

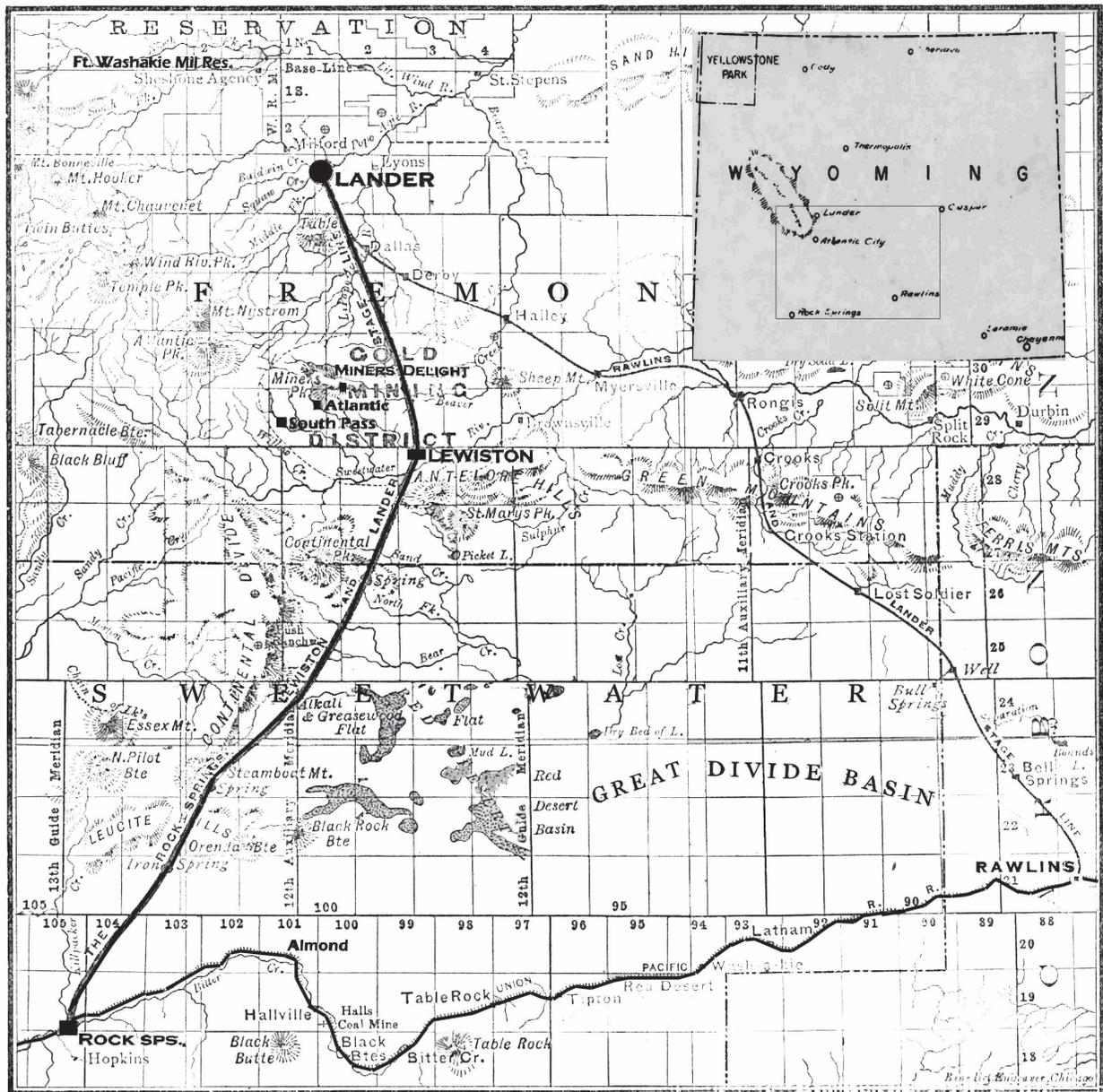
A History of Wyoming's Carissa Gold Mine

By
Susan Layman

The history of the Carissa Mine in west-central Wyoming begins in 1842, when an adventurer from Georgia found placer gold along the Sweetwater River near South Pass.¹ However, subsequent placer strikes were small, the area was already known for its harsh weather, and small groups of prospectors were vulnerable to Indian attacks. So development of the “Sweetwater mines” would have to wait.

