

# Now and Then

## THE MOUNT BAKER GOLD RUSH WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON

by Lane Griffin  
Reno, Nevada

---

In the summer of 1897 a rich vein of gold-bearing quartz was discovered high in the mountains of northwestern Washington state; thus began a frenzied gold rush that saw thousands of prospectors invade the high country of the north Cascades. Although somewhat overshadowed by the rush to the Klondike occurring at the same time, these gold-seekers uncovered several rich deposits that produced considerable ore at the turn of the century and continue to be mined today.

Gold had been found in tantalizing amounts along gravel beds of many of the rivers flowing out the mountains in this area since the 1850's. Finding the source of the gold in a mineralized outcrop was a formidable task, and it was almost 50 years before the ledge of gold was discovered. For those who have not ventured into the western slope of the Cascades, it can best be described as a temperate jungle, choked with vegetation so thick it is not at all suited to transportation nor exploration. Dense stands of fir, cedar, and hemlock populate the lower elevations with impenetrable underbrush of vine maple, devil's club and huckleberry.

Glacier fed rivers run full and ice cold with their courses constantly changing. Persistent rainfall, thick snowfall, and mountain fog make comfort and navigation almost impossible; and a work season of 3-4 months is strictly enforced by the raging avalanches of winter.

### Prospectors

Three prospectors who braved these hazards and hardships were ultimately successful in finding the ledge of gold in the summer of 1897 and setting off the Mount Baker gold rush that quickly followed. John Post, better known as Jack, was a veteran of the gold rush to the Fraser River in British Columbia in the 1860's. He had explored promising leads all along the Nooksak River and its tributaries in Whatcom County and he was generally acknowledged as one of the most experienced and informed of the explorers who settled in this northwestern portion of the state. He was always tramping the woods, streams and mountains except when forced by lack of money or bad weather





*Rebuilding the Stampmill near the mouth of the mine tunnel after the fire.*

*Photo, L. K. Pattison*

to seek employment and shelter in the coastal lowlands. Exploration in this terrain required teamwork though, so Jack enlisted the aid of two other local men whose experience at prospecting was limited, but their enthusiasm was high. Russ Lambert was a local attorney who, instead of mining the pocketbooks of clients, turned to the more honored pastime of



*Present view of the site above. 1996*



prospecting. The other partner of this gold-seeking triumvirate was Lyman Van Valkenburg, another Sumas resident who was a prominent citizen of the town.

