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and

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Payette National Forest
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Intermountain Region
January 1996

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By the 1920s, the riches of Idaho's Thunder Mountain gold fields and the excitement of the 1902 boom had largely been forgotten. The gold rush lasted only a couple of years, making millionaires of a few lucky prospectors who sold their claims to groups of investors, many from out-of-state. The gold rush attracted thousands of miners, businessmen, and fortune hunters to the remote area of central Idaho, and several towns were established. The mud slide that blocked Monumental Creek on the night of May 31, 1909, led to the flooding of Roosevelt, the main community, and with its demise went the Thunder Mountain mining district.[1]

A few miners hung on, extracting out small amounts of gold that ensured a modest living. Limited operations continued at the Dewey and Sunnyside claims, two of the most productive during the earlier boom, yet interest in the area waned, and in a 1912 report the state mining inspector referred to the "unfortunate Thunder Mountain boom in central Idaho about 10 years ago."[2] A geologist from the U.S. Geological Survey made two trips into the district over the next several years and his account describes the difficulty of reaching Thunder Mountain and its limited mining operations.[3]

In the mid-1920s, D.C. and Robert McCrae and R.A. Davis continued to mine the area, particularly the abandoned Sunnyside property, and placered during the spring runoffs. To process the ore they constructed a 10 stamp mill and operated it until 1936.[4] Another geologist from the U.S. Geological Survey spent four days

in the district in 1926, and noting recent press accounts he concluded that "available evidence indicates that optimism regarding the future development of the gold deposits of the district is warranted." These favorable comments led the Lewiston Tribune to run a headline on November 4, 1927, reading "Old Mine Lives. Salmon River Hills Full of Gold and Silver."[5] The decades following the collapse of the boom at Thunder Mountain remained the forgotten years, when the district attracted only occasional mention and scattered reports of mining activity.

The fame of the original boom of 1902 continued, however, to gain attention, and it led Zane Grey, one of the country's most successful and prolific writers of western novels, to organize a pack trip to the district in summer of 1931. Grey, a native of Ohio played baseball and trained as a dentist before turning full-time to writing. His career took off in 1912 with the publication of his second novel, Riders of the Purple Sage. During the years between the two world wars, Grey became one of the mostly widely read writers in the country, and more than 40 million copies of his novels have been sold. Grey went to Thunder Mountain because he wanted to base a novel on the 1902 gold rush, and as an avid outdoorsman recognized that the best way to provide for the setting was to visit the area.[6]

Grey contracted with famed Idaho outfitter and guide Elmer Keith of Salmon to take him on a hunting and fishing trip which would also provide the basis for the planned novel. To help on the trip, Keith hired two other packers, each of whom provided his own string of horses. Accompanying Grey were his son and

daughter with their spouses, a family friend, two stenographers, and his Japanese cook.[7]

The only account of Grey's pack trip comes from Jerry Ravndal, a young cowboy and packer who was hired by Keith. As he later recalled, Grey and his entourage arrived in Stanley loaded with equipment, including a movie camera and tripod. "We all went to work loading equipment and supplies onto the pack horses--I never saw so much stuff in my life as we had on that trip!" In Stanley, the party ran into its first obstacles. Drought had parched the woods and the Salmon National Forest supervisor was adamant that no one was to be packing into the Thunder Mountain district. As he stated emphatically, "Zane Grey or no Zane Grey! Book or no book! The answer is still NO, Mr. Keith!"[8]

The plans for the pack trip had long been made, and it now appeared that they would go no farther. Kenneth McBride, the postmaster of Salmon, offered a solution--the party could camp at his ranch about twelve miles south of town along Williams Lake. The countryside was spectacular, and McBride maintained that "Zane Grey has never seen country any prettier than that lake." Elmer Keith was pleased and he advised Grey that this was the best solution to the problem.[9]

The equipment and supplies were loaded on the pack horses in preparation for moving camp. The party headed towards Williams Lake with Zane Grey riding a horse provided by packer Jerry Ravndal, who remembered that "Zane started dragging out his huge, special saddle and fancy blankets and a bridle with one of those big old silver mounted bits on it." Despite the horse's discomfort, the group made its way to Williams Lake where two

camps were set up, one for Grey and his party and one for the packers. Tagahashi, Grey's Japanese cook, quickly won the friendship of the local packers with his good spirit and cooking.[10]