Soldiers from Fort Bridger,² stationed along the Sweetwater River during the summer of 1864, would locate the first claim in the area. They discovered a rich lead north of Rock Creek, near present day Atlantic City, and named their claim the Buckeye in honor of their regiment's home state of Ohio.³ The following summer, Tom Ryan, a soldier with the Nevada volunteers, was with his command when they passed through the South Pass country. Ryan had heard the rumors of gold in the area and he discovered “fine gold quartz on the Carissa” lode.⁴ Even though he did not have an opportunity to locate a claim, Ryan still apparently reported his findings when he reached Salt Lake City, Utah.

In the spring of 1867, a party of men, including H. S. Reedall, Major Noyes Baldwin, Homer Roberts, Porter Rockwell, and a number of others,⁵ left Salt Lake City, headed for the South Pass area. On June 8, 1867, Reedall and associates located the Cariso Lode, the first claim in the newly formed Shoshonie Mining District.⁶ Working the rich rock by hand with mortar and pestle all winter, the Reedall party recovered fifteen thousand dollars in gold by the spring of 1868.⁷



Map Showing Stage Routes and Gold Fields

The location of South Pass City and the Sweetwater mines at the foot of the Wind River Mountains. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)

The Sweetwater Mines

The discovery of the Cariso Lode started the "rush to the Sweetwater mines." This event took place in a vast, scarcely populated area at the southeast end of the Wind River Mountains with elevations over 7,500 feet and located sixty miles from the nearest railroad. The rush would give birth to South Pass City, Atlantic City, Miners' Delight (Hamilton City) and later, Lewiston, Wyoming. The Wyoming Territorial census of 1869 reported a local population of 1,907. An eclectic mix participated in the rush; druggists, lawyers, gamblers, and speculators joined the miners, merchants, and soldiers.

Judging from the census, the average participant in the 1868 rush to the Sweetwater mines was a twenty-eight-year-old white male. Only slightly more than two hundred women initially decided to come to a mining region where hostile Indians, severe weather, and a lack of comforts dominated the landscape. However, progress and civilization soon found their way into the area. The *South Pass News*, published twice weekly in bustling South Pass City, reported in 1869 that one could buy the latest goods and fashions there and in the surrounding towns. By then three hundred structures stood in South Pass City, where two years before lay only a gulch filled with sagebrush, snow, and wind.

The placer gold recovered in the area had washed down Cariso and Hermit gulches to Willow Creek, which flowed to South Pass City, although the "city" itself was situated on a portion of the creek devoid of placer diggings. Soon, however, the "easy" placer gold disappeared and only hard rock mining remained attractive. By July of 1869, three mills with a total of twenty-six stamps were operating in the district. Several arrastras also separated gold from ore.

Hermit Mill, built by Union Foundry in San Francisco, was the first mill in the Sweetwater district. An overshot water wheel powered the Hermit Mill's six stamps, which weighed 650 pounds

each. The mill started processing ore in July 1868 and shut down for the season on November 1. In that time, it crushed 1,040 tons of ore from the Cariso and surrounding claims, averaging thirty-six dollars a ton.⁸

By the early 1870s, however, bust had arrived on the Sweetwater, as the early reports of a "bonanza" were declared unfounded. Miners left for more profitable gold strikes. The 1880 census showed fewer than two hundred people in the area, with more women, families, farmers, ranchers, and sheepherders listed along with miners. Structures were abandoned to the elements, used for new purposes, or scavenged for their valuable materials by the hangers-on.

Bolivar Roberts, whose brother, Homer, had been one of the original locaters of the Cariso Lode, next acquired the Carissa and the adjoining claims. Bolivar Roberts patented them as the Mono Lode and formed the Carissa Gold Mining Company in 1885.⁹ He also held water rights on Willow and Hermit creeks essential for milling. He extracted about one million dollars from the Carissa¹⁰ before leasing it to local mining men. In 1895, Sam Leckie leased the Carissa from Roberts. That October 31, Leckie deposited a thirty-ounce gold doré with the Rock Springs National Bank, located on the railroad ninety miles from South Pass City.

