

The Prospector

Portland Gold Prospectors, Inc.

GPAA Portland, Oregon Chapter



October, 2022

SISKIYOU MOUNTAINS, JOSEPHINE COUNTY; 1853:

Quest for Cabin Gold Vault Led to Madness and Death

By Finn J.D. John

May 1, 2020

Part One: The Prospectors.

THE “LOST CABIN GOLD MINE” is a certifiable Western trope. If every ounce of legendary gold buried in an old log cabin became real and hit the banks at the same time, it would probably crash the international markets.

They make for fantastic stories, though. And often the gold isn't the only thing being hidden. Plus, of course, the fact that they might – just might – be real adds a distinctive spice to them.

One of the most interesting and colorful Lost Cabin Gold Mine stories is the one that supposedly took place in the hills south of Jacksonville in 1853. In this case, it's not a mine that's been lost – it's a vault: a small stone-lined crypt stuffed with millions of dollars' worth of freshly dug gold, and guarded by whatever remains of the skeletons of two long-dead men.

We have this story courtesy of poet-journalist-raconteur Sam Simpson, who was basically the Stewart Holbrook of the 1800s. As would be expected from Sam (or Stewart, for that matter!) it's hardly factually reliable ... but it is a humdinger of a tale.

OUR STORY KICKS OFF in the spring of 1853, when brothers James and Henry Wilson arrived in Jacksonville to work the nearby diggings.

At that time, Jacksonville had just been founded on the Rich Gulch strike two years before. But Rich Gulch, though worthy of its name, had been pretty shallow, and by the time the Wilson boys arrived things were already petering out. More rich strikes were coming, but that was in the future; for the time being, most of the miners were just trying to get in around the edges of what had already been dug, and they weren't finding much.



California Street in Jacksonville as it appeared in the mid-1880s. The town probably looked not much different in 1868 when Sam Simpson and Ted Harper came through on the trail of the Wilson brothers' stash of gold. (Image: Oregon Historical Society)

James and Henry had no interest in toiling in the dirt all day for a few dollars. They decided to strike out into the wilderness and try to find another Rich Gulch.

Problem was, in 1853 the Rogue Indians considered trespassing on their lands an act of war. Prospecting was absolutely unsafe, and there had just been a party wiped out near Table Rock, north of town. Most folks in Jacksonville were not keen on straying too far outside city limits until things had settled down a bit.

James and Henry didn't care, and they were able to assemble a small team of miners who felt the same way. So when they headed out to do their prospecting, they had some safety in numbers.

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Editor's Note:

I was recently introduced to the Offbeat Oregon podcast narrated by Finn J.D. John. It is a very informative and entertaining series of stories of Oregon's History. This article was published in May of 2020.

I highly recommend giving him a listen!

Secretary's Report September 18, 2022

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Attendees - 41 attendees and 1 guest were present.

Treasury Report - There was no Treasury Report read this month because Jim Erwin wasn't present.

Meeting Minutes - A motion was made and seconded to accept the Secretary's Report of the previous month as written and published in the September newsletter. The motion was approved by the members present.

Barn Sale - The Barn sale was really successful. Many people showed up and purchased a lot of stuff. Elaine got a nice sized check with the profits and was kind enough to donate half of the proceeds to our club. We still have some items left over so we are planning another sale in either October or November. There is a nice Kiln for sale for \$1000 if anyone is interested in purchasing it they can get a hold of Jim.

Treasure Trove - Dan Roose who owns Treasure Trove in Beaverton invited people to come out and check out his store. He has all kinds of prospecting equipment for sale and it's a good place to learn more about prospecting. John Richman will be demonstrating his Sluice Goose in the near future so go check it out. He also has an event called Pro's and Con's. His store is located at 10400 S.W. Allen Blvd. Beaverton, OR. his phone number is 971-708-8699 if you have any questions.

Election 2022 - The Election is just around the corner and remember Mike is resigning from his President position so we really need someone to step up and volunteer to take over this position. We also will be electing a new Treasurer and numerous Board Member

positions. October will be nominations and the Election will be in November.

Cape Disappointment - Jeff finally got his permit for Cape Disappointment after about 2 months. If anyone is interested in getting a permit his paperwork is available to look at.

