

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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For more than a century, popular lore has given one of Jim Butler's burros credit for the Tonopah mineral discovery in 1900. It's a great story and the tale has been incorporated into the Jim Butler Days celebration held in the Nye county seat since 1970. But was it true?

It's certainly not the first story of a wayward burro accidentally discovering great riches. On September 4, 1885, supposedly prospector Noah Kellogg found his missing burro at a silver outcropping in northern Idaho. The property became the highly-productive Bunker Hill and Sullivan mines. The nearby town of Kellogg has a humorous sign which proudly proclaims: "This is a town founded by a jackass and inhabited by his descendants."

One widely-accepted version of the Tonopah story can be found in the *White Pine News* of August 6, 1911:

"On the 19th day of May, 1900, the donkey, a restive little beast, was the direct means of bringing the desert's wealth to Butler's attention. The latter, picking up a bit of rock, was about to hurl it through space with the intent of fetching the errant son of Balsam to his senses; but the rock looked so much like the real thing, that instead of throwing it at the donkey Butler took it to

town for assay. It showed values as high as \$152 in gold and three hundred and fifty-five ounces in silver; so he and Belle [Butler's wife] went out to locate properties."

However, if one reads Butler's own account of the find in a November 19, 1902 letter to the State Land Register, there is no mention of a donkey or burro playing a role in the discovery that inaugurated Nevada's 20th century mining boom and reinvigorated the dying state:

"Tonopah is an Indian name, which I learned when a boy, signifies a small spring. The Indians, on their periodical trips from the Cowich [Kawich] Mountains and other places to Rhodes' Salt Marsh, camped at this spring. Rich mines had been discovered in the San Antonio range, and the country being highly mineralized, I long considered the mountains in the vicinity of the spring a good field for the prospector. Attention to other matters kept me away from the range until May, 1900 when I left Belmont, the county seat of Nye County, on a prospecting expedition to the south. I passed over the Manhattan Mountains, left Rye Patch and traveled all day to the spring known by the Indians as Tonopah, near which I found quartz. I followed up the float and found leads. There was bold, black cappings of fine-grained quartz, showing a great quantity of mineral, so much in fact that I considered it of very little or no value. However, I took several samples, passed over a great number of ledges, went on about four miles and camped on May 19th near what is now known as the Gold Mountain mines, and I saw those leads also, but, as they were small compared with the large ledges I had discovered early in the day, I did not think much of them, though I took samples with me which I afterwards had assayed. The first sample from Tonopah which I had assayed contained 395 ounces in silver and 15 ounces in gold to the ton."

There is more to the letter. Suffice it to say Butler said nothing to embellish the discovery, and he had ample opportunity to mention a wayward burro. Other accounts of the prospecting foray more concerned with fact than fable, particularly Sally Zanjani's *A Mine of Her Own* (1997), suggest that Western Shoshone tribespeople and probably one Tom Fisherman, told Butler, fluent in the Shoshone language, that he might find precious minerals at and around Tonopah.

According to Robert McCracken in *A History of Tonopah, Nevada*

(1990), "Thus, the tale of Jim Butler camping in Sawtooth Pass and picking a black stone to throw at his burro, then noting the unusual weight of the stone, is probably myth."

Looking back today, it is interesting to note that people in the early 1900s were more than willing to credit a burro over an Indian in playing a role in the discovery at Tonopah. Equally as noteworthy is that Belle Butler, escorting Jim on a return visit on August 25, 1900 to locate claims, identified and named the Mizpah location which would become the richest property in Tonopah.

In the end Tom Fisherman, a Western Shoshone, and Belle Butler, a woman, had as much to do with the discoveries at Tonopah as Jim Butler. Maybe Jim Butler Days can celebrate the real contributions of Tom and Belle as well as Jim at the expense of the legendary burro.

Photo: Nevada Historical Society

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, September 1998 edition)