

Part 5

Fred and Josephine Payne ordered a heavy steel prospector's pan almost 60 years ago, from a store in Cripple Creek, Colo., that outfitted gold miners.

For the next several years the Paynes panned gold, mostly in the colder months when other work was slow, on their Coker Creek farm, in Monroe County south of Tellico Plains.

They learned that the most likely place to find "placer" gold there is in the gravel next to the bedrock, maybe as deep as four to six feet below the surface of the bottomland that borders Coker Creek and its tributaries.

Fred would start by digging a pit, several feet square, to uncover the gravel next to the bedrock. Digging was fairly easy with only a mattock and a shovel for tools.

They'd load their pan with likely looking gravel and sand, and with water dipped from the creek would "slosh away" the bigger pebbles in the pan, until all that was left was a teaspoonful of dark sand and tiny flecks or "colors" of gold.

"It would take us 15 to 20 minutes to 'work' one pan of gravel," Fred says.

"And when we got down to that last spoonful of sand and gold, we'd have to be very careful not to wash it out of the pan."



Frederick C. Payne cherishes, and occasionally uses, a heavy prospector's pan acquired early in the 1920s. Picture was made this week in East Tennessee's "Gold Belt" in Monroe County. Mail address of Fred and Josephine Payne: Route 4, Box 81B, Tellico Plains, Tenn., 37385.

very careful not to wash it out of the pan."

Even the final spoonful would be far more sand than gold, but the high shine of those few flakes of gold, most of them no bigger than big enough to be seen with the unaided eye, could be very exciting.

"It'd make you want to work another panful of gravel right away," Fred says.

After Josephine learned to pan it became a recreation for them, and for their older children.

"We owned the land at the mouth of Hot Water Branch, which was as cold a mountain stream as there was around there," Fred says.

"We'd get out on days so cold we'd have to build a fire. We'd pan in that ice-cold water until our hands would almost freeze. Then we'd warm by the fire and right back we'd go and pan again."

(The fire was also convenient for "burning" the pan now and then to rid it of grease and oil. Gold can't be washed in a pan that has a particle of grease on it. Even greasy hands will cause the bits of gold to float in the pan, and they will wash over the side, Fred says.)

The Paynes say they have never, in

their time, seen any nuggets of any size at all come out of the Coker Creek gravel.

"We've seen a few about the size of the head of a match," says Fred.

"Or maybe about the size of a grain of wheat," says Josephine.

When they did come home from a panning trip they'd put their spoonful or so of gold into a small bottle or medicine vial, and would regard it as an interesting keepsake of not much value, except as a souvenir of a day of excitement.

They can't recall selling any of their gold for cash, but they did "lend" several bottles of it to their neighbor, James L. Akers, promoter of the Annette Mining Co. on adjoining Coker Creek land upstream.

Akers would "borrow" the specimens to show to investors in his mining operation, and usually he would give them the samples. At least he didn't return any of them to the Paynes.

Fred doubts that all the gold he and Josephine have panned would total two ounces, which at today's fluctuating prices would be worth less than a thousand dollars. But gold sold for slightly

more than \$20 an ounce in the 1920s, when the Paynes lived on Coker Creek.

To illustrate the value of Coker Creek gold at 1920s prices, geologist Robin Hale, doing his own field work and panning in Coker Creek gravel, has put together these figures:

A penny's worth of gold, at 1920s prices, would have been 2,000 flakes big enough to be seen with the unaided eye, the almost-microscopic size most commonly found in Coker Creek gravel.

When gold soared to its recent record prices in world markets, the same 2,000 tiny flecks from Coker Creek would have been worth about 25 cents.

One of Robin Hale's field experiments was to pick a likely site where he had the land owner's permission to dig on Coker Creek, and to start washing gravel at eight o'clock one morning and continue until six that evening, without much letup except for a few minutes to eat a packed lunch.

Robin dug the basal gravel off the bedrock, and to hasten the washing of it used a sluice box. He used a pan for the final cleanup of the sediment caught in the

Coker Creek Memoir

Paynes sell gold property; it's a 'lode' off their minds

riffles of the sluice.

He did the final separation of gold from sand by hand, at a table under good light. And for his long day's arduous labor he had 87 cents worth of gold, at recent prices.

But on another recent outing Hale's young son Russell found a nugget, about the shape of a grain of wheat but not as thick, that is worth \$10, estimate.

Fred Payne says that people who were quite intelligent "would get all fired up" over a few "colors" of gold in the pan.

"There was a fellow, Henry D. Jensewski was his name, that came out there from Chicago. He asked me to teach him to pan for gold," Fred recalls.

"I gave him a pan, and showed him how to use it, and showed him where I had a pit down to the base gravel.

"He took some sand out of the pit and went to the creek and washed it in his pan, and found a little scale of gold. It wouldn't weigh anything much, it was so thin, but it was half as big as my little fingernail, the biggest scale I'd ever seen.

