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HALIFAX, N. S.

MINING.

AN OLD COMSTOCK DODGE.

Written for the Engineering and Mining Journal by Dan de Quillo.

In Nevada, in the old flush times of silver mining on the world-famed Comstock lode, was practiced the device of instantly imprisoning the set of men who in running a drift or cross-cut chanced to cut into a body of rich ore. In the manufacturing regions of the East we hear of "lock-outs," but in the silver mines "lock-ins" were the events that brought crowds upon the streets and caused Virginia City, standing over the mines, and San Francisco, standing by the sea, 300 miles away over the Sierras, to roar alike with excitement.

No sooner was the cry raised in Virginia City of "Miners shut down in the Savage!" than the wire told the news to the thousands of speculators in San Francisco, and then surging crowds repeated the cry: "Miners shut down in the Savage!" The fact of the miners being imprisoned in a mine was good evidence that a find of ore had been made, but as to the extent and value of the strike all "outsiders" were in the dark, and were kept in the dark until the "insiders" had satisfied themselves in regard to the size and richness of the deposit of ore found, and had either bought or sold stock in the mine to the best advantage. It was for this that the miners were shut down. "Insiders" had all the light it was possible to obtain, while "outsiders" were all in the dark, yet that did not prevent the latter from gambling as recklessly in the shares of the mine as though they had full and reliable information in regard to the amount and richness of the ore found. The outsider gambled against thousands of other outsiders who knew no more than himself the value of the find.

When the cry was that the miners were shut down in the Chollar, the Petosi, the Isle & Norcross, or any other mine, there was always an excitement or such a rush for the stock as to send it booming upward. After the boom was under full headway it was an easy matter for the insiders to either buy or sell without their transactions being discovered. At such times a hint from a true friend on the inside was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to a speculator on the outside—yes, millions in the time of a great deal.

It may be thought that while on the surface surging crowds filled the streets, and all was uproar and excitement, it was rather hard for a party of men to be cut off from all communication with the outer world and imprisoned in the bowels of the earth hundreds of feet below the light of the sun. The fact was that the men liked a shut-down. Although temporarily deprived of their liberty they had a jolly good time of it down in the subterranean regions. Nothing was too good for them. Huge baskets of eatables from the best restaurant in the city were sent down to them, and to wash these good things down they not only had plenty of beer and ale, but also an abundance of the finest champagne. Bedding was sent down to them; they had the daily papers and took the work they had to do in very light doses, all having plenty of time in the cooling-off stations.

Although thus well provided, for the men were cut off from all communication with the outer world, could one of them have sent a note to a stock-dealing friend on the surface it would have been worth a small fortune both to him and the speculating friend. But absolutely nothing was permitted to go to the surface from the imprisoned men. A scratch on the bottom of a dinner pail or a seemingly innocent verbal message from a husband to his wife might tell outsiders whether to buy or sell.

To be shut down in a mine was a good thing for poor men when a big "strike" of ore had been made, as the mine owners nearly always generously carried for them a few shares of stock. They also, if requested to do so, bought shares for such of the imprisoned men as had money and were dealing in stocks.

The men were seldom shut down for more than three or four days. As may be imagined, they were all in demand when they were released from the mine and appeared upon the streets. The curbstone brokers and all manner of dealers and dabblers in stocks swarmed about them, all hungry for exact information in regard to the body of ore discovered. The men, however, were heroes for but a few hours, for as soon as they were released outsiders were permitted to enter and inspect the mine in which the find had been made.

It being observed that a "shut-down" of miners always caused a boom in the stock of the mine in which it occurred, it was not long before some companies shut down their men when there was nothing more in sight than an insignificant stringer of low grade ore. A few of these "fake" shut-downs brought the practice into such disrepute that the announcement of the men being shut down in a mine was received on the streets with jeers and hoots. That killed the business of imprisoning miners in the lower levels of the Comstock for all time.

In the "bonanza mines" was employed what was called the "secret shift." This was a shift or crew comprised of old and picked men, all staunch friends of Mackey and the other "bonanza kings." When it was expected that a drift or cross-cut would tap a body of ore, the work to be done was placed in the hands of the secret shift. In case of ore being accidentally cut into by the ordinary miners, they were sent to some other part of the mine, and the boss of the secret shift called out his crew and took charge of the development of the find. The boss and all hands belonging to this secret shift were as "mum as oysters" in regard to their work—were a crew of mutes.

1892, "THE CREAM OF THE HAVANA CROP."

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