

Mountain Echoes an Epilogue

Mining ruins tell us a lot about Alaska's early pioneers

Frank Baker

Rust. Oxidation. Nature's way of breaking down man-made materials into their most basic elements. If you've hiked in our state's backcountry for any length of time, you've probably found the ruins; decaying remnants from the past century, artifacts from what was once Alaska's golden age of independent mining.

It was a time when thousands of stolid souls, fiercely driven by a fever of optimism, put everything on the line for a chance at their own "El Dorado," their strike, their dream of riches.

Whether in the gold-rich tributaries of the Klondike, the beaches of Nome, high in the quartz-veined ridges of Hatcher Pass, or in the mountains of the Kenai Peninsula and Southeast Alaska, these impetuous fortune seekers came from many locations and stations in life. But they had one thing in common.

They were tough.

And as written in past weeks, my father, Kenneth D. Baker, was one of them. He wasn't the most successful as Robert

And they were pros, Hatcher and Tom.

With many years on the road.

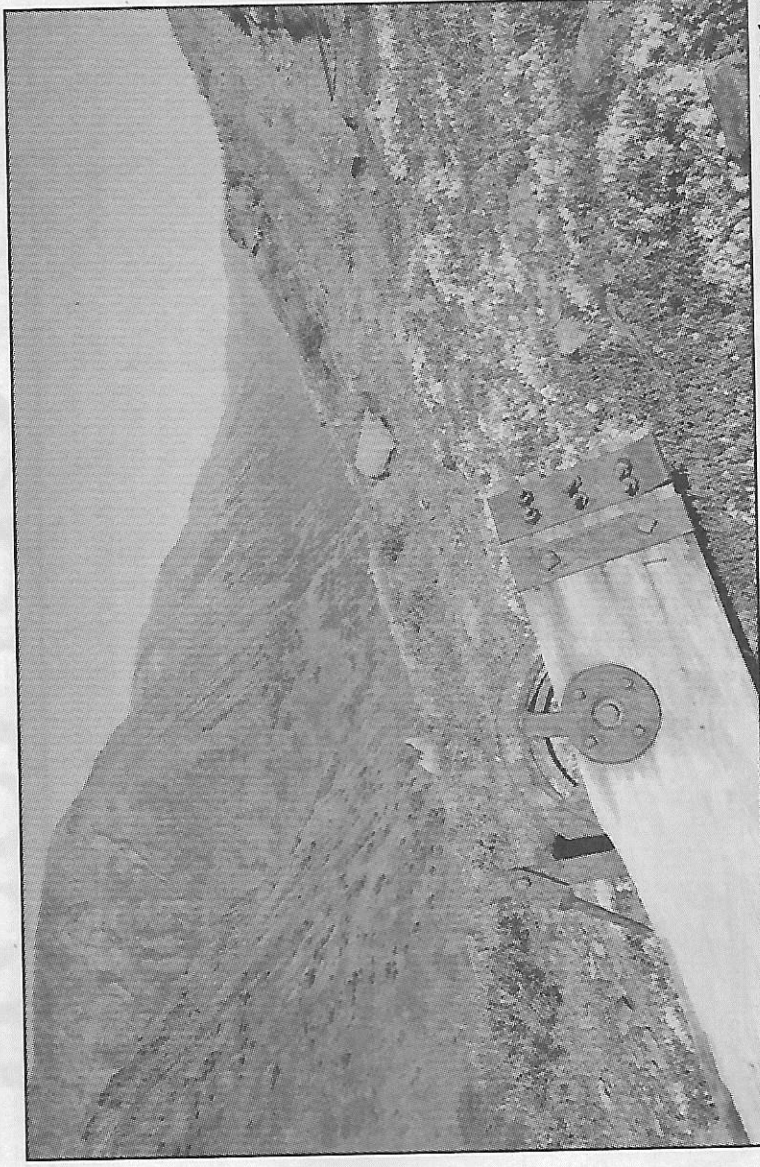
My own discovery

As reported in the third part of my series, it was a deeply moving moment on the afternoon of Sept. 4, 1998, when I finally found my father's mine site from back in the late 1940s. But after a lifetime of tromping around in Alaska's mountains and valleys, I've made what I believe to be an even more important discovery: it has to do with understanding the spirit and grit of those fortune seekers from a century ago. They were more than tough.

One can peruse books and archives about the hardships early miners faced, how their struggles often didn't "pan out," as the expression goes. But when you walk in their footsteps amidst the rubble of their work, either high on a mountainside or deep in a remote valley, you begin to feel it—the lengths they had gone to, how they were hanging out there on the edge.

Another passage from my father's poem "The Conifered Heights:"

"Way out there in the nowhere, You sweated and played at chance."



Photos by Frank E. Baker

Swetmann Mine relics from a century ago.

father and one of the Kenai's most prolific miners. After successes at Kennecott in the early 1900s, Hubbard was said to have rubbed elbows with Wyatt Earp in Nome during its gold rush. The ruins of one of Hubbard's old mining cabins on the Kenai Peninsula can still be seen along the Lost Lake Trail from Primrose.

Difficult logistics

In the early 1900s, getting heavy mining equipment to

Resurrection Valley) came from the newly established communities of Sunrise, more than 20 miles away, and later, Hope, roughly 13 miles away.

In contrast to the lower 48 states, where archaeologists have found evidence that the first humans into remote regions were Indians, miners were often the first to blaze trails deep in the backcountry of southcentral Alaska.

Today, old mining roads

part of the state, there are still active mines in Crow Pass, Hatcher Pass and on the Kenai Peninsula. But the heyday of the independent prospector has long since passed. Today, we have only a few rusting relics to remind us of those heady days a century ago, when the dreams of fortune seekers reached beyond the distant horizons.

(Editorial Note: For a comprehensive history of