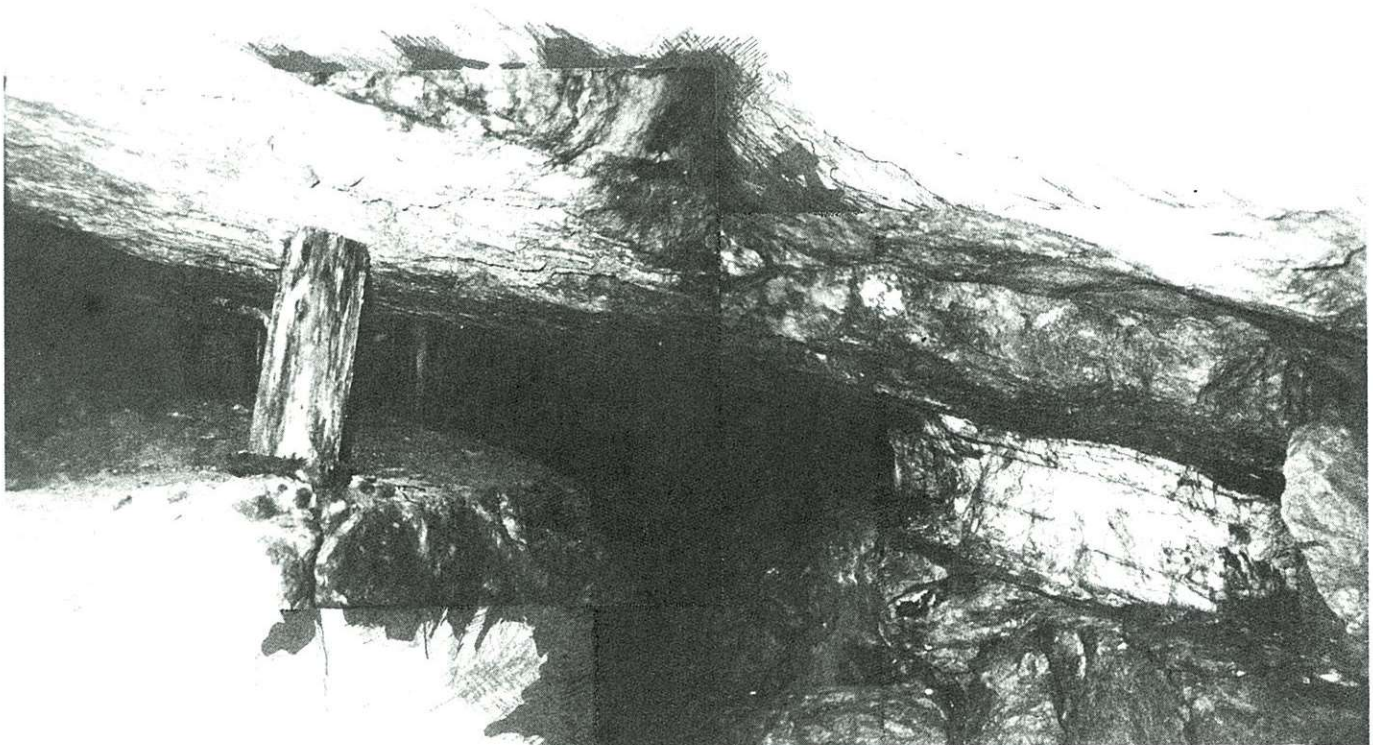
### The Discovery

On the 27th of August, after spending most of the summer in pursuit of outcropping exposures above treeline, the trio had narrowed their search to an area within sight of the majestic glacier-clad Mount Baker near the north fork of the Nooksak River. Specifically, the slopes of Bear Mountain and Twin Lakes contained rich quartz float that indicated the source was nearby. It was on this morning they decided to split up for the day - each man going where he might best

examine the rocky outcrops for gold-bearing ledges of quartz. Both Lambert and Van Valkenburg returned after a disappointing day to put on a pot of beans at the Twin Lakes Campsite. It was then that they heard their partner, Jack, as he approached exclaiming that he had found it! He had discovered the rich quartz vein with visible gold scattered throughout. For Jack Post this was the culmination of his life's work. It was he who had prospected all his days without success until now. The other two partners had their careers and certainly the discovery was a great event, but not as significant as for the penultimate prospector, Jack.

Their persistence and hard work paid off with a fabulous discovery, but as is often the case with such events, now the real work

