1930	8,238	1,627		3,083
1931	6,604	1,550		2,644
1932	5,598	1,133		1,913
1933	5,229	908	2,449	5,028

1934	5,168	1,138	2,633	8,378
1935	5,953	1,523	2,843	10,168
1936	6,868	1,633	3,687	15,216
1937	7,222	1,595	3,186	22,750
1938	5,730	1,448	1,904	28,242
1939	6,002	1,473	2,015	21,796
1940	6,673	1,701	2,533	22,782
1941	7,008	2,145	3,256	27,715
1942	8,131	2,384	4,856	41,825
1943	8,372	2,305	6,445	46,133
1944	8,202	3,108	5,141	23,608
1945	7,655	5,030	4,800	18,525
1946	5,928	11,828	6,728	8,670
1947	6,371	15,818	8,392	10,783
1948	5,679	17,891	8,967	12,630
1949	4,579	23,459	8,490	10,483
1950	4,274	23,301	11,168	24,090
1951	4,111	28,181	14,128	22,911
1952	3,643	30,491	34,260	24,557
1953	3,598	36,678	28,559	33,851
1954	2,922	46,206	45,705	42,545
1955	3,366	53,222	49,152	45,837
1956	3,303	58,496	54,205	37,489
1957	3,324	54,984	95,259	42,500
1958	2,972	48,739	82,464	25,100
1959	3,293	46,459	98,899	n/a
1960	3,624	47,469	107,404	n/a
1961	3,700	46,758	108,142	47,485
1962	3,392	42,478	101,826	32,412
1963	3,707	38,283	105,705	47,977
1964	4,355	34,755	114,312	46,378
1965	4,790	33,511	126,381	50,715
1966	5,222	33,492	136,667	57,289
1967	5,439	33,905	116,857	52,442
1968	5,558	31,937	121,424	50,258
1969	5,530	28,294	118,754	62,411
1970	6,025	24,723	105,804	W
1971	5,337	27,391	108,537	n/a
1972	5,522	32,015	116,949	n/a
1973	6,233	36,590	137,725	n/a
1974	6,896	37,508	144,629	n/a
1975	8,219	38,089	171,629	n/a
1976	9,437	38,992	183,972	n/a
1977	11,989	39,460	188,792	n/a
1978	13,814	36,796	188,982	W
1979	18,491	32,321	192,931	n/a
1980	19,320	29,801	191,805	102,498
1981	19,865	30,408	200,494	73,615
1982	18,307	30,788	215,782	41,691
1983	16,713	29,197	173,189	14,244
1984	17,967	29,796	275,684	n/a
1985	17,202	30,552	190,266	n/a
1986	15,216	29,363	174,419	n/a
1987	14,420	28,802	186,286	n/a
1988	15,913	32,352	191,544	n/a
1989	17,123	30,655	216,737	n/a
1990	18,902	30,454	n/a	n/a
1991	17,834	n/a	n/a	n/a
1992	19,226	n/a	n/a	n/a

*Statistics from the Climax Molybdenum Company.

**Not produced from 1920-23.

W: Withheld to avoid disclosing company proprietary data.

Employment and Safety

Year	Total Population	Mine Workers	Non Fatal Coal Mine Injuries	Total Coal Mine Fatalities	Value of Products
1890	413,249	5,827			
1900	539,700	7,459			
1910	799,024	14,768	146	319	*$33,673,879
1920	939,629	13,665	1,806	70	*$21,898,974
1930	1,035,791	10,683	1,522	36	$46,270,545
1940	1,123,296	8,217	693	24	$63,188,421 (thousand dollars)
1950	1,325,089	4,837	190	10	$154,897
1960	1,753,947	2,051	731	2	$342,233
1970	2,207,259	8,525	**657	**9	$389,789
1980	2,889,964	36,632			
1990	3,294,394	20,438			***$1,864

*Gold, Silver, Copper, Lead, and Zinc.

**From all mines.

***Non-fuel.