Poor Man's Fortune

Roll, Jarod

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As Gilded Age Americans fashioned a new industrial society out of iron and steel along transcontinental railroads, suspension bridges, and unspooling lines of barbed wire, they met an old menace: rust. “The decay of iron and steel by corrosion,” metallurgical engineer Alfred Sang warned, “is far more rapid than that of wood and other materials of construction.” Manufacturers and builders fought it with lead paint and, after 1870, a newer technique: zinc galvanization. Unlike a coat of paint, which needed regular reapplication, a galvanizing coat of zinc on iron or steel offered decades of protection. More and more manufacturers offered galvanized products as a premium alternative to bare metal goods. At the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, for example, exhibitors displayed galvanized iron in sheets and pipes, fences, railings, gates, and less obvious items such as birdcages and poultry nets. Visitors browsed most of these displays in the Sheet Metal Pavilion, itself made with galvanized iron. Elsewhere, the Brooklyn Bridge, the rising icon of modern America in the 1870s, featured almost 2,000 steel suspension wires protected by “the newly established art of galvanizing.” Even paint manufacturers took advantage of zinc’s anticorrosive properties by using zinc oxide to make a new type of rust-resistant paint to compete with lead-based products.1

The Granby Mining and Smelting Company and those who returned to work on its lands after 1865 reaped the benefits as demand for lead and zinc continued to grow, even after other commodities lost value following the Panic of 1873. Manufacturers used twice as much lead in 1878 as in 1868, which held the price of pig lead above the highest prewar levels for the first three years of the ensuing national economic crisis. In 1878 manufacturers used 17,781 tons of zinc, a fivefold increase since 1868 that gave zinc ore new value that continued to rise despite the depression. Initially, however, miners and smelters in southwest Missouri looked only to lead. Miners found zinc in its three main mineral forms—sphalerite, also known as blende and “black jack” (zinc sulfide); calamine (zinc silicate); and “dry bone” (zinc carbonate)—in considerable quantities around, and often mixed with, almost every run of galena. Although everyone knew what zinc ore was, no one knew what
to do with it until the late 1860s, when a new smelter opened near St. Louis. Working miners, not Granby Mining or the leasing companies that followed it, would be the first entrepreneurs to take advantage of the growing market for zinc ore. Their success not only sparked the most frenzied period of prospecting yet but also reopened old questions about who controlled the mines.²

Like their antebellum counterparts, the white miners who came to the district after 1865 wanted to work for themselves on an independent basis, preferably as owner-operators, and not as permanent employees of one company. Although Granby Mining offered generous leasehold terms to attract miners, it also ultimately considered them its employees in what resembled the inside contractor systems used in contemporary factories and most coal mines.³ Some miners found the relationship with Granby Mining too lucrative to leave, while hundreds of prospectors used it to accumulate capital to finance their own independent mining ventures. The emergence of outside buyers of zinc ore after 1870 provided a new, seemingly depression-proof market incentive for doing so. So did the gradual weight of the depression on the lead industry, which led Granby Mining and new leasing companies to tighten contract terms. While a few miners responded to company control with violence, others explored antimonopoly politics. Most, however, looked to escape the company grip, not fight it. As prospectors fanned out from developed holdings, they discovered the richest ore and mineral deposits yet across a wide swath of Jasper and Newton Counties and into Cherokee County, Kansas. Their finds launched dynamic mining camps—Joplin, Webb City, Carterville, Oronogo, and Galena—that made the district into a national leader.

Successful prospectors in turn created dozens of small mining companies that employed a new generation of miners. They built thriving communities that fostered miners’ ambitions and their sense of white social equality, particularly between men—in contrast to paternalistic company towns that often defined extractive industries. These achievements made the mining district famous as a poor man’s camp, a place where men with little means could still make money on their own account. At a time when some workers across the country organized in resistance to the logic of industrial capitalism, often in spectacular, violent strikes, miners in southwest Missouri deepened their commitment to the risks and rewards of the metal market and the ideals of the poor man’s camp.

The Granby Mining and Smelting Company led the reconstruction of the district in the late 1860s to take advantage of the dynamic market for pig
lead and the lead-based products of its affiliated companies in St. Louis. The galena found at Granby yielded lead of uncommon purity and softness that makers of white lead paint valued above all other grades. By the early 1870s, traders in New York considered the “soft Missouri” grade “superior to any refined lead produced anywhere in this country or in Europe.” Granby Mining, with its powerful connections in the lead industry, the state government, and the region’s burgeoning railroad network, stood to make handsome profits. Miners also looked to capitalize on these favorable conditions, first by working on Granby Mining land but increasingly with an eye to mining for themselves.4

In order to attract miners to work its holdings in the late 1860s, the company offered advantageous contract terms very similar to those that had gained the loyalty of prospectors in the 1850s. In notices that appeared weekly in area newspapers, the company invited miners to return to their claims on the same basis as before the war: they would have freedom to work as they saw fit so long as they sold their mineral to the company smelter. When Granby Mining purchased hundreds of acres near Minersville in Jasper County after 1865, however, it needed prospectors to explore these new holdings, where shallow deposits ran as irregularly and unpredictably as in Granby. To re-create the kind of entrepreneurial prospecting that had worked so well in the 1850s, the company advertised “the greatest inducements to all working men, seeking remunerative employment, and healthy incomes.” Granby Mining would pay prospectors one dollar per foot to dig exploratory shafts; miners in the 1850s had either assumed this cost themselves or sought third-party financing. If the prospector discovered mineral, he could then work the claim on a contract basis by returning the digging wages. In exchange for unfettered access to the claim, the miner agreed to sell all of the galena he raised to the Granby Mining smelter at the contract price, thirty dollars per 1,000 pounds in the late 1860s, which followed the market price of pig lead, and to pay a rent of two dollars per 1,000 pounds of mineral. Prospectors who dug shafts but did not hit mineral kept their wages. “This offer,” recruiting literature explained in 1868, “guarantees to each miner a support—whether he discovers mineral or not, and in every case where mineral is found, secures him the actual benefit of the profits of mining.”5