*Old workings of gently dipping Lone Jack vein. Log support is 2 feet high.*

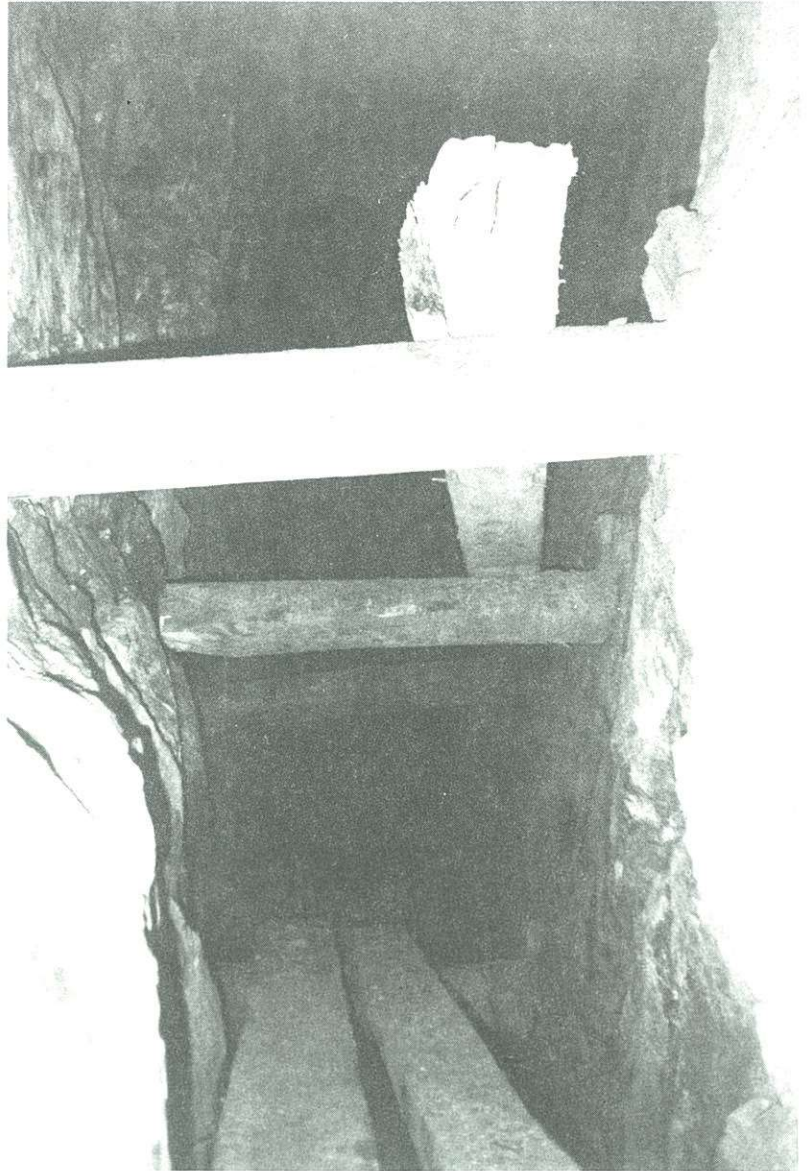




began: identifying all the mineralized outcrops and laying out the courses of the claims insuring their rights amid the confusion of the inevitable rush to come.

### The Rush

Van Valkenburg was selected to return to the county seat, Whatcom City, to record the claims, get supplies, and assay the samples taken. The paperwork was a wise investment because when the first assays of over \$10,000 per ton became public, the ensuing rush immediately brought eager claim stakers from all over the Pacific coast. The alpine meadows surrounding the twin lakes became the busy camp of the newly formed Mount Baker Mining District. The immediate prospecting efforts were short-lived however, due to the early snows of fall, but the rush began with renewed vigor as the spring thaw of the following year allowed access to the higher elevations. Pack trains following crude trails were used to get up to the treeline and from there the prospecting was done on foot. Acting as part mountaineer and part mountaingoat, the anxious explorer would comb the rain slickened lofty ramparts. The developing rush created several new towns along the route to



*New workings of vertically dipping Whist Vein. Log supports are 4 feet wide.*

the mines which supplied the exploration efforts and fueled the expanding wave of optimism.

### Development

While the new gold seekers were evaluating the surrounding terrain, news



came from the Whatcom County Reveille that the Lone Jack property had been sold to a Mr. Staneslawski representing a Portland syndicate. Within another year the property had been sold again to English and Son of Sumpter, Oregon for a reported sum of \$150,000. Thus organized, in 1900, by means of a steam donkey and horses, a 10 stamp mill was hauled over a trail from Glacier and erected near Silesia Creek, 4,000 feet from the mine. In 1901 a 50 ton aerial tram was installed between the mine and the mill. Because of the rugged terrain, complexity of construction, and harsh climate, it wasn't until 1902 before any gold was actually produced in any quantity. From the beginning of mining operations though, the Lone Jack vein contained sufficient free-milling gold to mine profitably by single jacking with hand steel. When operating, the mine was very successful, but fire destroyed the first mill in 1907. It was quickly rebuilt and operated continuously for the next 14 years. In 1920 a snow slide destroyed the second mill but another was built to replace it, however, it never operated for any length of time, and it also was destroyed by a snow slide during the winter of 1923-24. A 75 tpd amalgamation mill was built in 1924 but operated only a short time before it was crushed by the weight of snow during the following winter. The dwindling reserves and continued destruction of any man-made structures during the winter caused the mine

