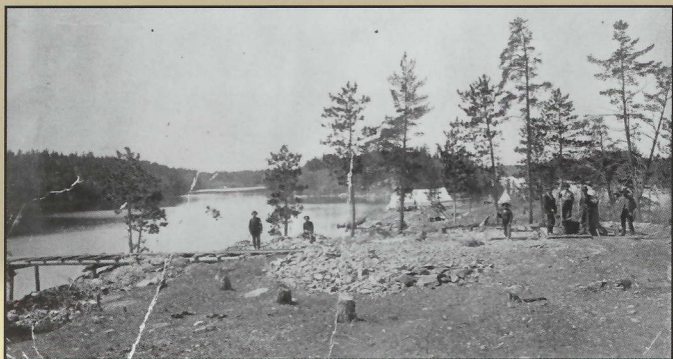




Rainy Lake Gold Rush



Miners stand on Little American Island near the entrance to the Little American Mine. Photo: Minnesota Historical Society

The Discovery

By the summer of 1893, there had been persistent rumors about the presence of gold in the bedrock of Rainy Lake. That July, an experienced prospector named George Davis, was sent to the Rainy Lake wilderness by a wealthy financial backer and instructed to “not return until you’ve found something.” An article in the Vermilion Iron Times on November 30, 1893 described his discovery:

“(Davis) discovered a lead, about 7 feet in width of silicious quartz, and on crushing and panning a fragment the size of a teacup, drew off about twenty-five cents worth of gold.”

Davis and his partner, Charles Moore, immediately staked their claim to the property.

News of the gold discovery spread like wildfire. By the spring of 1894 exploratory pits and mine shafts dotted nearby islands. For the next seven years, prospectors flocked to the Rainy Lake gold fields to seek both fame and fortune. However, they would not all be successful.



Lyle Mine on October 5, 1895.
Photo: Donald and Barbara Billick

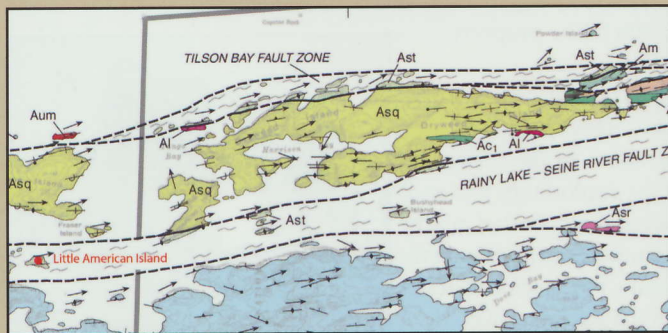
Rainy Lake Geology: The Right Ingredients for Gold

The geologic processes of Voyageurs National Park made this area ripe for the presence of gold and other valuable minerals that formed within the Earth. The majority of the mines in the Rainy Lake gold fields are located along the Rainy Lake - Seine River fault. Geologists have discovered that gold found in fault zones was formed when mineral deposition took place in 'fault jogs' — zigzagging cracks that connect the main fault lines in rock.

So how did these mineral deposits get here? Billions of years ago this area was the scene of mountain building and massive earthquakes. Hot, mineral-rich fluids flowed through cracks deep within the Earth's crust. When earthquakes struck, these fluids quickly depressurized. The drop in pressure allowed the fluids to vaporize and the minerals in the now-supersaturated water crystallized almost instantly — a process geologists call “flash vaporization or flash deposition.” This process was repeated thousands of times over the course of hundreds of thousands of years, eventually depositing gold in quantities large enough to be mined.



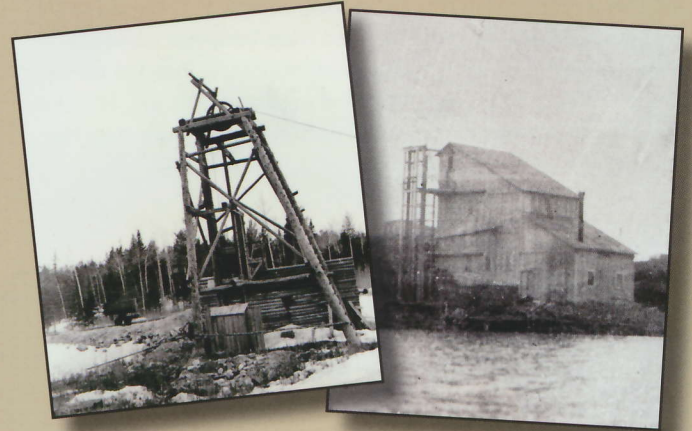
A gold-bearing quartz seam is seen inside the mining adit on Bushyhead Island.



