



Michener and Mining: "There's [not so much] Gold In Them Thar Hills."

By Anne Marie Mistretta

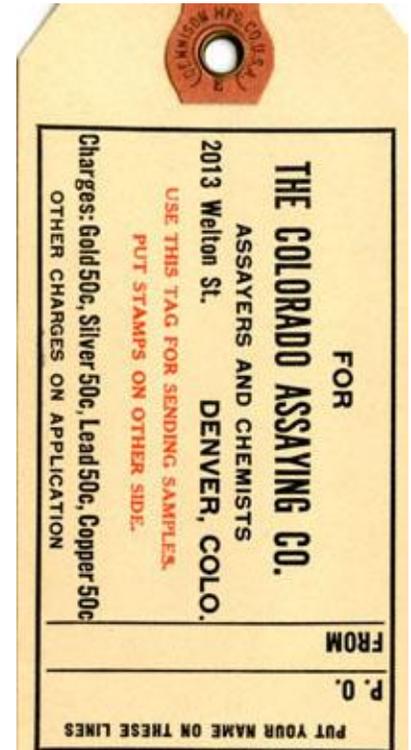
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Tom Michener, an early resident in Gallatin Basin, predicted this area's economic value more than 100 years ago. "The Gallatin Basin . . . is destined someday to become one of the main wealth producing parts of the county," Michener wrote in a Seattle-based magazine. Advertising the canyon's prospecting potential, he touted further, "the most important part ... is its undeveloped mineral resources."¹

Michener was part visionary, part booster, part speculator. A cattle rancher and a prospector, Michener was one of the first dude ranch operators, capitalizing on tourist traffic to Yellowstone National Park. An early developer, he supported a railroad through the Gallatin Canyon and a road from Black Butte to Gardiner.

Valuing education, he recruited his cousin, Kate Cope, in 1908 to teach school in his sister-in-law's cabin, before a school district was formed. Once the Ophir School District was recognized by the state in 1912, Michener served on the school board that rehired Cope in 1914.

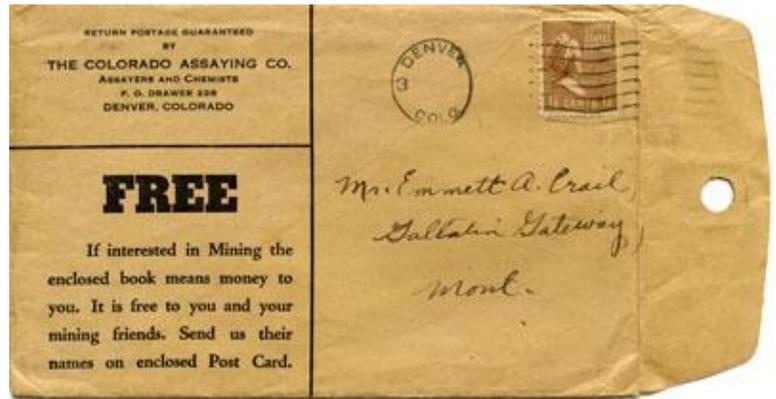
Like most Basin residents, Michener worked many jobs to eke a living out of the wilderness. Often the residents collaborated for success. Michener, Pete Karst, and Sam Wilson (first owner of the Buffalo Horn Ranch – now the 320) formed a consortium to establish client rates, charging weekly fees of \$12 for accommodations and \$6 a saddle horse. In *The Coast*, Michener touted a mining collaboration: "A. F. Crail. . .has with others located what they believe to be a rich deposit of tungsten ore on Deer Creek."