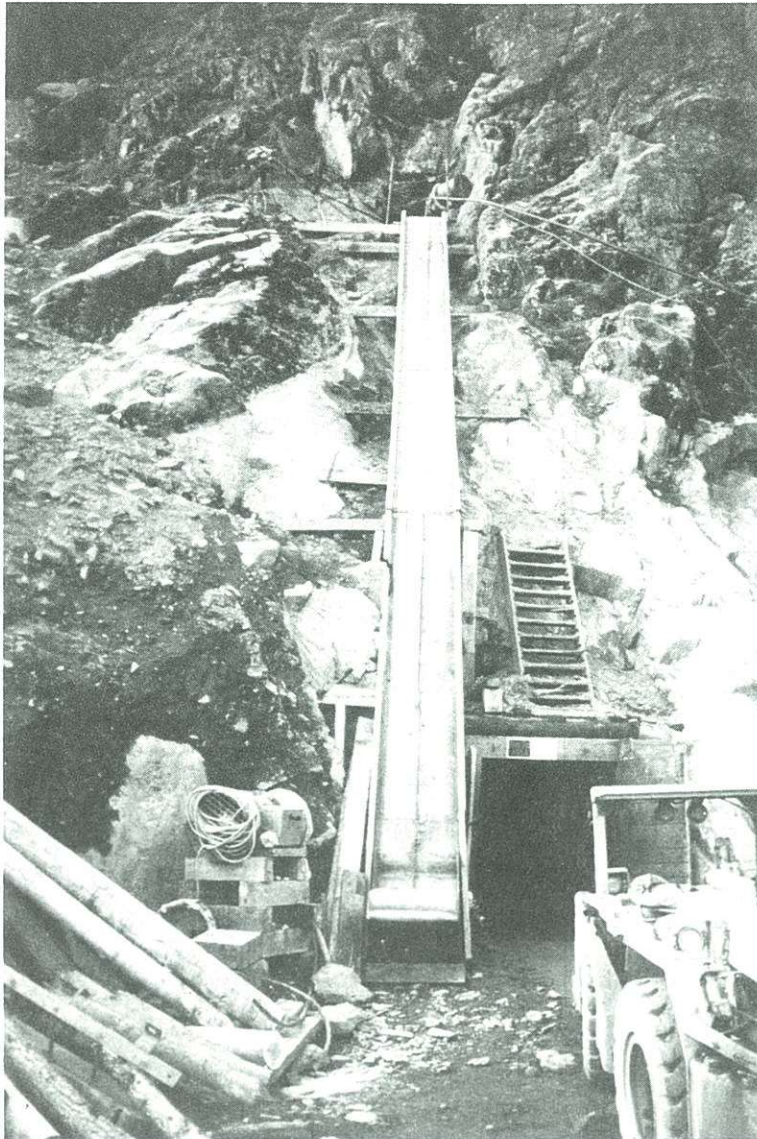
to become idle until 1990. There was a small bit of excitement in the interim when the Forest Service discovered over 500 cases of dynamite left over from the 1920's in one of the crosscuts of the mine in 1964. The explosives were detonated in place, but except for destroying the track and airlines, amazingly, no other damage was done.