The entire party spent a lot of time together. Once, during dinner, a neighbor rode into camp and was invited by the crew to have something to eat, as is custom in the West. Apparently Grey did not approve; having purchased all the groceries "he seemed to expect everyone to cheat him." A few days later the same neighbor came into camp driving the horses belonging to the Grey party; they had gotten loose and were heading out of the area. Western hospitality had once again shown its value.[11]

During the evenings, the entire party gathered around the campfire with Zane Grey telling stories. As one packer recalled, "they were really interesting, almost like reading one of his books." The days were spent hiking, fishing and enjoying the lake. Time went slowly at Williams Lake and the party was no doubt relieved when the rains returned and permission was granted to continue the original pack trip to the Thunder Mountain district. The crew loaded the equipment on trucks to be hauled over the mountains to the jumping off point at Meyers Cove. Zane Grey and his group, led by Keith and Ravndal, continued by horse.[12]

Grey and the others moved out ahead of the packers who loaded up the supplies and followed. Setting out early in the morning, they climbed a mountain, proceeded along the ridge to Meyers Cove and spent the first night at a ranch near Silver Creek. The next day they followed Silver Creek, and proceeded

down Camas Creek to its confluence with the Middle Fork of the Salmon River where they spent the night at Bear Camp. They settled in there for a few days, and Ravndal later said that "at this camp my esteem for Tagahashi grew every day. He was the best cook, the best packer, the best fisherman, and the best sport in the whole bunch." He also kept plenty for coffee ready for the cowboys.[13]

At Bear Camp they sorted out the supplies and Grey recognized that much would not be needed for the rest of the journey. He gave the extra food to Keith who left it along the trail, to be picked up later. From Bear Camp the party continued to the mouth of Big Creek, more than twenty miles away where they forded the Middle Fork which was running high because of the recent rains. They stopped at "Cougar Dave" Lewis ranch on Pioneer Creek, before proceeding to another camping place at Cottonwood Meadows.[14]

From there, Keith and Ravndal led the group to Cold Meadow and another camp site. By now, the party was short on food, having brought only what they expected to use. When a snowstorm hit, some in Grey's party began to talk about turning back before reaching Thunder Mountain. A few packers came into camp who had just come over Two Point Pass where seven of their horses had perished on the icy trails. Knowing that some wanted to return to Salmon by way of Two Point Pass, Ravndal insisted that they continue. "You guys can go anyplace you want...but I've got twelve head of horses and they are going with me by the way of Crooked Creek and Thunder Mountain. You go where you want!" The group remained together; "they had to go where I wanted to go,

and it did take a little bit longer but we didn't lose any horses on icy trails," Ravndal recalled. The route took them along Crooked Creek to Monument Creek "and right over the shoulder of Thunder Mountain, around the famous Dewey mine--but of course there was nothing except ghosts in that country by then."[15]

The trip lasted more than a month, and by the end Grey had gained enough familiarity with the country to provide the setting for his historical novel. As Ravndal stated, "he had gotten names, dates and so on from the local people, and enough sampling of the country to make the book authentic, and that was all he really needed."[16] The setting was an important feature of Grey's novels, and the physical terrain became more than a backdrop to the action. It was very much a part of the unfolding story. This is particularly true of Thunder Mountain, published by Harper & Brothers in 1935.

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Following the pack trip, Grey returned to his desk and continued to produce an average of two novels and numerous articles a year, including the novels The Drift Fence (1933), The Hash Knife Outfit (1933), Code of the West (1934). Only in 1935 did he complete Thunder Mountain which was published in the spring and quickly became a commercial success.

The novel is vintage Grey and it tells the story of the three Emerson brothers, prospectors from Montana, who make the big strike after years of hard luck. They find gold at Thunder Mountain, a rugged area where "the last remnant of the Sheepeater Indians pitched camp" and where "outcasts from various tribes" hid. The brothers, Sam, Jake and Kalispel, had learned of the

site from an old Nez Perce Indian and years later they had "toiled down into the valley from the south, and late in the day unpacked their weary burros and made camp." Sam, the eldest, observed dryly, "Reckon it's the place, all right." Jake, however, did not like the area--tough to work, rugged terrain, and he worried about outlaws.[17]

The brothers set to work, panning gold. Sam turned up one nugget and concluded "Thar's five hundred dollars--in thet chunk....An' a million more--where it come from!" They had struck it rich. But the distant sounds of thunder cast a pall over their activities and caused them to pause more than once.[18] The brothers shrewdly recognize that "the majority of prospectors who strike it rich never reap the profits of their discovery," so they decide to file the claims and organize a company. Jake and Kalispel would go to Boise, seeking investors, and they would return with needed supplies. Sam, the oldest brother, would remain at the mine, protecting and guarding their source of riches.