Boy Scouts - Mike got a hold of a Scout Master and has volunteered to go to a Boy Scout meeting and show them how to pan for gold. This is a great idea and beneficial to teach kids about panning. Anybody that knows any Boy Scouts may want to do the same thing.

Vancouver Chapter - The Vancouver Chapter is dropping a couple of the claims that we gave them in Washington because they forgot to file in September so they would have to pay to refile again so they decided to just let them go.

Gold Show Dirt - The leftover dirt from this year's Gold Show panning booth got all panned out and we got about 2 grams. The gold will be used when making up our gold bags that we sell.

Sportsmen's Show 2023 - We will be needing a bunch of volunteers for the upcoming Sportsmen's Show in February 2023. This is one of our major fundraisers so it's really important that we get a lot of participation from our members to make next year's show a success.

Raffle - The Raffle was held with \$1 and \$5 tickets. Ken Diddier was the lucky winner of the Gold Bag. Sven Swenson was the lucky winner of the Gold Nugget.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:40 PM

Respectfully submitted by
Yolande Kragerud, Secretary.



PORTLAND GOLD PROSPECTORS, INC.

PRESIDENT'S BLOG

OCTOBER, 2022

Thank you to everyone who attended the September Chapter Meeting. I hope everyone liked the new venue in Clackamas, OR. Thank you to Rocky and Cindy for arriving early so we could get into the building and start setting up for the meeting. We have a few details to work out including getting the microphone set up for the meetings and organizing the PGPI space in the storage room. We also need some additional help in the kitchen to get the coffee and refreshments ready to go and into the meeting area, and with clean up after.

As you may recall, on August 27th and 28th, PGPI held a "Barn Sale" at Jim Erwin's. The primary purpose of the Barn Sale was to sell the items retrieved from Richard Ruth's (4) sheds. We did very well on the sale, however there are still several items left that need to be either sold or disposed of. That being said, Jim has agreed to hold a 2nd "Barn" sale on October 29th and 30th. There will be a signup sheet at the October meeting for those who can help with the sale.

For those of you who were at the September Chapter Meeting, Sam Garcia brought the nugget he recently found at TYROY. That, along with the nugget that Rocky and Bob found at the TYROY outing in June, is very encouraging insofar as it looks like we are into some good material. Hopefully the weather will cooperate so we can actually have a full two week outing next June!

OK – Now I need to remind everyone that nominations for some Chapter Officers and Board Members will occur at the October Chapter Meeting. I am having some health concerns and need to step

down from being President at the end of the year. It is important that we have a President to help keep the Chapter viable. Elections are in November; only Chapter Members (green membership card) can vote. Please give some serious thought about what you can do to help the Chapter. Thank you!

→ Please note that I, along with Gretchen, will help with the transition to the new President, to help make sure he/she has the tools and information needed to succeed.

> Please remember that Tim Snyder, who creates the chapter's monthly newsletters and handles the club's social media accounts and website, is interested in any stories related to prospecting from anyone in the club for publication in the newsletter. You can forward your story/information to Tim via email at wrshpmzshn@gmail.com

> We also want to invite anyone at our meetings who has an interesting story to tell or something about prospecting to demonstrate or wants to show what they have found while prospecting, etc.– to let me know so we can either make time during the meeting or schedule time at the next meeting.

Hope to see you at the October's meeting! Thank you and Happy Prospecting!

Mike

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But, as it turned out, not quite enough.

They soon ran into a war party, which, of course, promptly attacked. They fended it off, but one of the miners was killed.

After that, the miners called a council and voted to head back to Jacksonville and wait for the war to end.

Henry and James Wilson, though, decided to take their chances, alone. They waved goodbye to their erstwhile comrades and struck out into the mountains.

This parting of the ways happened beside a mineral spring at the base of a tall rock formation that looked like an hourglass. So, noting this rock as a landmark to remember their path by, the brothers set out for a range of mountains visible in the distance – probably the Siskiyou.

