The Rand Mining District

An Incomplete History

HEMORRHOID XXIV - March 6014

Billy Holcomb Chapter 1069 - E Clampus Vitus

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The Ancient & Honorable Order of
E Clampus Vitus

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HEMORRHOID XXIV
A Historic Tour of

The Rand Mining District

March 20 -22, 2009

As envisioned by

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VNGH, XPBC, WDE, HMP, BH, BP, PL#11, LRDG, FOOG
Mining, Prospecting & Travels in the Mojave Desert Region

In order to understand the history of the Rand Mining District, one needs to look back at the pioneering origins of mining and exploration in and around the Mojave Desert. The history of the area shares much with the history of the first booming camps of the Mojave Desert, as well as the first towns of the Tehachapis and the Southern Sierras. (Wynn, 1949) The Death Valley Group of 49’ers was the first to direct public attention to the Mojave and the surrounding mountains. Misled by poor advice and even worse maps, few of these travelers, who had hoped to be taking a short cut to California’s gold regions, could have imagined the riches that lay just beyond the shores of Searles Lake. California’s gold lay west, and the Mojave and Sierra Nevada Mountains were generally perceived as obstacles along the way. As the 49’ers moved west through the Mojave and toward the Sierras, they hoped to find an entrance to Walker’s Pass and to avoid the tragedy of the all too familiar Donner Party. For these travelers, the Mojave was nothing more than an obstacle to cross on their way to their destination. Few, if any, gave any thought to the riches of gold, silver and tungsten that would later be discovered along their chosen route.

These parties of 49’ers passed in and around the Randsburg area, and were some of the first travelers to discover the beauty of Red Rock Canyon and the respite provided by Indian Wells. It was 1855, after the original parties had passed through the region, that it was first reported in the press that an oasis existed in the region that offered “fattening grasses” for livestock near Red Rock Canyon (Wynn, 1949). And thus, began the rumor which begat the legend that became the Rand Mining District. Kane Springs (Saltdale & Cantil) are widely considered to be the oasis the early pioneers had referred to. However, the tales of an oasis in the desert was far less significant to the early settlers of the area than were the many tales of the lost mines of which the early 49’ers spoke. Tales of lost mines and fertile ground were the custom of the day, but from the Death Valley 49’ers arise two of the most intriguing possibilities of the era: The tale of a great silver mine (The Gunsight), and the other of rich gold deposits (Goler) (Wynn, 1949). The history of the Randsburg Mining District owes much to the search for these lost mines, and to the determination and dedication of the miners and pioneers who traversed the Mojave in search of these lost riches.

In 1860, a group led by Dr. Darwin French, left Visalia to search for the elusive mountain of Silver known as the Gunsight. Although French’s expedition was unable to locate the lost mine, with the party traveled Dennis Searles (who with his brother John) who would later mine borax in the region and to which this day the area bears his name (Wynn, 1949). Dr. French was followed by a number of fortune seekers who sought after the riches of the Gunsight, but the mine proved as elusive as a desert mirage. That very same year, Dr. S. G. George also left Visalia in search of the Gunsight, but again was unsuccessful in locating the lost mine. Though the George expedition failed to find the lost riches in the desert, it is interesting to note that his party included William T. Henderson who later tracked down and dispatched of the bandit Joaquin Murrieta at Telescope Peak. The tale of the lost Gunsight would prevail for more than a half a century in the Mojave region, yet today there exists no conclusive evidence that the LOST mine has yet been found.
The story of Goler’s gold is a much different story than that of the search for the lost Gunsight. The most common story has John Goler prospecting his way out of Death Valley in 1867, and working his way south. Goler is supposed to have stopped for a drink and while kneeling at the spring was startled to see chunks of gold lying in the water (Wynn, 1949). Goler is said to have marked the spring by propping up his rifle on the top of a mound so that he could later locate his find. After gathering a few samples of gold, Goler rushed to Los Angeles and began to convince investors of the validity of his find. Grant P. Cuddleback arranged a well-equipped party to be led by John Goler to search for his lost mine in the Mojave. Distrust began to grow quickly as Goler’s original map was poorly drawn, and the party was unable to locate the canyon with Goler’s rifle perched upon a mound. Unable to locate the lost mine, Goler again returned to Los Angeles in an effort to arrange another expedition. This second expedition was again unable to locate Goler’s original find. Although Goler’s third trip to the area did find gold near Red Rock Canyon, Goler remained obsessed with his original find and left the group to search for his lost spring. John Goler was never to be heard from again, though his rifle was found in 1917 by local rancher Will Munsey (Mitchell, 2004).