The Federal Gold Mining Company

The fortunes and ownership of the Carissa changed after Barney N. Tibbals met with John C. Spry, a Chicago businessman, at Detroit, Michigan, in January 1896. At thirty-nine years of age, Tibbals was already a veteran of several mining districts, including Deadwood, South Dakota, and Leadville, Colorado, where he and some companions sank shafts north of town seeking gold. This history gave Tibbals a wealth of experience, a quality that Spry was seeking. Spry and Tibbals likely met through Herman Bennett, Tibbals' cousin and a captain on one of Spry's lumber

The Cariso Lode

Date of
recording
June 27th 1867

Shoshone District
Dakota Terr. June 27th 1867

This is to certify that Henry J Keelall has this day appeared before me Harris B Hubbell recorder and made oath in due form that he is the first and real discoverer of the above named Lode and has located the same with all clips spurs angles and shelves or offsets in accordance with the twenty mining laws of this Dakota Territory and the laws of the United States, and also claims 100,000 hundred feet on each side of the Lode for working purposes and all the privileges that are allowed to miners by laws of the district said Lode is situated at or near the head of Panmuck gulch and north of Hermit creek about five hundred yards and East of Willow creek about a half-a-mile running Easting and Westing in Shoshone district Dakota Territory. and that such claimants are actual and bonafide residents of the above named Territory

H J Keelall claims discovery 200 feet

East claims 200 feet		West claims 200 feet	
H J Keelall	No 1	P & Van Orelm	No 1
E J Marshall	" 2	Wm W Davis	" 2
Joshua Terry	" 3	Marthin Keplinger	" 3
Mounti Wath	" 4	Levi Curtis	" 4
H B Hubbell	" 5	D. J. Little	" 5
George Terry	" 6	Richard Grace	" 6
W B Baldwin	" 7	C B Eddy	" 7

The 1867 Cariso Lode location and claim notice, recorded in "The Mining Records of Shoshone District, Dakota Territory." (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)



John C. Spry in 1900. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)

boats.

Spry had made his money on the Great Lakes, freighting and selling lumber to the city of Chicago as it rebuilt from the great fire of 1871. When he and Tibbals met in January 1896, Spry was interested in investing in an undervalued, but potentially profitable, mining property. He valued Tibbals' firsthand western mining experience, and placed his trust in the personal connection that Bennett afforded. By June 1896, Spry's Chicago business cronies, with their separate connections throughout the Rockies, were telling him of mines in the Atlantic City area of Wyoming, four miles from South Pass City. Spry directed Tibbals to investigate the Sweetwater mines more thorough-

ly. Their initial agreement was for Spry to pay Tibbals' expenses plus fifty dollars in wages per month, as well as a one-eighth interest in any property Tibbals secured for the company.¹¹

In October 1897, after Tibbals examined the area's mines, Spry decided on the Carissa. Spry purchased a controlling stake in the Carissa Gold Mining Company, held by the estate of Bolivar Roberts, then formed the Federal Gold Mining Company to undertake operations at the Carissa. The following month, Tibbals tested nine tons of Carissa ore at the Helen G. mill in nearby Lewiston, Wyoming, recovering forty-eight dollars in gold. The Helen G. mill had been exhibited at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago before being re-erected on a bleak hillside overlooking the old Oregon Trail. By 1898 the mill was up for sale, and Federal bought a portion of its structure and equipment to become part of the company's new mill on its Carissa property.

Quietly, through different individuals, Spry bought adjacent claims, expanding the Carissa to its present size. The Federal's ownership saw the largest underground development in the history of the Carissa. Original diggings were expanded to a depth of over four hundred feet with five drift levels, includ-

ing numerous crosscuts that more clearly defined the ore body. Payroll sheets and expense ledgers of Federal Gold Mining Company show that Federal employed an average of thirty men as miners, teamsters, wood cutters, and others.¹² All of this activity was a major boost to the local economy.