Once into these mountains, or rather the higher foothills of them, the brothers stumbled across a narrow valley, walled in on both sides by steep and rugged cliffs, with a little creek running through it. The valley's defensive potential was obvious, and it had some nice little meadowlands for the horses to graze on; so the boys decided to let the animals rest a few days while they built a little log cabin there. Doubtless they planned to use it as a hub for the next round of prospecting expeditions.

The next day, though, while drinking from the little creek, Henry discovered that it was loaded with gold. Scooping up a handful of gravel, he found that it was literally peppered with nuggets. They wouldn't need a gold pan to work these diggings, he realized – they could just wade in the creek and pick the nuggets out with their fingers.

WELL, IT'S NOT HARD to imagine what the brothers spent the rest of that day doing. Or the next day either. Soon they had a huge pile of gold heaped up on the floor of their little cabin.

Well, that had been pleasant. They were now both rich men. The challenge would be living long enough to enjoy it; the brothers were very nervous about the Indians. They knew the Indian agents and the Army were doing what they could to settle things down; but they also knew that "pacifying" the Rogues would take a while. While they figured they were fairly safe in their secret hidden valley, they didn't have enough supplies to spend the winter there. If a cease-fire hadn't been negotiated (or forcibly imposed on the tribes) by the end of the summer, they'd have to take their chances, and the journey home would be very risky. And it's a lot harder to run for your life, if it comes to that, if you're carrying hundreds of pounds of gold in your saddlebags.

So as the leaves of the trees started to turn colors, signaling the approach of fall, the boys dug a large hole in the middle of their log-cabin floor, and lined it with close-fitting rocks. They wrapped up their gold in raw, untanned deerskins and basically filled up the vault with it.

They covered the vault with a couple of large flat rocks so that it would be easier to probe for, pushed the dirt back over it, and started getting ready for the trip back to town. Soon they were on their way – Henry in front, James bringing up the rear, each leading two horses.

They didn't get far. They weren't even out of sight of the cabin when a volley of shots rang out, and Henry dropped in his tracks. The horses reared and screamed, and a band of Shasta Indians burst into the clearing.

James promptly shot one of them with his black-powder rifle, dropped it, and pulled his Colt Navy revolver. The Indians, seeing this and belatedly realizing that they were charging a still-armed foe with empty rifles, turned and scrambled back to cover. James took advantage of the break to leap onto the one remaining unwounded horse and take off, past Henry's still and obviously dead body, galloping for the mouth of the valley and for home.

THE TRIP WAS A HARD ONE, as James had very few supplies and was armed with only a revolver. By the time he finally stumbled into a settlement in northern California he was in a terrible state of health. He took a stagecoach to San Francisco for medical treatment, but nothing seemed to help.

Perhaps sensing the end, he started writing letters to his cousin, Ted Harper of Chicago, telling him the whole story of the cabin and the Indians and the death of his brother. As soon as he got well, he wrote, he would be going back and getting his gold; but if he didn't make it, he wanted Ted to know where it was.

But he hadn't quite gotten round to telling Ted exactly how to reach the cabin when, in the fall of 1859, death came for him.

TED HARPER, WHEN HE was notified of James Wilson's death, headed west to settle his cousin's affairs. When he arrived, he found that James had apparently been in the act of writing that final letter, with detailed directions to reach the cabin, at the very moment Death had reached out his bony hand to claim him:

"Dear Cousin: I had hoped to see you before this, but the end has come sooner than I expected. ... I think it is nearly over. I must write what I intended to have spoken, and endeavor to give you such directions as will

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enable you to find the cabin, for you must find it. ... The first part of your course is plain enough: Start from Jacksonville and keep the California road for —”

At that precise point (as seems to be the case with most stories that include treasure maps or discovery directions) the text broke off with a smudge of ink, as if the writer had collapsed onto the page.

And so ends Act One of our little drama. Act Two wouldn't take place until about 15 years later, when cousin Ted enlisted the help of one of Oregon's most famous pioneer poets to help him find the cabin and retrieve the treasure.

Part Two: The Poet.

By 1899, when Samuel L. Simpson's drinking problem finally got around to killing him, he was essentially Oregon's poet laureate — the Stewart Holbrook of the 1800s.