The recruitment efforts worked. “There are a goodly number of experienced and energetic miners returning to Granby to seek their fortunes,” an observer reported in late 1865. William Frazer and Joseph Hopkins, both of whom had mined over a million pounds of mineral in the late 1850s, were among them. So were miners who had not yet achieved such success. Martin
Jarrett, who had lived next door to Frazer in 1860, did not make much money before the war, but he returned to Granby with his wife, Nancy. Now thirty years old, Jarrett resumed mining alongside a new partner, Jasper Moon, with a grubstake from Hopkins. Moon grew up around lead miners in the eastern Missouri field in the 1840s. In the fall of 1866, Moon and Jarrett produced 96,000 pounds of galena. Others achieved similar results. “The amount of lead ore being taken from the ground at the present time far exceeds that of any time previous,” a correspondent declared, “and the prospect looks flattering for the discovery of larger deposits than was ever thought of in the first opening of the mines in 1855–6.” Although this report exaggerated the comparison, the results suggested that contract miners found the company’s terms agreeable. In 1867, Granby Mining bought 2.5 million pounds of mineral from its miners. “Granby is flourishing,” Henry Blow informed his partner, James B. Eads, the following year, because “the prospecting was really like that under Blow + Kennett.” The place looked the same. A visitor in the fall of 1867 noted the “queer combination of people and pits, houses and hills, business and brush, called Granby.” “All around,” he said, “the face of the earth is scarred by pit-holes, and streets and roads and buildings have to give way to the requirement of the original idea of Granby—lead.”

White men with experience and property predominated at Granby, where they were well positioned to take advantage of the terms of sublease mining. Of 126 miners listed in the 1870 census, eighty reported owning personal property or real estate, with most claiming holdings worth between $50 and $500. Six miners owned property worth more than $500. Although these miners owned less property than their farming neighbors, their holdings compared favorably to those of other men their age, whether farmers or skilled workers. Records do not indicate who had worked in Granby before the war, but most probably mined lead somewhere in the Mississippi Valley. Bazil Meek, for example, mined in Granby in 1870 with his sons, Robert and John, who had been born in Illinois in the late 1830s; they claimed property worth $100. Meanwhile, John Trevaskis, who valued his personal estate at $300, was born in Cornwall in 1840 but had likely worked in more than one American metal camp. Many of these miners, like their prewar counterparts, were married with children. The majority, perhaps two-thirds, were native-born whites, although many of these had at least one foreign-born parent; most of those born abroad came from England, Ireland, Cornwall, or Wales. The 1870 census returns for Jasper and Newton Counties listed only one African American miner, Thomas Walker. Born in Missouri in 1841, Walker mined in Granby and claimed fifty dollars in property. Records do not reveal whether Granby Mining actively avoided subleasing land to African Ameri-
cans after 1865, but we do know that almost half of the 827 African Americans who lived in both counties in 1860 had since left. Many fled during the violent and chaotic war years. Those who stayed had to deal with former owners and many former Confederates. As mining restarted in the district, then, white men with common social backgrounds and national origins enjoyed almost exclusive access to its opportunities.7

The sense of democratic openness was greatest at Minersville, where prospectors were younger, possessing far less working capital than their counterparts at Granby. A visitor in early 1870 found 500 residents in the camp, many with prior mining experience. For example, John Sergeant and Elliott Moffett left Wisconsin, where they had mined lead together, in 1867 to seek better opportunities in Jasper County. Michael Brady, who was born in Ireland in 1836 and had also mined in the Upper Mississippi field, did likewise with his Iowa-born wife, Amanda, and their two young children. Re-creating a prewar pattern of generational support, the Bradys boarding Wisconsin-born James Cummins, a seventeen-year-old miner, in their new home. Unlike the miners at Granby, however, those seeking claims at Minersville had little property or savings. Of thirty-seven miners listed in the census, thirty-one, including Moffett, Sergeant, Brady, and Cummins, reported owning no property at all. The opportunity to prospect for Granby Mining offered them a new chance to establish their independence. That opportunity also attracted young men from the surrounding countryside who had no mining experience. Missouri-born brothers Benjamin and Thomas Holmes, who were nineteen and sixteen years old, respectively, in 1870, both mined but had no property between them. It made sense that miners with the most skill, experience, and past success gravitated to the developed Granby field. By contrast, the miners who prospected in Minersville lacked the capital, equipment, or connections to gain access at Granby. Instead, they listened to the assurances of Granby Mining that workers with no experience could discover and exploit lucrative new claims. According to company ads, “good laboring men of steady habits soon learn to mine, and will find it profitable as the mineral is readily found in paying quantities.” The company had no trouble attracting workers to Minersville but wanted them to deliver more galena. According to a visitor in 1870, “the general opinion prevails, that richer deposits of mineral lie below any depth yet reached.” To encourage the pursuit of those deposits, Granby Mining ran a contest that offered a $500 bonus to the miner or miners who produced the most mineral at Minersville in a three-month period. In July 1870, Moffett and Sergeant won the award.8

Like many of their counterparts, Moffett and Sergeant wanted to work for
themselves. They used the windfall to finance a search for a new, independent claim. In August 1870 they leased two sites along the east bank of Joplin Creek, one from John Cox and the other a few hundred yards to the south on land owned by Oliver H. Picher, a local judge. At first, their prospecting did not go well. According to local legend, Moffett and Sergeant exhausted their supplies and their money with little success before borrowing enough blasting powder “for one more shot before abandoning the effort” on the Cox leasehold. That last shot, the story goes, revealed a rich vein of lead mineral at the thirty-five-foot level. Now they had enough money to keep digging. In the three months that followed, Moffett and Sergeant made $60,000 from what became known as the “discovery shaft.” News of their good fortune spread fast.9

Hundreds of prospectors followed Moffett and Sergeant to the banks of Joplin Creek. Although rich, the deposits were not continuous, so no one knew where the next discovery might be made. The only way to find out was to dig. By the summer of 1871 miners worked both sides of the valley for three miles from where it joined Turkey Creek. Many of them came from Granby or Minersville, but others came from area farms after hearing “the news of rich strikes of lead near the surface.” Like Moffett and Sergeant, they all sought their own paying claim, free of company control. At first, they leased the right to dig from one of the three landowners in the valley: Cox, Picher, or George Porter. There in July 1871, in the midst of trees and fields, observers from Carthage, the Jasper County seat, found tents and “little mounds of earth scattered over the hillsides” where prospectors worked in pits that differed little from those seen in Granby in 1857. Next to each mound, a visitor reported, “there was a hole in the ground just like an ordinary well” surrounded by “a windlass, rope, tubs and picks.” Two men worked this mine: one “down in the shaft shoveling around in the mud and water” while “the other man worked the windlass.” Miners throughout the valley had discovered galena as shallow as six feet, usually in the fragmentary patterns seen elsewhere in the area. These two “were enthusiastic concerning their prospects for an early discovery of the mineral,” the visitor noted, although he confessed “infidelity concerning their bright anticipations.”10