Federal began laying the foundations for its new mill in the spring of 1898; by that fall, it was producing ore. The mill circuit consisted of a ten-stamp mill, a Frue Vanner, a Wilfley table, and an eighteen-inch bullion furnace for casting gold bars. In March 1899, Federal began sending ingots to the Denver Mint, shipments that continued through September 1906 to a grand total of 4,092.24 ounces.¹³ The gold price at that time be-

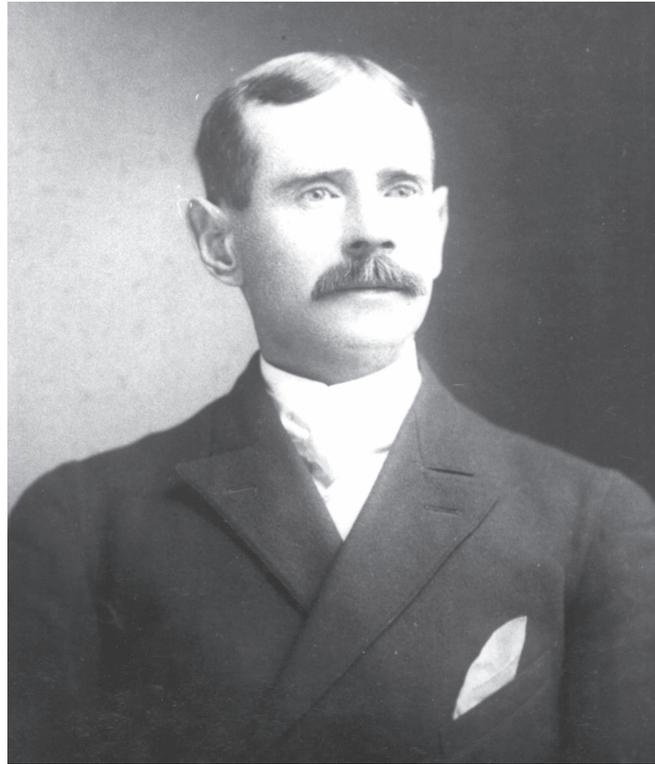
ing approximately \$20.67 an ounce, Federal's gross of \$84,586.60 equates to about six million dollars at today's prices. Mint receipts for 1899 alone show that bars sent from the Carissa totaled 1,893.2 ounces, worth \$39,132.44 at the time or \$3,029,120 today.

According to correspondence between Spry and Tibbals, the Federal Gold Mining Company shipped additional ingots to the Philadelphia Mint, of which there is no present information.¹⁴ Spry stated in letters to Tibbals that he did not necessarily trust the weights given by the Denver Mint, so he wanted to check a few bars at the Philadelphia Mint. In the end, Spry decided that the Denver Mint was on the up-and-up.¹⁵ Federal also noted on their internal ledgers \$108,238.52 in assets, including buildings and property. In contrast, expenses for 1899 were \$37,743.65, mostly for payroll. A laborer at the Carissa made three dollars for a nine-hour day and the foreman made five dollars.¹⁶

The Carissa provided important employment opportunities. More than three hundred individuals still lived in the area, according to the 1900 census. Their average age was now closer to forty, with bachelor miners appearing in the census along with established families. As long as the Carissa ran, the mercantiles and shops in South Pass City and Atlantic City remained active. The post office in South Pass City also served as the drop off for the Carissa's gold bars, each one insured and shipped to the mint in Denver.¹⁷

The Discontents

Spry was never satisfied with profits and expenses at the Carissa. His frequent letters to Tibbals attempted to micro-manage from afar and lamented the lack of large profits. A January 11, 1898, letter admonished that "it's not the amount of business a man does, it's the amount of profit he makes." On April 10, 1899, Spry complained: "Why aren't I getting more money[?] I thought



Barney N. Tibbals in 1895. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)

any time I wanted a batch I would have it." Under Tibbals' experienced management, Federal Gold Mining Company was able to provide employment and a modest living for miners in the South Pass area while also returning a reasonable profit to Spry. But Tibbals and the Carissa were unable to make Spry a "Vanderbilt," a desire that Spry explicitly shared with Tibbals in their correspondence.¹⁸

Spry ceased operations at the Carissa in 1906, but retained ownership of the mine. From 1899 until his death in 1927, Spry searched for a buyer for the Carissa, instructing Tibbals not to stope out the high grade ore, but to leave it in place for prospective buyers to sample. Despite his disenchantment with the Carissa, Spry continued to look for additional mining properties, trying in both 1906 and 1907 to convince Tibbals to go to Canada to look at mining properties. But Tibbals, disenchanted with Spry's decrees, had finally re-

