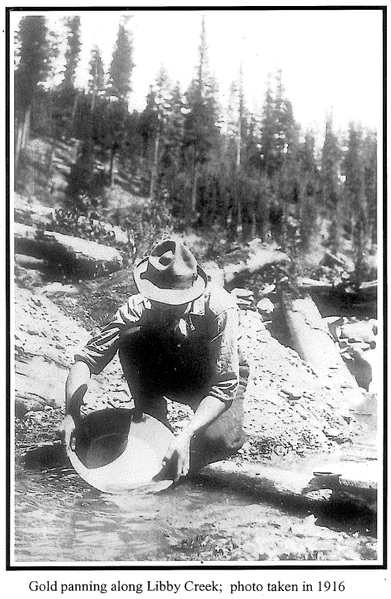
Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area



Gold panning along Libby Creek; photo taken in 1916

Kootenai National Forest

-DIRECTIONS-

The turnoff to Libby Creek Road is approximately thirteen miles south of Libby Montana on Highway 2. The Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area is an additional ten miles up the Libby Creek Road #231. Please note that Libby Creek Road is graveled but well maintained. A map has been included in this pamphlet.

-FACILITIES-

There are no developed parking lots or camping facilities at the Gold Panning Area. Camping is primitive with dispersed sites. However, there is a men's and a women's outhouse in the main panning area. For those planning longer visits to the area, Howard Lake Campground is one mile south of the Gold Panning Area. Howard Lake Campground, a developed fee campground next to Howard Lake, offers swimming, fishing, hiking opportunities, a water well, and toilets.

-AREA RULES-

1) Placer material shall not be removed from the Mineral Withdrawal Area (*Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area*). All material must be processed within the Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area and we ask that you limit yourself to one or two 5-gallon buckets at a time.

2) Only hand tools and pans are allowed for prospecting. No ***motorized**** or ***mechanized***** mining equipment is allowed.

3) **Please** *"Pack it in Pack it Out".*

4) There is a **14-day** camping limit.

5) No discharging of firearms within the Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area boundaries.

The purpose of these restrictions are for the protection of historical, archeological interest, protection of improvements, other surface resources, property, and safety.

MOTORIZED equipment is any equipment having or using an engine, motor, or powered by electricity.

****MECHANIZED*** equipment is any device designed to increase production above the level obtained with gold pans and hand tools. Examples would include: Sluice Boxes, Dry Washers, Rocker Boxes, Wheelbarrows, and Metal Detectors.

-GEOLOGY-

The bedrock seen on the mountain peaks surrounding the Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area is that of the Precambrian Belt formation. Rocks of Precambrian age, meaning older than Cambrian, are rocks at least 800 million years old. These sedimentary rocks, which are thousands of feet thick, were formed by the accumulation of mud, carbonate, silt, and sand in huge inland seas that extended for miles over what is now known as Northwest Montana and North Idaho. Low grade metamorphism altered the buried sediments to form the bedrock as it is seen today as quartzite, siltite, and argillite. The Belt rocks contain no animal fossils, but may contain fossils of primitive plants such as blue-green algae called Stromatolites. Some of the layers of rock contain ripple marks, salt casts, and mud cracks which indicate periods of wetting and drying during deposition.

The gold found in the panning area is defined as a placer deposit, meaning a place where eroded mineral particles (usually gold) have accumulated due to some form of movement such as by streams or glaciers. The gold - bearing gravels found in the Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area were deposited as a result of alpine glaciation, which occurred between 10,000 and 130,000 years ago. During the Pleistocene Era, much of the Libby Creek Drainage was covered by glaciers which gouged the Belt rock off of the mountain peaks and carved out the valley bottoms. The glaciers left deposits of till, or moraines, at the edge of the retreating ice. Water from Libby Creek, Howard Creek, and other glacial melt streams reworked portions of the glacial moraine concentrating the gold in the channels of Libby Creek and in what is now known as the Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area.

-YOUR GOLD-

Any gold you happen to find is yours to keep. If you wish to sell your gold, many coin dealers and pawn shops in Montana will buy raw gold. Ask around locally or check a phone book if you are interested in selling any gold that you may find.

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~HISTORY~

Placer Mining on Libby Creek

Miners began prospecting Libby Creek as early as 1864. Libby Creek was named in the 1860's by early prospector Stephen Allen, after his daughter Elizabeth or "Libby".

In the summer of 1867, a party of 12 miners were prospecting upstream on Libby Creek near the Libby Creek Canyon. A party of four miners: Stephen Allen, Anthony Kavanaugh, John Moore and Joseph Herron left eight of their companions, including John Fisher, to get supplies at Spokane Bridge, Washington Territory. After returning to the Kootenai in August, they were ambushed by a small group of Kootenai Indians on Libby Creek at about one mile from the confluence of Libby Creek and the Kootenai River. Three of the four miners died during the attack. For the next 21 days, Herron, who escaped with a chest wound, hid during the day and survived on service berries. He was finally located by a party of miners who treated his wound and took him out of the area. The small group of Kootenai responsible for the killings scattered, but five were later located by miners and executed.