Early U.S. Census data show that few reported mining as their occupations, yet nearly everyone was involved in prospecting. Andrew Levinski filed the first Basin claim in 1886; while Michener recorded his first in 1892. Claims north of the West Fork were worked by Emmett Crail, Cliff Umdahl (Crail boarder and ranch hand), Hugh Beatty, Pete Karst, Pat Shean, and others. Lew Bart started the Apex Mining Company. Karst discovered asbestos in 1908. Then in 1910, gold was found in the Gallatin. Vacant claims from the Park border to the West Fork were staked, the most promising claims near the West Fork.²

Although the Gallatin and its tributaries failed to offer up the motherlode, mining here is the stuff of "colorful" stories. Prospecting and personalities overtook production. That is when the "good spirit" and collaboration of the little Basin community disintegrated. Dr. Caroline McGill, 320 owner, captured many of these stories when she gathered locals' memoirs for a book about the Canyon. Lester Piersdorff, in his letter to McGill, said "Mining has been carried on since 1893. Some of it honest, but most of it wildcat."³

Michener established the West Fork Mining Company, owned by Hercules Dredging Company and Eureka Improvement Company of Spokane and Seattle. Stocks were sold. But then a 1916 report from the Spokane company's survey contained one sentence that "might have saved the canyon from becoming a wasteland of gravel banks – 'the gold is so finely divided that some of it floats through the riffles of the sluices'."⁴ The placer mines and stocks yielded little. "The mining wars"⁵ began.



According to Piersdorff, when the river failed to produce, investors felt duped. Some threatened charges of fraud and maneuvered to reclaim investments. Piersdorff believed that Michener's intent involved land speculation to force the railroad to purchase the property for tracks through the Canyon to the Park. Piersdorff's allegations might be corroborated by Michener's daughter, who wrote to Dr. Caroline McGill about her father in May 1940, "he always planned for a railroad . . . and when the Milwaukee came to Salesville, he was so sure that in a few years it would . . . come up the Canyon."

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The speculative bubble burst, though, after claim jumping resulted in two murders. Levinski owned claims up the Middle Fork onto Lone Mountain. In January 1917, Gladstone Stevens and George Miller, who worked with Tom Michener, re-posted Levinski's unworked claims and mines with lapsed registrations, and, as permitted then by law, they returned 30 days later to assume "their" claims. After an intense gunfight at Levinski's mountain copper claim, Levinski traveled to Karsts to call his lawyer but left the bodies where they fell. Levinski was acquitted based on the extensive bullet damage to his cabin showing the "good deal of ammunition in their efforts to 'get' him."⁶ Levinski disappeared sometime after the acquittal.

In this small community, folks took sides. Some connected Michener with Levinski's disappearance. But Rhesis Fransham, the first Gallatin Forest Ranger, maintained that he saw Levinski board a train out of town. This bloodshed fascinated people for decades, spawning research and interviews well into the 1970s.⁷

Michener didn't live to see his visionary predictions become reality. He left the area shortly after Levinski disappeared, further fueling speculation about Levinski's departure. Michener headed to New Mexico for oil exploration, only to die a year later.

Ironically, it was another Michener who profited from the mines. Dorothy Michener Vick and her husband Joe returned in the 1930s to reclaim the homestead and Michener businesses. The mining didn't produce much; rather the profits resulted from

tourists who panned for gold.

Margaret Michener Kelly analyzed in her May 1940 letter to Dr. McGill, "My father was always misjudged in the canyon. He had big visions of opening the canyon to bigger things. He was a dominant character and very determined and

consequently made enemies easily. He always had ideas . . . that would help everyone, but he tried to do too many things and on too large a scale. As I see it, he should have stuck to the dude business. . .“

As Michener predicted, the area has become an economic engine - but not only for the Gallatin County -- also for the entire state. Michener had foreseen the value of tourism, but he never envisioned that real estate and ski areas would dominate the economic landscape.

¹ Michener, Thomas. (June 1908). South end of Gallatin County. *The Coast*, Vol. 15 No. 6, 431-433.

² *Mining Science*. (June 1911). Vol. LXIII, 604.

³ Letter written by Lester Pierstorff to Dr. C. McGill, August 1939.

⁴ Roemhild, George, (September 13, 1970). Mystery surrounds some gold mining work in Gallatin Canyon. *Bozeman Chronicle*, p. 19

⁵ Letter written by Margaret Michener Kelly to Dr. C. McGill, May 6, 1940.

⁶ Old man who killed two claim jumpers in gun fight is missing; where is he?" (February 12, 1920). *Three Forks News*.

⁷ Burlingame, Merrill. (July 1, 1971). A note on the Levenski [sic] case.

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