



Unknown miner at his stone dugout near Randsburg, CA, ca. 1900 -1920.  
From KCET "Desert Gold," via USC Libraries and California Historical Society

# HISTORIC KERN COUNTY GOLD PROSPECTING

By **Tim Elam**

The beginning of the State of California is inextricably tied to the discovery of gold. In December, 1848, an American River gold discovery earlier that year was announced by the U.S. President James K. Polk to a joint session of Congress. In 1850, only two years after the American River gold discovery, California became a state. Polk's announcement commenced the greatest non-wartime migration in our nation's history.

Kern County's first gold was discovered on the Kern River in 1851. Kern River settlements such as Keyesville and Kernville sprung up quickly after 1850's discoveries. But the queen of the Sierra gold camps was Havilah, founded in 1865 after a discovery by Asbury Harpending. Harpending had a sketchy past that included being a failed Confederate pirate on San Francisco Bay. After being granted a pardon from prison at Alcatraz by President Abraham Lincoln in 1864, Harpending came to Kern County not wanting to attract attention. But Harpending's gold discovery led him to found Havilah and make a mint from selling tracts of land in the town. In the typical boom/bust cycle, Havilah began to decline within a few years, and Harpending got out of California around 1870. Harpending was swindled during the 1872 Great Diamond Hoax, an event that fooled the San Francisco banking community. He became a Wall Street banker, and after 1900, he wrote his autobiography. Never prone to understatement, Harpending's autobiography states:

*"I was literally chased from absolute*

The "49er" gold rush brought in dreamers and scalawags from every corner of the globe. Some of them landed in what is now Kern County. Stories of Kern County gold discoverers and the settlements founded because of those discoveries became legendary. Kern County became California's most productive gold producing county outside of the Sierra Nevada "Mother Lode" counties. To date, Kern has produced at least 4.06 million ounces of gold. Because no mining records were kept before 1880, the actual volume of gold produced is likely higher.



Asbury Harpending portrait, 1915.  
From *The Bakersfield Californian*

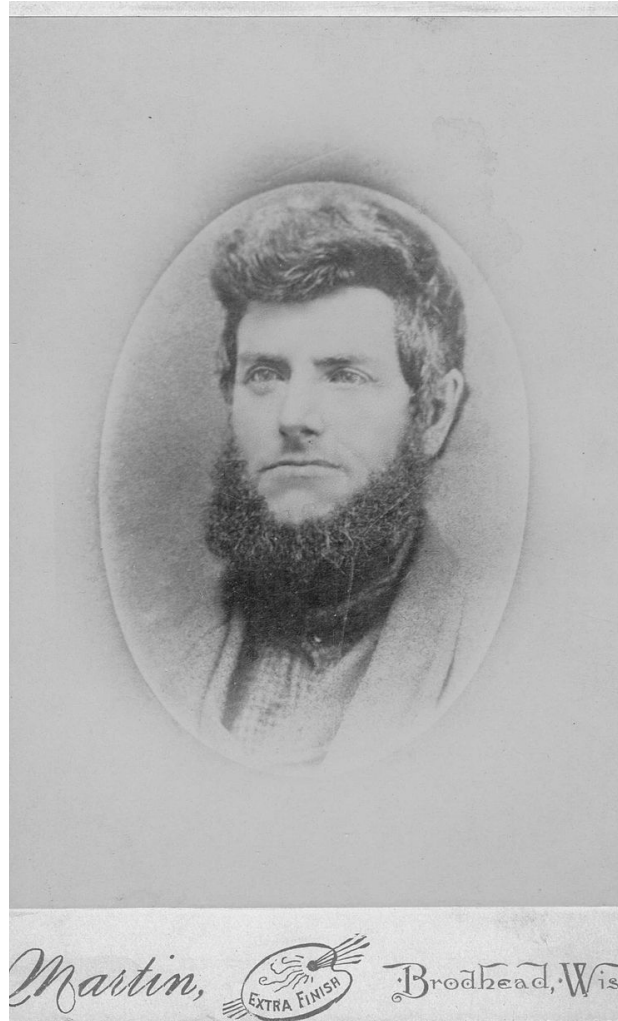
*poverty into the pos-session of a million dollars. I discovered a great mining dis-strict and founded a thriving town. And if the matter of paternity is ever brought in court, it will probably be proved to the satisfaction of a jury that I am the father of Kern County."*

Kern County Sierra gold mining proved to be largely unprofitable. Prospecting in the late 19th century shifted into Kern's desert. Perhaps as much as \$16,000,000 of gold was discovered in the 1870's near today's Red Rock Canyon. But in 1894/1895, Kern's two richest gold mining areas were discovered at Mojave and Randsburg.

Ezra Hamilton, a "Renaissance Man" with careers as an inventor, carpenter, farmer, brick maker, politician, developer, prospector, and Union soldier was down-on-his-luck after his Los Angeles brick-making factory failed in the 1890's. But he had noticed golden flecks in his brick feedstock clay mined from the Mojave/Rosamond area. Those flecks turned out to be gold, which he traced back to gold ore veins in hard rock. The discovery ushered in a series of profitable mines in old volcanic rock of the western Mojave. Hamilton also got out of the gold mining business in 1908, choosing to found a health spa at Willow Springs. Mining in the western Mojave has persisted erratically ever since. A 2016 re-opening of the Golden Queen Mine has once again turned Kern County into a gold producer.

Kern's most productive gold mining area proved to be in the Rand Mountains in the far northeastern part of Kern County. There, in 1894, gold was discovered by three unlikely partners: Frederic Mooers,

John Singleton, and Charles Burcham. Mooers was a Brooklyn journalist hired to write a story about dying mining camps...but instead got bitten by the gold bug himself. Burcham was a butcher by trade, also with wanderlust for gold. Singleton was a greenhorn to the prospecting world...and a carpenter. Mooers was the leader



Ezra Hamilton portrait, year unknown  
Public Domain

of the bunch. After the three wandered away from other desert prospectors, Carpenter discovered gold ore. The three prospectors knew they would have difficulty keeping their discovery secret from nearby prospectors. But the three came up with an ingenious plan. They loaded their wagon with worthless rock and returned to camp and announced their gold discovery. Skeptical, more

experienced prospectors raided their "ore" cart and found the greenhorns had "mistakenly" decided the rock was valuable gold ore. That deception gave the three prospectors a few more days to stake their claims legally, which they did.

Real gold ore was later taken to Los Angeles and assayed to be very rich. The most valuable member of the group turned out to be Burcham's wife, Dr. Rose Burcham. She functioned as a legal assistant and bookkeeper for the new Yellow Aster Mining Co. in 1895. Once the discovery was announced and mining commenced, Dr. Burcham convinced the three miners to not "sell out," as was usually the case. That decision made the three partners very rich. The resultant town became Randsburg...named after the rich Rand Mining District of South Africa. A second town, Johannesburg, was created in 1897 one mile away. Jo'burg was where the railroad stopped. It was intended to be the civilized town, suitable for families, whereas Randsburg was the typical wild and woolly mining town. Johannesburg even possessed a golf course, built before 1900. Like other mining areas, gold production

at Randsburg was intermittent after World War II. The last new ore mined at Randsburg occurred in 2003. Being a 19th century gold prospector in Kern County was a dangerous, lonely existence. But a few struck it rich, and their legendary stories are worth recounting.