

The Flourish that was Florence

The summer of 1861 in Idaho Territory was unusually hot and dusty. Near the settlement of Riggins, a couple of dozen men searched for gold. When they stumbled upon what was to be one of the richest claims of the time, they swore a vow of secrecy.

Needless to say, the secret of Florence got out, and a gold rush ensued. Claims were staked and the stories began to roll out of the hills with the gold. Many miners worked from dawn to dark, some panning \$100 of gold a day. Miller's Creek, Baboon Gulch, Halls Gulch, and other poetic place names fueled conversation in the big city of Lewiston.

Miners continued to pour into Florence until nearly 400 were working claims by November 1861. When winter hit, it was bitterly cold, and many miners died.

The spring and summer of 1862 saw a renewed boom, as 10,000 miners and merchants came to Florence. That fall, the cry of gold was heard again, this time in a place called the Boise Basin, 150 miles away. Like locusts, the swarm of miners moved south, leaving behind the skeleton of Florence. More than \$10 million had come out of Florence's draws and gullies in a little less than two years.

In the quiet that followed the boom, Chinese miners remained behind, calmly swirling their pans. In truth, Chinese patience may have been responsible for more gold being mined throughout the West than all the frenzied efforts of those who jumped from boom to boom.

All that remains of old Florence is Boot Hill, maintained by the U.S. Forest Service. The miners' graves are still humps in the ground except where many Chinese were buried. Their graves were often robbed or the remains exhumed and moved, leaving behind only casket-size depressions in the soil. The wooden grave markers tell the tales of infant deaths and shootings. Some say so-and-so just "up and died."

Where

Northeast of Riggins. A number of Forest Service roads lead into the area.

Admission

Free.

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