

THE WHITEPINE SKI AREA:

RECREATION FOR MINERS

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THE WHITEPINE SKI AREA:
RECREATION FOR MINERS

I. INTRODUCTION

Of the many ghost towns located in and around the Gunnison Country, Whitepine is unique. From Gunnison 32 miles to the east on U.S. Highway 50, lies the community of Sargents. At Sargents one can take Forest Route 888 another 13 miles northeast to an area called Whitepine. A description of Whitepine in the Gunnison News-Champion reads as follows:

The townsite is within the Cochetopa National forest and is situated on Tomichi creek. The elevation is approximately, 9,800 feet above sea level. The winters are cold and produce heavy falls of snow, but the area is adapted to summer recreation.¹

However, while Whitepine was certainly adaptable for summer recreation, its major attraction for many years was its mineral wealth.

The original mineral boom in White Pine (as it was then written) occurred in the 1880's. At that time gold and silver were the sought after minerals, and the mining in the Tomichi region concentrated on them only. Thus when the Silver Panic of 1893 hit, White Pine, like all towns depending on mining at that time, closed down. "The camp was deserted until 1901," states Perry Eberhart, "when another boom hit the area." Eberhart continued with another "revival (mining type)" which came to the area in "the mid-40's."² This time the small community did not grow as large as it had previously, but the growth lasted for nearly a

¹"40 Whitepine Acres, Lots To Go at Public Sale Here," Gunnison News-Champion 14 June 1951. p. 1.

²Perry Eberhart, "East of Gunnison," in his Guide to the Colorado Ghost Towns and Mining Camps (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1980), p. 271.

decade. The sought after minerals were now lead and zinc. These minerals were in demand for the "war need." While the boom of this era was not as loud, it was still enough to fill the "white silence of winter" that had "practically submerged" the Whitepine area for so many years.³

During this time the people of Whitepine encountered the same problem faced by the miners of that region in earlier years--isolation. Even though the great mines of the vicinity, the May-Mazzepa, the Erie, the Akron, and the North Star were some of the best in the Gunnison Country, the railroad never entered that region, and all ore was shipped to the depot at Sargents. Throughout the 1940's when the telephone was being used extensively in most of the nation, the Whitepine people were not connected to the service.⁴ The mining company, Callahan Lead-Zinc, provided sewer lines, water and electricity to its workers through the company housing the company rented to them. The nearest community was Sargents, some 13 miles away. Now thirteen miles may not seem a great distance in most places, but the dirt road between these small towns was a difficult, if not impossible, passage during the deep snows of winter.

The supervisors of the mine company, and the company itself addressed the problem of isolation by instigating entertainment and recreation for the workers and their families. The Whitepine Parent-Teacher Association, with the help of the Callahan company, purchased a film projector and provided "the usual Sunday night movie at Whitepine" for the children of the camp and their parents.⁵

³Betty Wallace, Gunnison Country (Denver: Sage Books, 1960), pp. 149 & 175.

⁴Telephone interviews with Anne Steinbeck and Margaret Flick, April 6, 1983.

⁵Mrs. Arthur Emerson, "Whitepine," Gunnison News-Champion 17 Feb., 1949. p.4.

The mining camp also sponsored public dances and two pinochle clubs, one for the women with meetings held in the afternoons, and one for both men and women, complete with prizes and usually accompanied by a pot-luck supper or a luncheon. These society gatherings were vital to the citizens of Whitepine, and made the weekly column in the Gunnison News-Champion often during 1951. The children engaged in sledding and skating during the long winter months, and with the introduction of a rope tow in 1946, skiing became an enjoyable pastime.