### Murder at the Lone Jack

During the active period of mining the owners usually closed the operations and went on standby during the winter months because of the extreme weather and snowpack. In the year 1916, the operations were completely shutdown with the beginning of winter. To insure no one would enter the mine and high grade the gold ore, two men were hired to caretake and guard the property. A big Swede, Martin Orner, living in Glacier was recruited for the job and to make the undertaking less lonely, another man, Tony Lopan, was enlisted to also spend the winter. Their only pay would be whatever gold they could recover as they waited for Spring's arrival.

This appeared to be a good solution for maintaining security at the mine until one day toward the close of winter a weak traveler was found tramping into Glacier - it was Tony Lopan and he carried a large heavy sack. His stay was brief and he insisted that his partner had gone out hunting one day and never

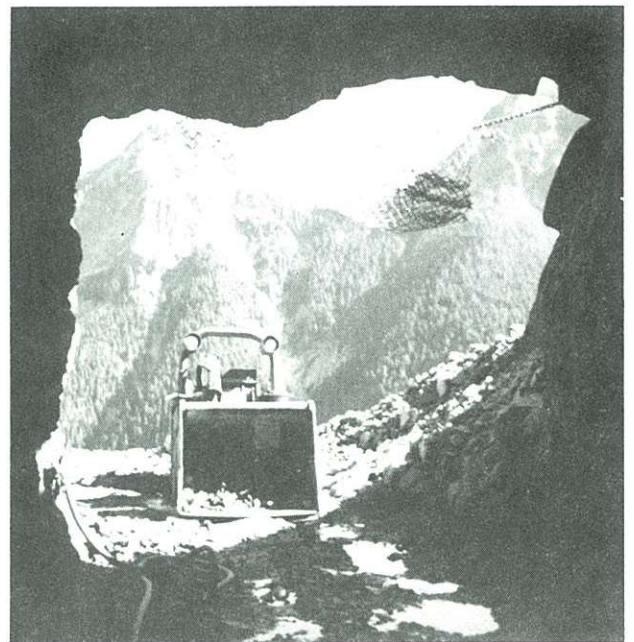




*Recent work on upper level of Whist Vein, haulage level and transport chute to upper level.*

came back. Attempts were made by townfolk to find the missing Swede, but he could not be located. Despite the suspicious nature of his partner's disappearance and his treasure filled sack, there wasn't enough evidence to hold him in custody. He departed hastily and was last heard of selling the gold to a

government purchasing agent in Seattle for over \$1500. It wasn't until several years passed that a local trapper who was in the vicinity casually entered one of the tunnels and passed by a water filled winze. Upon closer inspection he identified a man who had been bound with wire and sunk to the bottom of the winze by means of a rope and heavy rock. A group of people from Glacier made the trek up to the mine and identified the body as Orners', but by now, Copan had vanished and surely left the state. Unfortunately, here was another example of man's greed and the tragedy caused by his attempts to acquire gold at any cost.