This diagram shows the locations of fault zones that contain gold-bearing quartz. The Rainy Lake - Seine River Fault Zone is seen running through the middle of the diagram.

Getting to the Gold

Getting the valuable gold out of the rocks on Rainy Lake was not an easy process. Unlike the placer mining that had taken place at the start of the California gold rush, prospectors on Rainy Lake were unable to pan for gold. Instead, the gold was locked up in bedrock and required hard rock techniques to extract. Hard rock mining required a large organized labor force and equipment; including engineers, dynamite, a stamp mill, shovels, picks, and to pay for it all - capital.



This headframe sat over the entrance to an unidentified Rainy Lake mine. Photo: Koochiching County Historical Society

This 5 stamp mill crushed 500 tons of ore and was located at Rainy Lake City.

How the mining process worked on Rainy Lake:

- First prospectors would locate a gold ore vein.
- Next, shafts were blasted to the ore veins.
- Then, ore was blasted and extracted, and hauled by boat (or sled during the winter) to the stamp mill at Rainy Lake City.
- At the stamp mill, the ore was crushed, then mixed with water, and milled into a fine sand.
- The sand mixture was then forced through a screen onto a copper plate which was covered with mercury to collect all the free minerals.
- The mixture was then sent to a retort - a big iron pot that heated the mixture to high temperatures to separate the gold from the mercury.
- The semi-processed gold was melted into “bricks” which were then transported through Duluth, Minnesota and onto Newark, New Jersey for final processing.

A City is Born

Prospectors, and their families, who rushed to the Rainy Lake gold fields settled in Rainy Lake City; a bustling frontier town located along the shores of Black Bay. The new city was incorporated on May 17, 1894 and at the peak of the gold rush had a

population of perhaps 500 people. The city boasted of a dry goods store, lumber yard, bank, furniture store, hardware store, bakery, brick factory, butcher shop, several hotels, post office,



The Rainy Lake Hotel, seen in this early image of Rainy Lake City, housed miners and provided them with the goods and services they needed.

Photo: Minnesota Historical Society

customs house, newspaper, school, and combination jail/city council building. Perhaps L.D. Chadbourne described the scene best when he wrote:

“Every branch of business that is needed in a new town is well represented, especially the saloon business. There are only 16 saloons at present, but the people have faith there are more to follow.”

Rainy Lake City was certainly a place of promise, but it was also a tough place to live. In late March of 1894, William J. Paulman wrote to his wife:

“This is a pretty wild place, no laws yet. I sleep with my revolver on one side of me and (my dog) on the other side...”

The most difficult aspect of life in Rainy Lake City may have been the trouble of transporting goods to the town. As a result, prices for everything in Rainy Lake City were higher than elsewhere.



The first cargo of freight being unloaded at the dock at Rainy Lake City.
Photo: Koochiching County Historical Society

The Gold Bust

In the words of Judge John Berg,

"the chief reason why the mines were abandoned was the tremendous expense incident to the transportation of machinery and material."

It wasn't just the distance from major markets that hurt the Rainy Lake mines. Wasteful mining procedures, insufficient development capital, and a small quantity of gold all played their role. The final straw was a rush to the newly discovered gold fields in the Klondike during the summer of 1897.

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By 1897, advertisements in the Rainy Lake Journal were luring prospectors away from the Rainy Lake gold fields to Alaska.

Rainy Lake City Becomes a Ghost Town

In 1900 the post office at Rainy Lake City closed its doors. By the following year, the once bustling town was nothing more than a memory. Without the mines, Rainy Lake City had no reason to exist. Many of the buildings in Rainy Lake City were moved a few miles west to the newly established town of Koochiching (today's International Falls) while most of the mining machinery was taken by salvage crews and metal scavengers.



A group of picnickers poses for the camera at the former Rainy Lake City site in the 1920s. Photo: Marie Majewske

Visiting the Rainy Lake Gold Fields Today

Today, ghosts of the Rainy Lake gold rush remain in the form of abandoned mine shafts and waste rock piles. The best place to go in the park to see evidence of the Rainy Lake gold rush is Little American Island. Visitors to Little American Island have an opportunity to travel a 1/4 mile long, accessible trail to see mine shafts, a hoist wheel, and an overlook of the Rainy Lake gold fields. As you explore the island, think about what it would have been like to visit the site in 1894 or 1895, at the peak of the gold rush. At that time the forested island that we see today would have been largely cleared, as timber was needed for fuel to fire the stamp mill that was used to process the ore. Imagine making the journey to the island each day by boat or over the frozen surface of the lake.

