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Attending college includes “getting through” required courses in areas such as English and social science. Classes like English composition, American history, and introduction to psychology are required even when getting a degree in an unrelated field like engineering or computer science. Hence many students say “I *have to* complete my required courses to graduate” rather than “I *get to* complete them.” Note the *emphasis* on “have to” versus “get to”. Yet, for many people, the content learned in these classes becomes more relevant to career advancement than their core degree courses. Why? Composition is what you do virtually every day when you craft your reports, presentations, and emails. Psychology is equally useful as you strive to read people and build great relationships. But history, really? How can history be relevant? Answer: lessons. Besides being interesting, history provides a rich set of lessons learned we would be wise to give our attention. Apparently academics know what they are doing.

History and the lessons that come from it are perhaps the most overlooked aspect of our education. Maybe because some professors seem to focus more on memorizing dates and places than telling an engaging story and extracting the lessons to be learned. Or maybe we just don’t like looking backwards. Few people take the time at the end of a project, sale, purchase, vacation, or other significant event to record what worked and didn’t work for future reference. Few people who assume ownership for a used car, pre-existing house, new team at work, or new relationship fully understand the history behind what they are getting. No wonder we make the same mistakes over and over again.

The best history is that which is interesting as well as educational. There are countless examples, perhaps in your own communities as there are in mine in Breckenridge, Colorado. Thanks to several historians in Colorado, there are many stories such as the courage shown by Mollie Gortner who was the first woman to discover gold. Also the story of murder and cannibalism by Alfred Packer who provides a never-to-be-forgotten lesson on how to pick your friends. In terms of leadership lessons, there are countless examples in areas such as strategic thinking, leveraging partnerships, and decision making as evidenced in the stories of miners and business owners who made and lost their fortunes.

If you are unfamiliar with the United States gold rush, here is a little history and four lessons that come from it:

Reports of gold findings in Colorado date back to the early 1800s. However, the surge of prospectors didn’t happen until 1859 when as many as 100,000 gold seekers came into Colorado to make their fortunes. Some came after hearing of treaties reached with native Indian tribes. Some came after the economic downturn and bad crops at home in the Midwest and East. Others came solely based on reports of new gold discoveries. Within a few short years towns such as Denver, Boulder, Golden, Black Hawk, and Breckenridge were founded.

As with many other exciting boom periods, such as the dot.com boom in the late 1990s, some did well, but many did not. For many, the boom was quickly followed by a bust. Within just a few months in 1859, disappointing results caused two-thirds of the initial gold seekers to go back home. But for many who stayed and other new comers, rich gold mines were established. The gold and other minerals extracted as well as the many businesses created to support the mining operations created a multi-billion dollar economy for Colorado. Lesson learned – don’t let early disappointment keep you from persisting in that which you believe.



Leadership Lessons from the Colorado Gold Rush

Ten years earlier, in 1849, another gold rush preceded the one in Colorado. The California gold rush of 1849 produced over half a billion dollars worth of gold. As they say, “timing is everything.” The value of this gold was almost 35 times the amount the United States paid Mexico in 1848 for an area spanning from Texas to California. Unknowingly, just days after the gold was discovered, but not yet reported, Mexico sold the region to the United States for \$15M. Lesson learned – do your research before selling or buying something of significance.

Gold mining in Colorado proceeded from 1859 to 1942 with its peak production of 1.4M troy ounces in 1900. Tunnels and shafts 1000s of feet long were built to chase the gold veins. Rivers and streams were panned and then dredged. Buildings and towns were created to support the mining operations. In all, almost 50 million ounces of gold was extracted. In addition, hundreds of millions of ounces of silver and other lucrative minerals were extracted. At current prices of almost \$1500 per ounce, the value of 50M ounces of gold equals \$75B US dollars.

In an area of Breckenridge Colorado called the Golden Horseshoe (due to its shape), where we own and operate the Alpine Villa Retreat (www.alpinevillaretreat.com), exists one of the most concentrated areas of gold in the United States. Placer gold was initially discovered here in 1859 on the Swan River which runs through our property. The remains of the last dredge boat are still afloat in a pond adjacent to our property. The Breckenridge mining district is credited with production of about 1,000,000 troy ounces of gold including the largest piece of gold ever discovered in Colorado which was found in 1887 by Tom Groves and Harry Lytton. Their find occurred in the Farncomb Hill area of Breckenridge, also in the Golden Horseshoe. Tom wrapped his 13.5-pound hunk of gold in a blanket, parading it around Breckenridge and earning it the nickname of Tom’s Baby. He was very lucky his baby wasn’t stolen. Lesson learned – don’t flaunt your wealth or you’ll risk losing it.

Gold mining in Colorado resumed in 1947 after World War II but never reached the peak production levels attained in the early 1900s. Today, Colorado’s only remaining gold mine operates in Cripple Creek. The Cripple Creek mine is also Colorado’s largest producer of silver. They produced 210,921 troy ounces of gold and 110,383 troy ounces of silver in 2014. In 2017, they produced 451,000 troy ounces of gold and reported 3.5 million troy ounces of gold reserves. Lesson learned – plan for the long-term when you have something that is working well.

There are many fascinating tales from the Colorado gold rush – some of success such as Tom’s baby and some of misfortune such as the poor friends of Alfred Packer. There are lessons about what happens when you don’t involve others in decision making, don’t have a plan, and try to do too much on your own.

Consider giving more attention to history, whether at home, work, or from the historical record, and making note of the lessons to be applied. Next time you say “it is what it is” or “we are where we are”, be careful about dismissing how you got there. There might be a valuable lesson to be learned before you look forward.

If interested in learning more about the leadership lessons of the Colorado Gold Rush, we offer an experiential-based leadership development program on location in Colorado. Visit www.alpineinitiative.com.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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