



## A miner's life: Understanding what it meant

**BY LORY POUNDER**  
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A chunk of gold ore from the Country Boy Mine in Breckenridge.  
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BRECKENRIDGE - A cloud of darkness hung so thick in the dripping tunnel that voices of the past could almost be heard. Eight hundred feet of solid rock stood overhead and escaping to daylight seemed virtually impossible.

"The miners would have to 'kiss the rail,'" Paul Hintgen, owner of the Country Boy Mine in Breckenridge,

Owner of the Country Boy Mine, Paul Hintgen, pushes an original ore bucket down the tracks of the main tunnel.  
**Summit Daily/Eric Drummond**



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said after he shut off all power, shining only a tiny light similar to the candles early Summit County miners would have had to light their way.

That phrase was used, he explained, because often those candles would burn out and they would have to stay by the side of the tunnel, feeling their way out through the water-covered ground in absolute darkness. Today, electricity runs into the mine and boards keep people's feet from getting soaked during the historic tours that give an idea of what it would have been like to mine for ore in late 1800s and early 1900s.

"When you go underground, your senses really come alive," Hintgen said.

And while in the Country Boy mine, it is easy to see how working there would have played tricks on the minds of the miners.

They were a superstitious group, Hintgen said. Don't ever start a mine on a Friday, don't allow women in the mine, and be aware of Tommyknockers (the mischievous elf-like creatures that played tricks on miners) - these were a few of the rules they followed.

The mine, which is about two miles from downtown Breckenridge, opened in 1887 with a vertical shaft blasted into the mountain where a vein of gold was discovered. Two tunnels leading to the vein were built at later stages because of the danger of working on a vertical shaft, Hintgen said.



A miniature Sicilian donkey wanders around old mining equipment at the Country Boy

Mine this summer.  
**Summit Daily/Eric Drummond**  
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When visitors arrive at the Country Boy, they are greeted by four donkeys that hang around the area. For the miners, these animals were "essentially a pick-up truck," Hintgen said.

But it's after leaving the donkeys and the daylight that the trip into the past really begins. About halfway down the 1,100-foot tunnel into the mountain that stays 45 degrees year-round, Hintgen demonstrated what the drilling would have been like. The smell of wet, dusty rock immediately stung the air and the sound echoed deeply. After that, it's up to the imagination to envision what it would have been like when between 25 and 30 were being used at one time.

The early powered drills, patented in 1874, were referred to as widow makers, Hintgen said. If miners spent three or four years working with them, the dust would cause silicosis and kill them, he added.

Then, an improvement was made in the early 1900s that used water to suck the dust back, Hintgen said.

Before the powered drills, miners used a hammer and drill bit to slowly make their way into the rock wall. By the end of an eight- to 10-hour shift, they were required to have drilled two 10-inch holes that would be filled with dynamite, Hintgen explained.

On average, for their hard labor, miners were making about three times the average \$1 a day wage.

The Country Boy shut down Jan. 1, 1948, and reopened in 1994 for tours. Inside were the remnants of the past and eight major cave-ins that had to be cleared out. The tools and clothes that decorated the once vibrant mine are now on display. And a stock certificate hangs inside the gift shop building that still houses the air compressor used to power tools in the mine. The certificate says that in 1903, William Lennow bought the mine for \$500,000 - a hefty price in that time.

Today, \$50 million worth of gold, silver, lead and zinc sits trapped inside the mine, Hintgen said. However, that is likely where it will stay. Not only does he not have plans to reopen the mine, but he said it would be hard to turn it into one that lives up to today's standards.

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