The two brothers headed out of the district, reaching Challis in three days. Jake continued on to Boise, while Kalispel, the lead character, buys supplies and runs into a series of adventures. Along the way, he meets a shrewd woman, Sydney, reveals the find, but insists that it be kept secret. When he crossed the last summit into Thunder Mountain he saw before him "White Tents! Columns of blue smoke rising! Men wading in the stream!" The area had been discovered, the rush was on, and a boom town, Thunder City, was already sprouting up. As Kalispel rode down the slope, "the old bald-faced mountain had

growled ominously." Grey, as a reviewer described the town, populated it with "some honest miners, but more numerous were the desperadoes, thieves, cattle rustlers, gamblers, con men, greasers, saloonkeepers and speculators."[19]

The novel now becomes a struggle of the brothers to hold on to their claim and to derive their just rewards from it while the area filled "with adventurers, and miners who labored for gold only as a blind, while by stealth they stole and robbed."[20] As a reviewer wrote, "This is the story of its unsavory growth, a story of the hectic search for gold and of greed, treachery, deceit, robbery, murder, and various other forms of villainy and vice."[21] Along the way, the brothers are cheated, robbed, threatened, and shot. As one reviewer wrote, "the story resolves itself into a struggle for supremacy, fortune and a woman between Rand Leavitt, who jumped the claim and runs the town and Kalispel, who is determined to revenge his brother's death and secure justice."[22]

Grey introduces a number of subplots and characters that extend and round out the novel. Kalispel remains the central figure, a loner committed to his brothers who finds two love interests, a slick city woman and a saloon girl. Tensions mount, as a shrewd and ruthless businessman conspires to get Kalispel and seize his wealth. As he fights off attacks, the mountain has its revenge. At the culmination of the book, Kalispel, held for a murder he did not commit, is freed, and the next instant all attention turns to the mountain where "a groaning, straining rumble came from the depths."[23] An avalanche moved down the mountainside as the spectators and vigilantes fled. The wall of

mud and debris moved toward Thunder City destroying the stamp mill and buildings along the way. "The landslide seemed relentless," Grey wrote. "It had waited long; it had faithfully warned this mushroom city; and now it was fulfilling its augury."[24]

Much as in 1910, the slide proceeded only slowly and came to block Monumental Creek. As the water backed up it flooded the main town which Grey called Thunder City. As Kalispel fled he looked back to see blocked stream where "houses, half-submerged, like sinking boats, floated upon its surface." Nature had taken its revenge and now "chaos reigned down in that valley, transcendently beautiful in its sunset hues and curtains, terrible with its naked destructive forces of earth and rock."[25]

Grey's novel contains the features that had made his work so widely read and commercially successful. Thunder Mountain transported the reader to a simpler time and wilder location where sheer luck and determination could help make you a fortune. It offered an idealized view of a western mining community, one barely thirty years distant. The novel was a story of good, stumbling and barely coming out on top of evil. Added to the story were a host of characters, and two women pursuing the main character. Kalispel found love and devotion in the former saloon worker, and together they looked to the future from another valley. A reviewer writing in the New York Times announced, "It is one his best."[26]

Grey was also effective because of his skillful adaptation of the details of the actual Thunder Mountain boom into his story. It had originally been discovered by three brothers, a

rush followed, some crime was recorded but not on the extent of the novel. The district boomed with fortunes made and lost as quickly. And the end came with a mud slide, but after the mines had been nearly exhausted and many had already left the area.

