

Ghost Towns and Gold Camps



FREIGHT TEAMS at the 14-level Camp Bird mill, circa 1908, loaded with Pb-Cu-Ag-Au concentrates that will be shipped to a smelter. This 60-stamp mill was the second built at the site. The first was completely destroyed by an avalanche and fire in March 1906. (Photo courtesy Ouray County Historical Society)

Jeeping Through Time on Imogene Pass

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

From the vantage of Look-Out Rock, a thousand feet above Imogene Basin and the old No. 3 Level of the Camp Bird Mine, the whole world falls away. It is a wild place of snow-strewn spires, stunted trees and ragged weather.

It was here, one spring day, that Dave Leonardi was visited by an angel.

Leonardi, a heavy-equipment operator who works for the Ouray County Road and Bridge Department, had been toiling in his bulldozer to clear a path through heavy, deep snow to open up Imogene Pass for the summer season.

He had a bad feeling about the job that day. He was headed into a tricky spot on a steep embankment that had once almost claimed his life, when the snow slumped out from under him and his 'dozer plummeted straight down.

Brooding over all of this while finishing his lunch, Leonardi looked up to see an old man wearing miner's boots, hanging around on the overlook. How the man had arrived there, so quietly and suddenly, mystified him.

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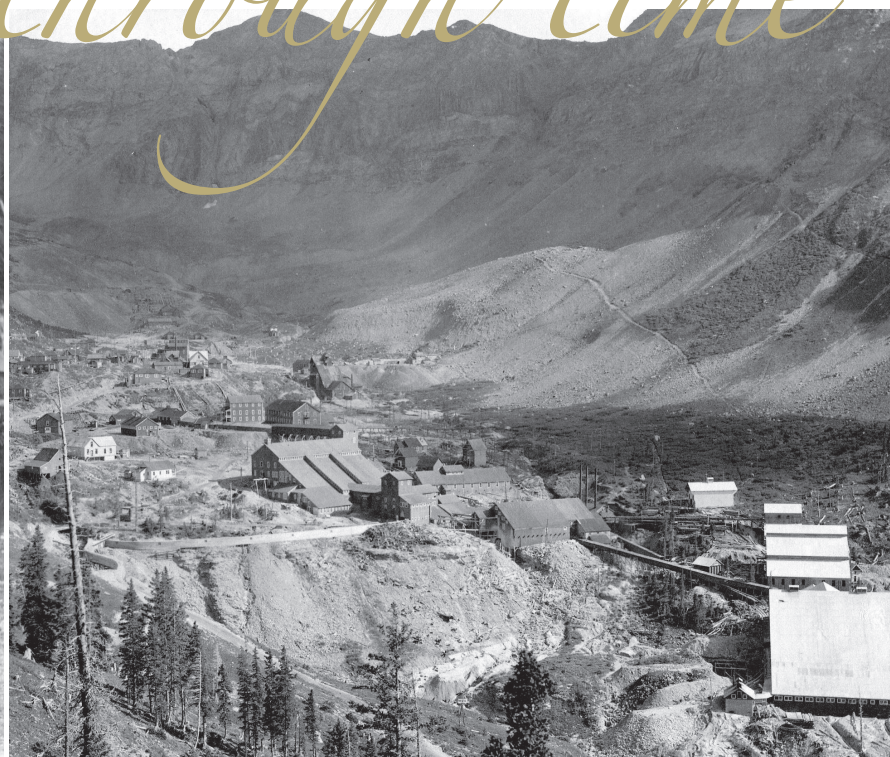
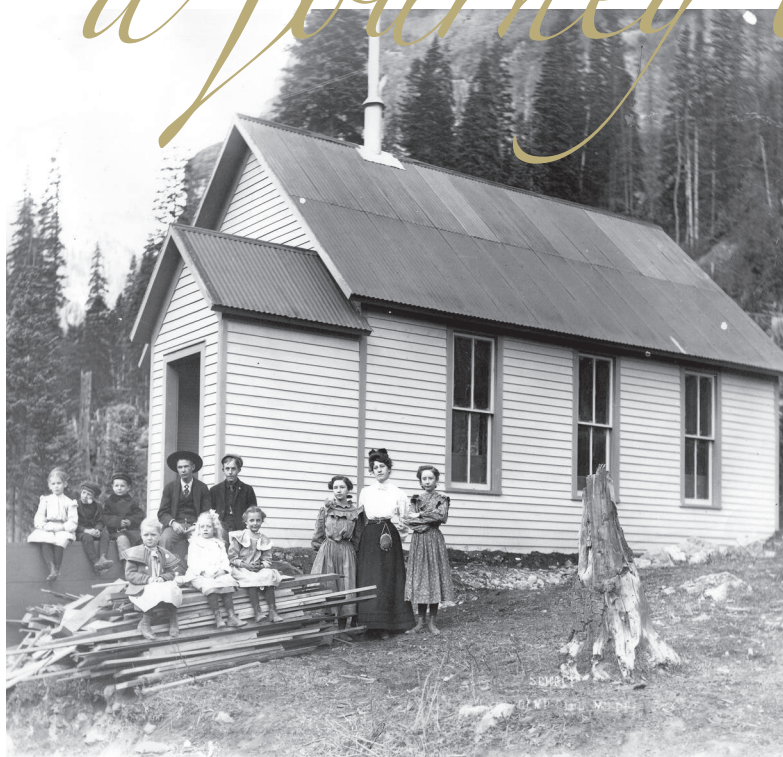
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a journey through time