No one predicted that these anticipations would in fact prove too conservative. Sometime in 1871, Jasper Moon, who had recently relocated from Granby, struck shallow deposits of galena, many of them the size of small boulders, on Cox’s land. Over the next two years, miners would take over 5 million pounds of mineral from the Moon Range, as it became known. Many prospectors met similar success. William Swindle, a farmer from
nearby Sarcoxie, spent the summer of 1871 digging on Porter’s land before he found galena. For almost two years he made an average of $10,000 per month from his mine on what was soon known as Swindle Hill.¹¹

When the dismissive visitors from Carthage returned a month after their first trip, they expected to see nothing but the remnants of fizzled dreams, maybe “four or five shafts.” “Contrary to our expectations,” however, “we found four or five hundred men, and plenty of shafts.” Nearly all of the miners were making money, some “from forty to fifty dollars a day.” “There was one shaft that had six hundred dollars’ worth of ore lying beside it.” The camp “has lead in unlimited quantities underneath it,” another report stated, and “the sound of the shovel and the pick is heard daily in the bowels of the earth.” “Some of the miners are making small fortunes every week.” Stories like these attracted hundreds and then thousands more miners to southwest Missouri.¹²

As prospectors dug more mineral from the ground, they created opportunities for upstart companies to challenge Granby Mining. So long as Blow’s firm operated the only large-scale smelter, it retained control of the regional lead market. Prospectors might have developed their own independent mines in 1870, but they still had to sell their galena at Granby Mining’s price. That changed in 1871 when Moffett and Sergeant opened their own smelter along Joplin Creek. For several months the former prospectors bought all of the galena produced in the valley, “about $1,000 worth of lead per day.” Others soon joined them. Patrick Murphy and W. P. Davis, who owned a freight business based in Fort Scott, Kansas, came in early 1871 to sell supplies. They soon made enough money to buy land from Picher and build a second smelter. The completion of the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad to Newton County in December 1870 made these companies viable. Unlike in the 1850s, smelting companies could now ship pig lead on trains that ran twice a day to St. Louis where it sold for over seven cents per pound in 1871. The new smelting companies initially created a more competitive market for galena that benefited miners. Their production and prospecting soon attracted more investors in land and smelting facilities. As other companies emerged to compete with Granby Mining, whether founded by former prospectors or by investors with purely commercial backgrounds, old questions about the relationship between miners on one side and smelting and land companies on the other became more acute.¹³

As in Newton County in the 1850s, the success of prospectors attracted investors who wanted to secure primary mining rights on land in the Joplin Valley. In late 1871, John H. Taylor, a lawyer from Kansas City, bought the
land surrounding the “discovery shaft” from Cox. Around the same time, three merchants from Hannibal, Missouri, leased part of Picher’s land. Likewise, Samuel Corn, a local merchant, and John Wahl, a St. Louis–based lead trader, took out mining leases on land along Joplin Creek but also elsewhere in Jasper County and near the original Spurgeon mines in Newton County. Unlike Moffett and Sergeant, all of these investors, including Davis and Murphy, were interested primarily in selling pig lead, not mining. They formed leasing and smelting companies, patterned on Granby Mining’s contractual practice, to govern production on their holdings. Facing new competitors, Granby Mining expanded by purchasing several hundred more acres near Minersville and at Leadville on Turkey Creek. The sudden growth of mining activity and smelting companies prompted investment in a new railroad that connected the Atlantic & Pacific to Minersville with future construction aimed toward Kansas. The profitability of these companies, as always, depended on the productivity of the miners.14

Miners and prospectors eyed the proliferation of leasing and smelting companies with suspicion. In February 1872, eighty “Citizens and Miners of the Joplin Lead Mines assembled in mass meeting” to defend their access to the land and authority over the work. Their declaration focused first on preventing investors from monopolizing land to ensure that new prospectors would have a fair chance: “No Miner shall hold more than one lot, nor company of miners more than one lot to every able-bodied man.” The second article stipulated that contract miners with claims must work their lots themselves, not subcontract work to another miner, and that they must employ “one able-bodied hand for each lot so held.” This provision not only attempted to exclude speculators who might consolidate control of the field but also pushed successful miners to redistribute some of their earnings to wage hands, who in turn might become prospectors themselves. The assembly agreed that any miner or company of miners who violated the first two articles or left their claims unworked for three weeks should forfeit their claim. The remaining articles called for the formation of a jury and the appointment of a miners’ magistrate to enforce the above code and arbitrate any disputes. This attempt at self-government closely resembled similar efforts by miners to maintain democratic principles in the first years of the California gold rush, including the provisions to restrict the number of claims one miner could hold. It reflected the concerns of working miners who intended to preserve the camp’s opportunities for men like them, then and in the future.15

In addition to these rules, the miners also passed a set of resolutions that proclaimed their independence from the leasing and smelting companies.
The first asserted “that it is the inherent right of the Miner to prescribe the terms and conditions of mining on ground once thrown open to mining work.” This concept of “miner’s freedom” was widespread among American miners, whether in Missouri lead, Pennsylvania coal, or Nevada silver, and had roots in southwest Missouri that extended back to the wildcat miners who resisted the impositions of Blow & Kennett in the 1850s. It was especially meaningful in the early 1870s for miners and prospectors who, in their effort to escape the authority of Granby Mining, had discovered and developed mineral land in the Joplin Valley only to find themselves facing possible submission to new companies seeking to restrict their ability to sell on the open market. “We hereby wish it distinctly understood,” their first resolution concluded strongly, “that we deem ourselves grossly wronged by certain persons claiming the right to buy our mineral at their own prices.” They also resented landowners who demanded high royalties. “We deem ten per cent of the price of mineral sufficient rent,” another resolution stated. They wanted their work governed by market incentives.16