But thirty years earlier, he was just another fresh-faced lawyer, just out of Willamette University's law school. He'd moved to Portland to open his practice, and now he was sitting at his desk in his brand-new office in Portland, sipping a glass of rye and waiting for his first client to walk in the door.

No one did. There were just too many lawyers in Portland in 1868. Fresh out of law school, with no social connections, Sam just didn't have a chance.

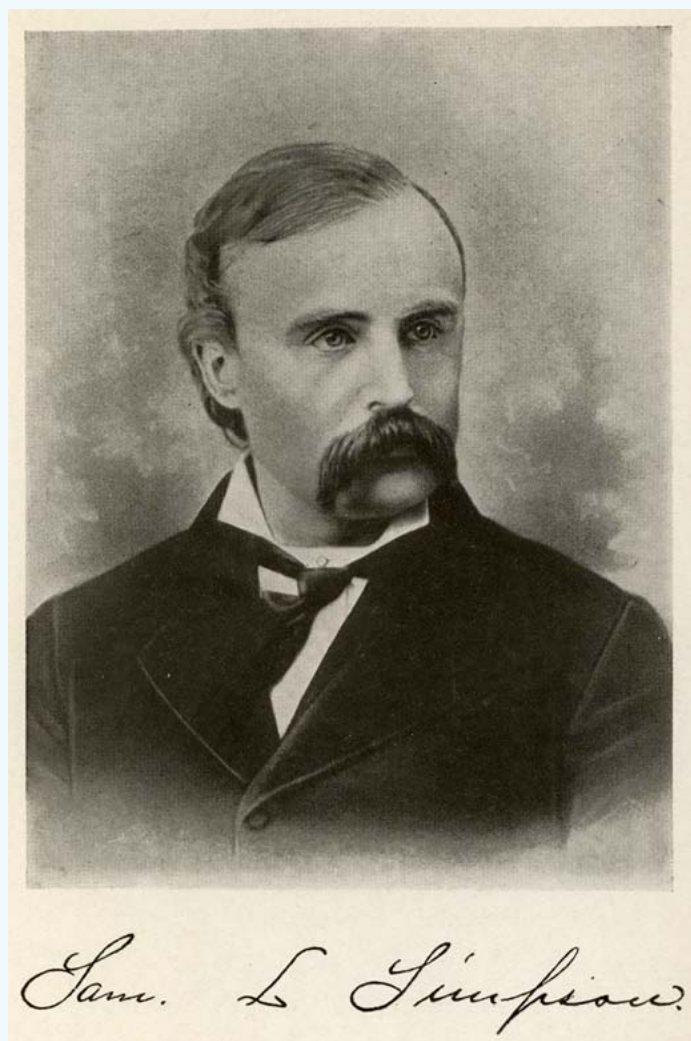
But finally the door did open, and somebody stepped inside.

It wasn't a client, though. It was one of the other residents in the boardinghouse he was staying in, a greenhorn from Chicago named Ted Harper. And Harper had a proposition: He wanted Sam to close up his law office and come to Southern Oregon with him. They would spend the summer hunting for a certain ruined cabin with an immense hoard of gold buried inside, deep in the wilderness south of Jacksonville, in a hidden valley boxed in by steep cliffs.

Only problem was, Harper didn't know exactly where the valley was. It was possible that they'd search all summer and get nothing for their pains.

But Harper did have a letter giving partial directions to the cabin, which his cousin — who'd built the cabin and buried the gold — had dropped dead in the middle of writing.

Simpson agreed to the scheme. He was brand new in the law business, had no clients and very



Sam Simpson as he appeared on the frontispiece of *The Gold-Gated West: Songs and Poems*, a posthumous collection of Simpson's work published in 1910. (Image: Oregon Historical Society)

SAM SIMPSON SHARES the story of the ensuing quest in his article in *The Native Son*, a Portland magazine, published in 1900 several months after his death. In it, he recounts that the two of them traveled to Jacksonville, and met almost immediately with an encouraging success. They found an old trail cutting off from the California road, lined with tree branches cleared with an ax; Indians would not have bothered, but a big party of prospectors leading half a dozen pack horses certainly would have. In fact, it was probably what led the Indians to them — if a habitually drunk lawyer-poet and a grass-green dude from Chicago could spot the trail when it was 15 years old, surely a party of Shasta warriors wouldn't have had a whole lot of trouble following it when it was fresh.