II. THE SKI AREA 1946-52

Throughout the Gunnison area people were beginning to become involved in skiing as a sport, not merely as a means of transportation. The Pioneer Ski Area was well underway by the mid-40's and the volunteer-built ski course was quite popular with Gunnisonites. Whitepine was not to be outdone, and they put in their own ski slope. As reported by Mrs. Lola Goolsby in the "Whitepine" column,

Among the equipment brought into Whitepine is an 1800 foot ski tow used in previous years at another Callahan camp. R.J. Flynn assistant superintendent will be in charge of the skiing when they decide where the course is to be located.⁶

The chosen location was across the main road from Tomichi creek, remembered George Means, whose father had helped clear the trail with tractor. The ski run was ready a few weeks later. Mrs. Goolsby commented that "grown-ups were out Sunday on skis," officially bringing the sport of skiing on designated slopes to the community of Whitepine.

Mr. R.J. "Jim" Flynn, the assistant superintendent in charge of the little ski area had been a champion skier, recalled Anne Steinbeck, a former teacher in Whitepine. When the area was moved before the 1947-48 ski season "Mr. and Mrs. Flynn went up to our ski course at the Erie above North Star Sunday to try it out" reported Mrs. Goolsby the following November.⁷ Flynn taught the residents of the area how to hang onto the tow rope--not an easy task. The tow would pull the skier up a fairly steep slope, a rather jerky endeavor, due to the alternating slackening

⁶Mrs. Lola Goolsby, "Whitepine," Gunnison News-Champion 7 Nov., 1946. p.7.

⁷Goolsby, 20 Nov., 1947. p.6.

and tightening of the rope.⁸ The engine, run by electricity from the mill, could pull several children up the hill at one time.⁹ In the Spring, when many people were using the tow and the weather was warm, the rope would get stretched out and would drag in the snow, according to George Means.

Jim Dunn, project supervisor, also taught the area children how to ski, mentioned Bob Ener. As a boy in Whitepine, Mr. Ener remembered Mr. Dunn telling him to point his skis downhill and that he would have to learn on the way down how to ski! The little run, about 200 yards in length, was not without its challenges. Well-groomed and wide, the slope had plenty of snow-- at least four feet most winters-- just perfect for the beginning skier. The tricky part was at the bottom of the hill where the creek was located. Here the skier had only about 75 feet to either stop or turn to avoid landing in the creek--many remember learning to stop in a hurry.¹⁰

The workers in the area were making pretty good money, so their children were equipped with the ski-gear of the times, Mrs. Steinbeck stated, and the kids were pretty good skiers. "They loved it, she laughed, remembering how her students taught her to ski after-school and on weekends."¹¹ The equipment consisted of wooden skis, leather lace-up boots, bindings designed to keep the ski attached to the boot regardless of the severity of the fall, and two poles complete with baskets. The Dunns, Flynnns, Emersons and Mahoneys were the families most involved in skiing and often travelled to other areas-- Aspen, Monarch, and Pioneer. They also were the contract workers, so had

⁸Telephone interview with Anne Steinbeck, April 6, 1983.

⁹Telephone interview with Bob Irby, April 18, 1983.

¹⁰Personal interview with Bob Ener, April 6, 1983.

¹¹Telephone interview with Anne Steinbeck, April 6, 1983.

more money to ski.¹² Their adventures were often reported in the local column, and showed definite enthusiasm for the sport.

Reports on the skiers at the Whitepine tow were less newsworthy, however. Only the out-of-town guests received much attention, as members of the community generally knew who went skiing and who did not. In the winter months many clips like the following could be found in the weekly column: "Several out of town guests enjoyed our ski lift here Sunday,"¹³ or, "the Gunnison boys enjoyed skiing in (sic) the lift here Sunday."¹⁴ Many times the "guest" skiers were well-known friends from Sargents, for instance, the Means' or Bob Irby, but they made the paper anyway. One of the most prestigious skiers to shoosh the slope was a Mrs. Hall. She was the wife of the president of Callahan Lead-Zinc company, and had come to Whitepine with her husband on business from the "offices in New York City." While Mr. Hall was attending to duties at the mine office," a report stated, "Mrs. Hall enjoyed the afternoon skiing."¹⁵

As a group, the people of Whitepine also occasionally made the newspaper. Mrs. Emerson noted in her January 27, 1949 column that "There were quite a few of the usual camp skiers out to enjoy the good snow" that week. Mrs. Waite wrote nearly a year later that "the Whitepine people are certainly enjoying the ski lift. Everyone is welcome to use the lift."¹⁶

¹²Telephone interview with George Means, April 14, 1983.