Although some of their demands resembled those made by miners elsewhere, the Joplin miners differed in their emphasis on the profit motive. It was “the duty of the Miner,” the second resolution declared, “to sell his mineral to the man who will pay the highest price for it.” In the 1870s, every organization of miners made demands about remuneration, whether coal miners paid by the ton or precious metal miners paid by the hour. Few others, though, defined their duty in terms of seeking the maximum proceeds available through competitive trading. In doing so, Joplin miners made a powerful argument about how the hard work of prospectors who sought their own economic benefit had led the discovery and development of the richest mineral deposits in the district. They had assembled to defend and preserve that lucrative system and their “just rights” in it from the impositions of others who did not mine. However, their statements revealed a common interest that worked against any organization more formal than this assembly of individuals: a fair means for men to seek their independence through economic risk. They punctuated these claims with a public assertion of authority as white men by quoting President Andrew Jackson’s first State of the Union address: “We will ask nothing but what is right, and submit to nothing wrong.”17

The new leasing and smelting firms accommodated some of these demands but not all. Most settled on a form of the contractual model pioneered by Granby Mining to harness the ambition of a miner to work “at his own risk and expense.” According to an 1873 survey of the district, these companies leased or subleased plots 200 feet square to prospectors working

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in pairs or small groups. Contrary to the miners’ resolutions of 1872, some firms offered a strict contract that required miners to sell their mineral to the company at a discount. Others, however, offered a more flexible contract that allowed miners to sell to another smelter in exchange for a royalty, which varied from one-eighth to one-fourth of the value of the traded mineral. In most cases, companies financed prospecting directly by paying miners a piece-rate wage for opening new ground. To discourage miners who might be tempted to neglect their sublease in order to prospect elsewhere, companies included a provision under which any miner who did not work his contracted claim for a period of time, usually fifteen days, forfeited it. In an attempt to lure prospectors back to its lands from Joplin, Granby Mining offered a substantial $100 bonus to miners who opened new exploratory shafts. Only one company strayed from the subcontracting model in the early 1870s: Corn and Wahl “worked the land they control at their own risk by hired labor.” The company employed 50 to 100 wageworkers between 1871 and early 1873. The model apparently did not deliver satisfactory results, however. In late 1872 the firm began offering contracts that paid prospectors on some of its less developed lands fifty dollars per 1,000 pounds of mineral, a startling high price. By the summer of 1873 Corn and Wahl had adopted the subcontracting system on all of its holdings. Whether or not there was consensus on contract terms, the lesson of Granby still held: “Prospecting makes prospects, and good mines cannot be found without it; and in this work no parties in the whole West surpass the Joplin miners and companies.”

Joplin’s reputation as a poor man’s camp grew as its promises repeatedly came true. Between August 1870 and the end of 1873, miners in Jasper County sold over 50 million pounds of galena that yielded pig lead worth an estimated $2.45 million. Meanwhile productivity was continuing to rise—in 1873 alone, miners in Joplin and Minersville produced over 19 million pounds of mineral. Local newspapers filled their pages with stories of success. In May 1873, for example, readers learned about “a couple of young miners named Richardson and Cody” who “at last struck a rich prospect” from which “about 500 pounds of a superior quality of ore was raised in a few hours’ time.” “The discovery was made,” the report stated, “only after much hard work and great perseverance.” The following week the same newspaper ran a story about Bradbury and Simpson, “two industrious miners” who struck a piece of galena four feet long and three feet wide in their shaft on the Moon Range. “All day the miners worked hard and faithfully, overcoming one obstacle after another” until “their labor and patience was finally rewarded by seeing the monster safely landed.” What did their faithful
efforts deliver? “The largest chunk of lead ore which has ever been brought to the surface of the ground,” the report declared, “the greatest strike in the mines!”19 In February 1873, a St. Louis newspaper commended “the pluck and the industry” of Joplin’s “poor miners.” “While they have lacked the capital they have possessed abundant nerve,” the report concluded, “and this has pulled them through.” Of course, landowners and smelting companies made a lot of money too. John Taylor reported weekly profits of $1,600 in late 1872; his companies had made over $50,000 in profit the year before.20

Aspiring miners arrived by the hundreds in Jasper County every month. When residents along Joplin Creek organized a municipal government in 1873, the new city of Joplin had over 5,000 residents. Most of them sought the success that their first mayor, Elliott Moffett, had achieved. Later that year the residents of Minersville also created a government. They renamed the place Oronogo because, one miner declared, “it’s ore or no go.” Meanwhile, prospectors pushed their search for mineral into undeveloped areas. In late 1873, neighboring farmers John Webb and William Daugherty began digging on their adjacent lands on either side of Ben’s Branch, a small tributary of Center Creek, a few miles southeast of Oronogo. The pair mined for a year, with some promise, but high water levels in the mine led Webb to lease his share to Daugherty, who kept mining with a succession of partners. The Webb diggings, as the camp became known, produced a modest 40,000 pounds of galena in the first year but suggested more. Because of numerous efforts like these, one observer noted in 1874, “gradually the limits of the great mines of the Southwest extend their bounds. New fields are opened. Already it is not possible to keep trace of them.”21

Local children were also drawn to the logic of the poor man’s camp. They were allowed to collect small pieces of mineral for sale to merchants. These scrappers, as they became known, were “of all sizes, black and white, dirty and noisy.” “Their occupation is that of picking nuggets of mineral from waste piles at wash places and abandoned shafts,” a local newspaper reported, “and their earnings, like that of any other class, vary according to the smartness and industry of the ‘scrapper.’” They could make from fifty cents to one dollar a day, which some spent on candy but others saved or contributed to the household earnings. “In this way,” the correspondent figured, “thousands of pounds of mineral which otherwise would go to waste, is gathered up and bought and sold, and if we are to judge from appearances, the weekly aggregate of this business in our city amounts to hundreds of dollars.” The scrappers of today might become the prospectors and miners of tomorrow.22

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And so, amid sometimes tense contract negotiations, by 1873 the miners of southwest Missouri fashioned an ethic of entrepreneurial labor that framed the promise of the poor man’s camp for the rest of the century. Those who made good encouraged more workers to “invest a few dollars in a pick and shovel, fill a haversack with rations and go for the mines.” “It has made fortunes for hundreds of poor men,” one miner told a journalist. They sub-leased land from established companies like Granby Mining and from new ones, or they leased it directly from farmers. They covered the length of Joplin Creek with tents and shafts and windlasses, mined the land at Oro-nogo with unprecedented fervor, and made Leadville productive again. They renewed attention to the old field at Granby and other abandoned mines in Newton County. Most important, they explored the spaces between, hunting for surface indications of the wealth that surely lay below. In all their efforts they followed a belief that the Joplin camp, “the head-centre of individual and combined enterprise, the neglected, calumniated creation of poor but genuine miners, the present seat of the most enterprising, well-to-do and persevering companies, partly formed by originally poor men—Joplin, the favorite of fortune, the most rapidly developing lead mine of Missouri—is just now in her infancy.” Although the profitability of lead in the early 1870s moderated the potential disagreements between miners and leasing and smelting companies, the growth of the district would reveal new incentives that challenged the peace.23 Few expected that those new incentives would come from an emerging zinc market.

