

Metal Mining In Death Valley

James E. Harris
Gaithersburg, MD

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Much has been said about the other mining in Death Valley such as borax, but I will talk about the metals that were mined in Death Valley. The most money taken out in the form of metals was gold mining probably followed by lead and silver. There were no silver mines in Death Valley, but there were a few gold mines, and I know something of those. I am probably the last surviving person who worked in the gold mine at Skidoo, California. I worked there in 1941 with my father, Michael Joseph Harris and with his brother Earl Lindsay Harris. Both are deceased. And after them Their brother Samuel Alma Harris worked at Skidoo. He ~~also~~^{is} deceased so I believe I am the last person alive who worked in the gold mine there at Skidoo. I will tell you about Skidoo because it was a very interesting camp. Our family lived at Skidoo twice, in 1939 and again in 1949.

Skidoo was discovered with an outcropping of a gold-bearing quartz rock which is designated as vein A. As you come in to the Skidoo site, the road forks just before you get to the site. If you take the road to the left, that will take you to the town that was Skidoo. As you near the end of the road, on the right is the open stope that was vein A. This open stope at vein A was the point of discovery. On the left side of the road, there is a place where the hoist house used to be. There was an inclined shaft that went down to this A vein. This was sunk down for probably 300 feet. The other thing about this A vein which I will discuss in details if you had taken the road to the right at the road fork, that would have taken you to a tunnel and also on the tramway that was at the level that would take the ore on to the mill. You can drive part way there on a vehicle. It is a very narrow road and you are not able to turn around so you will have to back up. There is a gate that was placed there by the Park Service to keep people from going to the mill. But if you go into this tunnel and I believe the tunnel is closed off and it should be because it is very dangerous. I'll tell you about some dangerous happenings in this tunnel.

This tunnel goes straight back probably about 2000 feet, then it branches ^{to} the left which intersects the A vein. This has an opening - they did have a hoist and a further extension of the inclined shaft from the surface that went on down quite a distance. The ore taken from there is pretty good gold ore. This gold ore was hoisted up to the tunnel level, and then it was trammed on out to the mill.

This ore also was stopped out from this tunnel level. Now stopping is where you get under the body of ore and you work up. It is much easier to stope than it is to sink. You draw the ore out in a ~~shote~~^{shote}. You don't have to shovel the ore You just draw it our from the ~~shoot~~^{shoot} into the ore cars, and the ore ~~is~~^{was} transported to the mill. This level at the entrance of this tunnel goes down as I said there was a hoist room inside the mine which obviously was an air operated hoist because you could not have an internal combustion

engine inside of a mine, and there was no electricity. Although they could have had an electricity generator somewhere, but I suspect that it was an air operated hoist. My father and I had gone back in there, and he said there had been. So he probably heard this from some old timers there.

So this inclined shaft continues on down below the tunnel level, and I don't know how far down but it is probably at least two or three hundred feet. It is very dangerous back in there. A person should not go back in there. I will tell you of something that happened to me. In 1949, I went back in this tunnel without telling anyone I was going. I went alone. The only source of light that I had was a flashlight, and I went back in to this very dangerous area and looked down and could see this ore that was blocked out. There is quite a bit of ore blocked out there, which I will discuss later. But I was back in there, and all of a sudden, the flashlight burned out, and there I was in total darkness with no other source of light. I needed to have light to get out I thought, I know that I came over some open wenzes and places that were very dangerous. I needed to see. I thought to myself, "I will not move until I think of a way to get out of here." It was total darkness, and you cannot imagine how dark it was. And I thought, and I remembered in the Bible, the first chapter of James, fifth verse says that if you lack wisdom, pray to God, it will be revealed to you so I actually prayed for wisdom to help me get out of there. God did give me wisdom. I remembered that some of these rocks were quartz, and I knew that quartz would spark if you struck it. I began picking up rocks and striking them together until I found some that would spark a bit. Of course, by this time, my eyes were totally dilated, and with this spark, just a little bit of a spark from the quartz rock, I could see a few feet. That enabled me to move a little farther and a little farther, and I would bang and strike the rock and see a little and move a little until I could see the tunnel. I had to make a right turn and then once I could see the tunnel, as they say I could see the light at the end of the tunnel, and I was able to get out. That was a very dangerous and foolish thing.

