

## THAR'S GOLD IN THEM THAR CLAY COUNTY HILLS

By

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Man's quest for gold has probably had as much influence on world history as any other single factor. There is something about the allure of gold that causes people to do things that rational beings might not otherwise do. Yes, the discovery of gold has brought wealth to many, but it has also caused the death, dislocation and destruction of even larger numbers. Although it is not widely known, events in our own Clay County area were strongly influenced by man's quest for the yellow metal. Our Alabama gold belt is in a triangular shaped section here in the east central part of the state, in the Piedmont Uplands, with Lake Wedowee at its center. In this short article, I will try to provide you a sketch of the history of gold mining in Alabama, and its influence in our immediate area. In the future, while you are out looking for artifacts, you might just look for something yellow and shining!!

The first known impact on this area caused by gold was in 1540, when the Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto ravaged the region in search of the golden treasures of "El Dorado." Not only did he kill and capture many of the local Indians just to the north and west of us in his greedy quest, but his expedition also left the white man's diseases that would reduce the native population to a small fraction of its original numbers within a few years. Finding only a few gold artifacts made by the Indians, DeSoto continued his expedition to the west where he met his fate in 1541 in what is now Mississippi.

Gold was first discovered by the white man in the American Southeast in the Carolinas in 1799. Shortly afterwards, prospectors made a major strike in Georgia in 1829 and shortly afterward the town of Dahlonega (The word for gold in Cherokee Indian) . By following the crystalline rock laden mountain chain southward, prospectors soon discovered the yellow metal in what is now Villa Rica, Georgia and shortly thereafter Alabama in 1830. The Alabama gold discovery was in an area that includes the nine present counties of Randolph, Cleburne, Talladega, Tallapoosa, Chambers, Clay, Coosa, Elmore and Chilton. Ironically, this was the same portion of east Alabama that the Creek Indians were allocated and forced into following their defeat at Horseshoe Bend in the Creek War of 1813-14. After the 1830 strike, white prospectors began to illegally pour into the Indian lands in search of gold. By 1832, the intruding settlers, primarily from Georgia, were streaming into east Alabama in such numbers that inevitable conflict with the Indians occurred, leading to the Second Creek Indian War. Unable to stem the flood of illegal settlers into east Alabama, President Andrew Jackson invoked the provisions of the Indian Removal Act and the Treaty of Cussetta earlier than planned, and forced the Creeks and other Indians to lands west of the Mississippi River. So, once again, the yellow metal had caused wealth for some and a great loss for others!

The height of the gold excitement in east Alabama came in the mid 1840's, as more and more prospectors moved in. These prospectors were followed shortly by other settlers who would farm and free range their cattle. In 1842, a German immigrant was digging a wine cellar near Hillabee Creek, north of what is now Alexander City, when he discovered a vein of gold ore. This discovery became known as the "Dutch Bend Mine." Other nearby discoveries were in the Goldville and Hog Mountain areas. By 1843,

Goldville had a population of 3,500 people. The Alabama gold mining went on at a steady pace until 1849, when word of the famous California gold rush came. Most of the Alabama miners were influenced by the exaggerated tales of the California strike and took Horace Greely's advice to "head west young man!" Many of the booming gold mining towns such as Goldville became ghost towns overnight. Gold mining nevertheless continued at a smaller scale in our area, and by 1855, Arabacoochee became the largest town in Alabama, with over 4,000 people working the gold mines. Arabacoochee is now a ghost town just south of Heflin. The low level of mining continued until 1874. In that year, Copper was discovered just north of the Randolph/Cleburne County line, and the Wood's Copper Mine began operation. A spin off of the copper mining caused a revival of gold fever in the area by 1880. By the early 1900s, mercury and cyanide became available to amalgamate the ever smaller gold particles from the residue. Gold production then showed a dramatic increase for a few years before it began another decline. America's entry into World War I caused a total suspension of gold mining in Alabama by cutting off the supplies of mercury and cyanide, as well as increasing the jobs and wages in other sectors of the economy. Interest in Alabama gold was briefly revived during the Great Depression by many of the unemployed locals who had no other means of income. It is said that many of them earned \$2 a day by panning gold - not bad during the depression! Afterward, gold seemed to be a totally forgotten subject in east Alabama until "recreational" or "hobby" prospecting became popular in recent years. And then, just last year, It was reported that commercial gold mining has been reactivated at a site in Cherokee County, Just north of the Cleburne County line. Will this be the start of a second Alabama gold strike?!