In the 1850s, G. C. Swallow had predicted that the area’s zinc ores would only become profitable with improved smelting techniques and a railroad connection. Zinc can be released from its mineral compounds only at temperatures over 2,000°F, when it escapes as vapor. Unlike lead smelters, which burned wood, zinc smelters required coal to obtain such high temperatures. Because they burned so much coal—three and a half tons for every ton of ore—zinc companies built their facilities near abundant coalfields. Once charged, the smelting facility used an elaborate series of containers to capture and gradually cool the zinc vapors to the point of liquid condensation at 900°F.

Despite European advances in the 1850s, Americans mastered the technology on a significant scale only in the 1860s. The first commercially viable zinc smelter west of the Appalachians opened in La Salle, Illinois, in 1860. In 1869, the Missouri Zinc Company built a second smelter south of St. Louis to process zinc ore found in eastern Missouri. The arrival of the railroad in
southwest Missouri in late 1870, so heralded for what it did for the profitability of lead, presented area miners with possibilities for taking advantage of the nascent zinc market. Miners who had contracts to dig lead mineral now found themselves in possession of large quantities of zinc ore that outside companies increasingly wanted to buy. In a district organized around galena, working miners and prospectors, not local landowners or smelting companies, would be the first to profit from the rising value of zinc. This development would both strain contractual relationships and give new energy to the already rampant entrepreneurial spirit of the poor man’s camp.

At first, miners responded coolly to zinc buyers. The early market prices were simply not high enough for them to shift their focus from galena. In 1871 buyers for the Missouri Zinc Company paid one dollar a ton for zinc ore from the waste piles that sat near every mine. The following year the Illinois Zinc Company, which had just opened a smelter in Peru, Illinois, paid two dollars a ton. Granby Mining began buying ore from miners on its lands for three dollars a ton in early 1873. For all three companies, the still-high cost of shipping large amounts of unprocessed ore to St. Louis dampened what they could pay. Miners gladly sold waste rock at three dollars a ton, but they needed a higher offer to actively pursue zinc ore when galena sold for around thirty dollars per 1,000 pounds. “The mining of it at that price can not be thought of in Joplin,” a local correspondent averred. Geologist Adolf Schmidt concurred during his 1873 canvass of the district for the state geological survey. “Zinc blende is abundant at most of the mines,” he reported, “but at present prices it scarcely pays the miner to remove it out of the way of the lead.”

Rising demand for zinc would within a matter of months make this dismissive account sound absurd. Between 1870 and 1875, the national consumption of zinc tripled. No mines outside of New Jersey could deliver enough ore, and so smelters focused more serious attention on southwest Missouri. In 1873 the farsighted Chicago Zinc and Mining Company built a zinc smelter at Weir, in Cherokee County, Kansas, where extensive, shallow coal beds had been discovered in the 1850s. Buyers for the company began paying eight dollars a ton for ore in Joplin. One correspondent reckoned that the new smelter “will scatter at least $1,000 per week in our midst for an ore that has heretofore been considered worthless.” While “Joplin is looked upon as the wonder of the world, almost, on account of her inexhaustible lead deposits,” he believed “that five years will develop the fact that the zinc will double discount the lead” and “surpass the wildest theories of men.”

When zinc buyers raised bids for ore to ten and then twelve dollars a ton
in late 1873, miners and prospectors took advantage. “We are pleased to perceive all over the diggings that the mining of zinc blende has been commenced with great energy,” an industry observer noted that October. “Tons after tons are brought up from shafts where, hitherto, no attention was paid to it.” “Miners are now more generally turning their attention in this direction,” another reporter noted, because of “a market having been opened for it . . . at fair prices.” These miners believed that they should be able to operate in two markets: one selling galena to smelters as contracted and another selling zinc ore freely for whatever buyers would pay.27

In most cases, at least initially, local smelting companies took a relaxed approach to miners trading zinc ore. None could smelt the ore and so at first “did not claim or ask any royalty on it.” As more miners began selling and then mining it, however, some companies insisted on imposing a small royalty. Picher, for example, charged his leaseholders one dollar for each ton of zinc ore sold, a nominal rate, “and no complaint was made by the miners.” Other firms added zinc terms to new sublease contracts that required miners to pay a flat percentage royalty, usually 10 percent, of “the cash market price.” Granby Mining, under new ownership after Blow sold his majority stake in late 1873, presented the only exception by buying all of the zinc ore its contract miners produced for a discounted flat rate, five dollars a ton in early 1874, that would fluctuate with market prices. Granby Mining’s holdings were rich in calamine, a main source of the zinc oxide that St. Louis buyers sought to make zinc white paint.28

Miners could extract zinc ore from existing diggings at little additional cost. They mined it from the same shafts and with the same techniques they used to produce lead mineral. Zinc ore required more processing before it could be smelted, however, because its metal content, around 30 percent, was less than that of galena, 70 percent or more of which was pure lead. To isolate zinc ore from the largest pieces of nonmetal material, miners used a process known as concentrating. They crushed the ore with hand-operated rollers and then washed these pieces in a jig, a shallow box two feet by five feet submerged in a bigger water tank that separated ore from waste rock when shaken vertically and sideways in a vigorous pattern that must have resembled dancing. Miners could build and operate their own jigs or, if more successful, hire a wageworker to do it. After jigging, miners had concentrated ore ready for sale.29

From 1873, miners responded with a rush for zinc ore that led to new prospecting and the reopening of lead mines thought dead. At the Spurgeon mines, the oldest in the region, miners found “zinc blende of a very superior quality . . . said to be the richest yet discovered.” Opening old mines led

