

Black Mountain and the French-Canadian Mission Creek Placer Miners

By Ian Pooley

Directly south of Black Mountain and the new Black Mountain/Sntsk'il'ntən Regional Park lies the Mission Creek canyon, the site of an early gold-mining rush. The Mission Creek placer mining area was initially established in 1861 by American miners who had previously discovered gold at Rock Creek in 1860. The American miners, however, did not stay more than a season. After the initial discovery, the Mission Creek site was principally exploited by French-Canadian settlers who had taken up farming at l'Anse au Sable, also known as Okanagan Mission. The same group also exploited the placer mining site at Cherry Creek east of Vernon, established in 1862. These early settlers, as described by historian Duane Thomson, combined subsistence farming with gold mining. In the summer season, they worked their diggings in the upper Mission Creek canyon or at Cherry Creek, often leaving their wives and families at the main settlement at the mouth of Mission Creek to tend the family garden.ⁱ A diary entry quoted by Thomson gives us a glimpse of one of these families:

“Saw two half breed women on the trail today.¹ One middle-aged and about three-quarter Indian, the other pretty, fair, and younger. Both with gay coloured handkerchiefs round their heads. The younger woman with three children, the eldest perhaps three years old, riding a little horse tied securely to the saddle. The younger ones, one sitting behind the mother and the other in front, on the same horse. Both women riding straddle. The one with children going to her husband at Cherry Creek. “ (Dawson Diary, 5 July 1877)

Early francophone settlers like William Pion, Ledoux, Calmels, Louis Christian, Peter Bisette, George Leblanc, Vincent Duteau, and Charles Christian engaged in this dual mode of production, earning a cash income from their mining activities to supplement their subsistence farming and support their families. Placer mining

on Mission Creek and at Cherry Creek tapered off in the late 1880s and early 1890s. In the final years of Mission Creek mining, the activity was carried out by both whites and Chinese: In 1888, four whites and eight Chinese were still working mining claims in the canyon.

¹ See Duane Thomson, "A History of the Okanagan. Indians and Whites in the Settlement Era, 1860-1920," Ph.D. Dissertation, UBC, 1985.

¹ Dawson uses a term common in his day, but now unacceptable, to refer to people of mixed-race ancestry.



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