Barney Tibbals and Federal Gold Mining Company's new mill in 1899. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)

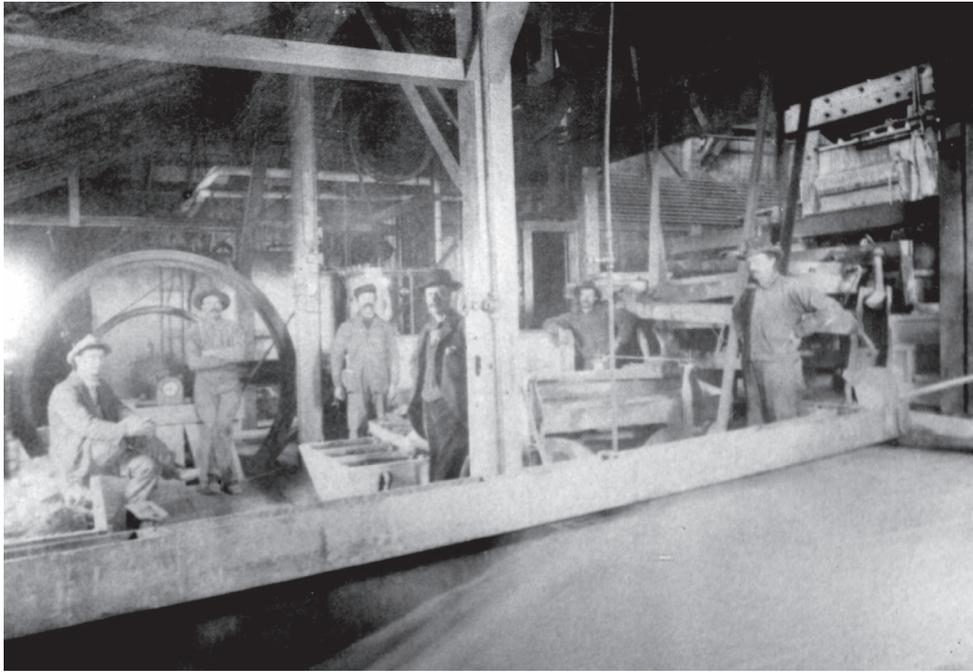


3. June 4⁰¹
M^r. Denver Mint, Denver, Colo.
Federal Gold Mining Co.
707 Chamber of Commerce, Chicgo,

Proceeds of Enclosed Bar
No 3

37.341 oz Troy
Fed. G. M. Co.
Per B. N. Tibbals
HAT.

An excerpt from Federal Gold Mining Company's bullion book. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)



Inside the Carissa Mill in 1899. Barney Tibbals stands in suit and hat at the center of this faded image. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)

tired from the mining life and moved to Boulder, Wyoming, where he operated a successful ranch until his death in 1939 at the age of eighty-two.

Complications from the Carissa mine followed Tibbals into ranching, however. In 1928, seventy years old and in poor health, Tibbals began a legal battle with the estate of his former employer.¹⁹ This arose from a contract Spry and Tibbals had entered into in 1904 in conjunction with an option taken on the property by a Mr. Ewing. The contract stated that Tibbals would be paid \$17,500 upon the sale of the mine to Ewing. Tibbals had been instrumental in getting Ewing involved in the option, but Spry held to the opinion that Tibbals' fee applied only to the sale of the mine, and since Spry never sold the Carissa, Tibbals was not entitled to his fee. This disagreement became the basis of the legal dispute once Ewing's option expired and the mine reverted to Spry's possession.

Barney Tibbals, the only real mining man involved in this lengthy legal mess, had walked away from the property in 1905. He only got involved again after Spry's death, when Spry's executor

posted a call for liens and Tibbals filed one against the estate. He may have thought this would be a short, uneventful process, but Tibbals' lawyer, J. J. Spriggs, seems to have contracted gold fever, as did the Wyoming lawyers that Spry's Chicago-based estate hired.