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The on-going success of Zane Grey's novels--reviewers of Thunder Mountain often cited his publishers who said that more than 11 million copies of his books had been sold--meant that they were turned into films more often than the work of most other western writers. Film makers recognizing the popularity of his stories, made the attempt "to retain the values of his stories rather more than in the case of other writers." An early critic of the film wrote that "Grey's name has appeared on the screen more often than that of any other author's." The story and the setting were of importance.[27]

The success of films based on his novels led producer Sol Lesser to purchase the rights to Thunder Mountain in the spring of 1935, shortly after its publication. Best known as a producer of a serials, low-budget westerns and Tarzan films, Lesser was born in Spokane and began producing movies in the 1930s.[28] He cast well-known actor George O'Brien in the lead role of Kalispel, the youngest of the Emerson brothers, and the film was the first of a "series of four outdoor yarns by famous authors that Lessor is lining up for early production," commented the journal Filmography.[29]

From the start, the production of the film attracted attention, with Lesser hiring an "autogyro", a helicopter, to search for an appropriate location in the Sierra Mountains, a

site true to the novel. George O'Brien went along on the three day journey in July, and they found a small valley about 75 miles from Sonora.[30]

Lesser was clearly in a hurry to complete filming before winter, and already in August, barely a month after acquiring the rights to the novel, the trade press announced that work on the site was underway. "A mushroom gold camp" had already "sprung up," it was reported, and this time "the lure of celluloid and not the fever of gold inspired the building of this picturesque city-from-out-of-the-past." In the valley of the Stanislaus River, a "tent city duplicated one of the colorful settings described by Grey in his novel." With more than a hundred tents, "several log cabins, a restaurant and a dance hall," the setting also served as the accommodations for the 80 actors. The crew even published its own news sheet, "The Daily Thunder," with a circulation of 82 and George O'Brien serving as the honorary editor.[31]

The full crew came to number over 100, and they spent about two weeks at Kennedy's Meadow on the banks of the Stanislaus River filming. "Thunder Mountain" was not the only film being shot in this picturesque location, particularly "with the film industry paying more attention to outdoor pictures this year than ever before," wrote a reporter for San Francisco's Call-Bulletin. The set was used in several more films. The critic also noted that tourists and campers in that area "are happiest of all," now with the opportunity to see films being made and stars up close they have "an unexpected thrill." Some even walked up and had lunch 'with the celebrities."[32]

The shooting and editing went quickly, and the film's preview was released already on September 10, 1935. Directed by David Howard, it "faithfully transferred to the screen" the Zane Grey novel. The film was predicted to be a success, especially "those box offices where outdoor stores of adventure and thrills spell dollars, and especially where the name of George O'Brien, who is starred, means anything, it should prove highly profitable."[33]

A reviewer praised the lead actor, writing that he "does a swell bit of trouping and has been surrounded by a capable supporting cast." The screen play by Dan Jarrett and Don Swift remains true to the novel, and it "shows unmistakable evidences of careful and painstaking preparation." The work of director Howard "for the most part is flawless."[34]

Along with praise for the director and leading actor, critics expressed their satisfaction with the story. "Lure of gold is the basis of the yarn," with O'Brien and his partner played by Dean Benton cheated out of their claim. O'Brien falls for the "money-loving and unscrupulous" Barbara Fritchie, and while distracted, Morgan Wallace jumped the claim. O'Brien is torn by his affection for Barbara Fritchie, much to the discomfort of Frances Grant, the lady who really cares for him. But O'Brien does straighten things out, getting Wallace's henchmen to confess to having stolen the claim and that Wallace had slain Benton. The film culminates in a fight between O'Brien and Wallace, with the latter last being seen as he is "flung over a high cliff."[35]

The acting was well received, with one critic writing that

"Miss Fritchie handles a despicable characterization in expert fashion and drew hisses from last night's preview audience as a tribute to her work." Furthermore, "Wallace is superb as the menace, handling the assignment with a suaveness that gives plenty of evidence of his trouping ability." A critic at Seattle's Post-Intelligence wrote that "a cleverly developed plot and George O'Brien's deft acting combine to give just the right robust quality to the drama unfolded in 'Thunder Mountain.'"[36]

The film was an instant hit, much like the book and the boom of 1902. But the film has not endured and it is difficult to find a copy. Although not one of Grey's best novels, Thunder Mountain is a good story and was a commercial success. The background to it also reveals much about the prolific author who visited sites before writing, and thereby providing greater authenticity even if he changed many of the details. Thunder Mountain was more than a simple historical novel. Based on an actual even, it gained credibility, and Grey shrewdly adopted the events of the 1902 boom to his own pattern for a successful novel and a good story.

NOTES

1. Two brief accounts are available. See Merle Wells, Gold Camps & Silver Cities: Nineteenth Century Mining in Central and Southern Idaho, 2nd edition (Moscow: Idaho Department of Lands, Bureau of Mines and Geology, 1983), pp. 137-156, and Bob Waite, "To Idaho's Klondike: The Thunder Mountain Gold Rush, 1901-1090," (Heritage Program, Payette National Forest, December 1994).