A TEACHER AND HER FLOCK of students (circa 1915) pose for a photographer at the old Camp Bird School House which was located along a creek at the base of an avalanche named the Schoolhouse Slide. The area is now completely buried in tailings. Children of mining families attended school at Camp Bird through the 1930s. (Right) The Tomboy Mine and townsite, circa 1910. The Tomboy and Camp Bird Mines ran simultaneously on either side of Imogene Pass well into the 20th century. (Photos courtesy Ouray County Historical Society)

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"The old man said to me, 'If it doesn't feel good in your heart, go with your gut. Maybe you oughtta quit for today.'"

Leonardi took the advice, and came off the mountain early. He never saw the man again. But surely if ever an angel were to reveal himself on Imogene Pass, he would take the form of an old tramp miner.

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

"Once there was laughter, and once there was life, and once there was silver, and gold..."
— C.W. McCall, 'San Juan Odyssey'

Imogene Pass, at 13,114 feet, is the second highest mountain pass in Colorado that you can drive over, and certainly the prettiest. Long before the days of blacktop highways, this formidable route provided a passage through the San Juan mountains from Ouray to Telluride.

The terrain is so rough, the route's uppermost reaches were only a horse trail until 1965, when a local Jeep club arranged to have the route improved for 4WD vehicles.

Today, a trip over Imogene Pass is not only beautiful and thrilling; it is also a passage through time. Anchored by the ruins of the Camp Bird Mine on one side, and the Tomboy Mine on the other, the journey is steeped in ghosts of the past.

As you rumble past old mine dumps, tram towers and cabin foundations that are now sprouting nettles and wild raspberry bushes, you can almost feel the residue of history settling on your skin and in your lungs.

"Imogene is the epitome of the history of both Ouray and Telluride," said Brandy Ross, a Ouray-based 4WD tour company operator who has been exploring the high country of the San Juans ever

since she was a kid. "You had the Camp Bird, and the Tomboy, running simultaneously. And the Camp Bird was running smoothly and had great benefits for its miners. But the Tomboy was in this complete mess, this turmoil of violence and politics. Miners were walking off the job. Scabs were coming in and miners were shooting at them."

Little evidence remains of these storied days. The thrill today comes from the rough roads, thousand-foot drop-offs, the whine of your straining Jeep engine, and the spectacular, pristine mountain scenery.

