

IDAHO'S SILVER VALLEY

Story & photos by Denise Seith

“If it’s not grown, it’s got to be mined,”

Lenny the mine guide stated matter-of-factly as he led our hard hat-wearing group into the dim, damp underground Sierra Silver Mine outside of Wallace, Idaho.

“If you really think about it, you’ll realize how true that is,” he continued, proudly. “The manufacture of everyday products requires silver, gold, copper, lead, zinc and other minerals.”

Nicknamed “Smurf” by his co-workers because of his short stature, the retired hard-rock-miner-turned-tour-guide entertained and educated us for about an hour as we toured the fascinating mine and learned its history. Through comical, yet true, stories of his career as a miner, we were surprised to discover that the tools of the trade haven’t changed much over the last 100 years.

Long pneumatic drills are still used to bore holes into rock and the holes are then filled with explosives. Although the noise from the drill was deafening, it lasted for just a few seconds. The demonstration helped us to better understand the working conditions of hard rock miners. After Lenny’s fun and informative tour, our group reboarded the vintage trolley that had brought us out to the mine and we listened to the driver as he pointed out local landmarks during the short and scenic ride back into downtown Wallace.

WALLACE

Wallace, Idaho, known officially as the Silver Capital of the World, is just one of 14 historical towns tucked into Idaho’s Silver Valley. The valley spans about 40 miles, mostly along Interstate 90 between the Coeur d’Alene River and the Montana border. It got its name because the silver deposits first found here in the early 1880s were some of the richest ever discovered. The valley’s Coeur d’Alene Mining District is still one of the largest silver mining regions in the world and has produced more than a billion ounces over the past century.

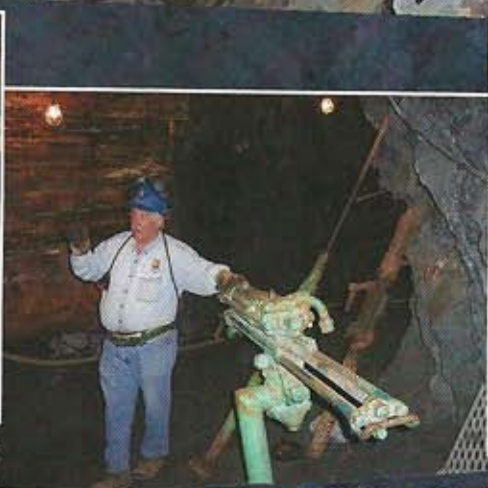
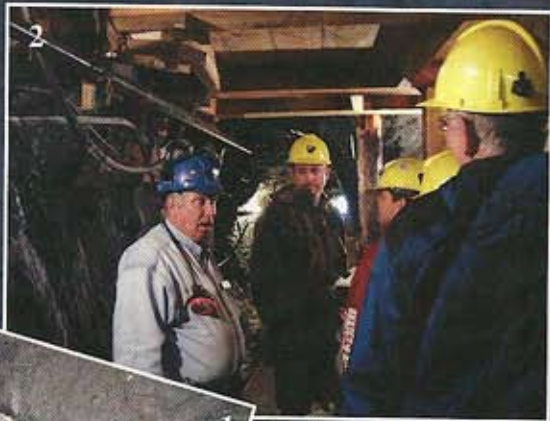
Wallace is home not only to the Sierra Silver Mine, but also many other attractions that preserve the area’s 120-year mining history. The Oasis Bordello Museum, Northern Pacific Depot Railroad Museum and the Wallace District Mining Museum are just a few. The entire town of Wallace is listed on the *National Register of Historic Places* and although the plank sidewalks are long gone, restored Queen Anne bungalow style homes and quaint commercial architecture give a good glimpse into yesteryear.

Like most towns in the Silver Valley, Wallace had a modest beginning. In 1883, Colonel Wallace (not really a colonel) purchased 80 acres and staked a claim. His wife, Lucy, became the first postmistress for a population of just 14. By 1887, mining claims covered most of the district and downtown businesses were well established, so much so that the first narrow gauge railroad arrived to serve a town that had grown to 500 residents.

In 1910, that railroad proved to be a literal life-saver during the “Big Burn,” when it transported thousands of people to safety. The Great Fire destroyed about a third of Wallace, causing \$1 million in damage. In just two days, about three million acres (4,687 square miles) were burned across Washington, Idaho, and Montana. It is believed to be the largest fire in recorded U.S. history and led to the establishment of the U.S. Forest Service policy followed today — to prevent and battle against every wildfire.