Be that as it might, Simpson and Harper now followed the path to its end, where they found — to their surprise and delight — the mineral spring and landmark rock mentioned in Harper's cousin James's letters.

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They rested their horses there for two days, then set out again.

But this time success was not to be so easily had. For weeks the two of them rode through the wild and rugged foothills, seeking that secret valley they'd read about in the letters of cousin James — but never finding it.

Simpson started experiencing a sort of disorientation as his dreams became indistinguishable from his daytime activities, riding endlessly through a trackless wilderness looking for a ruined cabin with its buried treasure trove.

Then one night, after they had made camp and Harper had fallen asleep exhausted, Simpson writes that he was visited by the ghost of a miner — tall, muscular, bearded, in a gray flannel shirt, with a ghostly Colt Model 1851 strapped to his ghostly side. The miner gazed sorrowfully into his eyes without saying anything.

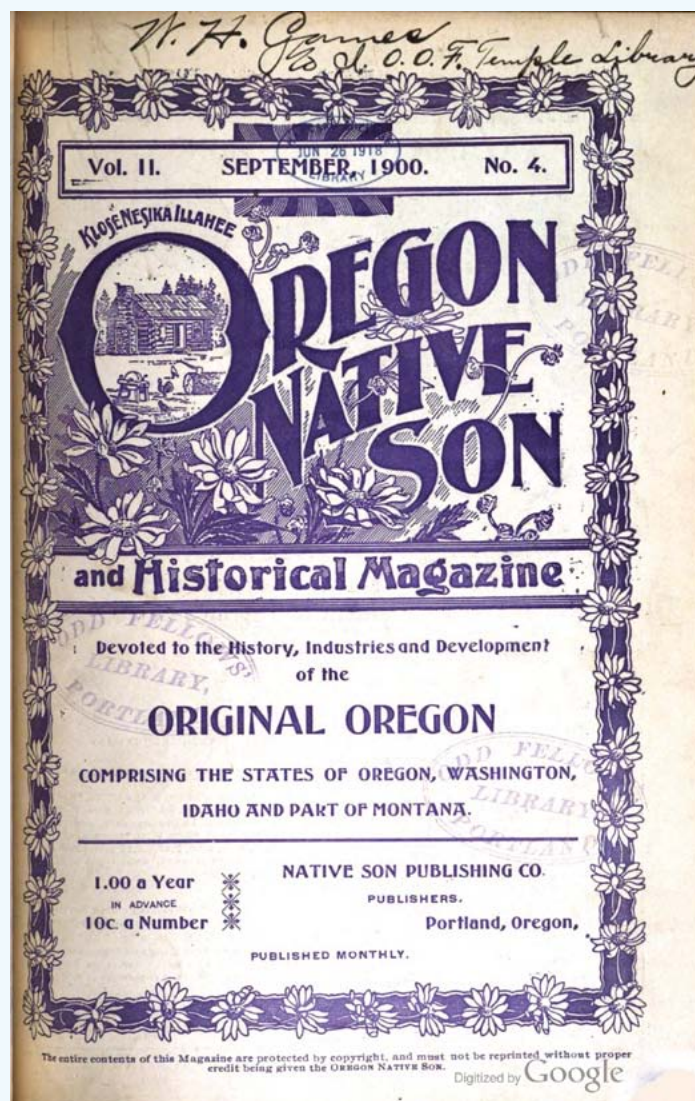
Then Simpson woke up. It had all been a dream! ... or had it? (Cue the suspenseful music: Dun-dun-dunnn!) Because now, when Simpson cast his eyes for the hundredth time on the broken-off final letter penned by his partner's cousin, there was new writing on it! Someone had taken a ghostly pencil and drawn what looked like two mountain ridges meeting at right angles, with a miner's pick just below!

"Who had done this, and what could it mean?" Simpson wrote. "Was it the idle and unmeaning tracery of my own unconscious hand, or was it the effort of some superior power to direct us in our search for the Lost Cabin?"

