

The Road to North Empire and Beyond

The road to North Empire is called North Main Street and is just across the street from Jenny's Restaurant. Some of the oldest homes in Empire are found along this road. North Empire or what is sometimes called Upper Empire was also one of the richest gold mining districts in Clear Creek County. It was on this road that the first Town Hall was located. The Town of Empire with U. S. Forest Service's approval now welcomes 4x4's up into the North Empire and Bill Moore Lake area.



This cottage was built by Dr. D. W. King of Empire, Colorado in the spring of 1861. My daughter Nellie Augusta was born here Feb'y. 10th 1862. My son George H. King was born here Nov. 26th 1863. Noted men who were guests: Hon. Bayard Taylor, Secretary of State, - Hon. J. B. Chaffee, - Capt. C. M. Tyler, - M. K. Smith, - Col. Levenworth, - Sam Tappan, - Rocky Mountain Reno, - Governor Evans, - Jim Bridger, old Rocky Mountain Scout, my father's friend in 1834, - Dr. Cook of Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.

Wm. S. King

The King House is on the east or right side of North Main Street as you head up the hill. The house was built in 1861 by Dr. D. W. King. According to Harrison¹, this was the first 2-story house in Empire. Dean W. King and his partner George Packard were the builders and owners of the Union Ditch which was built north of Empire. The ditch took water from Mill Creek and through a ditch about four and half miles long, emptied it into Lion Creek. Harrison writes that there were several problems with the ditch and feuds between the ditch owners and the miners went on for years. The remains of the ditch can still be seen in North Empire.



¹ Harrison, Louise C. Empire and the Berthoud Pass published by Big Mountain Press, Denver 1964
Page 40

The Shepherd House which is on the west or left side of North Main Street is just above the King House. It was built by Levi H. Shepard in 1864. Mr. Shepard was “James Peck’s right hand man”.

¹¹He was also the father of Emma Shepard Hill, the author of *A Dangerous Crossing*², whose letters to girlfriends back East described the trip west in a cover wagon and many of her adventures while living in Empire. Emma was 13 in 1864 when she began the trip west with her family. In her book she describes the house:

“Our house is built of logs and has four rooms – two below and two sleeping rooms above. Our living-room is large and has two windows. The ceiling is made of unhewn logs, with the boards of the floor above showing between, all clean with whitewash; and the sides of the room are just cotton cloth tacked to the rough logs and papered over with cheap paper (all the kind you buy here). The room is very attractive; for you know my father brought good furniture with him. We have upholstered chairs, a large easy-chair, a couch, and a bookcase full of books, besides our square piano...”



¹ Harrison Page 140

² Hill, Emma Shepard *Dangerous Crossing and What Happened on the Other Side* 1914

This is a wonderful book that has now been republished by Kessinger Publishing Legacy Reprints.

Further up North Main Street, the Union Mining District, which was created in 1860, built a sturdy log cabin on a clearing between Empire and North Empire. It contained two rooms and “it served as the town hall, the courthouse, sheriff’s office, and the recorder’s office. It also managed to provide living quarters for the newly elected recorder, young David J. Ball, recently of Ohio and not yet twenty-one years old ...”¹ In the photo below, David Ball is the short man with the bowler hat. For additional information about David Ball, refer to the Section MP 254 - 255 Ball and Lincoln Mountains.



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“The old log courthouse, the early home of little Dave Ball and later of Uncle Tommy Hodgkinson, that stood midway between Empire and North Empire was photographed for posterity on September 1, 1901, then torn down to make room for a new dwelling that attracted as much, if not more, local attention than the town hall. Brigadier-General Herman Sturm built a house, ‘Bachelor’s Roost’ as it came to be known, for his grandson, Herman Sturm and the two Bowman boys, George and Ed, who had been commissioned to superintend the driving of the Sturm tunnel to reach the Sturm mining claims...” The sign over the door read “Welcome to Bachelor’s Roost”².



¹ Harrison Pages 35-36

² Page 361

The author, who lived in Empire many years ago, was told by an old timer that the Empire Dump was listed, he thought, in the Reader's Digest as the Dump with the most beautiful view. Who could argue with that? The author has not been able to find any supporting documentation, but the view is really breath-taking.



