



## The fortune hunters: Hi-Desert held promise of gold

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George A. Grant National Park Service

### *The fortune hunters*

*Two men survey the New Gold Crown Mine in the Dale Mining District near Twentynine Palms in 1941. Overlooking Dale Dry Lake and the Sheephole Mountains, the property was taken over by the Gold Crown Mining Company of Los Angeles in the 1930s.*

In the 19th century, it was not uncommon for desert general stores to sell dynamite alongside other staples like cans of beans, peaches and condensed milk. For miners and prospectors, the west gleamed with the promise of gold, and the Hi-Desert was one of their hoped-for promised lands.

Modern-day miners Jim Wharff and Tom Koch provided a glimpse of the Hi-Desert's first industry — mining — during a recent lecture at Yucca Valley's Hi-Desert Nature Museum.

The miners used wet and dry methods to extract gold from rock and dirt. When water was available, they constructed elaborate sluices, flumes and other hydraulics, Koch said. But desert gold miners depended largely on crushing ore and dry washing dirt using air and vibration to find the coveted gold amalgam.

The Dale Mining District east of Twentynine Palms was a center of gold production, where fortune seekers used water to draw gold out of the alluvial plains, and turned to chisels, dynamite and pick axes to dig and blast it from hard rock.

Holding up a carbide head lamp that would have provided the only illumination in a shaft hundreds of feet from sunlight, Koch asked rhetorically, "Can you imagine?" With a shake of his head, he put the artifact aside. "I can't either."



Glenn Isaacs photo

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*Jim Wharff; right; and Tom Koch; modern-day miners; show some of the tools of their turn-of-the-century colleagues at the Hi-Desert Nature Museum.*

Displaying a plunger from a stamp mill, the miner described the milling operation that used mercury to attract the gold. Koch described how heating in turned the mercury from liquid to vapor, releasing the sought-after material.

“This helped save a canary,” he said facetiously while holding a lamp that could detect noxious vapors in a mine shaft without igniting a flammable gas.

“Gold and iron are associated in the ground,” Koch noted. The Eagle Mountain mine near Desert Center was one of the largest open-pit operations in the world from World War II into the late 1980s. Koch said the Kaiser Steel company used the byproduct gold it pulled out of its ore pits to help refurbish its Fontana steel mill, now the site of the California Speedway.

Speaking reverently of his elusive, precious quarry, Koch concluded, “It’s still out there. It’s just a little harder to find.”

Towns moved to where the gold was

The first image in Wharff’s slide presentation was a 1909 map showing area water wells and springs: the basis of desert existence a hundred years back.

Euro-Americans began their expansion into the Mojave Desert in the 1850s. As gold was being extracted from the Big Bear district, Wharff explained how prospectors migrated from the mountains into present-day Barstow, and later the Dale district.

By the end of the 19th century, gold seekers were populating a boom town just off the present-day Twentynine Palms Highway at Gold Crown Road.

As gold deposits were discovered in the hills to the south, the townspeople essentially picked up and moved to where the mines were operating. Wharff showed a photo taken in 1897 of the original settlement, looking down Rawhide, the main street. A 1913 photo, taken six miles south of the original town site, shows customers pausing for a historical portrait outside Dale’s General Merchandise Store.

All gold-seeking activities shut down during World War II, Wharff said, because gold was deemed a non-essential material. He added that President Roosevelt had raised the price of gold during the Great Depression to spur mining activity as an aid to economic recovery.

With just a little imagination, it isn’t hard to see a little gleam in the miners’ eyes when they talk about their hobby. It’s the gleam of gold.