To understand the way it used to be, it helps to pick up an old map that shows active mining claims in the area at the turn of the century (local bookstores sell them). Countless overlapping rectangles representing the claims that once chased ore-rich veins crisscross the map. There's barely a blank space anywhere.

A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

"There are miles of drift tunnels and many mine shafts hidden from your eyes: see them with your mind." — Tom Walsh, as recounted by his daughter Evalyn Walsh McLean

Imagine traveling from Ouray up to Imogene Basin at the turn of the 20th century, when the world-famous Camp Bird Mine was in full swing, producing millions of dollars' worth of gold-rich ore for its owner and founder, the dapper Irishman Thomas Walsh.

Pack trains and six-horse teams hauled supplies and ore shipments to and from the mine via a steep, narrow, crooked mountain road that led up and out of Ouray along Canyon Creek. It took 10 burros or seven mules to carry a ton of ore. A

wagon could haul two to four tons. Legend has it that a blind man could find his way along this road by following the stench of the decomposing bodies of the pack animals that were kicked over the edge of the road when they keeled over from sickness or exhaustion.

The Camp Bird, like most other mines in the district, was worked year-round. In the winter, avalanches buried the road with snow and debris up to 40 feet deep. A muleskinner or commuting miner caught in the wrong place at the wrong time could easily be swept to a White Death.

In the summer, you'd stop for a drink of cold, refreshing water at the Drinking Cup, where spring water spurts out of a cliff side covered in moss and clinging watercress, before negotiating the most notorious section of the Camp Bird Road, where the trail is chiseled out of a vertical cliff like a three-sided tunnel, and water drips out of the rocks that hang overhead.

Long before you could see the workings of the Camp Bird and the nearby Revenue, you'd hear the clatter of their stamp mills, and perhaps the dull thud of explosions. "It would have been loud. It would have moved you. It would have rocked you. Your horse would have been nervous," speculates Ross.

Now, you were overlooking the No. 14 Level of the Camp Bird Mine, where Thomas Walsh built his 20-stamp, 70-ton-per-day mill in 1897. A town of 500 or so people sprang up around it, with a post office, a school, a general store. But the mine's workings were in Imogene Basin, high above. A two-mile-long tramway with 46 towers connected the mine to the mill. Heavy buckets brought ore down the mountainside, and miners commuted to work in the empty bucket as it headed back up.



LOOKING DOWN on the No. 3 Level of the Camp Bird Mine from the upper reaches of the Imogene Pass road on a beautiful fall day. (Photo by T. Fitch)

THE FABULOUS CAMP BIRD MINE

"It is the consensus of opinion among the workmen that they could receive no better treatment in any other mine in the state."
— Ouray Plaindealer, Nov. 12, 1897.

In 1896, Tom Walsh was looking for flux for his smelter in Silverton. But he had a feeling he was onto something bigger than that, when he sampled a vein in an abandoned silver claim high up on the steep headwall of Imogene Basin. "It looked so barren that the average miner would have considered it no good," he later said of his discovery. "But as I examined it closely, I saw little specks and thread-like circles of glistening black mineral all through it, which experience told me was gold in tellurium form...."

His discovery turned out to be a gold vein the likes of which the district had never seen before. The samples ran as high as \$3,000 a ton, far more than the mere \$8 per ton from a showier lead-zinc streak nearby.

Using aliases so as not to arouse suspicion, Walsh quietly acquired dozens of claims throughout the basin, many for pennies on the dollar in the af-

termath of the Silver Crash of 1893. Soon he had assembled complete control of his asset and began mining in earnest.

The Camp Bird Mine became the largest gold mine in Colorado, and maybe the world, to be owned by a single individual. It made Walsh and his family stinking rich. (His daughter Evalyn bought the 45-carat Hope Diamond with part of her inheritance).