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many miners to new runs of galena, so that “with the zinc mining new lead deposits are being struck.” At Granby, “the whole appearance of the mines was changed by this getting of Zinc-ores.” Many miners had moved away from the company’s land in Newton County, where for nearly thirty years the galena deposits had been picked over, in favor of other more promising lands in Jasper County. The miners who worked at Granby, however, knew that although the galena was fragmented, the calamine ran in wide predictable sheets. By going back for these sheets, “the miners were sure to earn pretty good wages.” Working a foot-thick sheet of calamine, they could take out a ton of ore, or five dollars’ worth, a day. If they found any galena, they sold that too. “In this way,” a state geologist reported, “many good Galena deposits were discovered and mined, and the productions of Lead-ore increased with that of Zinc-ore.” Miners and lead-smelting companies both benefited from the arrangement, so long as prices for lead remained high.30

Just as miners deepened their investment in lead and zinc, the global economy collapsed. The worst economic catastrophe since the 1830s began with the banking panic of 1873 and then developed into a prolonged period of stagnation and deflation. Because the price of lead remained buoyant and the price of zinc continued to rise, however, miners dodged the long depression for several years. The crisis hit hardest in America’s burgeoning industrial centers, cities such as Pittsburgh, Chicago, and St. Louis, and in the coalfields, where workers lost wages, hours, and often their jobs. In these places workers clashed with employers and the state and created more expansive unions, particularly the Knights of Labor, a new national union that became popular among coal miners. Miners in western precious metal camps also suffered from falling prices and demand as their corporate employers cut wages and lengthened workdays. They, too, built stronger unions, led by those in Virginia City and Gold Hill, Nevada, and in Butte, Montana. Miners in southwest Missouri remained on guard against smelting and leasing companies that pushed for stricter leasehold terms, particularly on zinc ore sales. Some protested against the threat of monopoly control. Most did not, at least directly. They either accepted the terms or, more revealing, continued to search for new, independent discoveries. For these miners, the rising price of zinc blunted the worst effects of the economic crisis and sustained faith in the market.31

For a time in 1874, some miners seemed poised to form a union similar to those emerging elsewhere. The miners’ assembly had reorganized itself on a permanent basis as the Joplin Miners’ Union. Their counterparts in Newton County followed suit with the Miners’ Union of Granby. Both groups
collaborated with the Grange, an agrarian organization gaining support among farmers hit hard by depression. Together, they warned against the growing power of monopolies and government corruption and called for a cheaper currency to ease the burden on debtors. The unions and the Grange planned to run a third-party “people’s movement” slate for local office in the November election, in conjunction with the new People’s Party, a state-level coalition of Republicans and Grangers. Far from radical, the Missouri People’s Party shunned the national Republican Party’s Reconstruction policies and appealed to independent producers with an antimonopoly, small-government platform.32

Some in the miners’ union took a harder line in defense of their working rights. The trouble started in early 1874 when the Lone Elm Mining Company, an outfit owned by Philadelphia investors, terminated several subleases without explanation. Whether legally justified or not, the company’s assertion of authority mocked miners’ efforts to retain control of their work while under contract. To retaliate, a group of men bombed the company’s new steam engine with blasting powder. However legally murky the company’s act might have been, no one misunderstood the reason for the attack: Lone Elm “had taken the diggings away from some men and this was to retaliate for it.”33

The trouble was not over. A few weeks later, W. H. Picher, who had taken over management of the family land from his brother, Oliver H. Picher, tried to raise the royalty that his lessees, which included smelting companies and working miners, paid on zinc ore from 10 to 20 percent. “The miners refused to pay,” a local newspaper explained, because they claimed it violated their contracts. The dispute lasted into June, when Picher “notified miners working on his land to raise or dispose of no more zinc ores, until further notice.” Some parties gave in. The Jasper Lead and Mining Company, a lead-smelting firm that leased land from Picher, agreed to pay the higher charge on zinc ore, which it in turn demanded of its sublease miners. A month later, in response, masked men bombed the furnace and offices of Jasper Lead. Everyone interpreted the attack as a protest against Picher’s decision to raise royalties and the smelting company’s collusion with him, but prosecutors could not convict the alleged bombers because of a lack of witness testimony against them. While their acquittal reflected some degree of popular sympathy, local newspapers denounced them as “Communists,” dangerous revolutionaries like those behind the recent Paris Commune.34

The miners’ unions did not survive association with the attacks. Even though no one was held accountable, most district residents, including most miners, seemed to “recognize that no property is safe,” including theirs, if
such violence continued. Tense election-season debates over Reconstruction and African American rights also heightened scrutiny of the unions and exacerbated partisan divisions among miners. Both Democrats and Republicans blamed those associated with the local “people’s movement” for the bombings. Meanwhile, the unions’ support for the Republican-backed state People’s Party alienated miners loyal to the Democratic Party, which ran a racist campaign against Republicans for supporting the proposed Civil Rights Act. Although the People’s Party narrowly carried Jasper County, it lost Newton County and the election; local third-party “people’s” candidates were trounced everywhere. Democrats swept Missouri’s state-wide races and won a majority in the House of Representatives. Newton County party leaders championed the victory as a triumph for white workingmen: “Rough mechanics, miners and farmers have shut down on Republican blarney.” Divided by race-baiting partisanship and accusations of being “smelter-burners,” the union groups soon disbanded.35

Rather than back down, landowners and smelting companies tightened contractual terms on mineral and ore in response to the depression. Most companies lowered their price scale for mineral to twenty-five dollars per 1,000 pounds when pig lead sold for seven cents a pound in St. Louis. Miners earned 10 percent less than that as the price of lead fell to 6.3 cents per pound in 1874. Others tried to impose new controls on zinc production. When Jasper Lead relinquished its leasehold, the Picher brothers decided to manage their lands themselves under the auspices of the new Picher Lead and Zinc Company. After the recent violence, the new company abolished zinc royalties altogether and offered a discounted cash rate fixed to a market-tracking sliding scale, like Granby Mining, for all of the zinc ore its lessees produced. Corn and Wahl did likewise.36