¹³Mrs. Earle Waite, "Whitepine," Gunnison News-Champion 26 Jan., 1950. p.2.

¹⁴Waite, "Whitepine," Gunnison News-Champion 28 Dec., 1950. p.3.

¹⁵Emerson, "Whitepine," Gunnison News-Champion 17 Feb., 1949. p.4.

¹⁶Waite, "Whitepine," Gunnison News-Champion 12 Jan., 1950. p.4.

III. THE CLOSING OF THE MINE--1952

The mining of lead and zinc had become advantageous during World War I when the demand increased and with it the price. In 1948, Callahan Lead-Zinc company had "purchased the bulk of the property sold for unpaid 1947 taxes" and had staked "25 mining claims...in the Tomichi mining district near Whitepine"¹⁷ as an expansion of their operations in the area. The mine production in 1948 of Callahan's holdings set a "20-Year Ore Record" and the company received the Colorado "state mine safety plaque."¹⁸ Only a few months later, though, in May 1949, Mrs. Emerson reported that "due to the continuing decrease in metal prices the Akron mine and mill will be operated five days a week." By November 1952, "adverse market prices" and increased foreign competition in lead and zinc production led to the closing of "the modern 100-ton-a-day mill of the Callahan Zinc-Lead Company at Whitepine." The shut-down made necessary the discharge of 31 men, and according to James Dunn, only a "skeleton crew to maintain the property and continue some exploration and development" would remain in the company's employment. The article revealed the significance of the closing as "Callahan's payroll... about \$30,000 a month since Jan. 1, 1947...constitutes the sole source of income for the community of Whitepine, its two-teacher school and general store."¹⁹ A week later, one-third of Whitepine's population had left the

¹⁷"Some Lots, Mining Claims Still on the Block for Taxes," Gunnison News-Champion 9 Dec., 1948. p.1.

¹⁸"Whitepine Operations Boost County to 20-Year Ore Record," Gunnison News-Champion 10 Feb., 1949. p.1.

¹⁹"Unfavorable Zinc-Lead Market Closes Whitepine Mill, Simpson's Slate River Mine," Gunnison News-Champion 6 Nov., 1952. p.1.

once-thriving mine camp. The Gunnison News-Champion reported that of "the 160 persons who made up the population" of Whitepine only 45 remained, and that "the two-teacher school enrollment was 33" but had dropped to 9 students. The town's population continued to drop, as those who no longer had jobs were forced to go elsewhere. The column in the Gunnison paper, "Whitepine" disappeared, and news of those who remained was scarce. The boom was now bust.

IV. CONCLUSION

Once again the little community was empty, and the noises of a bustling mining camp gave way to the silence. The skiers no longer covered the hill with their tracks. The rope tow was eventually moved to Craner Hill, those interviewed recall, and provided recreation for other residents in the Gunnison country. Only the memories of those who skied the tiny ski area remain; clear visions of learning to use the rope, then conquering the hill and avoiding the creek, along with friends and family who have long-since joined the realm of 'fond memories' or past acquaintances.

The land once owned by the Callahan company, rented housing for their employees and the mill and mining operations, is now owned mostly by members of the Los Angeles Police Department. It has reached its potential as a suitable area for "summer recreation." One can only wonder how long the quiet and serenity will last, and if it will be mineral wealth or another type of "boom" that shatters the winter silence.

²⁰ Interviews with Bob Ener, Anne Steinbeck and George Means.

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