

'The Gold Is in the Show'

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TELLURIDE – In the last episode of the inaugural season of *Gold Rush: Alaska*, a small group of would-be miners/reality actors gathered around the littlest cabin on their claim, splashed it with diesel, and set it aflame.

“We’ve gotta get rid of this piece of crap,” one drawled into the camera.

“This is going to be fun,” another said.

The cabin was Jimmy Dorsey’s – a cast-mate who had deserted the show midway through that first season due to personality conflicts with several of the other guys.

As the cabin started to smolder, the granddaddy miner of the group drove up in a 40-ton excavator, raised its claw-shaped bucket and flattened the flimsy structure like a house of cards.

It was just one more episode in the unlikely story line that is Jimmy Dorsey’s life.

Dorsey’s story reads like this:

A down-on-his-luck realtor, rockabilly slap-bass player and kitesurf/snowboard instructor from Oregon gathers his young family and heads up to Alaska with five buddies, at the height of the Great Recession, to try his hand at placer mining, sort of.

Several months later, disgusted and disappointed by his experience on *Gold Rush*, he tramps the camp, morphing into Discovery Channel’s worst nightmare in the blogosphere when it turns out he never signed a nondisclosure agreement.

Dorsey’s tell-all blog, The Glory Hole, at goldiningrealityshow.com, spills the beans about how that first season of *Gold Rush* was allegedly scripted, how the actors were goaded into conflict by the show’s producers, how he was not paid what he had been promised. The blog inspires quite a following and elevates Dorsey to a new level of celebrity.

Meanwhile, his experience as a fake miner on *Gold Rush* sparks his desire to become a real one. He takes some online classes at the University of Nevada’s MacKay School of Mines, and lands back-to-back gigs as a jackleg driller at the Copperstone Mine in Quartzite, Ariz., and drilling and blasting at the Mt. Emmons Project in Crested Butte.

Then he heads to Telluride to take on a new role, as the Telluride Ski and Golf Co. snowboard supervisor. Here, he hopes to root his family – wife Joy, children Ella, Hank and brand-new baby Lena – for the long haul.

But with the ski season now over, Dorsey has tramped the camp again. He's landed a job at the Revenue-Virginus mine near Ouray, and commutes home to Telluride on weekends.

Somewhere along the line, Dorsey has become obsessed with gold mining. "I made a decision that I was going to go after this, and I dropped into this crazy world," he said. "Tramp mining is one of the nuttiest roles I've ever done. These guys are insane."

Dorsey has also hinted at translating his gold fever into a new kind of mining reality show, one in which he can portray the gritty, real world of hardrock mining.

A recently posted sizzle reel on his blog promotes the concept. He's working his connections in the reality television business to find a producer and financial backers.

It sounds like a long shot, but one gets the feeling he just might be able to pull it off.

On *Gold Rush*, Dorsey the reality actor was a burly young buck in Carhartt coveralls, with a bushy red beard and a missing tooth, who didn't have a clue about mining. The show made him out to be the ultimate greenhorn, universally disrespected by his teammates, who called him "dingbat," "sissy" and "the pet monkey of the camp," just for starters. And he willingly played the part.

Two years later, the missing tooth has replaced by a new tooth with a diamond in it.

THE SHOW

If you somehow missed the whole *Gold Rush* phenomenon, here's Discovery Channel's quick synopsis from Season 1:

"In the face of an economic meltdown, six men risk everything to strike it rich mining for gold in the wilds of Alaska. Todd Hoffman of Sandy, Oregon, along with his father Jack, lead a group of greenhorn miners," (including Dorsey) "in search of the American dream and a new frontier. Gold fever is back, and the rush is on. While leasing a gold claim in Alaska, Todd and company must ward off bears, build homes for their families, and keep the operation running as they take fate into their own hands with a make or break venture that will change their lives forever."

The bears were real enough, and the placer claim did yield a bit of gold. But Dorsey compares much of *Gold Rush*'s story line to the fabricated wrestling matches of the Worldwide Wrestling Federation. The fates of those six miners and their families were really not in their own hands at all, he says, but rather in the hands of producers and writers who pushed for the story to play out in a certain way as it was being filmed onsite, and then further manipulated it in the production phase before the season aired.

The actors themselves, much like Hulk Hogan and Macho Man of the World Wide Wrestling Federation, played up the fake drama for the cameras and mics that were in their faces virtually every waking moment. "I would spend hours thinking of things to say that would be interesting for the camera," Dorsey admitted. "We were like real-life actors, acting in our own movie. It was the weirdest thing in the world."

Boys doing boy-stuff, they ran big machines, cut down trees and built cabins, shot bears, brawled and mined for gold – GOLD! – against a backdrop of the great Alaskan wilderness and the Great Recession.

The Dorsey family stumbled into this twilight zone of allegedly manufactured reality. One episode, they say, had their small daughter Ella re-enacting a seizure that had actually happened to Todd Hoffman's daughter, who had been rushed to an emergency room in Anchorage, suffering from an overdose of DEET. The cameras missed much of the real action, so Ella did the redo.

