

# Ruby, AZ

Articles and images by Paula Beemer



There is something I find fascinating about towns with deserted buildings that today can only speak with echoes and images of the past: the laughter of a child, the cry of a woman or the jubilant scream of a man striking a vein of precious metal.

One of these towns is just 37 miles from Amado or 30 miles from Nogales: Ruby is one of the best-preserved ghost towns in Arizona. It is a mining camp, formerly known as Montana Camp, that was established in the 1880s to support the Montana gold and silver mine, one of ten mines in the Oro Blanco district.

I was invited by the Tubac Rotary Club a few weeks ago to attend a presentation given by one of today's five owners of the property in Ruby, Howard Frederick. He shared part of its history, operation background and described the conditions of the mine today. It all seemed so inviting that a few days later I was there with my family.

We followed the same winding road taken by the stagecoach more than 100 years ago minus the bumps, dust, changes on the horse team and the fear of being intercepted by Apaches or bandits. We experienced a very easy and scenic drive between the Atascosa Mountains and into the Coronado National Forest where Ruby is located.

Historically, the mine was established with the intention to mine gold and silver, but even though these elements were found, they were not the prevalent minerals in the area. Instead, lead and zinc were the ones that helped the mine reach greater success in operations.

According to the narratives of "Ruby, Arizona; Mining, Mayhem and Murder" by Bob Ring, Al Ring and Tallia Pfrimmer Cahoon, the mine changed hands many times. There was always hope for quick ways to make a fortune,

but it seemed that most money was made with the transaction of selling the claims rather than the extraction of the ore.

When Arizona became a state 1912, the price for lead and zinc started to improve considerably and with that, the interest to purchase the claims. It was in 1917 that Goldfield Mining Company of Wyoming took charge of the operation and began to invest in infrastructure and technology. The mine was functioning 24 hours a day, every day and most of the operation was automated.

Most of the adobe homes still standing were built then including the schoolhouse. The general store was also very successful providing all supplies to local and neighboring miners and their families, ranchers and residents from all surrounding areas including Northern Mexico.

To catch the rainwater in the summer, the company built the Gold Boulder Dam south of Ruby to store the water needed to power the steam engines in the mill, but when the dam was finished, it stopped raining.

Problems started to arise again: equipment malfunction, lack of water and difficulty accessing the railroad forcing the company to suspend operations in February 1918. The equipment was slowly removed after that and the mine was abandoned for approximately eight years.

In 1927 Eagle-Picher Lead Mining Company bought the Montana patents and once again investments were made in technology and water. A 17-mile pipeline was installed to bring water from the Santa Cruz River. Despite economic difficulties during the Great Depression in the '30s the mine managed to survive and grow to reach its operation's peak in 1937, processing 400 tons of ore and employing 350 miners. As a consequence, the camp also grew to approximately 1,200 residents.



*continued on page 14...*



Ruby was active with a very well-supplied mercantile, a post office, a hospital with a doctor, a dentist, a pool hall that would also serve as a dance hall and movie theater, a confectionary that provided a social point for gathering and a schoolhouse with 150 students from first to eighth grade and four teachers. The school was also used as a church on Sundays. To accommodate the growing population, tents were built as residences, besides the already established adobe homes.

Life was good, with picnics, kite flying, dances, movies, baseball, boxing, wrestling and gatherings. For some, there was a little more objectionable form of entertainment—bootlegging, prostitution and gambling.

By 1939 the company was experiencing difficulties finding the ore and they shut down again in 1940. The town was soon deserted.

Between 1935 and 1939 Ruby was recognized as the largest producer of lead and zinc in Arizona, but Ruby is also recognized for a few appalling events: the murder of the brothers Fraser soon after they purchased the Ruby Mercantile and a year later, the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Pearson, the new owners.

In 1920, John and Alexander Fraser were robbed and murdered by two Mexican bandits. One of them was captured and killed during his arrest and the other one was sentenced to jail in Mexico for other crimes committed in that country.

In 1921 Mr. and Mrs. Frank Pearson were robbed and brutally murdered inside the store by seven bandits. Their four-year-old daughter and a sister of Mr. Pearson witness the tragedy and were able to escape. Two of the men supposedly involved were captured, one was sentenced to death and the other one to life in prison. After many trials and confusion the execution took place. The one man sentenced to life in prison eventually escaped and was never found, and neither were the other five men involved.

After the mine closed in the '40s a few more attempts were made at mining, but it eventually it went into the hands of private investors from Tucson whose families own it today, including Frederick. Their main idea was to use it as a recreational area rather than a mine. "The value of Ruby is what it is historically, environmentally and aesthetically. That's its real value and that's a very difficult concept to get across," said Frederick in the book.

The book mentioned above is filled with details regarding these events as well as every aspect of the mine and life in the camp. I read it, lived it and felt for every one of them. It was the perfect addition to my experience.

Today Ruby is a wonderful site to visit that provides a picture heaven for photographers, and is great for bird watchers with more than 64 kinds of birds recorded, or for naturalists with more than 20 species of special status wildlife.

Fishing enthusiasts would enjoy the catch and release of bass, catfish and bluegill, all found in one of the water reservoirs. There's a lake to swim in during the summer and along one edge is a large area of white-

sand-looking tailings. Visitors have the opportunity to view more than 200,000 Mexican bats fly out one of the shafts between April and August. It's a great place for picnics and camping.

The site is open from Thursday through Sunday from 9 a.m. until dark. Check-in is required and there is a fee of \$12 per person a day or \$18 for fishing.

Ruby Mines is a non-profit foundation, "Ruby Mines Restoration Project" with a 501c 3 status that receives tax-deductible donations for restoring buildings and habitat in the area and preserving the town's historical records.

For more information, call Howard Frederick at 520-744-4471 or email [howard@rubyrestoration.org](mailto:howard@rubyrestoration.org).

*Images: Page 12. Top: The ruins of bunkhouse #1. Bottom, Montana Peak over the what is left of the assay office.*

*This page. Top, left: The warehouse. Top, right: A disintegrating old Ford dump truck with Montana Peak in the background.*

*Facing page. Top: Inside the schoolhouse. Long tables and benches were used as desks for the students. A potbelly stove was also part of the classroom and it was used to warm-up the room in the winter and at times to put the toys that "should have been left at home," says the book about Ruby.*

*Facing page, bottom: Matt Beemer stands at the foot of Montana Peak photographing the tailings, white-sand-looking processed residue from the ball mill.*



*Ruby, Az is located quite a ways down a remote dirt road along the US/Mexican Border. Remember to bring plenty of water and check that your vehicle is well maintained for any jaunt into the desert.*