Many miners accepted these terms in order to maintain access to rich ground where they could still make good money while national economic conditions worsened. An 1875 visitor to Granby Mining land along Joplin Creek found leasehold miners working a number of productive mines. In a single week that summer, miners Cyphert and Williams had hauled up over 21,000 pounds of mineral. Their neighbors, Olyphant and Company, had sold over 3,000 pounds of mineral and a ton of zinc ore the week before, while Hinton, Smith, and Company turned in 1,000 pounds of mineral and a ton of zinc ore. Prospectors Irwin and Haley were still digging without results, but the observer predicted that “before the summer is over these young gents will have a nice pile of greenbacks to start them in business.” Despite earlier troubles, miners on Picher land still expected big returns. According to a report in late 1875, the Coyle brothers sold over 5,000 pounds of mineral in
five days. Even with the company’s restrictions, contract miners continued to invest in their own operations. Burton and Company had a mine that produced 250 pounds of galena and 500 pounds of zinc ore a day. They ran a steam pump to keep water out. Burton had recently sold his lease on another mine for $400 to Dan Wenrich, who considered the prospect and the contract terms offered by Picher Lead and Zinc a good investment. “Nothing venture, nothing gained,” he explained. Their entrepreneurial plans were hard to unwind. The Coyle brothers, for example, were “determined in their purpose, notwithstanding the great expense incurred by their undertaking.” They not only worked the mine themselves but also gave “employment to several hands.” Such a scenario favored experienced miners, of course, and especially privileged white miners, both native and foreign born, but not exclusively. A few African Americans had started mining in the area. An 1875 report included news that Willard and Davis, whom the newspaper identified as “colored,” sold 6,000 pounds of mineral in a week.37

Many miners, however, left established fields to explore underdeveloped or new lands. Noting a now recognizable pattern, a correspondent from Oro-nogo reported in late 1874 that miners had left the camp because of the low prices offered by Granby Mining. Some secured leaseholds at the Webb diggings. Daugherty and his new partner, Thomas Davey, a machinist, had introduced a steam pump to drain the tract, opening 360 new acres for lease. With “good inducements to the miner,” a phrase that usually meant reasonable royalty rates, Daugherty and Davey attracted over 200 prospectors to the camp they dubbed Carterville. Meanwhile, John Webb had re-leased his adjacent land, now the site of a small camp called Webb City, to the new Center Creek Mining and Smelting Company, which in turn offered good sub-lease terms for miners to invest their labor “with a certainty of realizing immense profits.” During the winter of 1874–75, prospectors on these holdings discovered what many considered “the richest deposit of lead ore in Jasper County.” This “new bonanza,” a correspondent declared, might rather “become the richest lead discovery yet made in the State.” Miners Poundstone and Parker, whose shaft reached twenty-two feet, produced 40,000 pounds of galena in three weeks. Other miners hit “chunks of pure ore weighting 2,000 pounds” each. By the fall of 1875 the new Webb City–Carterville field drew in waves of miners who were fed up with tightened contract terms elsewhere. In a two-day period at the end of August, according to one report, “one hundred miners came in … from Granby and Joplin.” 38

These opportunities, along with rancorous memories of 1874, turned most miners away from insurgent antimonopoly politics in 1876 despite the ongoing depression. Local campaigns were restrained, avoiding the race-
baiting divisions of two years earlier. The new Greenback Party, which cam-
paigned nationally for a plentiful paper currency and cheaper credit, was
relatively popular in Jasper County, where it claimed a state-best 520 votes,
8 percent of the total. Farmers delivered most of these. Only fifty-five people
in Newton County voted Greenback, none of them from Granby. Republi-
can presidential candidate Rutherford B. Hayes won Jasper County and the
White House; Democrat Samuel Tilden won Newton County and the state.
The nation abandoned Reconstruction after the election of 1876, as white
voters, particularly in Missouri, forged a partisan truce around common as-
sertions of white supremacy. That truce did not end all conflict, however, as
workers across the country battled on a new scale with corporations over
responses to the economic crisis. Those clashes included small coal-mining
strikes in Missouri and Illinois in 1876 and a general strike in St. Louis that
punctuated the national railroad strike of 1877.39

While these events dominated the news, prospectors and miners around
Joplin and Granby continued to deliver success stories with pig lead prices
still above 6 cents a pound. In April 1877, even as the new boom camps of
Webb City and Carterville expanded, prospectors located a new mineral field
seven miles west of Joplin along Short Creek, just across the Kansas state
line. After miners hit a single surface deposit, subsequent digging by new-
comers uncovered a rich and shallow but fragmented array of galena and
zinc ore deposits several miles long. In keeping with the pattern of discovery
and development in the district, however, news of their success attracted in-
vestors from Joplin and nearby Baxter Springs, Kansas, who bought some
of the mineral land from area farmers and leased other portions from the
Kansas City, Fort Scott & Gulf Railroad. Led by Joplin’s Patrick Murphy,
these investors created two companies, the South Side Mining and Manu-
facturing Company and the Galena Mining and Smelting Company, to man-
age the holdings. Both adopted the district’s now standard leasing terms for
galena, with discounted prices on a sliding scale, but allowed miners to sell
zinc ore for open-market prices minus a royalty. That summer hundreds of
prospectors and miners from Joplin, Oronogo, and Granby rushed to Short
Creek to take advantage of these “good inducements.” They soon named the
camp Galena, after its principal product.40

The Galena rush rivaled anything contemporary observers had witnessed
at Joplin and gave new energy to the ideal of the poor man’s camp. Only two
months after the first discovery, a reporter from Kansas City, Missouri, noted
that miners had sunk over 1,300 shafts. The deepest shaft was twenty-four
feet and yielded several tons of mineral and ore a day, while the shallowest
paying mine went down only three feet. “Several poor fellows have already

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been suddenly hoisted from extreme poverty to fortune,” one reporter wrote. This was no miracle, he explained, but the result of men willing to work hard for the chance of making money. “One poor fellow who came here some days ago without a cent in his pocket, leased a claim, went to work, and yesterday struck a ‘big bonanza’ at the depth of four feet from the top of the ground.” Within hours, “he was offered $2,000 for his claim.” He refused and instead “went to work with renewed energy, and may be found in his shaft from early morning till late at night digging out immense chunks of the shiny ore.”

