

VIRGINIANA FILE

Historic Sites

(Cabin Branch Mine)

Prince William Public Library
Manassas, Va.

(Weems - Botts Museum Collection)

"Fool's gold" they called it. But what was so foolish about it, why was it so special, and what was it like to be one of its miners? These and many other questions come to mind when we speak of Prince William Forest Park's pyrite mine. Here you can discover some answers. Answers not only to questions about pyrite, but also what motivated men to mine in the first place. Dreams for get-rich-quick schemes are age old, no one is immune, and early Virginia was not without her share of propaganda. For example: shortly after the Civil War, "Harper's New Monthly Magazine" described Virginia's resources in the following glowing manner:

Indeed it may be said, without exaggeration, that in the single State of Virginia, in the most singular juxtaposition of what might be considered geologically incongruous materials, is to be found an almost exhaustless fund of God-given treasures, more than enough to pay off our whole national debt, and only waiting the magic touch of capital and enterprise to drag them to light for the benefit of man.

How's that for inspiration! Suggestive enough to urge men to walk, run, or ride to the nearest Virginia mine.

As you walk to the pyrite mine, a long time after that bit of prose was written, remember to look around and consider that your route of travel may resemble one which a pyrite miner walked about 75 years before. That is three quarters of a century ago this Cabin Branch Mine was operated and still we can see how hard its mining process was on the land.

THE PROCESS

From sunup to sundown many miners rarely saw daylight. During his 12 hour shift each man surely speculated, "There has to be a better way to earn a living." Yet because he needed the money, he would contribute, however insignificantly, his energy to the total mining process. In brief the operation ran as follows:

At this particular mine 3 shafts were built, 2 verticle and 1 inclined;

all 3 composed of many levels. Because of the crumbly consistency of rock here, supports had to be erected so as not to endanger the miners. After the ore was blasted from the huge lens-shaped deposit, the rock was transported by hand-pushed wagons on tracks of each level. At the shaft, the ore was dumped into a bucket and hauled up to the surface where narrow gauge⁺ cars, took it to bins, then to the mill where sorting began. For 50 cents a day child labor sorted it into 3 categories. It was divided much the same as we group things today, i.e., large, medium, and small. However each size of pyrite has an unfamiliar sounding name: lump, spall, and fine respectively. Like most specialized fields, mining has its own words with definite meanings.

THE LANGUAGE

For example pyrite is the more formal name for fool's gold. Examining a piece of the rock will show you how easily the sparkling yellow flecks could remind prospectors of gold. Actually gold has a more metallic luster, less eye catching than the glistening pyrite. Fool's gold assumes value equal to its name when gold deposits are occasionally found in the rock, but usually you are the fool if you think pyrite is gold.

Pyrite was measured in long tons, 2400 pounds, 400 pounds more than a standard ton.

Crews were the men who worked in the mine. Each crew had a blaster. Since he was in charge of the men, most probably the blaster was spared much labor. As crew leader, he may have had to only push the handle which set off the dynamite although his duties are uncertain. What is certain is he was paid according to how far he got each day. Therefore blaster with

⁺ Refers to the distance between the rails of the track. Thus, narrow gauge would be a smaller than standard distance.

fast crews got more money than those with slow workers. It might prove to be an interesting study to determine whether blasters who were kind to their crews got more mileage from them than cruel blasters did.

Drillers drilled holes for dynamite, muckers loaded ore onto wagons, powdermen carried dynamite from the powderhouse to where it was needed, and the timberman had to make sure the ceiling had enough support, for if he misjudged the beams' strength the lives of the men could be severely endangered. Clearly you would want to have a reliable timberman.

Even though the bucket referred to in THE PROCESS section is a familiar term, it served an unusual purpose. Not only was it used to haul ore, but also it carried workers to the various levels. Bells were rung to announce each bucket's load. For instance 1 bell might mean empty, 2 ... ore, 3 ... men. When a bucket of ore reached a waiting railroad car, it automatically dumped its contents. Hopefully when the load was a man he had time to jump out before he too was automatically dumped into the waiting car.