Wallace can claim some Hollywood fame, too. Actress Lana Turner was born here, but moved to California where she later became a movie star. In 1979, the western *Heaven’s Gate* was filmed in downtown, and *Dante’s Peak*, starring Linda Hamilton and Pierce Brosnan, was shot here during the summer of 1996.

To get a real sense of the Silver Valley’s mining industry, past and present, explore a few of the other 13



CRYSTAL GOLD MINE

1881

1: Quartz vein in mine wall.
2-4: Lenny "Smurf" Tour Guide
at the Sierra Silver Mine.
Background: Entrance to the
Crystal Gold Mine.



1: Smithsonite crystals.
 2: Gold panning after tour.
 3: Sprag Pole Museum.

rural communities outside Wallace, including: Kellogg, Murray, Cataldo, Osburn, Pinehurst, Prichard, Burke, Mullan, Wardner, Smelterville, Silverton, Kingston, and Enaville. Some have lapsed into ghost towns, but many offer modern-day amenities for travelers, museums, tours and plenty of outdoor recreation — camping, fishing, cycling, and hiking. Check your *Mining Guide* to find the nearby GPAA claims, too. And don't forget your camera because the Silver Valley is surrounded by pristine wilderness and views of the Coeur d'Alene and Bitterroot Mountains.

KELLOGG

Most of the valley residents live in Kellogg (next door to Wallace), which is the county's largest small town — population 2,400! The town was founded back in 1885 when a prospector, while looking for his lost burro, spotted a large outcropping of galena (lead ore) shining in the sunlight. Noah Kellogg's discovery eventually led to the creation of the great Bunker Hill and Sullivan mines and the town flourished. For more than a century, the Bunker Hill mine and smelter were known worldwide as a leader in lead-zinc-silver mining, but ceased operations about 20 years ago. Visit the Staff House Museum on McKinley Avenue to learn more. Their historical collection from the Bunker Hill Mine and surrounding Silver Valley is excellent. Mining equipment of all shapes and sizes is on display, as well as extensive metallurgical and mineral exhibits.

A definite highlight in Kellogg is actually found in low light conditions — the underground Crystal Gold Mine. Before heading underground on a guided tour, you'll be fitted with a bright yellow hard hat and provided with a flashlight "just in case." Take along a sweater or jacket because the temperature inside the mine stays at a constant 48° F.

The story behind the Crystal Gold Mine is as interesting as it is mysterious. For more than 100 years, no

one knew it existed. Back in 1879, gold prospector Tom Irwin discovered a gold-bearing vein and mined it for three years. Then, he and the mine disappeared.

Most claims back then were kept secret, so the lack of plentiful records meant the mine was lost until the 1990s. The present owner, a retired miner, uncovered and cleaned out the mine and found Irwin's track, mine car, tools, and high-grade gold ore — sure signs that the original prospector intended to come back, but strangely never did. Irwin's items are still there today.

During the years that the mine was lost and undisturbed, beautiful smithsonite crystals formed on the walls. In addition to the turquoise crystal color, you'll also see gold and wire silver, too. Following the 30-minute mine tour, you'll have the opportunity to pan for gold outdoors under the tutelage of your mine guide.

Even if there's no flash in your pan, you still might find small garnets. Star garnet is the Idaho state stone and occurs naturally in only two places — India and Idaho. Who knew?

MURRAY

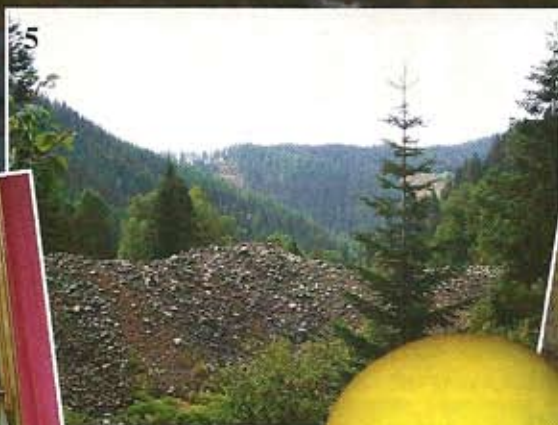
If you want to see more of the Silver Valley's mining heritage, take the easy scenic drive from Kellogg to the small town of Murray. For a town of less than 50 residents, more than 10,000 lived here in 1885 with hopes of cashing in on the gold rush. It was that growth that established Murray as the "Cradle City" of today's Coeur d'Alene Mining District. Piles of discarded rock called "tailings" line the road into town — evidence that dredges were used to mine here in the past.