"When he found that, I thought he was going to tear the laurel thicket down. He

came out of there hollering as loud as he could holler that he'd found gold. He was excited to death.

"He agreed to pay us \$22,500 for our 160 acres. Of course that was a fabulous price then. He was the son of a Polish nobleman, and said he had an estate in France, and that he'd go over there and sell it and come back and buy our farm.

"He wrote me a letter from France, and I still have it, saying he'd come back here. But for some reason he failed to sell and our deal fell through.

"We had to take half that amount

when we sold it to the Annette Mining Co. We sold it for \$12,500, and people around there still thought I made a fabulous trade. I guess I did, but it was nothing to what it's worth now," Fred says.

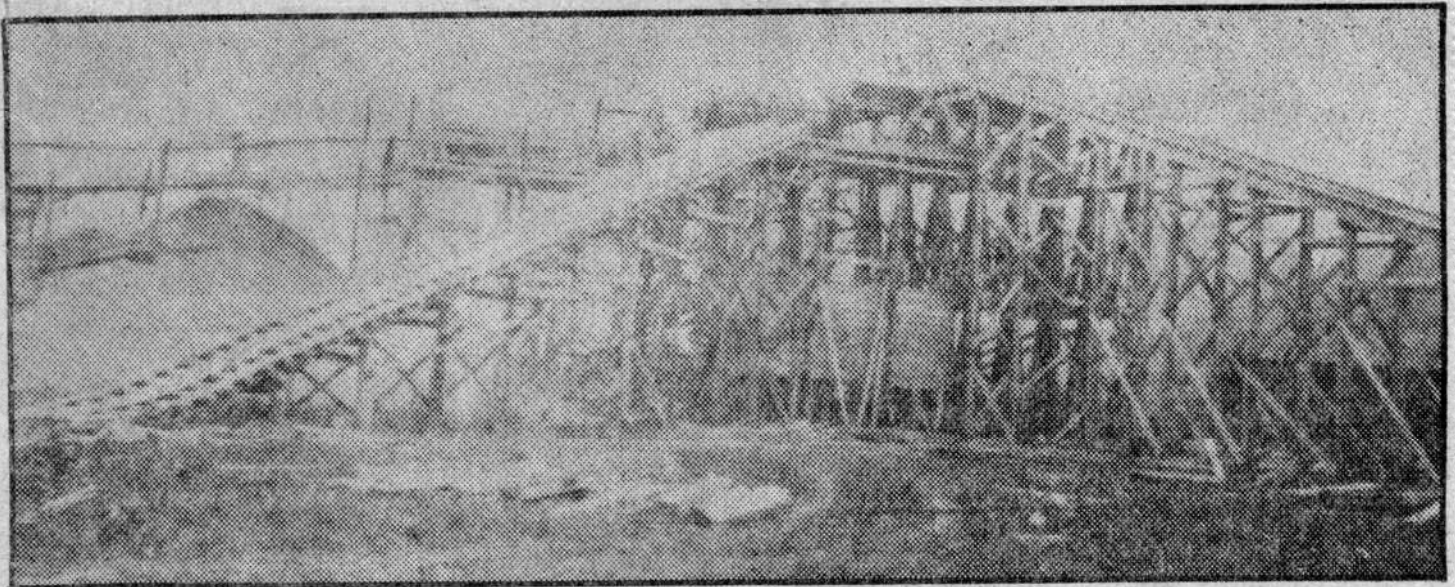
One of the mysteries that excited newcomers was the source of the gold in the basal gravel. They would reason that it had to have crumbled and washed there from the mother lode somewhere close.

They would reason that if they bought the land they might find the lode and dig the gold, in big chunks, directly from it. It never has happened that way, and the entire valley is tunneled and pocked from a search for gold that has now gone on for 150 years, since the first whites came into what was then Cherokee land in the 1830s.

The Payne bottomlands, by the middle 1920s, were flooded with muck from Annette's big gravel-washing operation upstream, and Josephine was weary of cooking for drop-in guests who came to throw away their money on the venture.

So they were glad at that time to be leaving Coker Creek, although both have had occasional regrets in the more than 50 years since.

Tennessee Travels



The ambitious Annette Mining Co. built this "concentrator" to catch gold separated from Coker Creek gravel. Carloads of gravel were pulled up one slope and dumped, and washed of gold by a stream of water directed down a long sluice. Snapshot was made in 1925 by visiting geologist Olaf N. Rove, who stayed in

the Fred C. Payne household while he did a "Reconnaissance of the Gold Deposits of Eastern Tennessee." Picture made available now from historical materials assembled by Stuart W. Maher, chief geologist of Tennessee Division of Geology. Pile of discarded gravel at left was later used on neighborhood roads.