From its discovery in 1830 until present time, a total of 49,383 Troy ounces of gold has been reported as mined in east Alabama. Probably an equal amount, or even more, was mined and not reported. Legend has it that the land that formed the great nine-county King Cattle Ranch in south Texas was mostly bought with gold from the King Mine north of here at Arabacoochee. Very little signs of the gold mining industry remains in our area today, other than some of the abandoned shafts that were not dynamited closed. One example is the Goldberg Mine on Wesobulga Creek, just upstream with its confluence with Crooked Creek near Cragford. In addition to gold, our east Alabama area is blessed with over sixty other minerals, such as arsenic, copper, graphite, mica, and pyrite. Many of these minerals were mined commercially at various times in our history, thereby contributing to the economy of the area. For example, near the turn of the century, there were over sixty graphite mines in the area, most of which were in nearby Clay County.

The gold bearing territory in our area was divided into two major categories for purposes of classification and administration. First there were the "formations." Formations were areas where geological inspections and surveys had located an abundance of crystalline materials that contained gold. The major formations in our area were the Ashland, Talladega, Wedowee, Pinckneyville, Talladega and Hillabee. The Wedowee formation was the largest and probably the richest of the formations. The Wedowee formation began in west Georgia and thence ran in a southwesterly direction through SE Cleburne County, diagonally NE to SW through the center of Randolph County, thence through SE Clay County, then through NW Chambers County, NW Tallapoosa County and finally into Northern Elmore County. The entire basin of Lake

Wedowee lies over the Wedowee formation. No wonder our bass like gold colored spinners! The second category used in describing the gold territory was "districts." The east Alabama gold mining area was divided into twelve districts for administrative purposes. These districts were named Arabacoochee (12), Pinetucky (9), Chulafinnee (5), Riddle's Mill (3), Idaho (11), Cragford (9), The Devil's Backbone (16), Eagle Creek (5), Goldville (14), Hog Mountain (1), Chilton County (5) and Coosa County (8). Shown in parenthesis are the number of larger mining operations in each district. However, counting the smaller mining operations, there were probably around three hundred operations in the twelve districts at the height of the period. It is significant to note that nine of the twelve gold mining districts were on the Wedowee formation.

There are specific terminology and processes that apply to gold mining. Some of this information is provided here for your convenience. Gold is found in lode, vein and placer deposits. Veins deposits are streaks of gold disseminated through a host rock such as granite. Lode deposits are two or more veins coming together in a host rock. Veins and lodes can be surface or shaft mined. Shafts can be vertical, horizontal or inclined. Placer deposits are formed by the weathering and disintegration of veins and/or lodes, followed by erosion and concentration of the gold through the action of flowing water or wind. Placer gold can be found in the form of nuggets, flakes or dust (sometimes called flour). Placer deposits were usually mined by surface pits or extracted directly from streams. Most of the placer mines in our area were found along the creeks and smaller streams. Typical occurrences of gold in this area are within quartz veins in schist, quartz veins in granite, or quartz veins in slate.

The discovery of gold in east Alabama produced a major impact. However, it can be easily argued that the impact was more on the overall historical progress and demographics of Alabama than it was on its economics. Some of the major issues or events that were at least partially caused by the discovery and subsequent mining of gold in east Alabama were: the removal of the Creeks and other Native Americans to the west in the early 1830's and 40's; the catalyst for the founding of many local towns such as Wedowee, Lineville, Cragford, and Arabacooche; the migration of large numbers of early settlers into the region; the bringing of the railroad into the area; place names left in the area such as Goldville, Gold Mine Creek, and Gold Ridge; sparked a major timber industry in the area to produce lumber for the mines and the following railroads; and resulted in many local land parcels having their mineral rights separated. For example, I am told that of the nearby vast Talladega National Forest, only around two hundred acres has its mineral rights intact.

Recreational or hobby gold prospecting is growing dramatically in America today. Membership in organizations such as the Gold Prospectors of America (GPA) has many thousand members, and a Television channel is on the airwaves today that is dedicated to recreational gold prospecting. At the state level, there is "The Gold Prospectors Society of Alabama" based in Birmingham. There are at least three local area recreational gold prospecting businesses. One is Leon and Connie Jones' "Golden Adventures" located just east of Heflin, Alabama, a second one is Tom West's "Grubsteak" in Tallapoosa, Georgia, and the third is The Gold Camp one mile south of Cragford on the Malone Road. These three businesses, as well as others in the area, either own or lease several of the old gold prospects and take customers there on recreational "digs." These businesses also sell the necessary hardware such as pans, snuffer bottles, sluices, dredges, metal detectors, etc. It

is important to note that the old abandoned gold prospects in our area today are for the most part on private property. If you want to do some recreational prospecting on your own, be sure to first obtain the landowner's permission, otherwise you can be charged with trespassing.

Yes, you too can experience the electric, age-old thrill of seeing yellow glittering in the bottom of your gold pan! Just remember, "all that glitters is not gold!" There is also fool's gold such as mica, pyrite, pyrrhotite, and chalcopyrite that can elevate your heartbeat temporarily.