At the turn of the century, as labor unrest simmered just over the hill in Telluride's corporate-owned mines, Walsh kept his own miners well-paid, well-housed and well-fed. The men put in eight-hour shifts and then retired to a pair of plush boarding-houses at the No. 3 Level.

Here, at an elevation of 11,244 feet in Imogene Basin, miners enjoyed private rooms lit with electricity brought over the mountains via a 17-mile power line from Nikola Tesla's newly built alternating current generators at Ames, near Telluride. The men had real beds, marble-topped washbasins and porcelain tubs with hot and cold running water. In the dining room, they ate sumptuously from china dishes before whiling away their free time in the game room or the reading room.

"The Camp Bird Mine is just sexy," said Don

Fehd, a Jeep tour driver who often drives past the old mine workings when he gives tours up and over Imogene Pass. "People had been looking for silver in that area for years and years. To me, the most fascinating thing about the story was that there was a six-mile vein of gold running through what had always been a silver district, and nobody had ever looked for it before."

After already amassing a huge fortune, Walsh sold the Camp Bird Mine for over \$3 million plus royalties and stocks in 1902 to a British mining company. "He basically in six years became one of the richest men in America," Fehd said. "To me, it's not so much the classic rags to riches story. It's more an example of thinking out of the box."

The mine continued to produce well into the latter half of the 20th century, generating many more millions of dollars' worth of gold, silver and base metals. The mill, rebuilt in the 1960s, was sold for a song to a Canadian mining company in 1995 several years after the mine had shut down for good. Strange but true, the company disassembled the mill, trucked it piece by piece down the Camp Bird Road, and shipped it to the Zaamar Goldfield of Mongolia, where it served briefly at a small mine there.

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the view begins nowhere and



FT. PEABODY was built in 1904 to prevent striking miners from returning to Telluride over Imogene Pass during the labor wars at the turn of the century. (Photo courtesy Ouray County Historical Society); (Below) Views of Bridal Veil Falls and the infamous Black Bear Pass while descending from Imogene Pass down into Telluride. (Photos by Brandy Ross)



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FORT PEABODY

"At the top of Imogene Pass, between Telluride and Ouray, a machine gun emplacement and a small wooden fort survive as silent testimony to workers' struggles and as a legacy to labor."
— History professor Andrew Gulliford, Fort Lewis College

The road becomes increasingly rough and steep as it climbs up out of Imogene Basin, past what's left of the 3 Level of the Camp Bird Mine, past Look-Out Rock where Dave Leonardi saw his angel, to Imogene Pass. On top, it opens up like a big flat football field, and travelers are treated to an unparalleled view.

Off in one direction, you can see the La Sal Mountains, Telluride Airport and some ski runs. The Town of Telluride lies out of sight in the valley, six miles below.

Head to an overlook in the other direction for unforgettable views of the Red Mountains that are the namesake of Red Mountain Pass. From the very edge of this overlook, you can even see Highway 550 and the Idarado Mine.

Now, turn around and look back down the way you came. Realize *that* used to be the easiest way to get from Ouray to Telluride.

Responding to the bloody labor strike that convulsed the Telluride mining district at the turn of the century, Governor James Peabody stationed six soldiers, a Colt rapid-fire machine gun and a shelter at the top of Imogene Pass in 1904. The soldiers' orders: prevent deported striking miners from returning to Telluride; shoot anybody who didn't stop on command.

They called it Fort Peabody. Today, a tiny wood-

en shack and a flagpole, surrounded by a rock redoubt, remain.

"Labor history has been totally ignored in the United States, and it's a dramatic history in Colorado," writes MaryJoy Martin in her book chronicling Telluride's labor struggle, *The Corpse on Boomerang Road*. "People should know that a governor had the gall to permit a border patrol station to prevent workers from entering a Colorado county."

During recent restoration efforts, crew workers found ammunition shells, a silver hairpin, an old piece of newspaper, coal, leather pieces, glass fragments, and a fire poker.

