

# Cache Creek Park: A Chaffee County Gold Rush

By Steven Wade Veatch

The first gold discoveries in Colorado were placer gold deposits. Cache Creek Park (figure 1), a few miles west of the small town of Granite in northern Chaffee County, was one of these early gold discoveries. The gold of Cache Creek Park was discovered in 1859 (Parker, 1992), the same year gold was found by George A. Jackson along Chicago Creek on the present site of Idaho Springs and only a year after Green Russell's discovery of a small gold placer near the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek that started the "Pikes Peak or Bust" gold rush (Chronology of



**FIGURE 1.** View of cabins and buildings in Cache (Cash) Creek (Park County, later Chaffee County), Colorado. The Cache Creek ditch, stretching 16 miles from Cache Creek Park to Lake Creek, was completed in 1863 and brought water to the goldfields for mining operations. Photo date is between 1865 and 1875 by William G. Chamberlain. Source: from a "scrap" book of Denver and Colorado of William G. Chamberlain, Photographer, 1861-1881. Courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, William G. Chamberlain, Call Number X-19192. © Denver Public Library.

Colorado History, Colorado State Archives, 2007, Davis and Streufert, 1990). These placer deposits not only started early gold rushes to Colorado but also led to rich vein strikes. Placer gold production of about 1,801,482 troy ounces has been recorded in 36 Colorado counties (Parker, 1974). Summit, Lake, Park, Clear Creek, Gilpin, and Chaffee Counties had the most significant placer deposits of Colorado (Parker, 1992).

Cache Creek Park produced over 49,000 ounces of gold—most of Chaffee County's production (over \$1 million at the old value of \$20.67 per ounce). The area was worked by individual prospectors and small outfits from 1859 until 1883 (figure 2). Starting in 1884, Cache Creek was worked as a large hydraulic mining operation—Colorado's only profitable one—by several English firms. Mining operations continued until 1911 when mining was shut down in one of Colorado's first environmental lawsuits. Since then there has been only intermittent small-scale placer mining (Parker, 1974).

Most Colorado gold placers, produced by natural gravity concentration, were formed during the last Ice Age (the Pleistocene Epoch). Only a few placers were formed earlier, such as the late Eocene or early Oligocene Castle Rock Conglomerate (Parker, 1992).

The earliest glacial period in Colorado is the pre-Bull Lake, followed by the Bull Lake. The last pulse of glaciation is known as the Pinedale. These names are from sites in Wyoming. Almost all of the Pleistocene placers in Colorado have been affected by either Bull Lake or Pinedale age glaciations, which altered or destroyed any earlier glacial deposits (see table 1). Gold was concentrated by glacial melt water action and is often found near terminal moraines. Moraines are glacially formed accumulations of unconsolidated debris deposited where the glacier melted. These debris range from silt-like glacial flour to large boulders. Terminal or end moraines are ridges of unconsolidated debris deposited at the end of a glacier.

Cache Creek Park was an outwash terrace of lower Bull Lake age; its gravels contained two sources of gold: 1) from the west or southwest, probably Lost Canyon Creek, and 2) the moraines of Lake Creek. In upper Bull Lake time these gravels were reworked by streams which brought in more gold from both of these two sources.

The gold deposits of Cache Creek are found in placer gravels up to 61 feet high that are bordered on the north by the Bull Lake terminal moraine of the Lake Creek glacier and bordered on the west by Lost Canyon Mountain and on the east by a granite ridge (Parker, 1992). There is a bench about midway in the gravel: cobbles and boulders



**FIGURE 2.** Mining was in operation for nearly 60 years at Cache Creek, among the longest operated single placer deposit in Colorado. A BLM gate is open, allowing access to these present-day goldfields. Photo date 9/2007 by S. Veatch.

above it are less weathered than those beneath it, suggesting that the rocks below the bench were weathered for a much longer time. The gravel below the bench is lower Bull Lake outwash; gravel above the bench is upper Bull Lake outwash. The bench is not present in all the parts of the gravel and reveals that the early Bull Lake outwash streams did not flow over the entire Park but were restricted to limited channels (Parker, 1992).