During this period the Eastern Mojave appeared to be long on stories of riches, but quite short on discovery. The same could not be said for the gold boom towns that were springing up in the Eastern Sierras, the White Mountain range, and places that lay in the Death Valley region. It was in 1865 with the discovery of the fabulous mineralized section of Cerro Gordo, that the operations of the Mojave Desert took their greatest stride (Wynn, 1949). With Pablo Flores’ rich gold discovery at Cerro Gordo came an influx of miners and supporting businesses to the eastern edge of Owens Lake. Freighting and hauling of ore, men and materials became more prevalent, and Cerro Gordo quickly became a powerful influence on the pueblo Los Angeles, as well as the people of Kern and Ventura Counties. Cerro Gordo was truly a miner’s town, and soon made for herself a sizeable reputation as a gun-toting, man-for-breakfast sort of camp (Wynn, 1949). Despite her well earned reputation as a rough and tumble town, across the state miners were packing up and leaving good claims in the rush to riches at Cerro Gordo. The mines at Cerro Gordo produced in excess of $17 million in gold, silver, limestone, zinc and lead; making it one of the wealthiest strikes in all of California at the time.

In 1874, the new boomtown city of Panamint City was the next town to emerge in the region. The first claims were made in 1873, after three outlaws held up a Wells Fargo stage west of Panamint Valley. While hiding out in the Panamint Mountains and waiting for things to cool down a bit, they discovered a rich silver ledge in Surprise Canyon, worth far more than the proceeds of the robbery. One of the robbers was an acquaintance of William Stewart, the U.S. Senator from Nevada and one of the namesakes for Chapter 10 of E Clampus Vitus. Stewart arranged for amnesty for the crooks in exchange for the return of the loot to Wells Fargo. His price was to be allowed to buy a portion of the claim. John P. Jones, the other Nevada Senator, also became a partner. The Panamint Mining District was quickly formed, claiming to be “the New Comstock.” In November of 1874, the Anaheim Gazette stated of the new boomtown, Panamint City, “there are 700 men, 10 women, and 4 inches of snow up at Panamint, and lively times are expected.” The name of the town, the surrounding mountain range, and the desert valley below derive from the name of the Shoshonean Indians living in the area (Ballarat: Joint Fall Clampout, October 13, 6006).
Though the mines at Panamint City had pretty much played out by 1875, and miners were quickly heading off towards the finds at Darwin, the small town of Ballarat at the crossroads near the base of the Panamints was just beginning to flourish. This little crossroads managed to hang on for nearly twenty years, until in 1896 gold was discovered in Pleasant Canyon. The Ratcliff Consolidated Gold Mines and the South Park Mining District soon sprang into existence. What separated Ballarat from the other early towns of this region was planning, and Ballarat is often considered to be the first mining town in the region to whose development was properly laid out and planned. This fact is in stark contrast to methodology used in the other towns of the area, including Randsburg. During its heyday, Ballarat boasted a population of 500, the two-story Callaway hotel, two stores, a Wells Fargo office and stage depot, along with a school district (Ballarat: Joint Fall Clampout, October 13, 6006). Of course, no mining town of the area would be complete without saloons and an appropriate red light district, and to this Ballarat held true as she never did lay claim to a church. The heart of Ballarat’s importance had always stemmed from the fact that it was on the way to somewhere else. Ultimately, it would be those who passed through Ballarat and the surrounding areas that would end up in the Rand Mining District.

Many stories emanate from Ballarat, but two of the most fascinating concern the tales of Shorty Harris and Seldom Seen Slim, two of the last “one blanket and one burro” miners of the area (Wynn, 1949). The legendary Shorty Harris, “last of the single-blanket jackass prospectors” and co-discoverer of Bullfrog and Harrisburg, lived out his last days at Ballarat. When he died on November 10, 1934, he was buried on the floor of Death Valley next to his old friend Jim Dayton. The site is marked by a large stone monument containing a commemorative plaque. The population of Ballarat eventually dwindled to one man. He was Charles Ferge, better known as Seldom Seen Slim. Since he was seldom seen, not a lot is known about him, though he was known to be a regular visitor to the Randsburg area. He was born November 21, 1881 in Springfield, Illinois. He prospected and worked odd jobs throughout the Mojave Desert region, settling in Ballarat around 1913. He was the self-appointed mayor, postmaster, dogcatcher and tax collector of the town. It is rumored that Slim had not taken a bath for more than 40 years, which he denounced as an outright lie, stating that he had had one as recently as the previous July. Seldom Seen Slim died in Trona on August 17, 1968, and now resides in the cemetery in Ballarat (Ballarat: Joint Fall Clampout, October 13, 6006).

