

Industry / Mining

By Jennifer Houdek

TREADWELL GOLD MINES

1881-1917

John Treadwell, famed founder of the Treadwell Gold Mines, was a California carpenter with twelve years experience in placer and lode mining in California and Nevada before he landed in Alaska in 1881. Drawn by stories of the 1880 Juneau gold strike, and a second discovery on Douglas Island one year later, Treadwell made his way north with the financial backing of John D. Fry, a San Francisco banker. The venture would change his life and livelihood forever.

Treadwell was born in 1842, in St. Andrews, Charlotte County, New Brunswick, Canada, to a carpenter who built the Treadwell Inn. Like his father, Treadwell took up carpentry. The younger Treadwell and his wife, Freda, moved to California, where their son Charles was born in 1876. In the summer of 1881, while Treadwell was overseeing home construction for the banker named Fry, news of the gold strike on Douglas Island reached San Francisco. Fry, along with a few other investors, paid Treadwell's way to Alaska to look over possible mining prospects.

In his book, *The Founding of Juneau*, Alaska historian Robert N. DeArmond described a man who identified the excellent opportunities before him and acted swiftly:

“Treadwell's name first appears in the Juneau records on September 13, 1881, when he purchased from Pierre Joseph Erussard the Paris lode claim on Douglas Island,” wrote DeArmond. “A week later Treadwell formed a partnership with Erussard, D.P. Mitchell and Dave Martin, called the San Francisco Company, and staked four gulch placers on Ground Hog Gulch. A few days later Treadwell and Mitchell staked two more placer claims in the same area. He evidently intended to work the placers as he built a house on

the trail below Silver Bow Basin, but for some reason the plans changed. In October he sold the house to Charles Wells for \$200 and thereafter devoted his attention to the Douglas Island property.”

By December, Treadwell decided to move back to Douglas, where he purchased two more lode claims and took samples of the dirt back to San Francisco for a mill test. Seeing the richness of the dirt for themselves, five California investors purchased \$10,000 worth of stock in Treadwell’s business. One of the men was Fry, the banker who had grubstaked Treadwell only months earlier. With the money, the men established the Alaska Mill & Mining Company. Treadwell returned to Alaska and purchased a five-mill stamp. Before long, he realized that the vein of gold was much larger than first thought. Moving quickly, with approval from his stockholders, he bought the adjacent claims and built a larger mine.

Described as a likeable man who never drank or smoked, Treadwell was getting rich thanks to the Alaska Mill & Mining Company. By May 1882, he bought out his stockholders and changed the name to Treadwell Gold Mines.

The Treadwell and Ready Bullion Mines across the channel on Douglas Island became world-scale mines, operating from 1882 to 1917 and employing over 2,000 people. The towns of Douglas and Treadwell existed to house the miners and their families, making the towns’ combined populations greater than that of Juneau’s.

The Treadwell employees were paid well, received company health benefits and, for employees with families, enjoyed private cottages complete with electricity and running water. Along with these lavish living conditions, a Treadwell employee was given membership into the Treadwell Club—a social club equipped with a gymnasium, swimming pool, dance hall, 500-seat theater, billiards room, bowling alley, sauna, library, and Turkish baths.

The Treadwell gold mine became the largest in the world employing the most technically advanced methods of the day and reaching veins as deep as 2,400 feet below the surface.

While in operation, the Treadwell mine brought in more than 3 million ounces (100 tons) of gold.

In 1889, John Treadwell sold his interest in the Treadwell properties for \$1.5 million and returned to California. From there he investigated the potential of coal properties in Kachemak Bay, without success. In a gamble that would later ruin him, Treadwell then partnered with his brother James and started a trust company that went broke. In 1914, living in New York City, Treadwell filed a voluntary petition of bankruptcy listing his liabilities as \$2,931,000 and his assets as zero.

Even without Treadwell's leadership, the mine continued to flourish and branch out into several other gold mines. In 1916, the Alaska-Juneau Gold Mine was built on the mainland, and it became the largest operation of its kind in the world. The Treadwell mines appeared to be played out by 1916—the gold was sparser and harder to get to. Finally a disastrous event in 1917 closed the mine forever when a cave-in and flood destroyed most of the operation. In its thirty-five years, the Treadwell Gold Mines would produce \$66 million in gold making it the largest gold mine in the world and the second largest gold mine in Alaska history.

A decade after his great mine closed, John Treadwell, bankrupt and living in a hotel in New York City, died on November 6, 1927. He was 85 years old.