| <b>Pleistocene glaciations in the southern Rocky Mountains</b> |                    |  |
|--|--------------------|--|
| <b>Glaciation</b>  | <b>Age range</b>   | <b>Notes</b>   |
| <b>pre-Bull Lake</b>   | 500,000 to 700,000 | Two or more pre-Bull Lake glaciations are recognized.  |
| <b>pre-Bull Lake</b>   | 300,000 to 500,000 |  |
| <b>Bull Lake</b>   | 130,000 to 300,000 | Named from moraines found in vicinity of Bull Lake near Wind River Mountains in Wyoming. This glacial period was followed by a much warmer interglacial period that lasted about 60,000 years. |
| <b>Pinedale</b>  | 12,000 to 23,000   | Last of the major glaciations to appear in the Rocky Mountains.  |

**TABLE 1. Based on Richmond (1965, 1986) and Armour et al. (2002).**

Since the time major mining operations ended, the natural recovery of the Cache Creek area is slowly occurring. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages the Cache Creek area for wildlife habitat, wetlands, and open space. Although the BLM has withdrawn the area from mineral entry, it has recognized Cache Creek’s important place in Colorado’s mining history and allows placer mining that minimizes impacts to the area. The BLM field office has established a 25 acre area for motorized placer mining. A permit from the local BLM office is required. The remaining BLM lands in the Cache Creek area are available for non-motorized placer mining, including pans, sluice boxes, and battery-operated re-circulators. The recreational placer season is limited to Memorial Day to November 30 of each year and limited to ten user days in order to minimize impacts to wildlife habitat.

The Cache Creek area has been of interest to the small-scale prospectors because of the placer gold that was left behind when mining operations ended in 1911. Today there has been renewed interest in this locality. Most weekends at Cache Creek look like scenes from the historic California Gold Rush: prospectors are crowded along every foot of the creek working the gold-bearing gravels with all sorts of equipment. Prospectors are busy on weekends shoveling source material—from banks above a gray and orange clay layer—into 5-gallon plastic buckets. This material is put through screens and then worked by sluice boxes or gold pans. Pay streaks of gold are commonly seen in pans.

Novice and experienced prospectors (figures 3, 4, 5, and 6) always find gold and a lot of fun at Cache Creek. The beautiful landscape of this area is an added bonus and enhances the recreational prospecting experience. Respecting the land and environment at this popular location will ensure that the BLM will continue to keep this area open for prospecting for years to come.



**FIGURE 3.** Patrick Hill (left) and Luther Brown (right) are members of the Gold Prospectors of Colorado. Here they are running an effective panning operation on Cache Creek. The native gold has been concentrated by gravity concentration. Photo date 9/2007 by S. Veatch.



**FIGURE 4.** Larry Weilnau is carefully inspecting gold nuggets in his pan. Photo date 7/2008 by S. Veatch.



**FIGURE 5.** Paul McRae, Shirley Weinau, and Paul Yeisley take a break from their sluice box on Cache Creek. Photo date 7/2008 by S. Veatch.



**FIGURE 6.** Shelly Veatch is screening gold-bearing sediment from nearby glacial deposits. Photo date 7/2008 by S. Veatch.

**Information on BLM rules at Cache Creek and a copy of the permit:**

([http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/rgfo/minerals/locatable\\_minerals/placer\\_mining/cache\\_creek.html](http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/rgfo/minerals/locatable_minerals/placer_mining/cache_creek.html))

**Getting there:**



|  |
|--|
| <b>U.S. Highway 214 West to Leadville</b>                                      |
| <b>Turn left onto Chaffee County 398 (Lost Canyon Road) at town of Granite</b> |
| <b>Go past Chaffee County 398 D on left</b>                                    |
| <b>Go past Chaffee County 398 B on right</b>                                   |
| <b>Go past power line and take an immediate left</b>                           |
| <b>Go through metal BLM gates until road ends at a parking area</b>            |

**References Cited:**

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### About the Author:



**Steven Veatch** is an explorer, researcher, writer, and geologist. Steve is from a pioneering Cripple Creek and Nederland mining family. He lives on the edge of the Florissant fossil beds with his wife.