Darwin derives its name from that of Dr. Darwin French of Visalia, who prospected this area beginning in 1860. He discovered silver at nearby Coso while looking for the famed Lost Gunsight lode. In the early 1870s the town came into its own as a result of a flurry of mining in the nearby Coso and Argus Ranges. It boomed beginning in late 1874 with the discovery of rich surface ores, assaying at $700 a ton in lead and silver, at the foot of Mt. Ophir. Within a year it boasted a population of 700 or more, many of them refugees from the Panamint boom.

The little town quickly gained a reputation for violence, and at one point it was said that of 124 burials in the local cemetery, 122 were the result of a gun or knife. One of the leading citizens was Victor Beaudry, an important player a few years earlier in the development of the Cerro Gordo mines. He gained control of the only nearby spring and became known as the Water King. By the early 1880s, however, the town had begun to fade as the Bodie and Mammoth mines came into prominence.
Small scale mining continued into the 20th century, with a minor revival occurring during World War I. In the 1920s there was a fair amount of activity, but the Great Depression brought such efforts to a halt. Between 1874 and 1951, the mines hereabout are estimated to have produced about 6,000 ounces of gold, 7.6 million ounces of silver, 118 million pounds of lead, 52 million pounds of zinc, and 1.5 million pounds of copper, for a total production of about $6 million. A few hardy citizens remain today among the historic building and old slag and ore dumps.

A rich ore strike was yet to take place in the Eastern Mojave, though traffic in the area was increasing rapidly and some enterprises were beginning to flourish. It would be a number of years before any significant activity was to take place in the Rand Mining District, but this portion of the Eastern Mojave was beginning to fill up with prospectors and miners looking to strike it rich.

Searles Dry Lake, located a scant 30 miles northeast of the Rand Mining District, was the scene of a great deal of activity in the 1870s. Accompanying Dr. Darwin French on his 1860 expedition in search of the Lost Gunsight was a prospector named Dennis Searles. Dennis and his brother John returned to the Slate Range in 1862 to inspect several likely sites in their efforts to locate gold and silver. They located a number of promising ledges in the Slate Range, packed in lumber and machinery for a mill, and established a mining camp. Numerous claims were developed, and for a time it appeared that a boom was in the making. As is often the case, the claims failed to yield riches and John Searles turned his attention elsewhere. It was during the course of this second trip to the area, John Searles picked up several crystals from the dry lake bed that today bears his name (Searles Wagon Road - Spring Clampout, 6005).

In 1872 Searles had drifted to Nevada, where he saw Francis M. Smith recover borax crystals from Teel’s Marsh. Searles had seen the poor-quality borax coming out of the small, localized deposits then being worked, and knew that “his” lake was a much more significant find (Searles Wagon Road - Spring Clampout, 6005). John and Dennis Searles returned to the Slate Range area for a third time in 1873, and with Charles Grossard and Edwin Schillings formed the San Bernardino Borax Mining Company. They filed claims on the northern end of the lake, and built a processing plant on the northwest shore, near present day Trona. In their first year in operation, one million pounds of borax was produced, worth over $200,000 (Searles Wagon Road - Spring Clampout, 6005). Once word of the discovery got out, prospectors switched their sights from gold and silver to borax. Though these prospectors had a difficult time competing with the better claims and water available to the Searles brothers, the abundance of good claims along the dry lake enticed ever greater numbers of people to the area.

With the riches flowing out of Cerro Gordo and the other mines of the Sierras and Desert regions, along with the borax and soda ash moving from Searles Lake, freighting and hauling supplies to the area became big business in the later part of the century. The long hauls of desert freighting were greatly shortened when the Southern Pacific laid its ribbons of steel over the Tehachapis and across the Mojave, into the city of Los Angeles in 1876. That same year the town of Mohave (the old timers pronounced this Mo-har’-vey) assembled itself out of sand, rock, adobe, and freighted in boards, and became henceforth an important jumping-off place for the inner reaches of the desert (Wynn, 1949). Mojave
quickly established itself as a strategic shipping center for the various desert mines, and contributed greatly to the business operations occurring in Death Valley, the Sierras and at Searles Dry Lake. Though Mojave is remembered as “a bear-cat of a town,” a scant twenty miles away the town of Tehachapi boasted twenty-two saloons and twice twenty-two ways of spelling the name. Established in the 1850's as Fort Tejon grew in prominence, Tehachapi served the area as cattle and mining town as well as operating the only significant lime kilns in the desert region.