2. Robert N. Bell, "Big Creek Gold District, Idaho," Engineering and Mineral Journal 94(November 9, 1912), p. 892.

3. J.B. Umpleby and D.C. Livingston, A Reconnaissance in South Central Idaho embracing the Thunder Mountain, Big Creek, Stanley Basin, Sheep Mountain, and Seafoam Districts (Moscow: University of Idaho, 1920), pp. 1-5.

4. Clyde P. Ross, "The Thunder Mountain Mining District, Valley County, Idaho," Economic Geology 28(September/October 1933), pp. 587-588.

5. Ibid. "Old Mines Live," Lewiston Tribune (November 4, 1927).

6. I am grateful to Hunter Nelson, my former neighbor in Hailey, Idaho, for telling me about Grey's pack trip. Hunter was working for the Forest Service in Stanley when Grey came through. Interview of Hunter Nelson, July 10, 1983, Hailey, Idaho. For a brief description of the routes into Thunder Mountain, see the 1902 brochure,"Thunder Mountain, Idaho's New Gold Camp," pp. 28-30.

7. Ethel Kimball, "Trail to Thunder Mountain," True West (April, 1973), pp. 24-28, 42, 44-46.

8. Ibid., pp. 24, 25, 27.

9. Ibid., p. 25.

10. Ibid., p. 26.

11. Ibid., pp. 26-27.

12. Ibid., pp. 27-28.

13. Ibid., pp. 28, 42.

14. Ibid., pp. 44-45.

15. Ibid., pp. 45-46.

16. Ibid., p. 46.

17. Thunder Mountain (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), pp. 4-5. "Latest Zane Grey Novel Has Setting In Idaho Mountains, Union Bulletin (Walla Walla, Washington) (May 16, 1935).

18. Ibid., p. 19

19. Ibid., pp. 87, 89. "A Zane Grey Tale," New York Times (May 5, 1935). A reviewer wrote in the New York Herald Tribune on May 26, 1935, that "the picture of the boom town is lively and exciting."

20. Ibid., p. 111.

21. "A Zane Grey Tale".

22. "Thunder Mountain," Boston Evening Transcript, Book Section, June 8, 1938, p. 2.

23. Ibid., p. 280.

24. Ibid., p. 286.

25. Ibid., p. 289.

26. "A Zane Grey Tale," New York Times (May 5, 1935).

27. "A Zane Grey Tale." George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, The Western: From Silents to the Seventies, second edition (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), p. 170. "Zane Grey Tales Easily Adapted For Film Play," Examiner (Los Angeles) (July 13, 1935). This and subsequent clippings on the film "Thunder Mountain" are from The Zane Grey Collection, Ohio Historical Society (Microfilm edition of newspaper clippings from the Zane Grey Collection, Roll 1, Frames 107-109.

28. "Lesser Buys a Zane Grey," Reporter (Hollywood, California), May 10, 1935. "New Zane Grey for Lesser, O'Brien," Variety (May 11, 1935). "Lesser, Sol," in Ephraim Katz, The Film Encyclopedia (New York: Perigee Books, 1979), p. 715.

29. "Sol Lesser Buys Zane Grey's Story, 'Thunder Mountain,' for George O'Brien Vehicle," Filmography (May 18, 1935). "O'Brien, George," in Film Encyclopedia, pp.870-871.

30. "Autogyro Is Handy Finding Right Peak for Film Company," Call-Bulletin (San Francisco) (30 July 1935).

31. "Gold Days of '49 To Be Re-Created," Examiner (Los Angeles) (August 9, 1935). "Novel Newspaper," Times (Los Angeles) (August 22, 1935). "Portable Equipment Sends Films Heading For Wide Open Spaces," Sun (San Diego) (October 26, 1935).

32. Mark Bret Twain-Harte, "Trio of Movie Outfits Build 'Boom Towns' at Sonora," Call-Bulletin (San Francisco) (August 17, 1935).

33. "Thunder Mountain," (Los Angeles) (September 11, 1935).

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid. See also, H.M.L., "Tune Romance, Western, Twin Orpheum Bill," Tribune (Oakland) (October 14, 1935).

36. "Thunder Mountain." John Fletcher, "Liberty Offers Two Exciting New Pictures," Post-Intelligence (Seattle) (November 2, 1935).