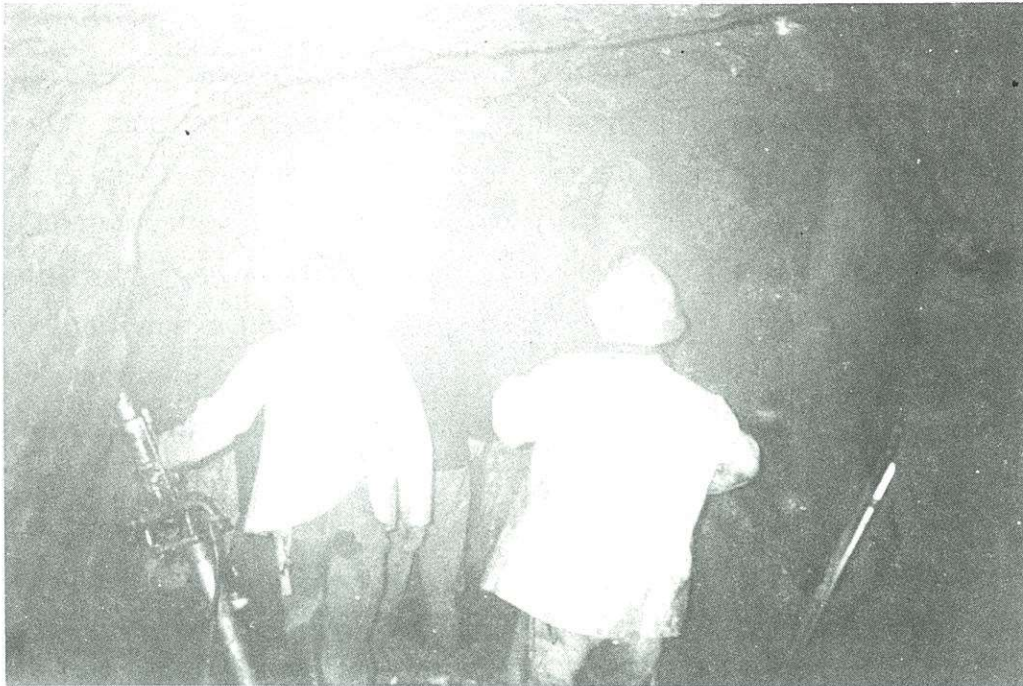


*New lower haulage level.*

### Recent Work

It wasn't until 1990 that a concerted effort was made to bring the Lone Jack





*Underground examination  
of Whist Vein.*

property back into production. At this time the lessee of the property contacted the author for a geological evaluation and proposed plan of operations. The property looked like a viable mining venture but it wasn't until a third member was enlisted that

a practical plan could be put into action. The last partner was a local timber contractor and ex-geologist who knew how to work in the difficult meteorological and political climate of the western slope.