TOMBOY MINE

"The view begins nowhere and ends nowhere. It is infinite, mountains beyond mountains."
— Harriet Fish Backus, *'Tomboy Bride'*

Downhill from the crest of Imogene Pass, the road descends steeply into a glacial cirque known as Savage Basin. There you'll find not much left of the mining camp surrounding the Tomboy Mine that Harriet Fish Backus described so lusciously in her book, *Tomboy Bride*.

The Tomboy Mine was established in 1880. The town built around it saw a peak population of 900 rugged and adventurous souls, and boasted a bowling alley, tennis courts, a school and the loftiest YMCA in the world. Winters were beautiful and cruel.

"Soft flakes showering down day and night raised the surface of the basin several feet," Backus writes of one winter storm. "Walking was extremely difficult, but after the snowfall ended there came one of those breathtaking beautiful days of brilliant sunshine after the storm. The cloudless sky was deep azure; the world below was blinding with sunbeams sparkling on the glistening white."

In 1897, a year after Tom Walsh made his discovery in Imogene Basin and started the Camp Bird Mine, the Tomboy sold to Shanghai and London investors for \$2 million.

The town of Tomboy was abandoned in 1925 when the mine shut down. Much of what time, weather and avalanches haven't ravaged since has been erased by aggressive reclamation projects in Savage Basin. But for those willing to expend a little time and imagination, there are treasures to be found.

"Tomboy is one of my favorite, favorite places to go up and walk around," said Brandy Ross. "It was such a lively, vibrant place. There are foundations everywhere. That town was bustling. Tomboy has more to imagine structurally than any other ghost town in the area."

Amidst the rubble, there's colored glass and shards of china. "Once, I found a really ornate silver



ends nowhere



CAMP BIRD MEN'S CLUB ROOM at the No. 3 Level boarding house, circa 1900. Living conditions here were quite sumptuous compared to other mines in the area. (Photo courtesy Ouray County Historical Society)

sugar spoon," Ross said. "It makes you wonder, what's the story behind this? There was a lady who was sitting up there with her tea, a hundred years ago. Was it during a snowstorm? Who was she entertaining? Were they warm? To me, even though there are not a lot of intact structures, there are foundations, and the debris. In that debris is a story."

The Tomboy Mine was company-owned, and no alcohol or prostitutes were allowed on the premises. Miners headed down to Telluride to carouse on their days off. But if they didn't have enough time to make it to town, there was always Social Tunnel on the Tomboy's property line a mile down the road near the Smuggler-Union Mine, where one could partake of particular goods brought up from Telluride. A red-light district called "The Jungle" eventually sprang up near the tunnel, beckoning to miners with its siren song of whorehouses, gambling dens and saloons.

Today, Social Tunnel remains a tangible passage through time. As you travel through the short tunnel blasted through a rock prominence and take the zigzagging journey down into Telluride, you leave behind the high lone-some voices of the past. 📍

Books that will see you over Imogene Pass:

Tomboy Bride, by Harriet Fish Backus (Pruett Publishing Company, 1969)

The Corpse on Boomerang Road: Telluride's War on Labor, 1899-1908, by MaryJoy Martin (Western Reflections Publishing Company, 2004)

Thomas F. Walsh, Progressive Businessman and Colorado Mining Tycoon, by John Stewart (University Press of Colorado, 2007)

Father Struck it Rich, by Evalyn Walsh McLean (Bear Creek Publishing, 1936)

Exploring the Historic San Juan Triangle, by P. David Smith (Wayfinder Press, 2004)

IF YOU GO

Imogene Pass - Ouray to Telluride

Time: 3+ hours

Distance: 18 miles
(11 miles from Ouray to Imogene Pass)

Difficulty: Moderate to difficult; high clearance 4WD required

Elevation: 13,114 feet

Historic Highlights: Camp Bird Mine, Fort Peabody, Tomboy ghost town

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