For the Rand Mining District the stage was set. Miners, prospectors, freighters and thousands of others were passing through the area in ever growing numbers. Searles Valley and the Panamint Valley were alive with activity, and nearly every bit of news, men, or material passed near present day Randsburg on its way to Mojave or Tehachapi and on to Los Angeles.

**Early Days in the Rand Area**

Though John Goler was unable to locate his find, the story of the Goler’s gold and the silver to be found at the Gunsight had attracted the attention of miners and prospectors, who began to search the canyons and washes of the eastern Mojave hoping for riches. In 1893, the first placer gold was found in the area of present day Goler Wash. Ramsey Cox, G. F. Mecham, and “Old Man” Swarthout were some of the first miners to discover placer gold in Goler Canyon (Wynn, 1949). In those first weeks, Ramsey Cox produced a nugget valued at more than $1900, along with several smaller nuggets worth $10 to $50 apiece. The stampede was on, and overnight the whole canyon and its many side gullies were crawling with prospectors (Starry, 1974 (2003)). Goler Canyon provided the first significant mining boom to the area that is known as the Rand Mining District, and men and equipment began to pour into the area and spread out shortly after the discoveries in Goler Canyon. Charlie Koehn developed a way station at Kane Springs to supply the miners with goods, and soon was freighting supplies to the area from the rail stop in Mojave. By late 1893, a news correspondent at Kane Springs reported that in a few short months Goler Canyon had produced more than $50,000 in gold nuggets and that more than 1,000 men were mining the various canyons in the area. The freight route that traveled from Mojave to Searles Dry Lake became an important supply and transportation route to the diggin’s at Goler Canyon, and it is rumored that a great many men abandoned the route in process to make their way to Goler Canyon.

For all their gold fever, however, the men of the Goler gold rush were far-sighted. They met and formed a mining district that in the enthusiasm took in a food portions of eastern Kern County (Starry, 1974 (2003)). Thus the Goler Mining District was borne, and officially recorded in Bakersfield, CA on March 15, 1893. Goler Canyon quickly became a full-fledged mining camp, with impromptu shelters giving way to more permanent facilities as more men and materials arrived in the area. Several people began to run freighting operations to Goler Canyon and the El Paso Range. The increased access to the diggin’s a Goler Canyon, accompanied with the July 1894 railroad strike that turned numerous unemployed men into prospectors, insured that new found riches in Goler Canyon would not be the last to be found in the area.

A note on Mexican Nell, from the magazine “Explore Historic California,” February 2004
In 1893 a curvaceous dark-eyed woman came down the mountains of Tehachapi across the desert to the Black Mountain diggings in the El Paso’s. She came on a freight wagon with food and mining supplies, and her latest lover. “Mexican Nell”, was her name, and she was described as having “temperaments as volcanic as the peak the camp was named after.” Word was that the camp in Goler Gulch was the place to be, so Nell said good bye to her partner in Black Mountain, and secured her belongings to the back of a burro she had gotten from a miner. She wound her way up and down the sandy trails to the new camp, hailing the boys as she rode in. She was ready and “willing to relieve the camp of its tedium and the boys of their dust.” Though there were many saloons, Nell, and the girls that eventually followed her to Goler, preferred Nugent’s where they could listen to the sound of the fiddle, guitar and accordion, and join the old time miners as they sang favorite old camp songs. As the evenings would wear on and the voices became weary from singing, the lonely miner could trade in gold dust or nuggets for one of Nell’s girls and go back to a tiny room or crib for a few hours of “companionship.”

- Garlock

With all of this coming and going of miners, tycoons, freighters and the thousands of others who passed on from camp to camp, the Rand Mountains were overlooked and their treasure lay undisturbed (Wynn, 1949).

Randsburg & The Rand Mining District

To the south of Goler lay a series of hills that held little promise to the prospectors. In fact, they had not yet been named. But that was soon to change, and the names Rand and Randsburg were to become synonymous with the Gay Nineties. Except in Colorado, the West’s big mining booms seemed to be over, and the low price of silver coupled with the failure to find any loads of significance led to stagnation in California and Nevada mining. The strikes at Goler started to change things in California. And then came Randsburg.