The old workings

*Loading holes with  
gelatin dynamite.*



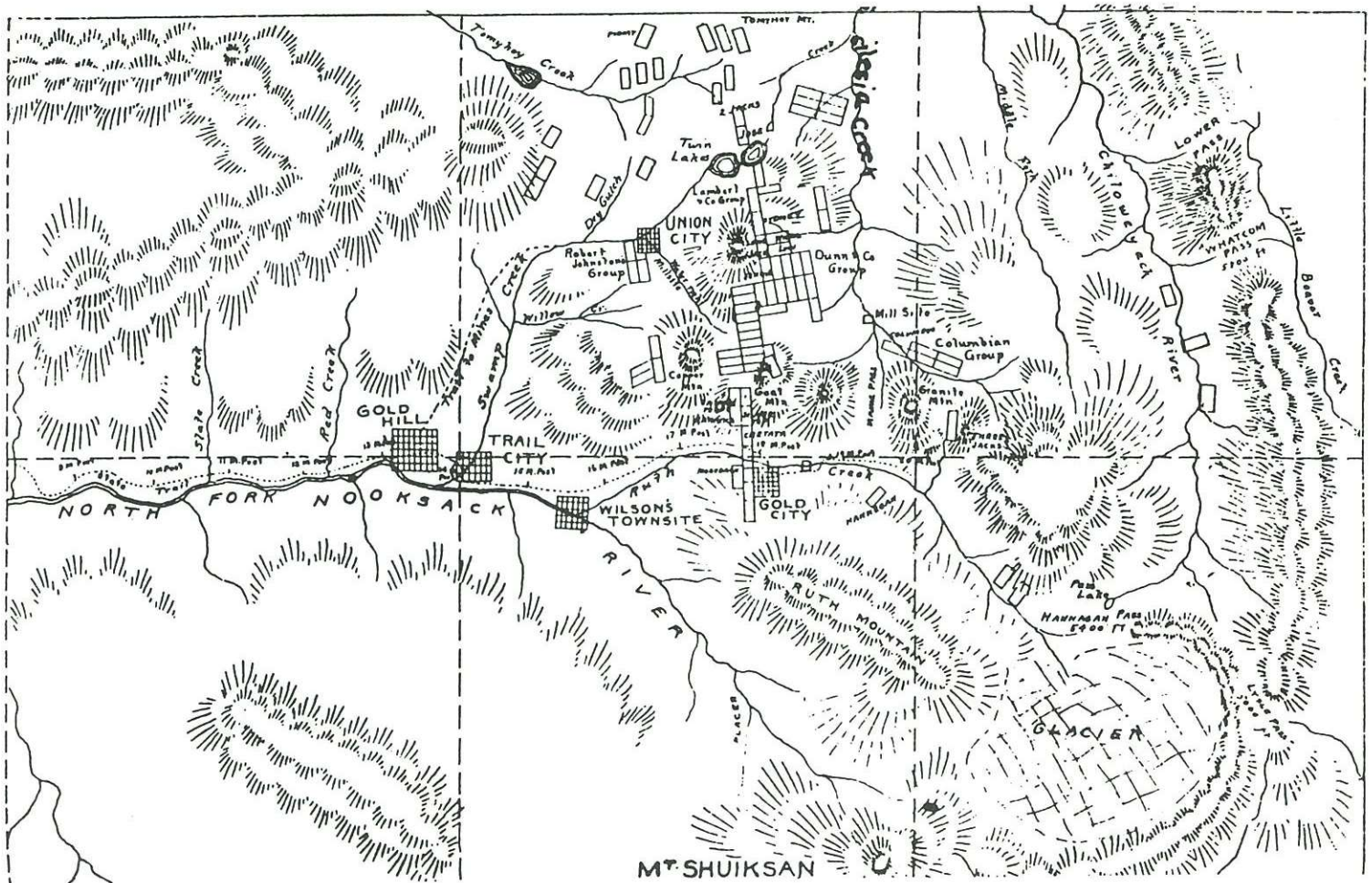


had been practically exhausted on the two major veins but a third vein lay exposed for over 100 feet, with visible gold, and was virtually untouched. A decision was made to develop this relatively thin untested quartz ledge. A haulage way was made at the lowest accessible point and stoping began upward on the vertically dipping vein using shrink stope technique with leg and stull supports. Jack leg drills were used, and gelatin dynamite employed to blast the rock; the only change in mining methods from the last period of mining in the 1920's was the