The photo, taken by the author on July 12, 2011, is from where the old Empire Dump was located. It is now reclaimed, reseeded and fenced. The photo is looking south past Empire as a storm approached Union Pass. The road in the photo is the Bard Creek Road which runs south out Empire up to Union Pass and beyond.

The section of road past the old dump is now called “backcountry motorized” by the US Forest Service. It is a designated 4x4 road; meaning only high clearance vehicles that are true 4X4's should try the road beyond this point. Once past the dump, it climbs a steep dirt road which leads up to the North Empire mining area and the Bill Moore Lake area.

Mike Holmes of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provided the following answer when asked “What makes the rocks in the North Empire creeks orange?”

“Sulfide minerals are often found in mine waste rock and tailings, and when it mixes with air and water a weak acid is created that dissolves the other minerals associated with the mining wastes. This mobilizes the metals that can cause impacts to the surface and ground water, and aquatic life. As the pH raises or acidity is decreased, many of the dissolved metals precipitate out and can cause the staining on the rocks, including the orange iron staining.”



Photos by author - 2011

Warning: A mining area can have open shafts, both deep (as in down), as well as into the mountain. Mine tunnels can give off poisonous gases that can be deadly. Many years ago, the author stood on top of an open mine shaft and dropped a rock, and it never hit. Several were tried, and none were heard to land, therefore the shaft must have been a hundred feet deep or deeper. The shaft was only about 4 feet square, open and unmarked or fenced and it would have been easy for any one to have stepped into it and/or fallen in. Old mine shafts and tunnels can be very dangerous places. *Please be aware.*

North Empire or Upper Empire

Photo provided by and used with permission from the Denver Public Library. The photo was taken by George W. Wakely in 1864.



MINES OF NORTH EMPIRE.

Today from the center of the Town of Empire, a scar can be seen on the mountain above Empire. This is the location of the Minnesota Mine and Mill which was built on the west slope of Silver Mountain about 1935. “The mine had a 100-ton cyanide plant which separated the gold from the ore. The mine employed 120 people with sixty to seventy men working underground, with the rest employed in the mill, shops and office.¹”

In an “Action Memorandum” with the heading of the Environmental Agency Region VIII, Denver, Colorado and the USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region, Lakewood, Colorado dated October 6, 1995, the following information is found on the second page:

“The area has been extensively mined in the past. The Minnesota mine and mill site was operated by various parties from 1934 to 1948. By 1938, a 300-ton-per-day mill equipped with a ball mill, concentrating tables, and a cyanide system was in operation. In 1942, Minnesota Mines, Inc. was the largest producer of gold in Clear Creek County, milling over 10,000 tons of ore per year. Significant mining and milling ceased around 1943.²”

¹ Page 446

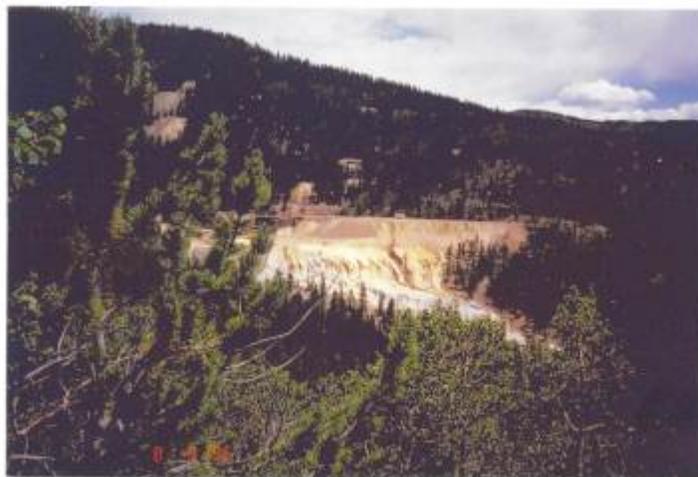
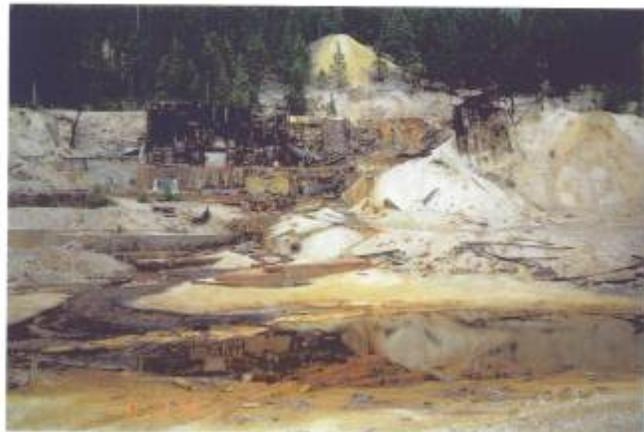
The Town of Empire began to look for ways to clean up the Minnesota Mine and Mill in 1995 and to protect the water that flowed into Clear Creek. The mine and mill site sat on the boundary of private land and federal land which is and was managed by the US Forest Service.