Frederick Mooers had been to Rand Mountain in 1894, where he found some placer gold. However, rather than remain at Rand Mountain (as yet unnamed) he moved on to the diggings at Goler, where his luck ran out in the spring of 1895. He talked two other men, John Singleton and Charlie Burcham, into returning to Rand Mountain to search for the source of the placer gold he found the year before. The three men headed north from Goler, then, after making sure they were not being followed, they made a wide turn back to the south and headed for Rand Mountain. Near the top of the mountain they broke off a piece of outcrop, and found it rich with gold. “Boys, we needn’t look any further,” shouted Mooers; “we’ve struck it rich.” (Nadeau, 1999)

The three worthies located their first claim on April 25, naming it for the fabulously wealthy district in the Transvaal of South Africa, the Rand. Shortly the town laid out at the feet of Rand Mountain would take the name Pioneer Camp, while the name of the Rand Mine was changed to the Yellow Aster. However, the men had no money to develop their claim. They would have sold out to a
speculator if it had not been for the intercession of Dr. Rose Burcham, wife of Charlie Burcham. Dr. Burcham practiced medicine in San Bernardino, and tolerated her husband’s search for the end of the rainbow. But when he finally struck pay-dirt, she gave up her practice and moved to the new mining camp at the Yellow Aster. Rather than letting her husband and his partners sell out for a quick buck, she convinced them to hold onto the claim and develop it. Dr. Burcham would become the guiding hand behind the Yellow Aster as the mine faced the legal and financial difficulties common to such operations. In fact, the Yellow Aster was one of the few mines that actually enriched it’s discovers rather than someone else.

About a mile away more promising lodes were found, and the town of Johannesburg, also named for after a town in the Transvaal, popped up. By October of 1895, Jo-burg, as it came to be known, had its first buildings, including a hotel and saloon. Over in Pioneer Camp, space was very limited (and very steep), so a townsite was laid out further down the mountain where the ground was a little flatter. This would be called Randsburg. Shortly, Charley Koehn opened a meat market and general store. In the valley to the north of Rand Mining District, Eugene Garlock opened an eight-stamp mill at what was then known as Cow Wells. Soon, heavily laden wagons were making the trip from the Yellow Aster and other Rand area mines to Garlock’s mill. On the return trip, the wagons carried casks of water from the well. By 1896 things were really booming; Randsburg boasted more stores, saloons, gambling establishments, and dance halls. Regular stage service was opened to the railroad in Mojave, and the little stamp mill at Cow Wells did it’s all to keep up with the ore arriving from the Rand mines.

The excitement at Randsburg and Johannesburg caught the attention of the Santa Fe Railroad, and by 1897 rails had been laid across 27 miles of desert from Kramer Junction to the south to Johannesburg. Daily passenger and freight service began on January 17, 1898; the line was originally plotted to extend into Randsburg, but that never came about. By June, the Yellow Aster was sending its ore rail to a fifty-stamp mill in Barstow rather than by wagon to Cow Wells. Although the Yellow Aster still had to ship its ore by wagon two miles to Johannesburg, the mill at Barstow (unlike that at Cow Wells) had enough capacity to handle all it ore. However, it wasn’t long before the owners of the Yellow Aster made plans to open their own mill, and in February of 1899 a 120 stamp mill, the largest in California at the time, began operation. The Yellow Aster went on to become the largest and longest-lived silver producer in the Rand District. By 1918, it accounted for nearly $12 million of the $20 million produced in the district.

But gold was not the only metal that would make men rich in the Rand District. During a labor strike in 1903 Charles Taylor and Tom McCarthy went prospecting and discovered tungsten deposits four miles south of Johannesburg. On October 21, 1905 the Mining and Scientific Press noted that T. McCarthy and C. S. Taylor received returns from a carload of tungsten ore which they had recently shipped to Germany. It netted $8,000 after paying freight and all other expenses. In February 1906 E. B De Golia and a Mr. Atkins purchased Thomas McCarthy and M. C. Curran’s claims for $114,000 with $27,000 cash down. Since September 1905 McCarthy and Curran had shipped three carloads of ore to Germany and sunk a shaft to 50 feet on a 3 foot wide vein. De Golia and Atkins organized the Papoose Mining Company. Initially De Golia and Atkins shipped the low-grade ore to the idle Barstow mill but by March 1907 they constructed the first tungsten mill; however water for the mill had to be hauled in
railroad tank cars 45 miles from Hinkley. Up until this time hand sorting was the only concentrating method used. At this time the railroad constructed a spur and the place began to be called Atolia, a contraction of Atkins’ and De Golia’s names. On January 25, 1916 the mill was destroyed by fire, a loss of about $109,000 to the Atkins, Kroll and Company, but by March the mill had been reconstructed.