Murray's main attraction now is the famous Sprag Pole Museum, named after the supporting poles once needed to help hold up its wooden walls. The museum is eclectic to say the least and began in 1933 with a single whiskey jug displayed behind the bar. From there, the collection exploded. Today, 10,000 square feet

4: Molly B'Damn Exhibit at the Sprag Pole Museum.

5: Tailing piles at Murray.

6: Interior of the Sacred Heart Mission.



Background: Denise and Larry Seith at Crystal Gold Mine.

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1: Interior of the Crystal Gold Mine.
2: Staff House Museum at Kellogg.

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are jam-packed with 100 different collectible exhibits, historical photographs and antiques such as gambling devices, music machines, clocks and coins from around the world.

The museum also interprets stories of colorful characters such as Molly B'Damn, an Irish woman who earned a Florence Nightingale-like reputation when she nursed miners during a smallpox epidemic. Molly B'Damn was also associated with "houses of pleasure" and various other businesses of the day. Grants and donations fund the museum, so admission remains free, but spending a few dollars at the adjoining small bar and restaurant supports the local economy.

CATALDO

If you're wondering what was happening in the Silver Valley prior to the influx of prospectors and miners you'll find the answer at the Sacred Heart Mission, Idaho's oldest standing building. Located in Old Mission State Park in the town of Cataldo off I-90 the Mission was established by the "black robes" or Jesuit priests. Between 1850 and 1853, the Jesuit and the Coeur d'Alene Indians constructed the Mission, which is now open



3: Sunshine Mine fire monument.

the National Register of Historic Places. They built it entirely without nails. Made from large, hand-hewn logs that were latticed with saplings, woven with grass, and caked with mud (known as "wattle and daub"), the exterior walls are over a foot thick. The interior walls were adorned with hand-painted newspapers, partly visible even now. Although made from tin cans, the chandeliers are quite elaborate, as are the gilded crosses carved from local pines. You'll also be impressed by how carefully the wooden altars were painted to resemble marble. In addition to the Mission, tour the Parish House and Visitor Center.

Over 120 years of mining in Idaho's Silver Valley has created a unique and colorful culture. Whether it was silver, gold, zinc, or galena that first attracted prospectors and miners, today it's fun to turn back the clock to the early days of Idaho's mining heritage and learn how bustling cities were reduced to ghost towns and, in many cases, brought back to life again.

And where else are you likely to meet a "Smurf" in a hard hat wielding a pneumatic drill?



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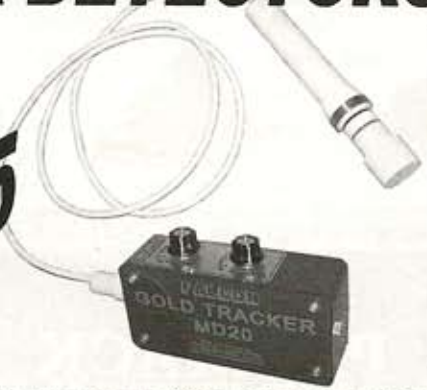
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Denise Seith is a freelance writer and treasure hunter based in Salem, Ore. She and her husband, Larry, own www.GoldRushTradingPost.com, an online prospecting equipment and supply store.

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phone: 208-784-0821
www.silvervalleychamber.com

Wallace Chamber of Commerce
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phone: 208-753-7151
www.wallaceidahochamber.com

Sierra Silver Mine Tour, Inc.
(Open May through September)
420 5th St.
Wallace, ID 83873
phone: 208-752-5151
www.silverminetour.org

Crystal Gold Mine
(Open year-round)
Kellogg, Idaho
208-783-4653
www.goldmine-idaho.com

Staff House Museum
(Also known as the Shoshone
County Mining & Smelting
Museum, Inc.)
820 McKinley Ave.
Kellogg, Idaho 83837
phone: 208-786-4141
www.staffhousemuseum.com

Sprag Pole Inn and Museum
Murray, Idaho 83874
http://silver-valley.com/sprag_pole

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