



Close-up of Charlie Spencer taken in the spring of 1909 during his attempt to mine gold from the Wingate sandstone along the San Juan River.

# Charlie Spencer's Mining Operations, 1908-1909 San Juan River, Utah

by Robert Sorgenfrei, Librarian/Archivist  
Colorado School Of Mines, Arthur Lakes Library  
Russell L. & Lyn Wood Mining History Archive

In 1883, gold was discovered not far from the San Juan in Glen Canyon on the Colorado River and a minor gold rush began in the region. This paved the way for gold discoveries along the San Juan River in 1892, and by the end of the year the San Juan region was full of gold seekers. The Gabel Mining District along the San Juan River was organized on November 28, 1892. The district boundaries extended from the Utah-Arizona border to a point 50 miles north of the San Juan River between 110 degrees and 112 degrees west longitude. Lengthy rules and regulations for the mining district were drawn up and are on file at the Recorder's Office in Monticello, county seat of San Juan County, Utah. In 1892, *The Salt Lake Tribune* carried numerous articles about the San Juan Country that fueled the gold rush to the region. For a while in 1892, more than 200 men a day were coming into the region. However, this was a short-lived gold rush. The gold to be found was mainly flour gold, so fine that it defeated the efforts of most miners to recover it in sufficient quantity to justify the effort. By the end of January 1893, the boom was over and men started to head for more promising areas in Glen Canyon and in the Henry Mountains. After the 1892 gold rush, mining continued along the San Juan on a small scale. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most mining activity was confined to a 20-mile stretch of the river below Clay Hill Cross-

ing and as far as the great bend of the San Juan River. At this time, there were two prominent mining operations in the San Juan Canyon. The first was owned and operated by the Otto Zahn family of Los Angeles at a place called Zahn's Camp. They bought the placer claims at the camp in 1902 and off and on conducted mining operations there at least until 1915.

A few miles away from Zahn's Camp, there was a second mining operation run by a person that would be associated with ambitious mining schemes for over 50 years. Charles H. Spencer, known to all who knew him simply as Charlie, was born in Walsenburg, Colorado in 1872. Later he became teamster delivering freight by wagon in the Durango area. He was first drawn to the San Juan Country in 1892 when his freighting firm was engaged to haul supplies to miners during the short-lived gold rush. Later he claimed that he celebrated his twentieth birthday by driving a wagon and team of oxen over country in the San Juan Region that had never seen a wagon wheel. He was an expert bullwhacker, a special brand to teamster who could get a team of oxen to go places few other drivers could. Spencer started to pick up knowledge of mining by watching and conversing with miners along the San Juan River as he delivered freight. Although he had little formal schooling, he was a quick learner and was very personable. As he learned about mining, he became adept at using mining terms and jargon in ways that impressed would-be investors. Spencer soon got a sales pitch down that he used for years to entice money out of would be investors.

Albert Jones, who worked for Spencer wrote of him: *"His Western manners and the magnitude of his projects and their fabulous possibilities seemed to have an irresistible appeal to the small investor, and when one operation failed or was inconclusive, he always managed to raise more money and try again."*



Spencer freighting in supplies to his camp along the San Juan. Charlie Spencer was famous for getting an oxen drawn wagon over terrain that few other bullwhackers could.



Spencer Camp or Camp Ibex, as Spencer called in the winter of 1908-09. The camp was located at about mile 37 above the confluence of the San Juan with the Colorado River.

When he made what he thought was a discovery while prospecting, he spent little time with scientific testing. Since he truly believed everything he claimed, and was a born salesman, he was a real threat to the pocket book of any naïve investor. Yet Spencer was not a fraud. He believed everything he told investors. He was also a hard-worker, not afraid of doing his share of manual labor in camp.

After Spencer started prospecting along the San Juan, he developed a theory that the gold along the San Juan River came from the Wingate Sandstone located along the river. He had tested for gold in gravel bars along the river and found nothing, but he did find gold in eighteen-inch layers of red sand that ran through the gravel bars. This red sand came from the Wingate Sandstone. Spencer believed he had discovered the source of the gold in the San Juan. With this “discovery,” he became convinced he had the answer to recovering the gold that had eluded other miners along the San Juan River. Why get it from placers where the river has ground it down to flour when you can get it from the source, he reasoned. There are vast amounts of Wingate Sandstone right along the river in great piles that did not have to be mined, but simply crushed and chemically amalgamated in order to get the gold out. To Spencer the Wingate Formation was an unlimited source of “ore at hand.” All Spencer had to do was convince others of his theory and vision for gold mining on the San Juan and get them to finance it.

By 1908 Spencer had amassed enough capital from investors in Chicago to set up an operation along the San Juan River at about mile 37 above its confluence with the Colorado. The place along the San Juan River where Spencer ran his mining operation, he called Camp Ibex, because as he put it, “only a mountain goat would attempt to reach the place.” However, it was commonly referred to as Spencer Camp, and most maps that show its location use that name. In the camp itself, three rock walled structures covered with canvas tenting were erected. Two of the build-

ings served as bunkhouses and the other was a cookhouse. Camp Ibex or Spencer Camp operation launched Spencer’s career of promoting ambitious but ill-advised mining projects that spanned more than fifty years.