The heyday was the years 1916 to 1918 when Atolia boasted a payroll of out $60,000 per month. During that period nearly $10 million was produced. The mines at Atolia produced more tungsten than any other mine in the world during this period. In 1916 the town of Atolia boasted four restaurants, three general stores, a drug store, two stationary stores, two shoemakers, one hotel, three rooming houses and several lodging tents, four pool rooms, four barber shops, an ice cream parlor, picture show, garage, three butcher shops, a newspaper, and new school house for 60 pupils.

By 1918, although tungsten was still going strong in Red Mountain, gold mining in the Rand District was declining rapidly. A year later, two prospectors discovered a rich silver load to the east of Rand Mountain. This created another rush to the newly organized town of Red Mountain, where “every night is Saturday night and Saturday night is the Fourth of July.” (Nadeau 1999) The discovery, which saw the establishment of the Kelly Mine and the Big Silver, led to one of California’s most famous silver booms. (www.high-desert-memories.com/atolia.html)

The mines of Red Mountain continued to produce through the 1920’s, but by 1930, with the exception of the tungsten mines at Atolia, the gold and silver were pretty much played out. The Santa Fe tracks were torn out between Kramer and Johannesburg, as there simply was not enough business to make the line profitable. The depot at Johannesburg still exists—its top floor was separated from its lower floor, and both were made into private residences about 300 feet apart. Atolia continued to produce tungsten through World War II, but eventually its mines would close too. Today little remains of Atolia, but Randsburg continues to hang on as a “living ghost town” with two inns (the Randsburg Inn and the Cottage Inn) as well as the White Horse Saloon and the Randsburg General Store—where the best ice cream shakes in all the known world are served. The Randsburg Inn and the General store are Clamper-owned, as are several antique and curio shops in town. Johannesburg continues as a quiet desert community, while Red Mountain clings to life along U.S. 395.

The Second Era of the Rand Mining District

Mining in the Randsburg-Johannesburg-Red Mountain area continued for many years, albeit intermittently, and continues up to the present day. A simplistic way to keep track of things is to break the glory days of the mining boom into three distinct segments. Gold was discovered in the Rand Mountains in 1895 with the location of the Rand Mine, whose name was later changed to the Yellow Aster. This same deposit is being mined today, of which we will hear more later. In 1918 silver was discovered at the fabulously rich Kelly Mine in Red Mountain. This single mine produced something on the order of $27 million before the price of silver dropped and the mine closed in the 1940s. In between was another boom, just as important financially, which also played an important role in our national
defense during three wars. This time the prize was tungsten, and this less well known flurry of mining activity is the subject of this article.

Tungsten has the highest melting point of any pure (unalloyed) metal. Its name is derived from the Swedish words *tung sten*, which literally mean “heavy stone.” It is heavier than uranium, and only slightly less dense than gold. One of its most common uses is as filaments for incandescent light bulbs. It is also vital in the production of very hard steel and in the manufacture of heavy military ordnance, such as armor piercing projectiles for tank and antitank guns.

The discovery of tungsten in the area dates to about 1905. It was encountered by prospectors who arrived in the Rand Mountains after the most productive gold claims had been staked, and then drifted southward in search of some new bonanza. They sank shafts 75 to 100 feet through deep alluvial material all the way to bedrock. Here they excavated loose gravel deposits, lifted them to the surface, and ran them through dry washers. In this way they eked out enough gold to “pay wages” and keep themselves in beans and bacon.

But there was a problem with the ore. Nodules of a light-colored material the miners called “heavy spar” were found among the gravels. This complicated the refining process, as the heavy tungsten was concentrated along with the gold. Some of this material was also found in the gold ore from the Yellow Aster. By 1905 heavy spar was identified as scheelite, the most common form of tungsten ore. The presence of tungsten was considered a nuisance, as there was really no market for the metal in such small quantities.

Subsequent shafts encountered rich veins of scheelite in formations that were called spuds or stringers. In later days the area of greatest mining activity was known as the “spud patch”. Although there was no great demand for the metal, there were sufficient quantities of ore that a mill to process the scheelite was built in 1907. At this stage of the game a 20-pound unit of concentrated ore, containing 60% tungsten, was worth about $6, and only a few mines in the area yielded ore this rich.