THE MEN

As for who worked there, 200 to 300 men labored both above and beneath the ground. Their workdays were by no means short. Since the mining continued 24 hours a day and there were 2 shifts of men, it is easy to divide the minor's life into 12 hour workdays. Many of them even slept at the mining site. Consider then how we complain when we cannot leave behind all work after we have put in 8 hours. Eventually mining could come to envelope their entire lives. No wonder they finally went on strike for a pay increase. If you dedicated most of your waking hours to a project, you would want to feel it was worthwhile; pricetags tend to make ordinary labor seem more important. If that many people put that much time into mining, surely the site must be impressive.

THE SITE

"But there's nothing here!" Such might be your immediate reaction upon seeing the Cabin Branch Mine Site. That is because the Civilian Conservation Corp dismantled the structures in the 1930's and used the material to build the cabin camps now in the park. However if you continue down the trail beyond the barren site you can find remnants of some of the approximately 70 buildings used between 1889 and 1920. Were all those really necessary? After thinking about it you will probably conclude they were. As was stated, many laborers lived at the mine and that would require a variety of building: a blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, sawmill, henhouse, icehouse, and workers' quarters to suggest a few. Black workers lived apart from white workers and the former's housing was labeled "colored quarters." There was a company store too that sold, as an old miner put it, "everything from knitting needles to 2 horse wagons." A company official made daily trips from the store to the main office where the miners' wages were recorded. This was to insure that the workers did not purchase more from the company than they could afford.

Obviously fool's gold was considered important enough to warrant this mini-city for miners.

THE PURPOSE

If it wasn't true gold, couldn't it have a purpose anyway? It could. Sulfur is extracted from pyrite. Take a deep breath at the site and you may smell the evidence. Of note the yellow residue on the ground and under rocks. You might even want to lick a tiny portion of the sulfur off your finger. Bitter? When you have sulfur you can get sulfuric acid, and sulfuric acid is a basic chemical widely used in industry for things like glass, soap, bleach, acid, textiles, paper, dye, medicine, sugar, rubber, starch, syrup, leather, fertilizer, sheet metal cleaning, precious metal refining, etc.

With all those uses, pyrite would be much in demand. And when an item

is in demand, the people who have that item can make money. Such was the case with the nearby town of Dumfries.

THE TOWN

At one time this area boasted prosperous farms, farms which supplied tobacco for exportation from Dumfries. Second in financial importance only to New York, it was an important US seaport. Eventually minerals from the soil were depleted, the tobacco industry floundered along with the Dumfries shipping port, and a new source of income was sought.

Pyrite mining filled the bill. Imagine the town's relief when ore was spotted and verified to be in the Quantico Creek, and the test shaft encountered pyrite. Copper and iron were also recovered, but although silver, gold, and lead were present they were not excavated because of their low concentrations. Thus, a 31 year business, owned by the American Agriculture Chemical Company, was started in 1889, providing a livelihood for Dumfries.

THE DEMISE

When the new twenties decade began, pyrite mining at the Cabin Branch Mine ended. Several events led to its demise. 1.)Sulfur was discovered elsewhere. 2.)Companies were hesitant to enter into long term contracts if sulfur might be more cheaply obtained in the future. 3.)Probably the most influential episode was when the miners decided to strike for a pay raise, an increase from \$3.50 a day to \$4.00 a day. The superintendent responded to this "unreasonable" 50¢ demand by closing the mine and saying he would watch it fill with water and let frogs jump in before he would reopen.

Perhaps it is just as well. Mining severely scars the land, as you can see.

THE EFFECT

Vegetation is sparse, stream life is miniscule if that. Rainwater seeping through the ground into the creek becomes very acidic, a condition most wildlife shuns. Also, the wind has helped erode the exposed earth

where the shafts were sunk.

