



# Off The Main Road Alaskan Adventure

By Duane Ryks

*Above—The view of the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Valley to the south from Hatcher Pass Road. Palmer, Alaska is about 12-miles away.*

## Chapter One

# There IS Gold in those hills

I reached down into a small stream. After swishing the sand around in my palm, I picked out several small flecks of gold. Standing up, I saw a shining gold rock just out of reach on the other side of the stream. I quickly found a place to cross, and went back to where I first saw the glimmer. Sure enough, I picked up an acorn-size piece of quartz rock that was covered on one end with pure gold.

The base for our Alaskan trip was our son, Troy's house in rural Palmer. The view from his deck is of Hatcher Pass, just 12 miles away. A short drive up the Palmer-Fishhook Road (Hatcher Pass Road) brought us to the base of the pass where the road meets with the Little Susitna River and Canyon. The Little Su is a crystal clear, aqua blue stream that runs over and around multi-colored rocks and boulders. The mountains rise up over a mile high on either side.

Near the top of the paved road there is a pullout with a splendid view of the mountains and the Matanuska-Susitina (Mat-Su) Valley below. My wife, Sandy took panorama photos that we stitched together to form one wide view. One photo cannot possibly take it all in.

Further up the pass the Hatcher Pass Road turns to the west and becomes gravel while the paved road becomes Gold Cord Road which ends at Independence Mine Historical Park. This was a hard-rock mining operation that flourished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Miners dug the quartz laden with gold out of an underground mine in the mountainside. Then it was crushed and the gold extracted. The Independence Mine produced millions of dollars worth of gold in its time. Today it has a museum, kiosks, some standing buildings, and artifacts left behind by miners and prospectors. Most of the mining operation is now just a pile of lumber and rubble. Hiking trails allow you to wander up to the mine and traverse the mountainside cut by small rushing streams created by melting snow.

Along the drive to Independence Mine, road signs proclaim, "Open to recreational gold mining." So Troy and I took the suggestion and really did find gold. I am not





*The Hatcher Pass Road follows the Little Susitna River and Canyon. Some areas are open to recreational gold mining.*



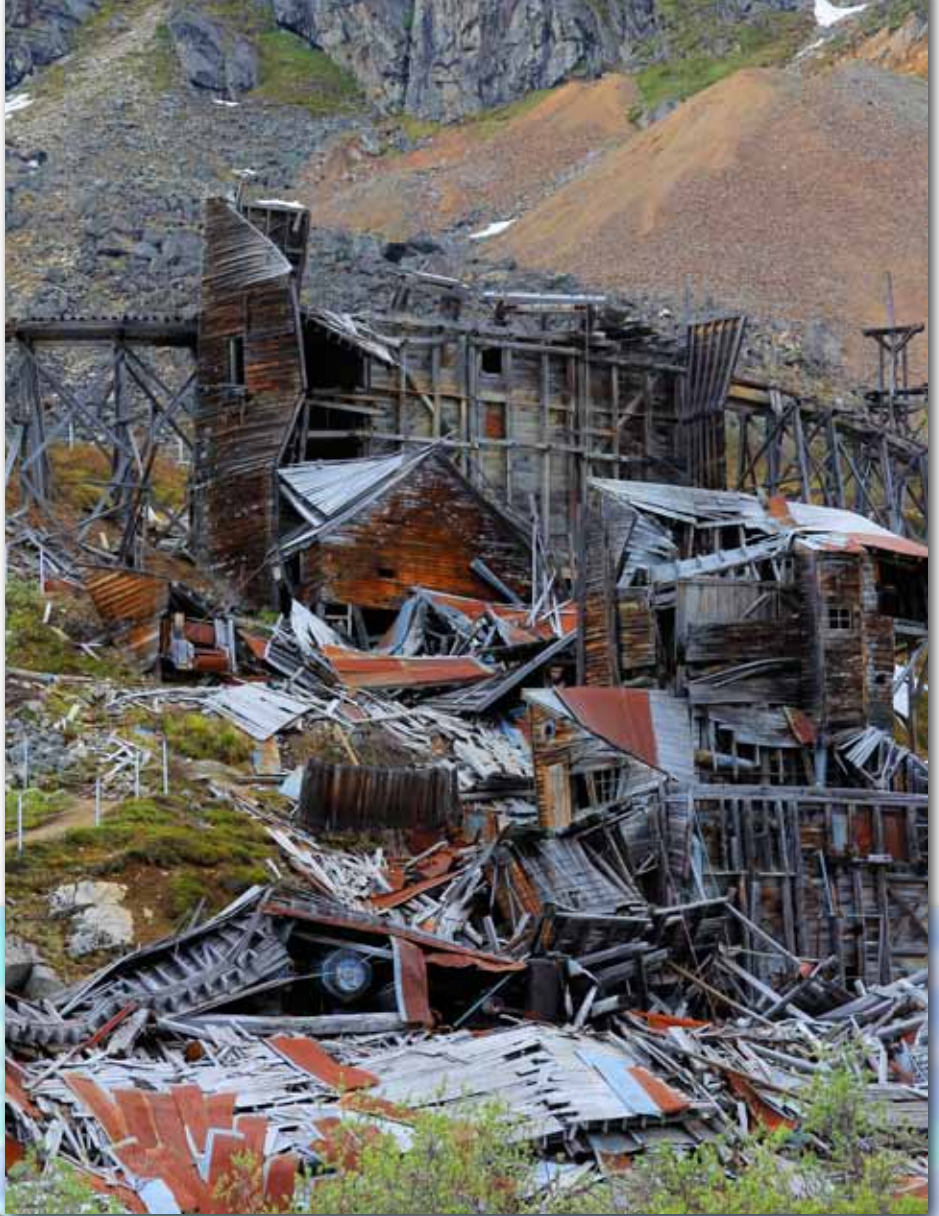
*Right—The Independence Mine is now a pile of rubble. During its operation it produced millions of dollars of gold.*

*Below—Some of the equipment left behind by gold miners. To the south is the Mat-Su Valley.*

*Opposite Top—The view of the valley below the Independence Mine with one of the many small mountain streams created by melting snow.*

*Opposite Bottom—The view to the east of Hatcher Pass along the Fern Lake Trail.*

*Photos courtesy of Sandy Kay Photography. Contact her at [www.sandykayphotography.com](http://www.sandykayphotography.com) or email: [sandykay7@gmail.com](mailto:sandykay7@gmail.com).*







ready to quit my day job and take up gold mining, but finding gold was exciting. We didn't bring along a gold pan, so it was amazing that we were able to collect some "color" in a short amount of time just using our hands. The value has yet to be determined. I left the gold with Troy who started a collection in a small jar. He bought a pan the next day to return at some point to try his luck again.

The unpaved road over Hatcher Pass to Willow, AK on the west side was closed due to snow until July 1<sup>st</sup>, so we couldn't go any further without hiking. Sandy and Troy have been through the pass and said the views are spectacular. Nestled at the top of the pass is crystal clear Summit Lake.

This is a favorite playground during winter on snow machines. Almost all of the land in Hatcher Pass is public allowing for all types of recreational use. An alpine ski area is being planned in the near future.

