

The Bridal Chamber

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For more than a century the voices that recalled and relived the myths and mysteries and hard fact memories of New Mexico mining lore have spellbound listeners when recounting the saga of the Bridal Chamber.

Lake Valley was one of three mining camps to emerge near the south end of the Black Range about 1880. Hillsboro and Kingston, the other two were a few miles away. They all are on the west side of the Rio Grande Rift. All had extensive gold and silver claims. Hillsboro was basically a gold camp and the other two, silver bonanzas. As so often true on the early frontier, these dramatic discoveries were quiet memories before the century's end. The boom towns became a silent listener to the winds and the ghosts.

The first claim discovery site at the Bridal Chamber area was made by a cowboy prospector, George Lufkin, in August 1878. Lufkin found a partner, Chris Watson, but they depleted their meager resources quickly. Soon they began to seek an infusion of new funds.

Meanwhile, Indian raids (Apache) delayed their return to the original diggings. Their actual work on the discovery remained stagnant until they interested a Fort Bayard Trading post owner, John Miller, in the claims. As many such historical webs are woven, the discoverer loses control of the treasure for necessary financing.

Based on assays at the initial discovery, Miller hired an experienced mining engineer, George Daly from Leadville, Colorado. Daly later secured the assistance of Bernard MacDonald, also from Leadville.

Although highly recommended as a potentially valuable deposit, one could hardly have imagined its extraordinary example of nature at her creative heights. A small opening into the fabulous ore body was broken through by MacDonald in mid August, 1881. The "Chamber" measured more than 100 feet by 100 feet and varied from 10 to 20 feet from floor to ceiling. Almost the entire room was lined and filled with interlaced crystals of Chlorargyrite (Cerargyrite), Silver Chloride (AgCl), Calcite and Native Silver.

The light from candles, lamps and torches sparkled back reflections that numbered the senses. The dark room was reflecting light from the glistening crystals. The sight must have stunned those eyes that first tried to focus on its magnificence! No one ever had viewed such a sight before - or since. No where on earth has a comparable deposit of silver ever been discovered.

A candle would melt the Cerargyrite stalactites into silver globs. Much of the was mined with axes and hatchets. Saws were used to cut the silver into blocks. One horn silver crystal mass weighed over 10,000 pounds!

Records indicate 2.5 million ounces of silver was recovered from the Bridal Chamber. A nearby "lesser" discovery, the Thirty Stope, produced a million ounces. It is doubtful these records allow for the actual amount removed. Most early official reports of precious metal extraction were on the low side.

A very sad footnote to history: At the very hour the Chamber entrance was broken into, Mr. Daly whose appraisal of the location was so instrumental in funding search, was killed with three of his friends. An Apache party, led by Chief Nane', ambushed them nearby.

Twenty two months later, the infamous Victorio would lead his Apache band to kill 16 more men at Lake Valley. Life on the frontier indeed had its hazards, and mine safety was only one of them.

The whispering breezes that waft these learned hills and valleys are all that remember those wretched days of hope and toil and those dramatic nights of whiskey, women, wild card games and wounds that bled.