

# Billings Man Relates History Of Early Montana Prospectors

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Several weeks ago The Yellowstone News ran a story by Ed L. Nowels on the origin of the name "Montana" which was given to the Treasure state after much debate in the halls of congress. This story uncovered another story of interest regarding the early days of the west and Montana in particular.

The story comes from George R. Pierce of Billings, whose



JAMES PIERCE

father, James Pierce and cousin, Green Russell, both of Georgia, were early-day prospectors in Colorado. Pierce's father and another cousin, and Dr. R. J. Russell of the original Colorado party came into Montana in 1863 and operated as prospectors and miners. Much of the story is from notes of James Pierce.

The story dates back to 1849 during the gold rush in California. While on their way overland to California W. G. and J. K. Russell of Georgia found some gold on the North Platte and the Sweetwater rivers. Green Russell and others followed to California and returned to Georgia in 1852 with approximately \$20,000.

Remembering their find in While on their way overland to prospect the mountains in Colorado in the spring of 1853. In this party was James Pierce, father of the Billings business man and state legislator. They outfitted at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., where Pierce and his cousin, Dr Russell, had just proved up some land, having arrived there the year before.

The party prospected along the Platte river and found some gold. They headed for the mountains and continued to find showings of gold. They were joined by a man named Cantrell who had been to Fort Laramie with a wagon load of whiskey which he had driven by himself from Kansas City. He had been a California miner and took a sackful of dirt from their diggings to Kansas City with him. It was panned out in Kansas City and caused the "Pike's Peak or Bust" stampede of 1859.

The party turned back to the South Platte and as it was now September and prospects were discouraging they decided to "bed down" for the winter on their old camp site. Here they found a village of tents and Indian lodges. Their party of 13 joined this group. Three of their party decided to go back to Georgia for help and return the next spring. They carried with them most of the gold dust that had been taken out during the summer. They arrived home late in the fall and had the gold coined at Dalonga, Ga. This was the first gold ever coined from the Rocky mountains.

Later that fall no less than 2,000 people arrived from the east, due to Cantrell's story of gold which appeared in many newspapers. The town of Auroria was laid out, which is now a part of west Denver. Other towns sprang up and the boom was on. By the spring of 1859 close to 250 cabins and houses were built there and 25 to 30 thousand people had arrived from the east.

The three Georgians returned from their state in June, 1859 and brought 50 Georgia miners with them. At that time they found gold in Russell Gulch and in other locations. The Georgians proved to be past masters in placer mining. Luck was not so good for Pierce so he went down the Platte river and took up a ranch. After that he did little mining in Colorado.

The War Between the States started in 1861, and a number of the Georgians endeavored to get home by a southern route. Their trip was not successful, so they returned to Colorado in 1863. Pierce and his cousin, Dr. Russell, went to Montana, landing at Fort Benton by boat. They were prospectors and miners in Virginia City, Helena and Ruby valley until 1870.

From here the story is told by George Pierce of Billings, who said that during this period his father and 14 others were employed by China Clark, developing a mine which later became famous. When they were due to strike the main vein, the people who were backing the project demanded the controlling interest. Clark and the 15 miners held a council and decided not to yield.

Five of this group went to work on a "day's pay" basis in other mines. The proceeds from their work financed the remaining 10 to complete the Clark holdings. Clark bought the interests of the people who refused further finances.

Pierce's father and Dr. Russell operated a quartz mine in this area and removed \$100,000 in gold. But they spent their entire sum buying machinery and equipment. They returned to Georgia in 1870 for more men to help them with their mine, but the elder Pierce got married and Dr. Russell went to Texas.

In 1873, Pierce's father and mother also went to Texas, stopping near Fort Worth until 1885. They then went to Arkansas and remained until 1886, when they returned to Colorado and settled near Idaho Springs where his father operated a placer mine on Clear creek. The Billings man was born at Idaho Springs.

Pierce related one of his father's stories regarding the camels which were brought to Montana to carry supplies from Fort Benton to the various Montana mining camps. A tenderfoot, seeing

them grazing where the state capitol now stands, shot one of them for a wild animal. The miners held a court, and finding the tenderfoot guilty, assessed the following penalty: The man was to dig a grave of sufficient size to bury the animal, the work being done between sunup and sundown without food or water. If he did not fulfill the requirements the miners would do the digging, but would bury the tenderfoot with the camel. He got the job done.

The U. S. Army 73rd Engineer Combat battalion has constructed 500 miles of road and built 30 major bridges in Korea.