LINKS:

Juneau - John Rishel Mineral Information Center:

<http://www.blm.gov/ak/jrmic/museum/trdwlmn/trdwlmn.html>

City of Juneau, Gallery of Historic Photos:

http://www.juneau.org/history-old/treadwell_photos.php

The Story of Albert Aris, a Treadwell Miner:

<http://www.oz.net/~markhow/arisgold.htm>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about John Treadwell, the Treadwell Gold Mines, and the gold rush of Juneau and Douglas Island. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **JUNEAU GOLD RUSH** or **TREADWELL GOLD MINES**.

MORE READING:

Adams, Frank Dawson. *On The Microscopical Character of the Ore of the Treadwell Mine, Alaska*. 1889.

Alaska Treadwell Gold Mining Company. *Annual Statement, 1891-1900s*, Serial Publication. London, England.

Christoe, Alice Henson. *Treadwell, An Alaskan Fulfillment*, 1909.

DeArmond, Robert N. *The Founding of Juneau*. Juneau, Alaska: Gastineau Channel Centennial Association, 1967; Centennial Edition, Color Press, 1980.

Dawson, George Mercer. *Notes On the Ore Deposits of the Treadwell Mine, Alaska*. 1889

King, Mary Lou and Laurie Ferguson Craig. *Treadwell Mine Historic Trail: Walking Tour Map & Historic Guide*. Juneau, Alaska: City and Borough of Juneau, Parks and Recreation; Taku Conservation Society, 1990s.

Kinzie, Robert A. *The Treadwell Group of Mines, Douglas Island, Alaska*. New York: American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers, 1903

Mahaffy, Charlotte L. *I Remember Treadwell*. Coos Bay, Oregon: Accra Print, 1983. Second edition Gastineau Channel Historical Society, Juneau, Alaska, 1992.

McCarley, Laura Cecelia. *Treadwell, Alaska: 1881-1917*. Juneau, AK: New Treadwell Publications, 1980, 1981.

Redman, Earl. *History of the Juneau Gold Belt: A Collection of Stories Telling about the Mines, the Prospectors, Their Golden Dreams, and How They Tried to Achieve Them*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Mines, 1986, 1987.

Ruotsala, Jim. *The Mighty Treadwell*. Aptos, CA: International Mining Journal, Inc., 1996.

Stone, David and Brenda Stone. *Hard Rock Gold: The Story of the Great Mines That Were the Heartbeat of Juneau*. Juneau, Alaska: Juneau Centennial Committee, 1980, 1983.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Robert A. Kinzie papers, 1984. Alaska State Library. Engineering plans, blueprints, maps, and reports, concerning the Treadwell mines on Douglas Island, Alaska, correspondence, studies, surveys, and photos, regarding water power development project on Speel River near Juneau, Alaska, and pulp mill data, including prospects at Thane, Alaska.

Henson Family photograph collection, 1898-1915. Alaska State Library. Contents include images of Treadwell Mine Dining Hall, stamp mills, bunkhouse, Treadwell Club, Douglas School House.

Harry F. Snyder photograph collection, Treadwell, Alaska, 1916-1918. Alaska State Library. Harry Snyder worked at the Alaska Treadwell Gold Mining Co. at Treadwell, Alaska, during its peak, 1916, and during the Glory Hole cave-in, 1917. The material in this collection was gathered from his own resources and those of 5 other men who also worked at Treadwell: Virgil G. Moore, Leo J. Higley, Alex Morgan, George E. McDonnell, and Bob Traver.

Mrs. Harry F. Wood photograph collection, 1906-1923. Alaska State Library. The album, titled, "Treadwell Mine Days, compiled by Mrs. Harry J. Wood," includes personal snapshots and commercial photographs from the Merrill Studio in Sitka and Case & Draper among others. The photographs, taken between 1906 and 1923, show Treadwell, Alaska, the Treadwell Mine, club, stage and natatorium, the first flight over Juneau, President Harding and party in Sitka and other locations and individuals, perhaps friends and family.

VIDEO:

Juneau. VHS (26 min.). John Sabella & Associates; Juneau-Douglas City Museum; Sharpe Productions. Juneau, Alaska: Juneau-Douglas City Museum, 1999. Depicts the founding and history of Juneau, Alaska, with an emphasis on gold mining in Juneau and Treadwell.

The Treadwell Mine. VHS (58 min., 56 sec.) Rick Urion. Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Digital Images, 2003. Depicts the founding and history of the Treadwell Mine, Douglas Island, Alaska.