In doubt of his own reason, Simpson said nothing to Harper. But two days later, when the two of them climbed a peak to survey the surrounding country, he saw the two mountain ridges that the ghost had sketched! And, just below, where the miner's pick had appeared

Now very excited, Simpson told Harper all about his dream and the ghostly vandalism that had been mysteriously perpetrated upon his cousin's last letter; and the two of them enthusiastically descended from the peak and made a beeline for the spot.

"On — on we went in a dream of wonder and future wealth, and nothing impeded our progress now, until at last we entered a narrow valley walled in by precipitous mountains and bordered on each side by



The front cover of the magazine in which Sam Simpson's reminiscence of the lost mine appeared. (Image: Google Books)

a beautiful stream," the poet writes. "We knew we were upon sacred ground; and along the shadowy fringe of the forest, where the fretted waters sang a barbaric tune, we rode, silent as spectres. A resistless magnetism drew us on, and not a word was spoken."

A poet indeed!

Near the top of the little valley, the two searchers found the blackened ruins of their personal El Dorado:

"We turned a projecting angle of the wood, and a square, black object half buried in a tangle of weeds, was before us. ... We had found the Lost Cabin! — nothing now but an empty pen of scorched and blackened logs."

With, he adds, a skeleton inside. Apparently after killing Henry Wilson and scaring off James, the Indians had dragged Henry's corpse back into the

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cabin and set it afire; but the logs, cut just a couple months before, had been too green to burn.

The two Argonauts stepped past the slumping skeleton and grinning skull into the enclosure and started probing the floor in search of their golden fleece. The floor was hard packed, and Simpson drove his pick into it again and again. Finally the point connected with solid rock. It was the vault!

At that moment, a shot rang out behind him, and a terrible cry. Ted Harper had accidentally shot himself. He now lay there on the floor next to the bones of Henry Wilson – fresher than his cousin, but every bit as dead.

It was all too much for the sensitive poetic soul of Sam Simpson, who promptly fainted.

“Then it was night, a long, starless and dreamless night of clouded intellect and slumbering soul. When the cunning forces of Nature had repaired the fragile structure and the dawn of reason came, they were telling the story of a stage-driver on the Oregon and California route, who, many months before, had captured a nude and sun-bronzed wild-man – gibbering like a monkey, but harmless as a babe – near the boundary line, and sent him north to Portland.”

Part Three: The Bottle.

AND NOW WE COME to the last act in our play: What are we to make of this crazy yarn of ghosts and lost gold?

Certainly anyone who would take it at face value is likely to already have put money down on some beachfront property in Arizona. But, in the true spirit of lost-gold stories, author Ruby El Hult has found quite a bit of circumstantial evidence to suggest that this expedition did happen – or, at least, that Simpson and Harper left together on some sort of prospecting trip in 1868. Or at least that Simpson did. Maybe.

If, that is, we stipulate the existence of both the cabin and James’s letters – there’s no source for either one other than Simpson’s article.

As Hult confirms, the dates line up; Simpson closed his law office in Portland in April 1868, and, other than the fact that he wrote his most famous poem (“Beautiful Willamette”) shortly thereafter, he’s not on record as doing anything else that summer.

But as Hult notes, there are a couple other factors

that have to be considered.

First, there’s the fact that Simpson was a poet and a storyteller. And remember, he didn’t write this story till much later. After his failed attempt to get started as a lawyer, he went into journalism, writing for newspapers in Corvallis, Eugene, Salem, Portland, and Astoria. By the time he put pen to paper to tell this lost-cabin story (presumably in or just before 1899, since it was published after his death) his poems and stories of “colorful” Oregon characters were widely published and admired. And he was just as likely to add spicy little fictional details to his stories (you know, to make them more “colorful”) as Stewart Holbrook ever was. How much of the Lost Cabin story is spicy little fictional details, one wonders? Most of it? All of it?

Second, there’s the fact that he was an alcoholic. This, as Hult notes, suggests an explanation for why he claims Harper just randomly showed up in his law office to entrust him, a complete stranger, with a very valuable secret. But, if the two of them had done some carousing together, it becomes very likely indeed that a story like this would have been shared over a pint or two of rye.