In November 1908, Spencer was able to recruit the services of John H. Marks, a mining engineer and his assistant, Albert H. Jones, a civil engineer. Both worked out of Denver and came out to the San Juan Country to survey and mark Spencer’s claims for him. They worked for about three months doing this survey work while Spencer was away purchasing machinery to bring into the camp. He returned in mid-February and told them a road would have to be constructed to get the machinery down to the camp along the river. With Marks and Jones marking out the route, Spencer employed a pick and shovel force of Na-

vajos and Paiutes to construct the road. A 1000-foot rise from Nakai Creek to the rim at the top of the San Juan River Canyon had to be traversed before the road could be built down to the river. In places grades ran as high as 25% on the road. In March 1909, the road was completed. Spencer Camp was about as far away from a railhead, as one could be in the early twentieth century continental United States. Gallup, New Mexico and Mancos, Colorado were the nearest railheads, and both about 200 miles away. With the road built, Spencer was able to get heavy machinery such as crushers, boilers, amalgamating tables, and a large gasoline Otto engine to his camp by wagons drawn by as many as five teams of oxen at a time. Hauling this machinery 200 miles from Gallup was a major feat and a tribute to Charlie’s bullwhacking skills. The only other place to get supplies was at Oljato Trading Post on the Arizona Utah border near Monument Valley, but supplies were expensive there and Spencer preferred to get them in Gallup and haul them in.

By the time Spencer got his road built and the machinery hauled in and put in place, he was almost out of money and operations had to be suspended. This was around the end of March 1909. In order to try to get more money out of his investors, Spencer hired Marks to write a mine report on his San Juan Mining Operation that he could use to attract investors. After this report was written, Spencer took it and his sales pitch back East and was able to squeeze more money out of his investors. He returned to his camp in June 1909 but this time a mining engineer from Chicago with assaying knowledge came along. After about a week of making tests and assays, the mining engineer from Chicago became convinced that the operation was of no commercial value and the operation was closed down.

Spencer then went to Chicago again and tried with all of his powers of persuasion to convince his investors to let him keep trying. But investors refused. However, just before he was ready to call it quits and come back west, he

met Dr. Herbert Parkyn, a psychologist and mine promoter in his own right who had written a pamphlet entitled *How to Get Back The Money You Lost in Mining*. Spencer found a kindred spirit in Parkyn who in turn found a new group of investors willing to back the operation.

The investors sent out from Chicago, W. H. Bradley, a mining engineer to observe the operation, take samples and make tests. Bradley soon became convinced from his test results that the operation had no commercial value and the camp was shut down. However while at Spencer's Camp, Bradley had tested the shale deposits from the Chinle Formation, known locally as "San Juan silts" and found some promising results from the tests. Just after this happened, two prospectors passing thru camp told Spencer and Bradley that the Chinle formation ran right along the river at Lee's Ferry, Arizona. The idea of recovering gold from Chinle shale appealed to Spencer since it did not have to be crushed, and was sluicable with high pressure hoses. At a site like Lee's Ferry, shale could be hydraulically mined right along the river with pumps powered by coal found upriver, and supplies could be brought in easier. Therefore it was decided to shift the mining operation to Lee's Ferry. This operation too ended in failure when it was discovered that an unknown substance clogged the amalgamator, allowing gold to be passed out with the tailings. Years later it was learned that this substance was rhenium. Before the operation folded, the one event that Spencer is most known for occurred: the steamboat, *Charles H. Spencer* was built at Lee's Ferry and abandoned at the river's edge where it remains today.

Charlie Spencer was undaunted by every set back he encountered with his mining schemes and went on promoting bigger and better things that somehow in the end never seemed to quite pan out. In early 1960's while in his nineties, he tried to mine the rhenium at Lee's Ferry that had forced him to abandon his gold mining operation fifty years before.



A view of the San Juan looking downriver from Spencer Camp. This area is now silted in and unsuitable for rafting.

However in the end he mined far more money from investors than he ever made from the ground. Spencer died in 1968, living to see Glen Canyon Dam built, and his mining camp on the San Juan that launched his mine promoting career drownd by the waters of Lake Powell. Before his death, he expressed doubt the sandstone and shale formations that Glen Canyon Dam is built on would ever support such a structure in the long term. Charlie knew a great deal about the rock formations along the river that denied him the gold he sought after; perhaps more than the civil engineers that designed the dam. In 1983, after a period of heavy rain and runoff from snowmelt the spillways of the dam came close to failure. Perhaps Spencer may yet have the last word about the sandstone and shale formations he knew so well: the dam has yet to experience a 100-year flood.



Charlie Spencer and crew at Oljato Trading Post in 1909.