"They call them pick-ups," Joy explained. "They film a scene and it doesn't quite make sense, so then you have to go back and put on the same clothes, you have to say lines and stuff that lead up to what they had filmed so it makes more sense."

As the season wore on, the show became a pressure cooker, fueled by egos and jealousy. Tempers flashed. Fists flew. Cameras rolled. Jimmy ended up with some broken ribs after a fellow reality actor allegedly assaulted him. The cameras missed that bit.

"When you have a camera in your face, it creates such a weird dynamic among people," Joy reflected. "People are so jealous and so weird around cameras, and also tame. So they act out when the cameras aren't there and then they're really cool when the cameras are there. You can't create reality when there are cameras around. You just can't. It's impossible."

Joy, meanwhile, clashed as badly with the other men on the show as her husband did. "They were so disrespectful. So horrible to me," she said. "I would sit in my cabin and sob."

The producers drove her crazy, trying to plant seeds of dissent between her and Jimmy, asking her slyly if she ever thought about leaving him. They wanted her to grow a garden, she said, and set up a schoolhouse for the miners' children. "It was the dumbest thing. I was only mic'd when they wanted something from me."

After a while, they'd had enough. The Dorseys simply packed up and left the show.

SICK, BROKE AND FAMOUS

Back in the lower 48, life continued to be surreal for the Dorsey family.

Joy had contracted giardia from drinking contaminated water at the mine camp. Worried about the health of those they'd left behind in Alaska, she says she contacted the Gold Rush producers.

"I told them, 'You need to tell everyone up there that I have giardia because they're going to get it too.' The producer of the show said to us, 'Don't tell anybody, because we would love to film that. That is real drama.'" (The Discovery Channel denies this happened.)

The Dorseys were also broke. "We came home to no job," Joy said. And because they'd left the show early, they brought back next to no money from Alaska.

The Discovery Channel was on their case, allegedly levying threats and bribes to get Jimmy to sign a nondisclosure agreement after the fact, to make him quit blogging.

"You do not want to stare down the loaded gun of Discovery Channel. That was said by one of the producers to me," Dorsey said.

On top of everything, the Dorseys were now famous.

"It was really weird coming home and signing autographs in the food stamps office," Jimmy said. "Everyone walking up to you and going, 'Aren't you Jimmy Dorsey?'"

He wore the beard for a while. Now that he's shaved it, folks don't recognize him much anymore.

FOOL'S GOLD

In the end, the only gold that Jimmy Dorsey brought home from Alaska was a sack full of fool's gold that he'd picked out of the sluice for Ella.

It seems an apt metaphor for reality TV in general – how it seeks to produce a reality that it sells as the real deal.

Because of his blog, Dorsey said, "Gold Rush is now synonymous with fool's gold; it's synonymous with the fact that they fooled everybody.... They are mining the viewers; that is where the money is."

Fool's gold is a metaphor also for reality-show fans, watching lives clash and unravel on the screen, sometimes tragically so.

"Did you know that 13 reality show participants have committed suicide?" asks Jimmy.

"No, 14," Joy corrects him. "Because they humiliate you, on TV." (See www.realityshowsuicides.com for a detailed account of each one of these lives cut short.)

Finally, fool's gold is a pretty good metaphor for Dorsey himself. He willingly played the fool on Gold Rush, then used his exposure on the show as a springboard for a fresh start.

"I know that to tell a good story, different characters need to be juxtaposed against each other to create a dynamic stage," he wrote to one fan on his blog. "I allowed them to make a fool out of me."

STRANGER THAN FICTION

Gold Rush's success has proven true that there is no such thing as bad publicity. The show continues to have a global following. It has just wrapped up a successful second season and is steamrolling toward a third.

"Jimmy Dorsey was a phenomenal character on Season 1, but we are now the number one show on Friday night without him," Doyle pointed out. "A year- and-a-half later, Jimmy Dorsey is no longer relevant to the Discovery Channel."

As for Jimmy and Joy, they're the first to admit that Gold Rush has been good for them, in spite of everything. It's all just a big lesson in taking what life throws your way and making the best of it to create your own reality.

"People ask us all the time, 'Would you do it again?' I can't say that I wouldn't," Joy said. "I know so much more, now. Not to mention, it has given us new opportunities."

The Dorseys watched the cabin-burning episode of Gold Rush safely from the comfort of Joy's mother's couch in Portland, Ore., where they took refuge after leaving Alaska. As they saw the cabin crumple under the excavator's claw, they recalled they had taken out homeowners' insurance on it, and filed a claim. The money added up to more than they'd earned from their entire time in Alaska – enough, in fact, for a down-payment on a nice RV, to give Jimmy a home when he goes tramp mining.

"How come producers are so afraid of filming the truth in something that's real?" Jimmy asked. "Why do they feel they have to write it, when life is very interesting?"