And if the two of them were party buddies, other things become possible as well. Simpson’s description of dissociation while the two of them were riding through the wilderness, for example, in which he was never quite sure if he was awake or dreaming. Or the visit from the ghostly miner.

“Those who believe in ghosts will have no trouble here,” Hult writes dryly, “but I for one wonder how much liquor Harper and Simpson had with them.”

Plenty, of course. No alcoholic ever leaves home without a generous supply or plans for replenishing it as needed.

Chances are pretty good that the two of them spent that whole summer in a drunken stupor, just trying not to fall off their horses. They may have found the cabin, or maybe they didn’t. At some point, either Harper shot himself by accident, or Simpson shot him, or maybe he fell and hit his head. Who really knew what happened? The only witness was a gibbering madman found frolicking mindlessly around the stagecoach road the following week.

In fact, it’s even possible that Harper didn’t die at all – that he double-crossed Simpson, grabbed all the gold for himself, and disappeared. Maybe what Simpson remembered as a gunshot was the sound of Harper’s

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rifle butt crashing into the base of his skull. Maybe Harper took advantage of Simpson's preoccupation with probing the cabin floor to clobber him – not quite succeeding in killing him, but badly rattling his marbles – and then dug up the gold himself and used Simpson's horse to pack out the gold.

So once again, in answer to the question of whether this lost treasure trove is still out there, or if it ever even existed in the first place, we have the usual answer:

Almost certainly not.

But if your back-woods travels ever bring you to a pretty little secret valley in the Siskiyou, with grassy fields and forest and a little laughing brook running through it, hemmed in all around by forbidding mountain cliffs ... you might consider spending a few days poking around in the bottomlands, just in case.

(Sources: Treasure Hunting Northwest, a book by Ruby El Hult published in 1971 by Binford & Mort; "The Lost Cabin," an article by Sam L. Simpson published in the September 1900 issue of The Native Son; "Samuel L. Simpson (1845-1899)," an article by Ulrich H. Hardt published Nov. 7, 2019, on The Oregon Encyclopedia, oregonencyclopedia.org)

From Jim Erwin

A few years ago, I was involved in the Fly Fishing industry where I helped a friend who was a factory representative for several fly fishing related companies.

I have accumulated tons of fly tying items, and quite a few rods and reels. I am trying to get rid of those items and will have a booth at the Fly Tying Expo, in Albany March 10 and 11, with set up March 9.

If anyone is interested in helping with this, I will pay lodging and meals for helping in the booth.

Please let me know by calling 503-519-6200 or emailing me at jimerwin223@gmail.com.

Also, please consider helping with Richard Ruth's barn sale at my house August 27 and 28th. We will have set up Monday August 22. We need help and would appreciate members helping on any of the three days. . You can notify me at the above, or call Mike at 503-413-9238 to volunteer.

A PICK, A SHOVEL AND PERSEVERANCE

Sam Garcia and his wife recently made a trip to Baker City (OR) for some family business. Since they were relatively close to the PGPI claim near Baker City, they decided to make a trip over to the claim to check it out. Sam took a pick and shovel and some gold pans. He needed the pick and shovel to get material from the pile of paydirt left from this year's outing in June. He found a way to work with the material (which included clay...) so he could pan



it out. He definitely found some color, including a gold nugget weighing 18.8 grams! Sam will be at our next chapter meeting – and will be talking about this remarkable and exciting find. Yes, there is gold at the PGPI claim!!!



An Excerpt from Rocky Tester's Article in the last issue.

We decided to go deeper with my Roto-Hammer with chisel bit but still nothing. About that time Larry Chadwick and his wife showed up with a bag of reclamation seed for us to take back. They are members of PGPI who live in Baker City. He told us they spend a lot of time in the TYROY area on their four wheelers. Larry's sister owns a claim over the ridge from us on Elk creek. The next day they show up with big generator and Hilti chisel gun and proceeded to really bust up the rocks and gravels for us.

The new **Washington Gold and Fish** pamphlet is now available. You must have it with you whenever you prospect in the state of Washington.

Download a copy to print here: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/licenses/environmental/hpa/types/prospecting>



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