By September of 1867, the *Montana Post* reported that there were 500 to 600 miners working on Libby Creek for a short time. The mining camp established on Libby Creek was named "Libbysville". The initial excitement began to die down and only about one hundred miners were on Libby Creek in 1868. By 1876, John S. Fisher or "Jack" was the only reported miner working on the creek. The placer mining activity in this very isolated mining district seems to have ended until the mid 1880's.

The Second Rush on Libby Creek

By 1883, an outwash of miners from the Coeur d'Alene Mining District began to work their way into the Cabinet Mountains via the Vermilion River. Some sniping activity (prospecting for gold in bedrock without formal claims) was noted in 1885 on Libby Creek by Thomas Shearer. He then headed to Thompson Falls, Montana Territory where he interested miners such as B.F. Howard and Oliver Woodcoe to join him and file claims on Libby Creek. A second rush began in the area of Libby, Poorman, and Bear Creek in 1885.

Hundreds of miners were working Libby Creek during this time. However, it was interesting to note that the mining camp was so isolated that the "soiled doves" (prostitutes), which were found in other more lucrative and accessible mining camps, were not to be found in the Libby Camp during the 1880's. A tent camp was established in the Libby Creek Mining District by 1886 and named "Lake City", or "Oldtown". George Good operated a store in this mining camp 1887, which was supplied by a packstring (horses or mules) via a trail from Thompson Falls.

In the spring of 1889, Planina E. Field arrived with her husband, Martin V. Field, to Libby Creek. She was the first non-native American woman in the mining district and for some years was the only woman in the mining camp.

Chinese miners began to lease claims from the white miners on Libby Creek in 1887, and by 1889 there were about 25 Chinese working on the district. One night in November of 1890, a Chinese miner was allegedly seen robbing the sluice boxes of Thomas Bryan on Libby Creek. A miners' meeting ensued and the Chinese were banned from Libby Creek and given an hour to leave the camp. They left via the trail to Thompson Falls and no Chinese were allowed in the Libby Creek Mining District for many years.

The isolation of the Libby Mining District was lessened by the construction of the Great Northern Railroad into the Kootenai in 1892.

The Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area

Mining has taken place in the vicinity of the Libby Creek Recreational Gold Panning Area or "gold panning area" since 1886 when placer claims were first located on upper Libby Creek and Howard Creek. Howard Creek and Howard Lake were prospected and named after the Howard brothers, Alfred and Benjamin. These two were among some of the earliest miners to file and work claims on Upper Libby Creek from 1883 and 1886. A.V. Howard worked on his claims on Libby and Howard Creeks from 1886 to the 1920's. B.F. Howard, who had arrived at Libby Creek during late summer of 1885, had a mining camp in the vicinity of Ramsey Creek. He mined on Libby creek until his death in 1915 at the age of 80.

Mining activity and claims were located in the vicinity of the gold panning area through the late 1880's and early 1890's, but no major mining development took place. On June 28, 1890, J.T. Vaughan and H.F. Greenwell located the Horseshoe Placer. They continued to locate and work other claims in the area of the gold panning area and surrounding claims until the early 1900's, when they patented and leased their claims. These miners were some of the initial developers of the present gold panning area. In 1899-1900, Vaughan and Greenwell hand dug a mining ditch from a point above Libby Creek Falls to their mining claims. This 6000 foot long ditch supplied water necessary for placer and subsequent hydraulic mining ventures.

The mineral claims in the gold panning area were surveyed in 1901 by Nimrod E. Jenkins and patented shortly thereafter. Vaughan and Greenwell began ground sluicing in the area of the present gold panning area in the early 1900's and later leased their claims from 1904 to 1908. The firm of Cannon and Lee of Spokane, Washington later bought claims in the area and established hydraulic mining operations in about 1909. One of the partners died, and the properties in the gold panning area were tied up in court for years.

In 1930, L.J. Olson and Harry Bolyard acquired the former Vaughan and Greenwell properties from a Mr. Curtiss. They sold the properties in 1931, and in 1932 the Libby Placer Mining Company began installation of hydraulic mining equipment and flumes on their mining claims on Howard and Libby Creek. There were 15 men employed to work the operation. The cabins, seen near the bridge crossing over Libby Creek, were built in 1932 by the Libby Placer Mining Company. This operation was unsuccessful and the property was reacquired by Harry Bolyard and L.J. Olson of the Liberty Placer Mining Company. The Liberty Placer Mining Company resumed hydraulic mining operations in the old mining area of Vaughan and Greenwell from 1935 to 1937. After difficulties arose from disposal of tailings, both gasoline and diesel-powered earthmoving shovels were used to excavate goldbearing gravels.

