

It all started when William F. Holcomb left Indiana to seek his fortune in the mining camps of Northern California. Discouraged by his poor luck there, he drifted southward. While in Los Angeles, he was told a story about a small gold discovery in the San Bernardino Mountains. So it was in 1859 that Bill Holcomb came to these hills. And the rest is history.

# Gold Fever Trail

## Nuggets Of History In Holcomb Valley

*Welcome to the historic gold country of the San Bernardino National Forest. This trail takes you through the now peaceful Holcomb Valley where the saga of early miners is still recorded. The mileage shown at each stop is the distance from the Big Bear Ranger Station. The tour is 10.9 miles in length over a dirt road, and 8.2 miles back to the Ranger Station via State Highway 18. Plan on about three hours to complete the trip. From the Ranger Station go west on Highway 38, drive 1.2 miles and turn right on Polique Canyon Road. 2N09. (Holcomb Valley turnoff.)*

### 1. Holcomb View Trail

(3.6 miles)

**Follow the Pacific Crest Trail about 250 feet to the viewpoint.**

If it hadn't been for "boot soup," Bill and his companions would have starved that first winter. Bill being a fine marksman, was hired by other prospectors to fetch bear meat. His search led him through Polique Canyon. When he reached the summit of the ridge he looked northward and saw a beautiful little valley about two miles in the distance.

The following day, Bill wounded a "monster grizzly" and trailed it past a quartz ledge which was flecked with gold. The yellow metal seemed to be everywhere! The news of Holcomb's discovery spread like wildfire, and the rush was on. By July 1860, the valley was swarming with prospectors.

### 2. Last Chance Placer

(5.2 miles)

**Drive in 200 feet.**

The miners worked the ground at this site down to within several feet of bedrock many years ago. Once "pay dirt" was reached, it was moved by horse and cart, or in sacks on the backs of burros, to be "sluiced in the rockers." These crude gravel washers were located near hand-built earthen "snow ponds" where snow melted to supply the water needed. One such pond can be seen just up the gulch from these tailings.

Diggings were shallow and easily worked. In 1860, an average of three pounds of gold a day was removed from this area by Holcomb and his companions. As the placer gave out, a shaft was dug to search for bedrock and the "Mother Lode." However, they encountered a large amount of water which made the attempt unsuccessful. To this day, the Mother Lode, which supposedly enriched this whole area, has never been found.

### 3. Two-Gun Bill's Saloon

(6.2 miles)

**There is a short 280-foot walk to the saloon.**

This interesting log structure saw many a gold nugget slide over its bar for a glass of Old Gilt Edge. The early day saloon was not only a place for drinking, it was the social hall, court house, and city hall of most boom towns and mining camps. It was a place to gather during the day when not engaged in digging or looking for gold, and at night to spin yarns, drink and have a fling with "Lady Luck."

### 4. Jonathan Tibbetts' Grasshopper Quartz Mill

(6.7 miles)

Located in the "center of activity" was a high piece of ground known as "Chinamen's Knoll." Here Tibbetts operated a Pico Steam Engine powered stamp mill. Heavy iron heads rose and fell pulverizing ore from John Bull's seven mammoth ledges of honeycombed quartz.

### 5. Hangman's Tree

(6.9 miles)

This stately juniper stands as a symbol of the law and justice of the early turbulent days of Holcomb Valley. As miners and prospectors came to seek their fortune, outlaws, claim jumpers, gamblers and general trouble makers followed close behind.

There is recorded evidence of as many as four convictions and subsequent hangings at one time on this tree. When the victim of a hanging was finally cut down, the branch from which the rope hung was chopped off. So you can tell how many "met their Maker" here.

### 6. Original Gold Diggings

(7.1 miles)

It is in this general area that Bill Holcomb made his original discovery



of gold while trailing a wounded bear. "Pannin' and diggin'" along this intermittent stream yielded some of the purest gold ever discovered in California.

### 7. Belleville

(7.4 miles)

East of the original discovery was a rich flat which drew the largest gathering of prospectors. A town soon sprang up. In addition to the many saloons, there was one store, two butcher shops, two laundries, one bakery, three carpenter shops, two blacksmiths, one stamp mill and one sawmill.

On the outskirts "dugouts" and hastily built shacks were used as shelter for the miners. The population was the typical mining town variety: good men and industrious workers, worthless characters and professional "badmen."

The blacksmith's wife, Mrs. Jed Van Dusen, made a flag from petticoats for the town's first July 4th Celebration. For her patriotic efforts the town was named Belleville in honor of her pretty little daughter, Belle.

The Presidential election of 1860 in Belleville was held at Jackson's grocery store. Abraham Lincoln received 307 votes in the county. In an election one year later, Belleville missed becoming the county seat by a mere two votes. San Bernardino won that election.

### 8. Arrastres

(7.4 miles)

*There is a 300-foot walk.*

Remains of several "arrastres" may be seen in the area. Although they are of more recent construction than those of the 1860s, they serve to illustrate the method then used for extracting gold from the ore.

