

Way We Were

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Spirits in the Tunnels

Mahala Ruddell, Research coordinator

Mines are dark, dank, and dangerous. When working the claustrophobic tunnels, it surely didn't take much to ignite the imagination. Every sound could suggest a creepy spirit. Park City's mining days were diverse in culture and rich in tradition. In such settings, ghost stories abound, one of the most famous being about the "Man in the Yellow Slicker."

Some who encountered the Man in the Yellow Slicker found him benevolent. According to oral tradition, one miner credited the ghost for saving his life. On an otherwise typical work day, the miner was filling an ore car when he noticed a lantern swinging over the track in the distance. On approach, he realized no one was holding the lantern and stopped, wary. Having heard that the Man in the Yellow Slicker warned workers of impending danger, the miner knew to progress no further. Looking for the source of danger, he realized that a switch in the track had been left open. Had he progressed down the tunnel with his loaded ore car, he might have been run down by another car, or his own overturned.

In different tale, however, the ghost is not so altruistic. The Man in the Yellow Slicker wasn't always a friendly ghost warning of danger but instead a malicious spirit seeking revenge for his murder. This ghost was that of a miner who had been caught drilling into someone else's claim. Upon discovery, company officials threw him down a 600-foot shaft. He haunted the tunnels near the scene of his unjust death. Miners believed that if they saw his ghost and mentioned it aloud before leaving the tunnels for the day, they would not survive their shift.

Who was the real Man in the Yellow Slicker? As with most ghost stories, we're not really sure of his origins. Because of the damp conditions in the mines, most miners wore yellow slickers when working. And because mining was a dangerous occupation, many lost their lives on the job. Some folks believe that ghosts are the souls of people unable to let go of the earthly realm because of unfinished business. Any one of the miners killed while working could be the benevolent spirit that warns his fellow miners of potential disaster in an effort to save them from a similar fate.

What of the man murdered by officials? In the late 1800s, there was a particular controversy over the location of mine claims that led to murder. Jake Smith sank a shaft that cut into an Ontario vein sparking a fight between himself and James Moray, an official employed by R.C. Chambers, superintendent at the Ontario and stakeholder in many claims in the district. Moray shot Smith over the issue during an altercation at a saloon. Perhaps Smith's story, or another like it, morphed into an even more sinister tale, and Smith became the malicious spirit in the tunnels.

Whatever his history, in this season of ghosts and ghouls, keep an eye out for the Man in the Yellow Slicker.



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Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Jim Santy Collection

Caption: With the melting pot of cultures and traditions in Park City during the mining heyday, superstitions of all sorts were abundant. Pictured here are miners around the turn of the century, one of whom sports a yellow slicker just like the spirit is purported to wear while making his ghostly rounds.