Tibbals filed his first lien in Illinois in February 1928 after hearing of Spry's death, then, in accordance with the law, Spriggs filed a second lien in Wyoming in March 1928. The Wyoming Supreme Court ruled in Spriggs and Tibbals' favor in November 1930, but lawyers for Spry's estate appealed the case to the federal courts. In late 1939, the case was finally decided in favor of the receiver for Spry's estate, who began to try to sell the Carissa in January 1940.²⁰

By this point, however, Spriggs—who had become a party to any settlement through a 1932 agreement with Tibbals—seems to have developed an obsession over the case. He immediately appealed to Tibbals' widow, Anna, for money to renew the fight. Anna Tibbals' brother, Peter, advised her in Feb. 1940 not to give Spriggs any more money, and it is not clear if she did so. That

did not matter to Spriggs, who pursued his claims for the next thirty years, long after everyone else considered the issue settled. Spriggs continued desultory legal filings, with at least Anna's tacit approval, into the 1950s. A final resolution of sorts came in November 1969, when Janet and James Tibbals, Anna and Barney's children, deeded whatever "rights" they had in the Carissa to Spriggs, who died a short time later.²¹

This legal dispute kept the fate of the mine in the courts from the late 1920s until Spriggs' death. Barney Tibbals eventually lost his desire to maintain the battle in the courts, but was prodded by Spriggs to continue the fight.²² So Tibbals spent his final years filing legal briefs and testifying in court over a gold mine that he had left in 1906 because of contention and perpetual disagreement with Spry over how to run the property.

So why would all of these lawyers and businessmen—people who normally made decisions based on facts—become so enamored with this mine? It is a difficult question to answer, but even discounting Spriggs' persistence, the Carissa and other mines in the area have had very devoted followers both historically and presently. Spry, who

probably could have found a buyer if he had put more effort into it, held on instead until his death. He never operated the mine after 1906, but he never let go of it either. Perhaps it comes down to mining's stubborn optimism. Wyoming never had mining rushes of the likes of Colorado or California, but the Sweetwater district produced the largest gold boom in Wyoming, and many people still feel that perhaps the big bonanza has been overlooked and remains to be discovered.

Subsequent Operators

Until Tibbals' claim was resolved at the end of 1939, Spry's estate did not hold clear title to the property, and thus could not sell the Carissa mine. The dispute also discouraged companies or individuals from leasing or investing in a property with such an uncertain fate. Nevertheless, several companies eventually did lease the Carissa after Spry's death, starting with Midwest Mines Corporation of Chehalis, Washington, in 1929.

From 1901 to 1905 inclusive—some of the Carissa's best years of production—the Dexter Mining and Milling Company operated a placer



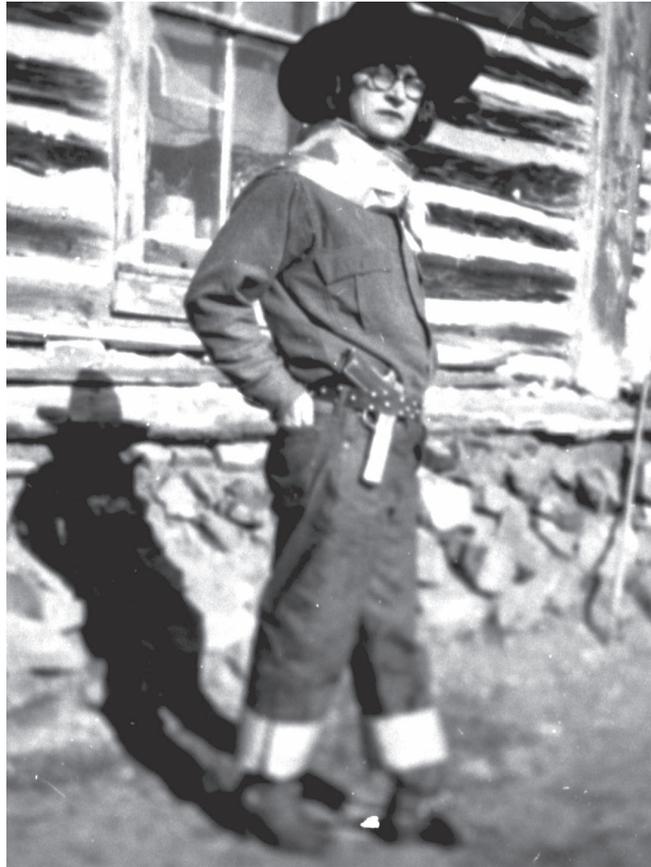
Mid West Mines Corporation's new mill in 1929, with the shell of Federal Gold Mining Company's mill to the left. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)

mine and custom mill four miles away in Atlantic City. The Dexter's production deposited at the Denver Mint totaled only 872.2 ounces,²³ however, before the company suspended operations in 1905 and sat idle for over twenty years. In 1929, Midwest Mines purchased the Dexter mill building and leased the Carissa mine.