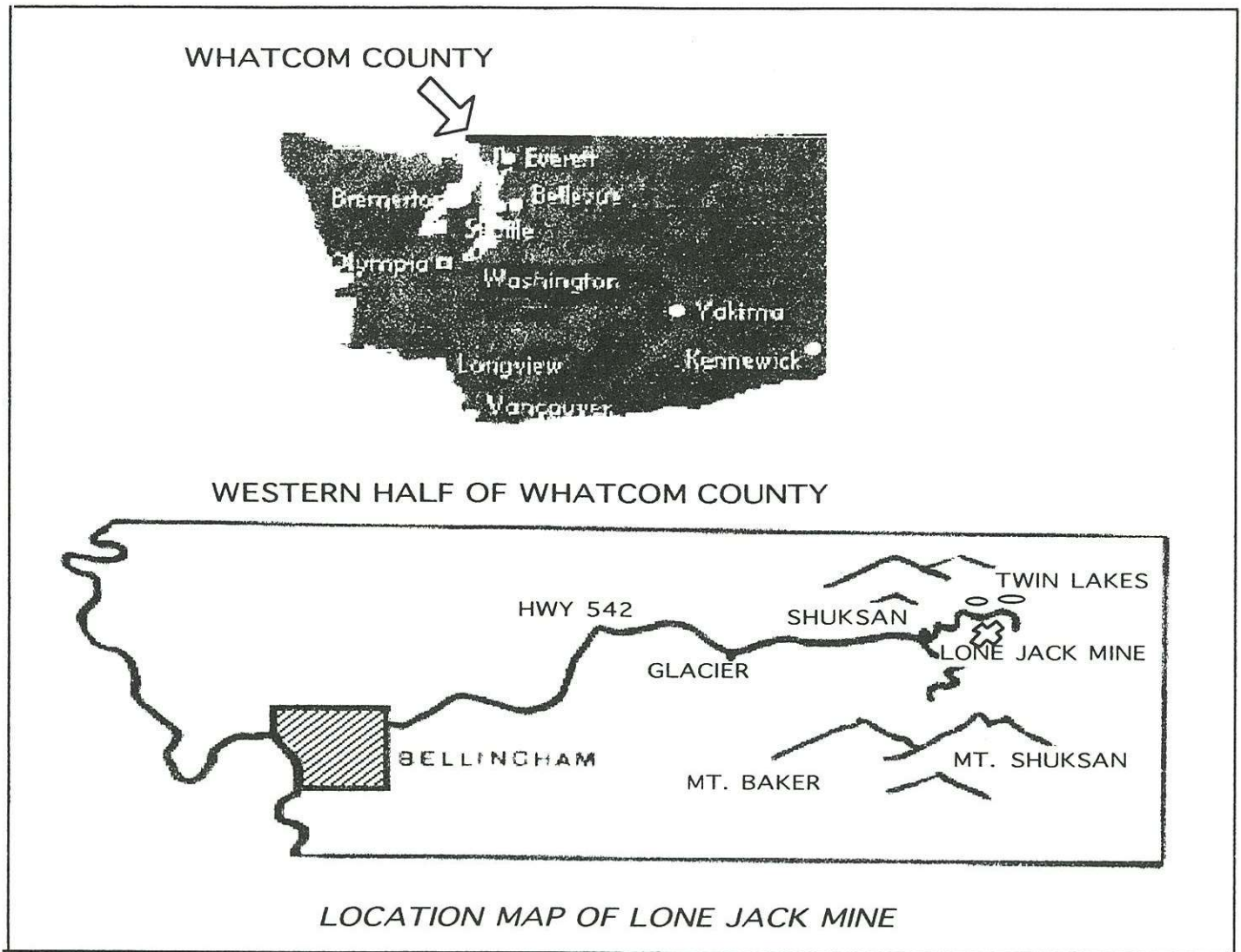
use of an LHD (load, haul, dump bucket loader) for mucking purposes. The vein proved to be a good producer of gold. Over the next three field seasons (August to October) the ledge was almost completely mined out above the haulage way. Last year, work consisted of relocating a new haulage way at a lower elevation to intercept the vertically dipping vein then stope upward again.

The ore is trucked to Bellingham and then shipped via rail to the Asarco mill at East Helena, Montana. The production is limited

Detail Map of the Mt. Baker District - 1897







but we have achieved the status of being the second largest gold producer in the state of Washington, all within the confines of a wilderness area.

The operations are available for observation during the field season of August through October, and a weekend trip would be highlighted by equally interesting attractions nearby such as Mt. Baker and the surrounding glaciated peaks of the North Cascades. Leaving Bellingham and traveling eastward you could trace the route of the first

prospectors and take in the breathtaking scenery along the Nooksack River. At the maintenance facility at Shuksan a dirt road is taken approximately 8 miles to the Twin Lakes campground (high clearance vehicles recommended). A short 2 mile hike will take you over Bear Mountain to the property where you can view an operating mine and inspect the old workings to gain a historical perspective on perhaps the most famous gold mine in northern Washington State.



## Artifacts

Few artifacts have been preserved in the Mt. Baker district due to heavy rain, snow, and subsequent erosion and avalanches. The workings are wet but accessible, however their inspection is not recommended. Old mill site and building foundations can be located after examination of the terrain. You can trace the debris of old mining and milling equipment as gravity has taken them on their slow downhill journey.

Next year will be the centennial anniversary of the discovery of the Lone Jack Vein. We may have the opportunity then to create some modern collectibles in memory of that event.

I was able to salvage an old sample bag used to keep select ore samples from the Lone Jack Mine. It is from Laucks Laboratorys, an assaying lab in Seattle. The vintage is probably 1930 - 1950. 