Jim Lewis, Superfund Project Manager, for the Colorado Department of Health has provided the following information and photos about the clean-up of the site:

The Minnesota Mine is a part of the Central City/Clear Creek Superfund Site. The mine, located north of the town of Empire, was identified as source of sediment loading to Lion and subsequently North Empire Creek during storm events. North Empire Creek is tributary to the West Fork of Clear, which in turn is the receiving stream for metals and sediment loading from the Minnesota Mine. During storm events the tailings were eroded and transported via Lion and North Empire Creeks into the town of Empire where they were re-deposited within the town.

In addition to the sediment loading, the adit (horizontal tunnel) located on the exiting ground level drains low-pH metals contaminated water across the site to Lion Creek. The mine before remediation is presented in the second attachment labeled “before remediation”.

The first set of photos show the massive volume of waste rock (uneconomic sulfide bearing rock), the old mill foundation and the mine discharge flowing through the debris. The bottom photo is a view of the eroded tailings impoundment with the mill foundation in the background.

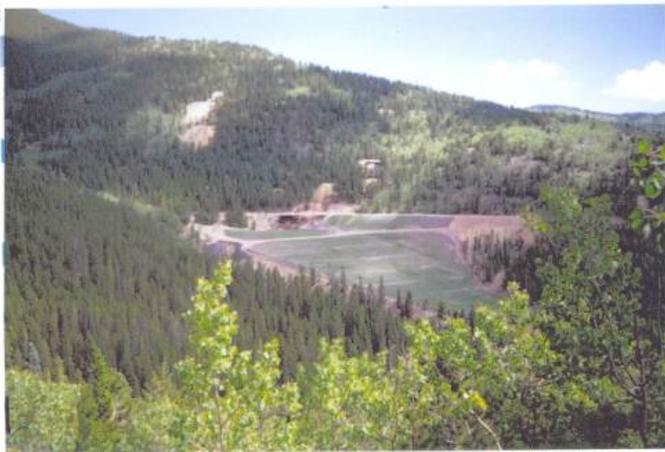


The second set of photos show the mine after remediation. Remediation consisted of the consolidation of the waste rock with the mill tailings and application of an engineered cover over the consolidated material. The top photograph is the mill foundation with the vegetated cover in the foreground. The bottom photograph is the covered consolidation pile with the vegetated cover. This photograph was taken from the same vantage point as the bottom photograph of the tailings impoundment before remediation.



The implementation of the remedy took place in 1996. The cost of the remedy was \$516,000.

We appreciate the help of both of these men and their agencies in helping us answer our questions about North Empire and specifically the Minnesota Mine and Mill.





The Conqueror's Boardinghouse

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An important mine up at North Empire was the Conqueror Mine. Harrison writes that Charles Heckman built the impressive miners' boardinghouse.¹ Heckman was also the one responsible for the Heckman dam found between mileage posts 252 and 253. While living in Empire, a favorite long-time resident told me about the Halloween parties held by locals at the Boardinghouse many years ago. They involved elaborate costumes and a fine dinner. As she told the story, the party was in full swing, when a lost hunter showed up at the boardinghouse door to ask for directions. When her husband and another local answered the door in their Halloween finery, the hunter, speechless, left very hastily and has never been seen again in Empire or the surroundings. I have no idea if the story is true or not, but considering the source, I suspect it is. We had a great laugh then, and as I write it now, I can't help but remember how much she enjoyed sharing a part of Empire's history.

The area above the Conqueror's Boardinghouse and North Empire is now designed "backcountry motorized" by the US Forest Service. There are several 4x4 web sites about North Empire and the Bill Moore Lake Area. The author has been told by Dan Lovota, District Ranger of the Clear Creek Ranger District that the cabin at Bill Moore Lake in the author's photo to the right is no longer there.



¹ Page 366