

The Story of Bohemia Johnson

Adapted from article by Dan Hill



Statue of Bohemia Johnson
Bohemia Gold Mining Museum

The man who discovered the gold in 1863 and started the gold rush was named James Johnson, but was better known by his nickname, Bohemia Johnson. Born in Missouri in 1830, he was 30 years old when he moved to Ashland, to work on a farm. The 1860 census listed his occupation as “miner” although he was living on a farm and was probably a farm hand, mining in his spare time.

In 1863 Mr. Johnson and his business partner George Ramsey, also a miner, traveled to Roseburg. In

Roseburg one of the two got into a fight and, according to legend, killed a man. Running from the law the two headed into the mountain’s northeast of Roseburg. They followed the river to Steamboat Creek then to City Creek.

Near the headwaters of City Creek, while hunting, Johnson, noticed a unique color on the forest floor. Looking closer, Johnson discovered a very rich piece of gold bearing ore. It appears he did not share this discovery with his partner George Ramsey because Mr. Ramsey doesn’t appear on any of the mining claims nor in any further documents. Johnson filed a total of 12 mining claims between the year 1867 and 1869 that are still on record in the Douglas County archives.

It is believed that in 1864 Mr. Johnson spent the summer prospecting and placing markers for his mining claims. In 1865 he returned with nearly 40 men to firmly establish which parts of the area he had laid claim. It was about two years before any of the claims were officially recorded. Douglas County sent a clerk to the area to begin recording claims. Mr. Johnson began recording his claims in August of 1867. His most profitable claim was called the Excelsior.



Steven F.
Chadwick

A few months after he filed on the Excelsior he sold it to Steven F. Chadwick who later become Oregon's 5th governor. Mr. Chadwick, a Douglas County judge at the time, paid Mr. Johnson \$1500.00 for the Excelsior, the equivalent of around two million dollars today.

Documents in the Lane County archives show that Johnson signed his name with an X which likely meant, like many people of the time, he did not know how to read. The way he handled his business affairs, however, made it clear that he was an intelligent man skilled in business. After selling his mines, Johnson left the area never to return.

There was an obituary found at the Cottage Grove Genealogical Society for a man with the same name born in the correct year. The obituary said he was a wealthy miner from Cottage Grove who died in Denver Colorado in 1905. His estate was settled in Chaffee County Colorado and his widow took possession of a house at 1653 Main Street in Cottage Grove. There is evidence that suggests this man was Bohemia Johnson, but there is no proof that he was the same man. We may never know for sure what happened to the man who started our first gold rush and whose name continues to label much of our community.

Discussion Points

1. Summarize how James Johnson came to find gold.
 2. Why do you think James Johnson left the Bohemia Area and did not return?
 3. Why would U.S. census records be useful when researching history?
-

Vocabulary

Census: Population count conducted in the United States every 10 years, records U.S. citizens, where they live and their occupation

Claim: (mining claim) Legal statement of ownership, a mining claim is the parcel of land someone has registered for, giving them the right to extract (mine) the minerals including gold and other precious metals

Headwaters: The starting point of a river, creek, or stream

Prospecting: To search for mineral deposits using geographic knowledge and various tests to locate areas rich in desired minerals

Special thanks to the Bohemia Gold Mining Museum – located at South 10th and Jefferson Street in Cottage Grove. Pic: Inside the Bohemia Gold Mining Museum, the mural on the wall is of Bohemia Mountain.

