

Historical reflections: Photos from Montana's past

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Three Thousand Acres of Land Near Helena Studded with Jewels." Thus screamed one deck of a multi-deck headline in the Helena Independent in February 1891. The truth of the headline, much like the number of quality sapphires actually contained in what would prove to be producing ore, came in a ratio of a few carats to the ton.

The discovery referred to what placer miners were finding on Missouri River bars northeast of Helena. An English firm would move in on the promise, hype it until the stock inflated, then move out, leaving a typically western boom-to-bust episode in its wake. But the real lode, indeed, the only one like it in the world, lay north, near the Judith Basin community of Utica, the small town immortalized by cowboy artist Charlie Russell in his painting, *A Quiet Day in Utica* (1907).

The lode itself was located in the foothills of the Little Belt Mountains twelve miles southwest of Utica at a place called Yogo. The site of a brief gold rush in 1879-1880, Yogo was a near ghost town by 1886. Eight years later, however, Jake Hoover, the old hunterprospector who in the 1880s had taken in "Kid Russell," thought he had found gold in paying quantities. Instead, what Hoover and friend Louis Pepin led others to find was the largest, most remarkable cache of sapphires in the world.

Yogo sapphires come from a thirty-million-year-old dike of solidified magma. The dike averages eight feet in width but narrows in places to only a few inches. It runs roughly east-west for almost five miles in a line straight enough to be perceived easily from the air. Its depth is unknown. Diggings have descended several hundred feet, but the dike probably goes to 7,000 feet deeper than the Grand Canyon- and may go all the way to the earth's mantle. If studded with sapphires throughout, and if miners could get at them, the lode's dollar value could be in the billions.

Such prospects are tantalizing because Yogo sapphires are unsurpassed in their consistent blue cornflower or royal blue color and for their brilliance, even in artificial light. Sapphires from elsewhere in the world- Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Australia, Burma, Kashmir- have either been difficult to obtain in quantity or are of such irregular quality that many of them must be heated to extreme temperatures or "cooked" to make their color uniform or change it altogether. By contrast, Yogo sapphires need no such treatment, only cutting and polishing, if they can be found in sufficient size and thickness. But the trick has not been in certifying the sapphires' quality so much as in mining and marketing them profitably. Their story, recounted many times in newspapers, magazines, trade journals, and government reports over the years- and most fully in Stephen M. Voynick's book, *Yogo: The Great American Sapphire* (1985)- is marked far more by failure than success.

Following Hoover's find, a number of American attempts were made to mine the dike, but as Voynick notes, their efforts- and those of later entrepreneurs- were hampered by not understanding all the variants of a complex business. Unlike gold, which can be sold, indeed, can become currency itself once extracted from ore, sapphires must be cut and marketed. The New Mine Sapphire Syndicate, an English company, enjoyed the greatest success at Yogo from 1899 to 1927, thanks in part to the marketing ability of its partner, Johnson, Walker, and Tolhurst, Ltd., of London, which had credible access to the world gem market. Called the English Mine, the Montana property was managed for years by Charles Gadsden, now commemorated in local lore.

Like the English syndicate, American firms also entered the Yogo sapphire picture around the turn of the century, locating themselves elsewhere on the dike at what came to be known as the American Mine. But they met with repeated frustration for reasons ranging from undercapitalization to a lack of marketing savvy to simple bad luck. The English bought out the American Mine interests in 1914, but eventually ran into problems themselves. The mines were closed during World War I and were dogged after the war by poor markets and double taxation by the United States and Britain. A major flood through the property in 1923 destroyed much of the mining infrastructure, and by 1927 the British syndicate shut down operations altogether.

American interest rekindled in the late 1940s, and by the late 1950s, the New Mine Sapphire Syndicate (not to be confused with the name of the earlier British company) had consolidated enough of the scattered interests to resume mining. When Helen Bourret of the Great Falls Tribune reported on the resurgence of interest in Yogo in 1957, the Tribune used a number of John O. Hurlbut photographs of the site, including one of the views here. In the foreground are the remains of a sluice box, with the mine's hoist building, track trestle, and tailings in the background. The ore itself had to be weathered before sluicing in a process similar to gold placering, in which dirt was washed through sluice boxes so that heavier elements-like gold and sapphires-dropped to the bottom and became lodged in riffles. From there, they were scooped out by hand. Crushers had been tried at various times but had to be abandoned because they destroyed too many sapphires.

Despite the New Mine Sapphire Syndicate's hopes, it failed to realize success and the property has passed through a succession of owners since. One owner, Chikara Kunisaki, a California produce wholesaler, was a partner in Sapphire Village, an ambitious scheme in the 1960s to sell subdivided lots to rockhounds, the proceeds of which would help pay for more serious mining efforts. When investors failed to materialize in sufficient numbers, Kunisaki, to protect his sizable investment, bought out his partners and, under the name of the Sapphire International Corporation, dug a 6,000-foot tunnel into the dike. Then Kunisaki ran out of money, and the property passed to yet another firm in 1976. And so it has gone for the past twentyfive years. Now, a group of local investors under the name of Vortex is attempting to mine Yogo sapphires and market them both as loose gems and in finished jewelry. "We're after the diamond market," Lanny Perry told Great Falls Tribune reporter Karen Ivanova recently. Perry, a partner in the Vortex Mine, added: "We're trying to go in and say we've got a better, rarer stone."

And so they have. But Montana's cache of fabulous blue sapphires has yielded itself with surprising unwillingness. The only source like it in the world, it has brought more grief than fortune to its developers.

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