The mill was constructed by E. B. DeGolia and a Mr. Atkins. The settlement that sprang up around the mill was christened Atolia, a contraction of the two names. Edwin Gudde’s 1949 California Place Names goes a step further and states that DeGolia supplied only the “lia” and the “o” came from Pete Osdick, a prominent local miner.

This status quo continued until 1914. With the onset of World War I the price of tungsten more than tripled, and good pieces of float (ore) brought $2 to $3 a pound. It is stated that particularly rich specimens were used as poker chips and could be exchanged for supplies and services in local business establishments. High-grading became rampant, and even the local children could be seen scouring the dumps for pieces of tungsten float. The late Bob Powers states in his 2002 book Desert Country:

*When the tungsten discovered around Atolia became so valuable, the miners were watched like the laborers in the South African diamond mines. The Atolia Mining Company would not allow the miners to bring up their own dinner buckets. As soon as the men were through eating, a guard would take the buckets and send them to the top of the 900-foot shaft.*
They were inspected and given to the men when they came up. The miners were even made to change their clothes before and after coming off shift.

On January 25, 1916 the mill was destroyed by fire, at a loss of $109,000, but was quickly reconstructed and back in service by March. Atolia’s heyday was from 1916 to 1918, when the mining company boasted a payroll of about $60,000 a month. The mines in the region produced almost $10 million worth of tungsten during this period, making it the largest tungsten operation in the world.

Depending on the source quoted, the town had a population of from 300 to 2,000. Yet another says that during World War I 4,000 people lived and worked in the Atolia area, and during its entire existence produced tungsten worth a total of $65 million. In the middle of the boom in 1916 the town boasted four restaurants, three general stores, a drug store, two stationery stores, two shoemakers’ shops, a hotel, a rooming house, and various tent lodgings. There were also four pool halls, an ice cream parlor, a movie theater, a repair garage, three butcher shops, a newspaper, and a school accommodating 60 pupils.

Times were good in Atolia, but not for long. When the armistice ending the war was signed on November 11, 1918, the demand for tungsten immediately crashed. The town’s fortunes declined for the next two decades, but were revived during World War II when the demand for tungsten once again shot up. A presidential Executive Order of 1942 closed the country’s gold mines so the workers thus engaged could be diverted to the war effort. Tungsten, however, was a strategic metal, and the mines at Atolia were promptly reopened. The Hoefling brothers of Sacramento worked the claims, moving 600,000 cubic yards of gravel to extract the tungsten. As a bonus, they also recovered a small amount of gold and silver. The level of activity during this period was significant, but never matched the excitement of the First World War.

Once again, the end of war brought operations to a halt, although the mines were reopened again during the Korean War of 1950-1953. At the close of hostilities mining ceased for good. There is still tungsten in the ground here, but today China produces the commodity so cheaply that it can be imported more economically than it can be mined in this country. China is estimated to possess 75% of the planet’s known supply of the metal. If the world situation should change and once again create a high demand for tungsten, the mines could almost certainly be revived.

Early days in the Rand District were rowdy, but not lawless. There were plenty of saloons, pool halls, and inevitably, houses of ill repute. During Prohibition days the former mining towns became party towns catering to a large and thirsty clientele from as far away as Los Angeles. The remoteness of the region discouraged against any large presence of lawmen, and there was an “anything goes” attitude in the air. Even if the law did make an appearance, there was some confusion over just where the San Bernardino-Kern county line was located, and therefore over which county’s officers held jurisdiction.
The Rand Mining District Today

Today, the Rand Mining District is just a shadow of its former self. It was witness to three distinct periods of mining frenzy: gold from the Yellow Aster and the surrounding mines at Randsburg, tungsten from the spud patch at Atolia, and the rich silver strikes at Red Mountain. The Yellow Aster shut down in 1942 after 47 years of continuous operations and the production of $16 million in gold. The Big Kelly Mine at Red Mountain opened in 1919 and yielded $27 million in silver, but finally shut down as the supply of ore was exhausted and the price of silver plummeted. The Randsburg Railway, later purchased by the Santa Fe, ceased to run in 1933. The rails were taken up, and the decline of the Rand District began in earnest. Worked-out mines were abandoned and mills were torn down and vandalized.