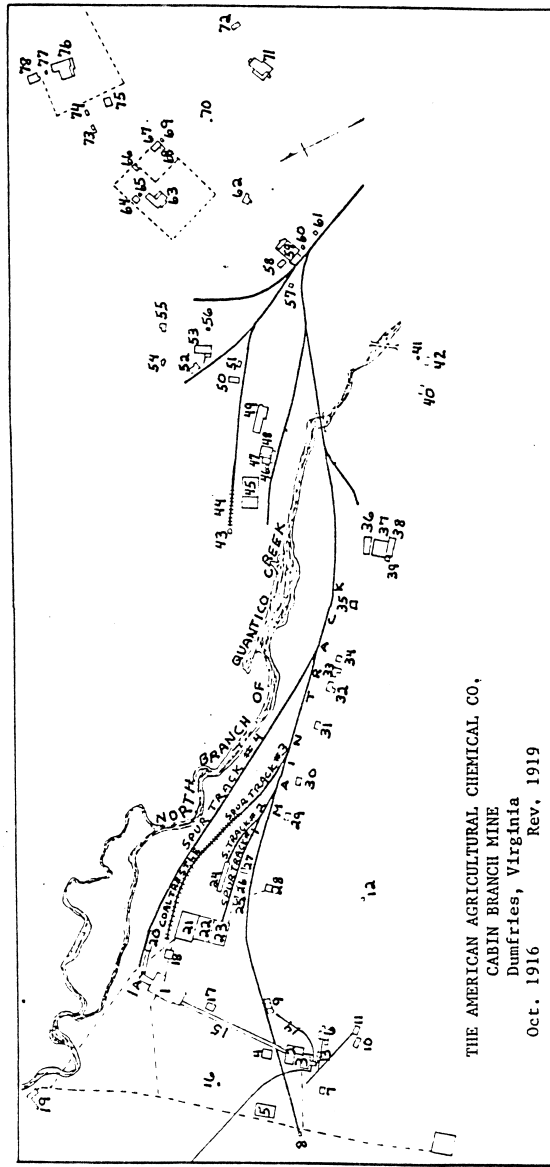
We have left our mark, not easily erased. Was it worth it? History does not change; it is useless to condemn our predecessors for their actions. Can you resist the impulse to imagine mountains of wealth when the sun shows off metal speckled rocks, or when you actually hold the "gold" in your palm. We are conjuring the same dreams those miners did, and that may be where the value lies.

Numbering Key

CABIN BRANCH MINE

1.	Mill	40.	House
1A.	Classifier Room	41.	Old Shaft
2.	Crusher House	42.	House
3.	Head Frame	43.	Water Tower
4.	Hoisting Engine	44.	Coal Trestle
5.	Change House	45.	Old Machine Shop
6.	Blacksmith Shop	46.	Tool House
7.	Shed	47.	Store House
8.	Incline Hoist Shed	48.	Miner's Camp
9.	Ore Bins	49.	Saw Mill
10.	Shed	50.	Freight House
11.	Carpenter Shop	51.	Oil House
12.	Powder Shop	52.	Old Store
13.	Main Shaft	53.	Open Shed
14.	Runway Shelter	54.	Dwelling
15.	Conveyor House	55.	Dwelling
16.	Cap House	56.	Old Shaft
17.	Transformers	57.	Shed
18.	Water Tower	58.	Shed
19.	Pump House	59.	Commissary
20.	Concentrate Bin	60.	Shed
21.	Boiler Room	61.	Shed
22.	Engine Room	62.	Building or shed
23.	Machine Shop	63.	Dwelling
24.	Locomotive Shed	64.	Shed
25.	Ware House	65.	Shed
26.	Pipe Shed	66.	Unknown
27.	Oil Shed	67.	Shed
28.	Office	68.	Sheds
29.	Old Colored Quarters	69.	Sheds
30.	Old Colored Quarters	70.	Spring House
31.	Old Colored Quarters	71.	Superintendents House
32.	Old Colored Quarters	72.	Wood Shed
33.	Old Colored Quarters	73.	Men Houses
34.	Old Colored Quarters	74.	Men Houses
35.	Old Shaft	75.	Ice House
36.	Old Ore Bins	76.*	Detrick House
37.	Old Mill	77.	Well
38.	Old Pit Head	78.	House
39.	Head of Old Incline		

* Mr. Detrick discovered the mine.



THE AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL CHEMICAL CO.
 CABIN BRANCH MINE
 Dumfries, Virginia
 Oct. 1916 Rev. 1919