The early types consisted of a low stone and dirt wall built around a large and fairly level stone. To a vertical post in the center was pivoted a long horizontal beam. An end of the beam was harnessed to a donkey or mule to provide the power necessary by walking in a circle outside the low arrastre wall. A heavy chain was fastened to the beam about midway, and the free end of the chain linked to a bolt wedged into a heavy "drag stone." Occasionally, two drag stones were used.

The slow, tedious process of grinding the chunks of ore took about four hours. Water was used to wash the crushed ore out of a single opening in the arrastre where the gold was separated from the sand, usually by sluice boxes. In the early days of the gold rush, over 100 arrastres were built and used to grind gold-bearing quartz.

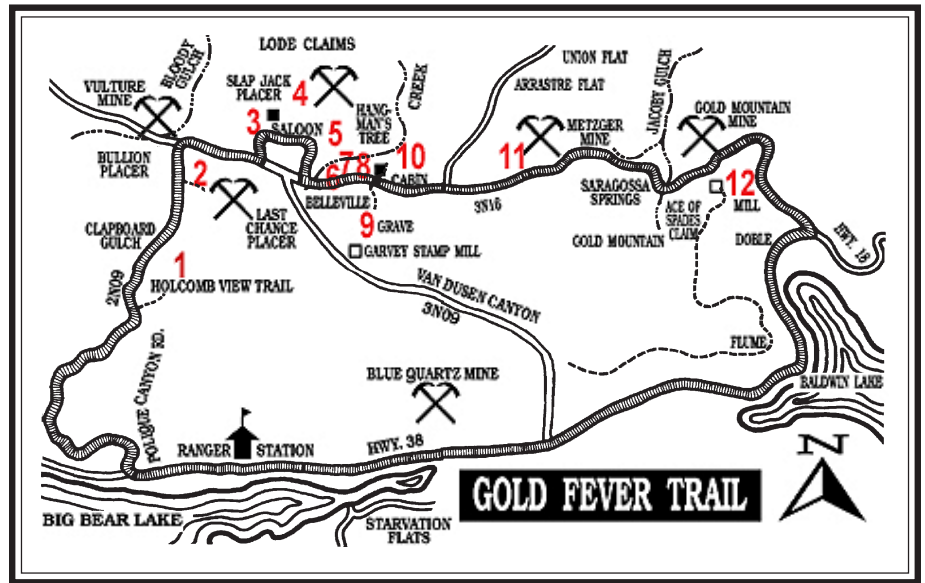
### 9. Ross' Grave

(7.7 miles)

*There is a 460-foot trail to the grave site.*

Very little is known of this man except for his name and the cause of his death. Ross was killed accidentally while operating a saw, and was buried on the spot. The remarkable thing is that in those days of the lust for gold, someone cared enough to take the time to hand carve the old picket fence surrounding the grave.

At the peak of the rush in 1861, an estimated 1,300 people were tempo-



rally residing in Holcomb Valley. Most, if not all, of the timber now standing has grown since the days when loggers with their cross-cut hand saws and "yokes of six" were snaking the timber to nearby mills. Lumber was needed to build the towns of Belleville, Union City, Clapboard and Doble. Heavy timbers were also needed to shore up the ceilings of the underground mines.

### 10. Pigmy Cabin

(7.7 miles)

*The trail to the cabin is 870 feet in length.*

This old cabin was a curiosity because it was so small. It is even more interesting to know it was a barber shop as late as the 1930s. One story claims it was built small because of a fast approaching storm. Another has it that the builder was eager to finish and try his luck at the nearest stream. The cabin was destroyed by fire in November 1983.

### 11. Metzger Mine

(9.3 miles)

*There is an 800-foot trail to the mine.*

Soon after most of the placers were staked, gold-bearing quartz veins were discovered in the hills to the north and down through Jacoby Gulch to the east. The vein the miners followed when they dug this hardrock "drift" is visible above the mine entrance. Lode claims could not be worked except with heavy machinery which was not readily transported on pack animals. The necessity for a wagon road was so great that miners subscribed \$1,500 and a road was constructed by Van Dusen down through Lower Holcomb to connect with the old toll road in Cajon Pass. On the new road, by wagon, came an 800-pound boiler to power the first quartz mill. It took 27 days to



transport it from Los Angeles to Holcomb Valley.

### 12. Gold Mountain "Lucky Baldwin" Mine

(11.3 miles)

The last major gold discovery occurred in 1873 when Barney and Charley Carter were out prospecting for silver. While they were camped on the north side of Baldwin Lake, Barney went to inspect the quartz ledge that was immediately above their camp. His discovery turned out to be a mountain of gold ore. Elias J. "Lucky" Baldwin purchased "Carter's Quartz Hill." By 1876, Baldwin had 180 men working in his mine and had constructed a 40-stamp mill to process the ore. The site of a large mill and cyanide processing plant can still be seen on the hillside to the west of the site.

History now has it that when Holcomb shouldered his rifle and left Starvation Flats that day in 1860, more gold would be taken out of "his" Valley per square mile than anywhere else in Southern California.