In 1959 there was talk of turning the Yellow Aster property into a tourist attraction with a mine train taking visitors underground to show where the ore bodies had been extracted, but these grandiose plans never came to fruition. Sometime later there were rumors that the U. S. government was interested in the abandoned shafts and tunnels as storage for old records on paper and microfilm, but this too failed to materialize.

Randsburg today is one of the best preserved mining towns anywhere on the Mojave Desert. There are still a handful of businesses on the main street, overlooked by the Yellow Aster. Prominent among them is the White House Saloon, which at the time this article was written is a Clamper-operated watering hole. Clamper signs and symbols are visible several places throughout the town. Also worthy of a visit is the local museum, and a fine example of a five-stamp mill can be seen nearby. Fellow Clampers are encouraged to drop in and stimulate the local economy.

A new chapter in the story of the Rand Mining District began in 1984. In that year Glamis Gold, Ltd. acquired an option to purchase claims in Kern County. Included in the ensuing sale was the Yellow Aster, where the company did exploratory work in 1985. Two years later, mining commenced at the adjacent Lamont and Descarga sites, using the heap leach method to extract the gold. The Rand Mining Company was formed to manage the site.

After three years, the Rand operations changed and expanded. Mining ceased on the Descarga claim in 1989, and the Lamont claim was “mined out” by June of 1990. In May of that year open pit mining was begun at the original Yellow Aster claim, which was estimated to hold 11 million tons of ore containing about 0.022 ounce of gold per ton. The size of this operation required the construction of another leach pad and another recovery plant. In July of 1991 they purchased a number of claims including the Baltic mine and several adjacent properties, and production began in August of 1993.

In 1995 Glamis expanded the Rand site, adding a 60 million ton leach pad and additional processing facilities. In 1996 the leach pad capacity was reached, and ore was transported to other facilities for processing. Production was also restarted in part of the Lamont pit in the fall of that year. In 1998 the Rand properties produced about 87,000 ounces of gold, and an additional 71,000 ounces in 1999. In 2001 the company began to phase out operations at the Yellow Aster, and in 2002 the Rand mines produced 67,000 ounces. The author was unable to obtain any more current production data, but
given the recent record high prices of gold, it seems likely that the mines of the Rand District, first discovered five and a half decades ago, will continue to exert a strong economic influence in the foreseeable future.
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VNGH’s Note

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Interesting Sites & Side Excursions in the Randsburg - Red Mountain Area

- **The X-15 Crash Site**

  On November 15, 1967 Air Force Major Michael Adams was killed when his X-15 disintegrated at an altitude of 60,000 as he attempted an emergency landing procedure at Cuddleback Dry Lake east of Red Mountain. Take Hwy 395 to Trona Road, head out Trona Road 3.5 miles and turn left on dirt road at N35.24.714 W117.35.664. At 3rd crossroad at 0.7 miles turn right to the crash site monument.

- **Searles Wagon Road**

  A mere 30 miles from Randsburg, Searles Dry Lake is one of the most significant mining operations to take place in California. Run off from the surrounding mountains has deposited on the now dry lake significant Borax deposits. Head north on Hwy 395 to Hwy 278 and continue north. Searles Dry Lake will be on the east side of the highway approximately 4 miles from the 395/278 intersection (see map).

- **The Trona Pinnacles**

  Tufa pinnacles rise out of the dry lake bed and are remnants of the last ice age. The Trona Pinnacles are certainly one of the most unique and beautiful geologic features in the Mojave Desert, and once served as the setting for the original Planet of the Apes. Near Searles Dry Lake (above).

- **20-Mule Team Parkway**

  Mining superintendent J.W.S. Perry and a young muleskinner named Ed Stiles came up with the idea of hauling the borax ore to Mojave by hitching two ten-mule teams together to form a 100-foot-long, twenty-mule team. The borax wagons had to be hauled up and out of Death Valley, over the steep Panamint Mountains and across the scorching desert to reach Mojave. Located off Highway 395, approximately 5 miles south of Johannesburg.

- **ECV Monuments**

  Silverdollar Saloon located in Johannesburg. Highway 395 just south of Trona Road. Plaque is located above the doorway to the saloon. The Randsburg Jail in Randsburg, CA near the intersection of Butte Avenue and Randsburg Cut-off Road. This plaque is in a concrete monument placed on the north side of the jail. The Town Ladies located in Johannesburg, on highway 395 about 2 blocks south of the Silver Dollar Saloon. Small aluminum plaque located on the front of the old saloon building.