In April of 1938, a dryland dredge worked the gold panning area. This dredge, in operation until April of 1940, processed gravels which were fed into it by the diesel-powered Bucyrus-Erie shovel.

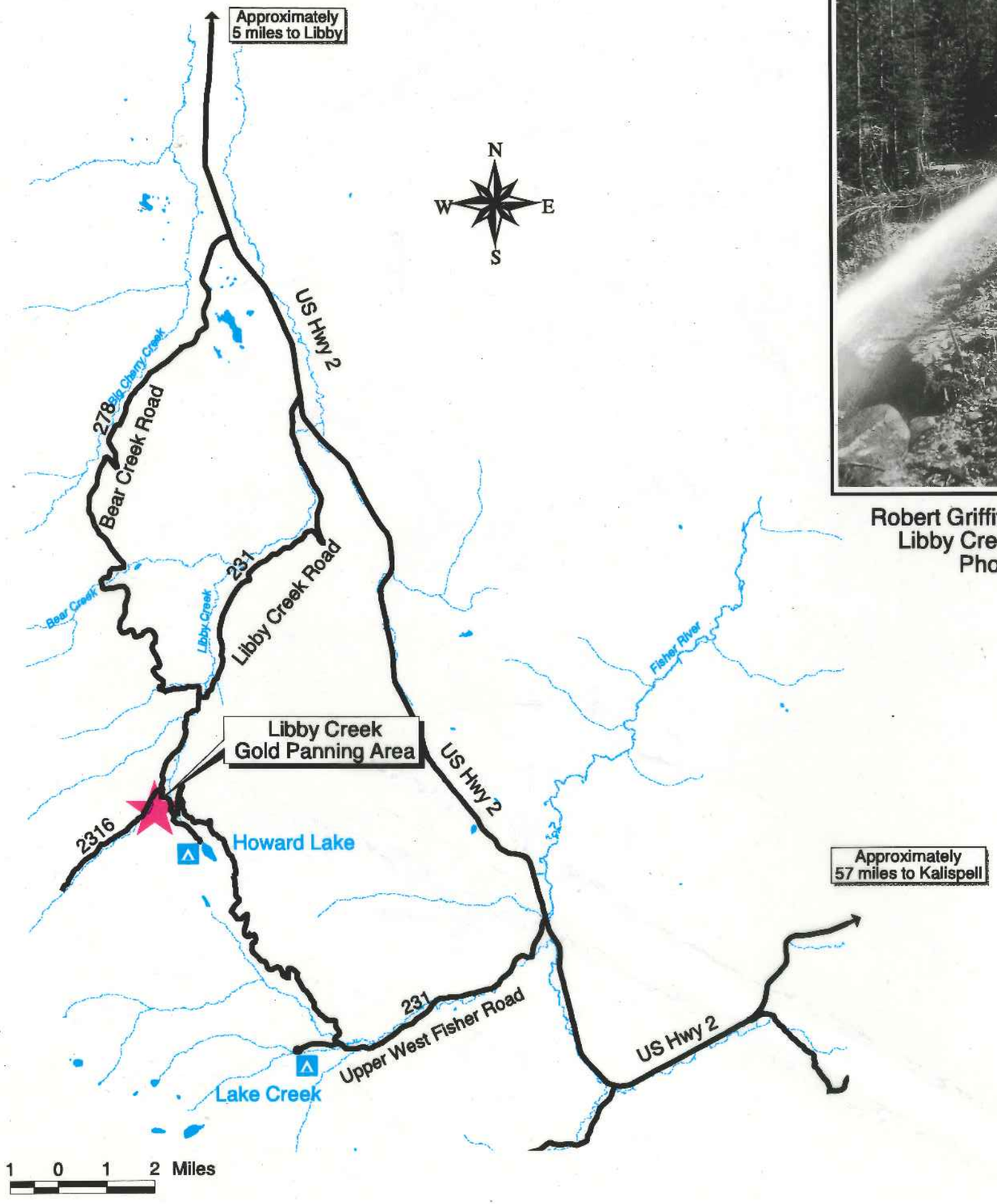
Hydraulic operations on a small scale recommenced and were utilized in what is now the gold panning area until 1947. With the use of hydraulic hoses, bulldozers, and sluice boxes, 15,000 cubic yards of material were processed in 1947 and a value of $6,600.00 in gold (1947 gold prices) was recovered from the mining area. Sporadic mining took place at the Liberty or Bolyard Placer until 1987 when the patented claims, which constitute the present gold panning area, were acquired through a land exchange. The gold panning area was established for the public in 1988 and withdrawn from mineral entry.

