

Polaris

Montana's Mining Heritage

A former bright star in the Big Sky

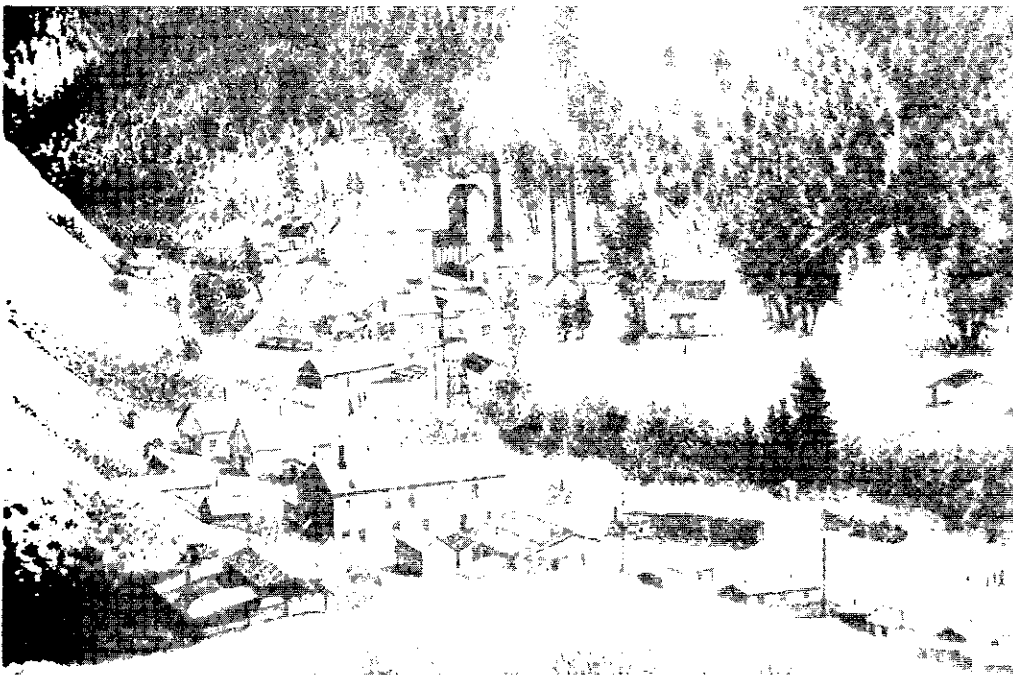
The present site of Polaris, northwest of Dillon, is two miles south of the original town site. The smelter and cabins located at the original camp are gone, but the boardinghouse was moved to the present site and today functions as a store and post office. In addition to the post office, Polaris has a fire department and a small elementary school.

The Polaris mine was located in the Lost Cloud (sometimes referred to as the Beaverhead) mining district. Although the Silver Fissure mine produced silver in 1886, the Polaris mine was the most important silver lode in the region. It was located by six men on January 31, 1885.

In 1892 the mine changed hands and was later mined and leased in 1900. The Polaris mine was purchased again, this time in 1905. The buyers, the Silver Fissure Mining Company, built a smelter near the mine and

used steam traction engines to haul ore over the forty miles of wagon road between the mine and Armstead, a town now under water, formerly on the Oregon Short Line Railroad. (Near the turn of the century, six-horse teams hauled the ore to Dillon for shipment.) A 100-ton smelter with four blast furnaces was erected near the mine in 1906-07. A fire destroyed most of the smelter in 1922; but it made little difference, for the mine was only operated until 1908.

Astronomers know of Polaris as the star Alpha Ursae Minoris (or the Little Bear), and also as the North Star, Polestar, and Cynosure. The people in and around Polaris, Montana, may or may not bother to watch Polaris, the bright star at the tip of the tail of Ursa Minor, but they surely watch the school enrollment figures closely to gauge the health of Polaris, Montana.



Polaris camp and smelter. The one-hundred-ton smelter was built in 1906-1907. Fire destroyed most of the smelter in 1922. Photo courtesy of Oren Sassman.