Despite the weakening of the lead market in the late 1870s, the southwest Missouri mining district, now including the Galena camp and increasingly known as the Joplin district, still offered perhaps the best opportunity for poor men with little capital to invest their labor and time in hard, physical work that paid. The rapid development of the district after Granby Mining reopened its lands in 1865 demonstrated that promise to the almost 3,000 miners who worked there in 1880. Despite the proliferation of leasing and smelting companies patterned after Granby Mining, miners seeking greater independence and profits discovered most of the rich mineral deposits. When the companies set less favorable terms or mineral deposits ran thin, they branched out in search of new fields. In hundreds of individual decisions to explore further rather than to fight control, prospectors developed the richest deposits of zinc ore in the country at a time when manufacturers demanded it more than ever. That determination to mine for themselves, even if not always successful, pushed leasing and smelting companies to adopt contractual terms that preserved market incentives for miners, particularly on zinc ore, and thus the promises of the poor man’s camp.

Their entrepreneurial efforts turned rudimentary diggings into bustling camps and prosperous towns and cities. In 1880, more than 7,000 people lived in Joplin. A city that had not even existed in 1870 was now the sixth-largest city in the state. Granby was home to more than 1,800 people. The newer camps grew fast: the Census Bureau found more than 2,700 people in Galena and more than 2,000 in Webb City–Carterville. Railroad companies built new lines, one finished with a ceremonial lead spike, that connected Joplin to the smaller camps as well as to the zinc smelter in Kansas and the trunk line near Granby. The miners who lived in the Joplin district shared similar origins and backgrounds with those who came to the area before them. Native-born whites predominated but made up a lower percentage of the mining workforce than of the county population, which was 95 percent native born. The foreign-born miners came mostly from Great Britain and Ireland. Judging by the birthplaces of their children, many miners had
lived in Illinois, Missouri, or Wisconsin at some point in the previous two decades, which meant that they likely had metal-mining experience, although rising numbers came from nearby farms. They continued to settle in family groups that provided social cohesion and economic stability. These communities overwhelmingly favored white newcomers but not exclusively so. More African Americans worked as miners in 1880 than ten years earlier, although the numbers were small: twenty-four mined in Jasper and Newton Counties, and twenty mined in Cherokee County. Together, their output pushed these mining camps to the forefront of the base metals industry. From 1847 to 1869, district miners had sold 37,300 tons of mineral and no ore. During the 1870s, by contrast, they sold more than 124,000 tons of lead mineral and 108,000 tons of zinc ore.42

By 1880, these miners worked according to an informal, district-wide leasehold system that tied success to the market. They were paid for what they produced at market prices in exchange for conceding certain discounts and rights to smelting companies and landowners. According to an increasingly standardized contract, lessors contracted partnerships of working miners, also known as companies, as they had since before the early 1870s to work specific lots. Most contracts allowed miners and their families to live on the lot free of rent; they provided their own housing, in most cases rudimentary “board shanties.” Miners were required to sell all of the lead mineral they produced to the lessor at a discounted price that followed a sliding scale pegged to the price of pig lead in St. Louis, a standard of twenty-five dollars per 1,000 pounds when pig lead sold for seven cents a pound. If the lessor did not buy, miners were usually free to sell elsewhere in exchange for a royalty. The efforts to enforce a discount price on the sale of zinc ore, however, had not succeeded. The most common contract gave lessors a right of first refusal on all zinc produced by a lessee but at “the cash market price” in Joplin, not a company-specific rate, minus a royalty. While many lessors ran lead smelters and so could demand discounts on mineral, no lessors had zinc-smelting capabilities and thus no equivalent leverage when purchasing ore. Offering market prices on zinc ore was also an easy way to attract and keep miners who were not shy about leaving for a better deal. The distinction between discount and cash market prices mattered to miners because the latter gave them a more direct stake in the market. These terms prevailed in most of the camps.43

The resolutions of the Joplin Miners’ Union lived in these incentives for zinc ore mining, but its resolutions on workplace control did not. Most leasehold agreements gave the smelting or land company or its agents the right “to go and remain upon said lands, at all times to inspect said lands and to
see that this contract is complied with.” Where miners failed to comply, the
compny reserved the right to take possession of their lots without notice.
These terms assured lead-smelting companies of constant production at
predictable prices and allowed miners to profit directly from their success
while bearing the expense of developmental work and the risk of loss from
accidents, complications, or geological capriciousness. Miners called con-
tracts like this “jug handles,” because “the risk is all on” one side, theirs. Yet
they readily assumed that risk in “the hope of a big deposit just ahead, to be
made accessible by a few more blasts or strokes of the pick.”

To outsiders, this method of wide-open exploration made district miners
look irresponsible and careless. The unpredictability frustrated government
officials. “It is extremely difficult to give the weekly wages of lead miners,”
W. H. Hilkene, the Missouri commissioner of labor statistics, noted in 1879,
when “some weeks miners do not average as much as common day laborers,
other times the run of lead may be such as to give them $25 per week.”
Another commentator reported in 1879 that the district’s camps “have a
strange, confused appearance. The yawning mouths of the shafts are at every
hand, and little, box-like miners’ cottages nestle about among the huge piles
of debris” that left “very little hope for gardens and flowers to soften the
ugliness of the abodes.” These conditions raised questions in the minds of
observers who held to middle-class notions that white men should behave
with prudence to safeguard their dependents at home. “It seems hard to have
women and children surrounded by such chaos,” this observer sneered. How
to make sense of people who chose to live like this? Like drunks, gamblers,
and criminals, he averred, “perhaps the men do not care because the quest
of ‘mineral’ becomes all absorbing.”

Where these critics saw wanton waste, others saw admirable economic
dynamism. “Each miner tries to get as much as possible out of his own lot,”
F. L. Clerc, reporting on behalf of the U.S. Geological Survey, explained in
1882. To maximize production, companies of working miners “hire laborers
to assist them, and by hard labor” were “known to have delivered 100,000
pounds of lead ore in one week,” Hilkene admitted. Mine laborers earned
between $1.00 and $1.50 a day; many saved their wages to invest in their
own prospecting business. Two-thirds of those working in the mines in 1880,
however, claimed a direct stake in their product. They were willing to lead
precarious lives because they believed that the risks would yield rewards:
financial success, economic autonomy, and manly independence. The pro-
cess might not be pretty, Clerc argued, but it delivered results. “The miners,
working on their own account, with hopes of large ultimate gains, have every
inducement to work hard and cheaply, and to follow every clew that may lead
to the discovery of ore.” If not these “enterprising, skillful, well-to-do miners, naturally associated as partners, who have made one or more good strikes, and are always ready to take hold of any new venture that promises well,” he asked, “where else could be found capitalists so willing to risk their money in a speculative venture” like lead and zinc mining?46