This is not the end of the foolish things that I did. Because if you go back in that tunnel, again I do ^{NOT} recommend hat anyone do this. But I will tell you what happened. You go back in to where the tunnel branches to the left - I told you about my episode there. If you continue to the right there is an open raise and you can feel a breeze or at least, in 1949, you could. Because this does open up to some other workings. I started climbing up in this raise and it was so wide that I could not touch the sides of the wall and it was so high that I could not reach the hanging wall and it was so steep that I could just barely climb and the footwall had been rounded. This was a transfer raise. I started up and once I started, I could not go back down it is too steep, and I kept going up and up and up, again very foolishly, I was by myself. I did not tell anyone where I was going. Then I remembered my uncle Earl Lindsay Harris had told me in 1949 that he had found this place, and he did the same thing as I did, only he did it in 1939. I continued on up this raise wondering where I was going and what was going to happen. I finally came up to a sort of a landing, but fortunately tied to a rail or timber was a 1" diameter rope about 10 feet long hanging down there. I grabbed this rope and gave it a tug to make sure that the rope was secure and then I used this rope to climb up. I got up to this landing, and this landing turned out to be the end of the tunnel which intersects the vertical shaft. The

vertical shaft is one of the other places I shall talk about transferring the raise and the minings from this vertical shaft area were hauled by ore car and dumped down this transfer raise, a distance of about 200 ft., vertical or on the incline. There was an ore bin at the bottom where this ore would be drawn out and put into cars and taken to the tramway with a car pulled by a mule and taken to the mill to be processed.

The second part of this Skidoo mine I will talk about is the vertical shaft. If when you come to or after you have passed this A vein on the right and you see the remnants of what was the hoist house. It is very hard to find. It is a little cutout in the ground there and there is a concrete foundation. I remember seeing it in 1939. That is the building. It is a corrugated steel building. Of course the hoisting machinery had long since been taken away. So if you leave there and make a left turn you will come to another dump where there is another ore bin. This ore bin goes to the B vein. And this is the vein that is very prominent when you look at it from a distance. This vein has a split to it, sort of a V. Going past this B vein tunnel, there is a tunnel. We worked the B vein in 1949. We increased the length of that tunnel probably 75 ft. following a small ore body there. As you continue on you see this road. It becomes a very steep road and curves to the left. You probably will need a four wheel drive to go up this road. If you follow that road, it will take you up to a large dump and this was the dump from the vertical shaft. I remember in 1939 and 1949, there was the gallows frame there, the hoisting framework there. It was made of 12" or 10" timbers. That is long since gone. This vertical shaft is a two part shaft; one part being for hoisting work and the other being a manhole where the air pipes and where miners could climb out themselves without being hoisted. As I said when I went up that transfer raise and into this tunnel, I continued following this tunnel, and the tunnel intersected one of the many levels off of this vertical shaft. There was probably about five levels off of this vertical shaft. Which is probably about 500 ft. deep. So I climbed up this vertical shaft and came out to the surface. It is no longer possible to do this, so if you did what I did, you would be trapped in that mine unless you were able to climb out some open stope somewhere. Because the Park Service prudently has covered over this vertical shaft so that people cannot go down in there. Of course, they also cannot come out. They would come to boards, timbers, etc. that close this off and they would not be able to get out of the mine that way. So off of this vertical shaft, there were many tunnels running off. There was one stope that was called the million dollar stope. In fact you can see where it is caved in from the surface. If you look more or less from the vertical shaft, as I remember, it is sort of south easterly You will see where the ground is caved underneath This was in the vicinity of this million dollar stope. Because apparently there was a lot of pretty good ore, probably some of the best ore from Skidoo was taken out of this stope. Now if you go on up past this vertical shaft there are numerous shafts and diggings. We worked in one of these in 1949 and took out some ore. This was done by hand drilling, single jacking and hoisting the ore by hand with a windless and it was, believe me, very, very hard work. Miners frequently get silicosis from breathing silicon dioxide which is quartz rock dust, very bad for the lungs. So in 1939 my father and his brother, Lindsey were also working in this mine. As I said, we worked part of this in 1949.

In 1939 my father and his brother, Lindsey had a sublease on Skidoo. Now this sublease was a lease from the people who leased the mine. I believe their name was Rogers and Stibers. They had a sublease. They had an Ingersol Rand air compressor on a four wheel drive with steel wheels. I think that air compressor may be down at Stove Pipe Wells Hotel. In 1939, as I said my father and his brother had a sublease on this mine, that is a part of the Skidoo mine up above the vertical shaft. Now they found some very good ore there and I don't remember what the value was but it was probably some of the best ore found at Skidoo. Unfortunately, this sublease that he had had a thirty day cancellation clause that his lease could be canceled for any reason with the main lessor giving a 30 day notice, which they promptly did as soon as they found that he had discovered some good ore. They would check his progress frequently so they would know what he was doing, and where he was mining and sample his muck pile and know more or less what he was doing. He mined the 30 days as fast as he could. I remember them taking a pick-up load of ore to the mill. This pick was probably not even a ton of ore. It was pretty rich ore. We heard that they took out about \$90,000.00 in a couple of months from that little ore shoot that he had uncovered. Of course that was back in 1939 when gold was worth about \$35.00 an ounce. Today it would be worth about ten times that with the price of gold being roughly \$325.00 per ounce. It is about ten times the price of what it was then. However the cost of mining has probably gone up about 10 fold as well. You probably are not much better off. One thing my father learned from that experience was never ever have a lease on a mine less than 5 years duration and not to have a cancellation clause where the owner could go in and take advantage of his discovery.