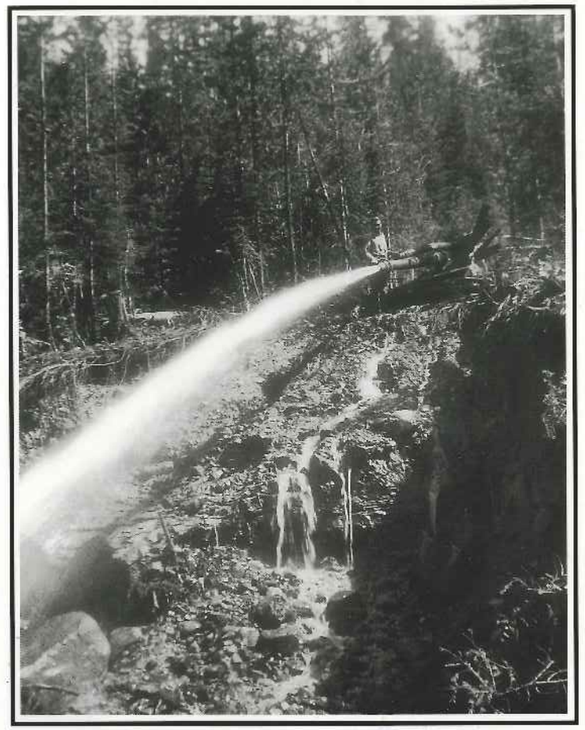
Though no one ever made a fortune on Libby Creek, wages were made there for decades. The creek continues to be prospected and placer mined to the present day.

Please Protect the Past for the Future

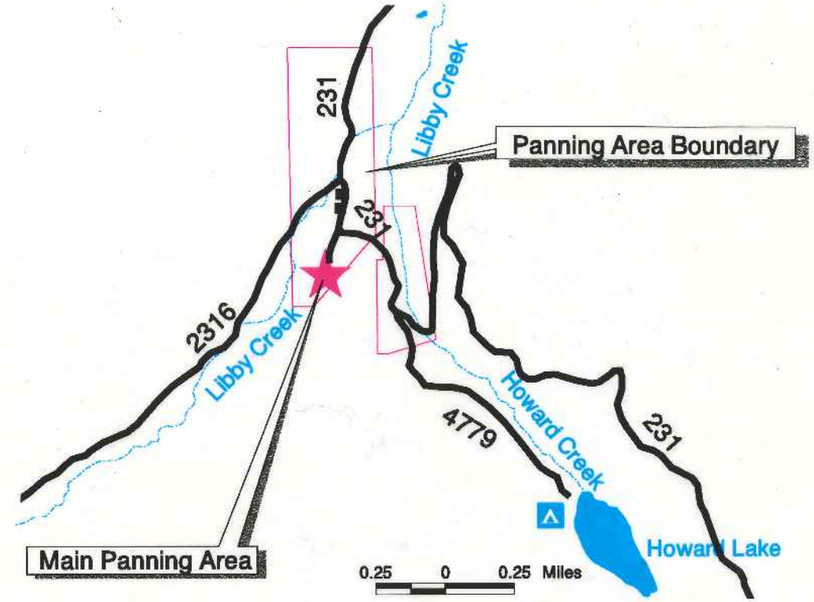
Please do not collect or vandalize historic cabins, artifacts, or mining equipment so that we can all learn from the history of the area. Please do not disturb historic materials or equipment while excavating for gold.

VICINITY MAP





Robert Griffith hydraulic mining in the
Libby Creek Gold Panning Area
Photo taken in 1939



THE GOLD PANNING AREA

Photo taken about 1900
A.V. Howard

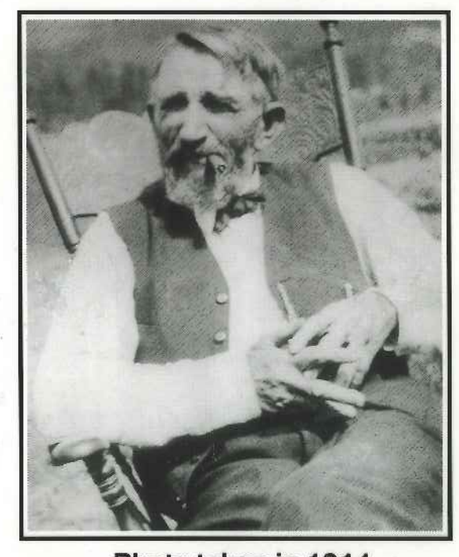


Photo taken in 1914
B.F. Howard

Designed by M. White, B. Lacklen, and B. Holman