The new arrivals determined to replace Federal's aging processing plant with the larger Dexter mill. Midwest hired Zoe Green, a twenty-nine-year-old woman from Atlantic City, to ramrod a crew that took the building apart and moved it in the summer of 1929 to the Carissa site, where it stands today. The revamped operation still relied on antiquated stamp milling and amalgamation technology, however, and Midwest used all its initial capital to get its replacement mill up and going. Thus, Midwest faced the start of the Great Depression with no funds to pay creditors and was forced to cease operations in the summer of 1930. The Carissa mine was once again idle.²⁴

Mica Mountain Mines was the next company to try its hand at the Carissa. Mica Mountain bought the property from the Spry estate in 1946, and a Butte, Montana, engineer, Ray Tower, embarked on an extensive remodeling of the mill's equipment.²⁵ Tower removed the stamps and installed a Colorado Iron Works ball mill, duplex mineral jig, and flotation cells, followed by a cyanide system to maximize gold recovery.

The refurbished mill produced both concentrates and bullion. The concentrates went to a smelter in Garfield, Utah, and the bullion to the mint in Denver. While records for the smelter are unavailable, mint receipts total \$74,698.00 for two and a half years of production at the fixed gold price of \$35 an ounce.²⁶ Once again, the Carissa mine proved to be only a modest gold producer and Mica Mountain found itself unable to recover the cost of the improvements fast enough to maintain sufficient operating capital.



Zoe Green, who supervised relocation of the Dexter Mill to the Carissa Property, photographed in Atlantic City in 1929. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)

The Carissa changed hands once more, in 1949, when George Colemere formed Pioneer Carissa Gold Mines, Incorporated. The new company made deposits at the Denver mint beginning that October, again in October and November 1954, with a final deposit on January 18, 1955. A bar deposited in October 1949 tipped the scales at 369.47 ounces, and Pioneer Carissa's grand total ultimately reached 721.91 ounces.²⁷

As usual, however, acquiring sufficient capital posed a problem. A letter to stockholders, dated July 5, 1951, stated that "the principal factor preventing our [operating] has of course been lack of sufficient funds. . . . For the present in order to meet commitments and continue our planned debt reduction the only method of securing the



The Carissa Mill and South Pass City State Historic Site as they appear today. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site)



**Consolidated McKinney
Resources Inc.
Presents**



**The Carrisa Gold Mine
Fremont County, Wyoming.**

TRADING ON THE
VANCOUVER STOCK EXCHANGE
V.S.E. Trading Symbol: CKY

A Consolidated McKinney Resources brochure promoting the Carissa Gold Mine. (Courtesy of South Pass City State Historic Site.)

necessary money is to levy an additional one cent assessment. Your cooperation . . . will be appreciated.”²⁸ Unfortunately the stockholders did not cooperate, thereby ending the last era of production at the Carissa mine. From the 1970s through early 1990s, several companies, including the Canadian firm Consolidated McKinney Resources, Inc., took options on the Carissa. They conducted limited underground sampling and core drilling, but never put the mine back into production.

The Carissa Mine’s Preservation

The Carissa mine sat shuttered and decaying for almost two decades while the town below it, South Pass City, was purchased by Wyoming’s Seventy-fifth Anniversary Commission in 1967 and restored. In 2003, the State of Wyoming realized an opportunity to purchase the mine, an act that reunified the town with its economic engine. Now seasonal visitors to South Pass City are able to explore and experience the Carissa Mill, the hoist house, and the town site. Their shared history spans nearly 150 years. Barney Tibbals would be glad to see that the buildings and streets where he once lived are still frequented, but he would surely take issue with the Carissa mine’s present employment, for, in his mind, it would not be living up to its full potential. ■

Susan Layman is employed as collections manager by South Pass City State Historic Site and as manager of the Smith-Sherlock General Store, run by the Friends of South Pass. She is also president of the Atlantic City Historical Society, dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history of the Sweetwater mines. With Jon Lane, curator of South Pass City State Historic Site, she co-wrote the book South Pass City and the Sweetwater Mines, published in April 2012.