This Skidoo mine was owned by Howard Gray. He was known as Judge Gray and he lived in Beatty NV. This was in 1939. I remember him. He was an elderly gentleman. He died later and his son Howard Gray, an attorney in Ely inherited the mine. I will tell you something about Skidoo that may not be known by many people. There are some various stories about how Skidoo got its name; some said that it was because there were 23 mining claims there, another was it was because there was a 23 mile long pipe line that went from the ore mill to Telescope peak; either or neither of these stories may or may not be true. However, in 1949, when we were working off of that B vein that I told you about I went back in there and I found an old 1910 Sears Roebuck catalogue. Which I still have so that catalogue lay in that mine about 39 years and I have had it since 1949 so I have had the catalogue for 48 years. One of the things you could buy from this catalogue was records, cylinders and disks. One of these records was "23". That was a popular song so 23 may have something to do with how Skidoo got its name. Either 23 mining claims or a 23 mile pipeline. Now about this 23 claims. A standard mining claim could be 800 ft. wide and 1600 ft. long according to the 1872 mining law. Now these claims were not all contiguous. A mining claim is about 29 acres. That is a pretty good sized piece of land. I had heard that the owner of Skidoo at that time was Montgomery who was well known at Ryolite. He, I believe bought Skidoo from the discoverers. A surveyor was hired to survey these claims, however many there were. I am not sure whether it was 23 or not. It should be a matter of public in Inyo County in Lone Pine, Ca. It turned out that there were places between the claims that were open ground.

Probably Judge Gray located these places and quietly allowed the

mining company to go ahead and mine. Then he brought suit against the companies for mining out ore under his claims. It is my understanding that he did win his case and it was a triple damage which was the usual case in damages in mining law. The owner of the mine, Montgomery, was very upset by this. He felt that he had been duped and taken advantage of. Nevertheless he then said - now this is all hearsay. I heard it from my father who heard it from the old timers. One of the old timers' name was "boot nose" Walker. This name was appended due to his large nose. Anyhow he was told this story that Mr. Montgomery said to Gray, "Would you take all of the claims in payment for the damages granted to you?" Judge Gray agreed to do that. Montgomery said how you own the claims." Judge Gray became the owner of Skidoo around 1917. Now this mine at Skidoo has absolutely no water. ^{all} The water had to be hauled when we were there in 1939 and 1949. The closest water was Imigrant Spring which by the road was about 10 miles which as the crow flies is about 4 miles. But we would get our water from Wildrose Spring in Wildrose Canyon which was about 20 miles from Skidoo. So the mine at Skidoo has absolutely no water. In order to mill ~~this~~ ore, water is needed. Montgomery had put in a large pipeline. I am probably the only person who has walked most of the distance of this pipeline from Skidoo. I walked it in 1949. "You have the claims, you have the mill, you have everything, but you don't have the pipeline because the pipe line is not on the Skidoo property. The pipe line extended beyond Skidoo toward Telescope Peak for about 20 miles. It was an 8" pipe line. Montgomery began dismantling this pipe line, ^{which} ~~that~~ was his property. When this pipe line was taken out, that almost doomed Skidoo for a mining camp because the ore there probably did not justify putting in another pipe line. As I said I have walked that pipe line and you can see that mill was powered by water power in 1917 and you could see there by the mill by the big bull wheel of the mill and I will describe this mill in some detail later. I followed this pipe line and walked all way across where it crosses the road ^{at} and across Harrisburg ^{Flat} and on across Ogabury's diggings. Around Harrisburg Flat you can see pieces of the pipe line that had apparently froze ^{it} and burst. This was 8" pipe, standard gage. The sample that the Park Service shows is a thinner gage and probably was used at higher elevations where the pressure was not as great. The removal of this pipe line was the end of Skidoo as far as a real mining place. Now in 1939, Rogers and Stivers who had the lease from Gray did operate the mill and they operated by hauling water from Imigrant Canyon up to the mill by truck. It takes about 3 tons of water ^{to mill} for 3 tons of ore, that by being very conservative and reclaiming the water, providing that the ore did not slime ^{the} water ^{and} the ore there at Skidoo did not slime very much. Now I will tell you about this mill I will describe ⁷¹ how this mill worked. This is a fifteen stamp mill. Stamp mills had batteries of 5 stamps. The big bull drove a shaft that had 5 cams with two lobes on there ^{in each cam} and each of these cams would lift these stamps which weighed probably about 1000 lbs and ^{2 ft} the stamps would drop about a foot and crush the rock. The stamps would wear out. They were replaceable. On the bottom there ^{would be} were shoes that also wore out. In milling ore you have to have a classifier and a classifier is a screener of larger debris leaving the paydirt.