

Slaughterhouse/Kerber Creek

The Slaughterhouse/Kerber Creek Route is the most popular route in the area because it centers around the hub of activities for the Kerber Mining District. Follow the red markers to find your way through this route.

The Twin Towns

The homestead communities Kerber City and Sedgewick were located right across from each other. They were established before mining fever hit the area. Kerber City was established in 1881, and consisted of a bank and a brewery. The brewery served the Kerber Saloon and others along the trail.

As the mines multiplied, so did the thirst. Sedgewick grew to 650 people by 1881 and 2,700 people by 1882. Sedgewick had two hotels, two dance halls, several saloons, a large billiard hall, a bowling alley and several mills.

The Town of Bonanza

Bonanza boomed between 1880 and 1888. Silver, copper, lead and zinc were found and 1,500 mining claims came into existence. Soon 37 buildings flourished along plank walks lining both sides of Kerber and Copper Creeks. The walks blended into the residential section, which grew up the hills and into the forest.

As the price of silver fell Bonanza lost its importance. By 1890 there were only 100 residents but some of the mines stayed in operation. In 1937 a fire wiped out the town of Bonanza and not many structures were rebuilt.

The Town of Exchequer

Mining was a tough life. The cemeteries outnumber the towns. The small Exchequer cemetery holds the remains of many miners and their family members. Among the grave sites rests the famous Anne Ellis who wrote the book "Life of an Ordinary Woman." The book tells about the life and hardships of mining camps, including the Bonanza area.

Bonanza Mine, Cocomongo Mine, Cocomongo Mill

The remains of the Cocomongo Mill are still visible from Forest Road 873. Ore from the Bonanza Mine and Cocomongo Mine was pulverized, mixed into paste and placed in steam-heated containers. Mercury and other compounds were added to the mixture to separate the gold and silver. During the mining and milling, heavy metals would seep into the nearby streams. Recently efforts have been made to restore water quality within the Bonanza Drainage.

Ulysses S. Grant visited the area to consider purchasing some mines. He offered \$40,000.00 for the Bonanza Mine and \$160,000.00 for the Exchequer Mine, but was refused.

Bonanza Mill

The remains of this mill can be seen west of Kerber Creek and south of Bonanza. The mill was first constructed in 1899 by Mark Bidell, who leased the Bonanza Mine property. All the high-grade ores from the Bonanza mine were processed here. Four different mills were built on the same foundation between 1899 and 1917.

The Beaver Boom

In the early 1900s the beaver population got out of control. The beaver worked their way deep into the mines, chopping and toppling timbers as they went, collapsing the mines. In the 1930s professional trappers were brought in to get rid of the problem.

Bootlegging in Bonanza

Bootlegging became a problem in Bonanza when the mining boom hit but it was no worse than any other town. The sheriff concentrated his efforts on Bonanza and often did searches through town looking for stills. One day a mother looked out her window and saw a woman running past her house with a strange contraption. The mother asked, "Where are you going and what are you carrying." The woman responded, "a still and I am hiding in the woods until the sheriff is gone."

John Ashley family, Sedgewick 1893. Photo: Kemper/Stinton Collection



Old Steam Engine. 1917. Photo: Saguache County Museum



The St. Louis Mine circa 1890. Photo: Kemper/Stinton Collection



Cliff Mine



Buying supplies in downtown Exchequer. Photo: Kemper/Stinton Collection

1915. Ore teams on Main Street in Bonanza. Photo: Kemper/Stinton Collection

Underground in the Rawley Mine at the 1,050 foot level. Photo: Saguache County Museum

Exchequer Mill and Kortright cabin.



Otto Mears Toll Road

The Toll Road route, shown in brown, was once known as the Otto Mears Toll Road. It runs between Shirley and Bonanza.

Otto Mears participated in the mining boom by constructing at least twelve wagon roads, one of which was the Otto Mears Toll Road. A gate was placed at each end of the road and a fee was paid to travel the road.

collected 10 cents toll from all who entered the gate. The road wound its way up through the main street of Bonanza, over the hill to Shirley, and on to Poncha Pass, named for a hot spring the natives called "Pooncha." A narrow gauge railroad line in Shirley picked up ore in this small mining town. At its largest, only 50 tents occupied the site.

The story of railroading in the San Luis Valley revolves around the Denver and Rio Grande Railway, organized by General William J. Palmer on October 27, 1870.



Life in the early 1900s.

The railroad grade along Highway 285 is an abandoned portion of the Denver and Rio Grande. Passengers and ore traveled this stretch to the San Luis Valley (including Bonanza) in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As ore production declined, the entire San Luis Branch was abandoned in sections from 1950 to 1958.

Turquoise Mine

The Villa Grove Turquoise Mine is the main attraction along this route. This primitive road requires a high-clearance 4x4 vehicle. It is indicated by yellow markers and will be slow going due to the rough, rocky, and narrow road.

From south to north, the route will take you across Bureau of Land Management lands and then onto National Forest past the access road to the Turquoise Mine. The mine, on private property, is visible as a large disturbed area on the landscape. Please respect private property rights.

This is one of the more recent active mines. It was one of two active turquoise mines in the State of Colorado. Around 1890 the precious stones were traded in New Mexico for a good profit.



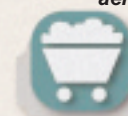
Alder Creek

Following the green markers the Alder Creek Route will take you past many closed mines including the Shawmut, Legal Tender, Rawley, Colorado Bell and Morning Star.

Wagon wrecks were common. Coming from the mines, ore wagons were heavy even for a team with 6 horses. One story tells of a chain being connected to the back of a wagon but the load was too heavy and the chain snapped. Two horses died and 4 were injured. The teamster, or wagon driver, escaped badly shaken.

Aerial tram, 1922. Photo: Kemper/Stinton Collection

A view of the landscape traversed by the aerial tram. Photo taken in the late 1920s. Photo: Kemper/Stinton Collection



Clover Creek

Follow the gray markers for the Clover Creek route. This route will take you along parts of the old aerial tram and past the Little Darling mine.

Aerial Tram

During the early 1920s an aerial tram was built between the Rawley 12 mine and Shirley, where ore was then transported by railroad. Construction of the aerial tram was dangerous business for teamsters and truck drivers. Huge beams were strapped to each side of a mule and long mule trains traveled through deep snow.

Because it was winter, large fires were kept burning day and night to prevent cement from freezing before it set. Tram towers were raised and steel girders bolted in place. Before long, cables were stretched and the tram line was finished.

These men are celebrating the completion of the aerial tram around 1922. Photo: Kemper/Stinton Collection



1917. Mule train carrying supplies for the aerial tram.



Whale Hill

This scenic route offers technical driving near Whale Hill for very experienced 4x4 drivers. The vistas from Whale Hill are spectacular. This route is marked in blue.

The Big Bang

Explosives were often stored outside; in winter the powder would freeze and the explosive would not work. Often miners would warm explosives inside their shack in the stove. One day a miner was thawing his explosives. They started on fire. He ran from the shack as fast as he could and barely escaped. It destroyed his home and he learned his lesson.

Another miner thought that someone was stealing his stash of explosives but he could never prove it. One day he saw a pack rat running into a hole in the rocks with something in its mouth. The miner was so mad he shot the pack rat without really looking in the hole. To his surprise the hill exploded. It was the pack rat stealing the explosives.