Notes:

1. James L. Sherlock, *South Pass and Its Tales* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978), 2.
2. Fort Bridger is located in the southwest corner of Wyoming, about one hundred miles from South Pass City. After the Civil War, troops were reassigned to the western territories to protect settlers and travelers on the Oregon Trail. The trail passed ten miles south of South Pass City and then passed by Fort Bridger.
3. C. G. Coutant, *The History of Wyoming*, v. 1 (Laramie: Chaplin, Spafford and Mathison Printers, 1899), 639-40.
4. Coutant, *History of Wyoming*, 647.
5. Coutant, *History of Wyoming*, 647.
6. Cariso Lode, Shoshonie Mining District, Claims and Deeds, microfilm, Wyoming State Archives, Cheyenne.
7. Coutant, *History of Wyoming*, 650.
8. Rossiter W. Raymond, "Statistics of Mines and Mining in the States and Territories West of the Rocky Mountains," Document 207, 41st Congress, second session, 1870.
9. The name of the lode and mine can be somewhat confusing. The "Cariso" became the "Carisa," "Creasser," and finally the "Carissa," as it has been spelled now for a number of years. All of these changes appear to be simply variant spellings by different people on various documents.
10. Sherlock, *South Pass and Its Tales*, 100.
11. Barney N. Tibbals, unpublished diary, 22 June 1896, South Pass City State Historic Site Archives (hereafter SPCSHSA).
12. Loose payroll ledger sheets, FS13 H and I, Federal Gold Mining Company ledger book, p. 8-97, FS14 K, SPCSHSA.
13. Spreadsheet developed by the author from Bullion Receipts, Denver Mint, National Archives and Records Administration, Lakewood, CO.
14. John Spry to Barney Tibbals, 6 Apr. 1899, Letters of John C. Spry, 1897-1906, SPCSHSA.
15. John Spry to Barney Tibbals, 27 Apr. 1899, Letters of John C. Spry, 1897-1906, SPCSHSA.
16. Federal Gold Mining Company ledger book, p. 8-97, FS14 K, SPCSHSA.
17. Smith-Sherlock Store ledger sheets, WS1 C, and oral history, SPCSHSA and Atlantic City Historical Society records.
18. John Spry to Barney Tibbals, 10 Apr. 1899, Letters of John C. Spry, 1897-1906, SPCSHSA.
19. M. C. Amyx to A. H. Maxwell, letter, 1 Oct. 1938, Carissa Legal Correspondence, SPCSHSA.
20. Attorney Wheaton Augur to Attorney A. H. Maxwell, letters of 24 Feb. and 6 Mar. 1928, Letters of Wheaton Augur, 1927-31, SPCSHSA; John J. Spriggs to Barney Tibbals, letter containing a copy of the state supreme court decision, 13 Nov. 1930, Carissa Lawsuit File; "Carissa Mine May Be Sold," clipping from unknown newspaper, 18 Jan. 1940, Carissa Lawsuit File, SPCSHSA.
21. Peter Sherlock to Anna Smith Tibbals, letter, 23 Feb. 1940, Carissa Lawsuit File; Letter and Quit Claim Deed, Nov. 1969, Carissa Lawsuit File, SPCSHSA.
22. A. H. Maxwell, attorney, to J. E. Beach, attorney, letter, 3 June 1933, Carissa Legal Papers, SPCSHSA.
23. Author's spreadsheet developed from Bullion Receipts, Denver Mint, NARA, Lakewood.
24. No record of the Mid West Mines Corporation's production at the Carissa mine has been discovered.
25. John Lane and Susan Layman, *South Pass City and the Sweetwater Mines* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2012), 46.
26. Author's spreadsheet developed from Bullion Receipts, Denver Mint, NARA, Lakewood.
27. Author's spreadsheet developed from Bullion Receipts, Denver Mint, NARA, Lakewood.
28. Pioneer Carissa Gold Mines, Inc., Letter to Stockholders, 5 July 1951, SPCSHSA.