LETTERS FROM JARBIDGE

by Howard Hickson

Struggling through waste-deep snow, Jim Johns began the steep descent into Jarbridge Canyon. He looked for the year-old gold camp at the bottom of the canyon but tall trees hid the place and only a few wisps of smoke indicated the presence of anything resembling civilization.

He had gotten off the train at Deeth, a hard seventy or so miles south of the diggings. Jim had a job waiting in Jarbridge. Tucked inside his coat was a letter from William T. Morgan urgently asking him to drop everything and come to the remote camp in northern Elko County.¹

His trip hadn't been bad until the last 20 miles. The trail into Jarbridge from the Nevada side was closed by deep snow, so he shouldn't have his small pack of blankets and clothes and trudged north. He considered himself lucky in one way, he had left his carpenter tools in California. Not having that extra weight made the hike an easier one.²

After reaching the bottom of the deep canyon another two miles of walking took him into the little tent community which was not unlike thousands of other Western mining camps of the 1800's, but this was January, 1911. The Australian and Jarbridge had been introduced, a friendship that would last ten or twelve years.

James Watkins Johns stood six-feet-tall, weighed around 175 pounds and had blue eyes.³ He was born in Perth, Australia on May 28, 1876. He and a long-time friend, George Spieran, traveled to South Africa, worked in the diamond mines for a few months, then took a boat to San Francisco, arriving on the morning of the 1906 earthquake.⁴

For a couple of years the two worked together at Bingham, Utah and McGill, Nevada, both copper towns. Jim returned to California, settling in Visalia, working as a carpenter and George remained at Bingham.⁵

Now, Jim was returning to Nevada, to Jarbridge this time, and he had what appeared to be a pretty good offer. His pay was to be $5 50 a day and he had been told that board was only $1.25 per day if a man provided his own sleeping accommodations.⁶

His destination, Jarbridge Canyon, didn't have too good a reputation with local Indians who believed that a cannibalistic giant, called Tsaw-haw-hitts.
lived in the place, preying on the Indians. The name was eventually pronounced Ja-ha-bich then bastardized to Jarbridge. Even today people mispronounce its name as "Jarbridge."

In 1924, in a letter written to Donna Dove in Elko, Frank Winters, a resident of Jarbridge, wrote:

"Early Indians said Jarbridge Canyon was once a huge lake near which dwelt an Indian superman of huge size. The Indians in this vicinity were allowed to live in peace and plenty only by keeping the giant supplied with food from their hunting grounds. If they failed to supply him with food or otherwise offended him, he would suddenly appear with a huge basket on his arm, seize a young man or woman, throw him or her into the basket and disappear. Victims were either eaten or thrown into the lake. The last time he was seen he was headed into Jarbridge Canyon. Should he be sleeping there, no Indian will dare awaken him and take the chance of incurring his wrath.

I don't know how the Indians feel about going into the canyon since Jarbridge town was built, but I do know that a few years prior to the strike no inducement was sufficient enough to get an Indian to go there."[9]

Sid Tremewan's parents said an old Indian woman told them this story:

"My papa and other Indians chased the devil out of Owyhee and run him into Jah-ha-bush. He was an Indian devil. He no good. My people no go near Jah-ha-bush."[10]

Mormon prospectors visited the canyon in 1870's when feverish mining and prospecting activity gripped the whole state. Men were out in hordes searching for a show of color to tell them they had struck it rich. During that time the prospectors did not find much in the canyon to convince them to stay and work the ground.[7]

In the middle 1880's, a cowboy by the name of Ross, who worked for the Scott-Hanks outfit, found a few signs of the gold in the area, but did not do anything about his find.[10]

About then a rumor began circulating about a rich find made by a shepherder. George Ishman and John Pence of Salt Lake City heard the story and decided to find what was called "The Lost Shepherder Mine."[11]

At their camp, less than a mile from the alleged lost mine, Pence became ill with violent cramps and, in a delirium, saw a vision of a pile of pure gold, diamonds and other precious stones guarded by a skeleton holding a rifle. Pence, too weak to go on, remained in camp while Ishman continued alone. According to Ishman, his mule died of poison, but he was still able to find the lost mine. Almost overcome with dizziness, he filled his pockets with ore samples and walked back to the camp.[12]

Alternating riding the only remaining horse, the two men traveled to Mountain Home, Idaho where Ishman developed paralysis and died. Pence returned to Salt Lake City and could not be persuaded to return to Jarbridge Canyon. One piece of ore they brought back was said to have assayed at $1,200 per ton.[13]

David A. Bourne, discoverer of the ore body in 1909, told a somewhat different version in later accounts.[14]

He said Ishman was a camp tender for sheep owner Pence in 1883. Ishman gave his boss a chunk of ore he had found and Pence has assayed. After testing the piece, Pence went to Ishman, but the man was paralyzed and couldn't talk. After attempts failed to get Ishman to tell him where the gold had been found, Pence hired mediums, hoping they could read the sick man's thoughts. They failed also.[16]

F.H. Winter wrote, in 1924:

"I was with a small party of prospectors that went into the place in August, 1891. My partners were George Knapp, Ernest Bingham, Teen (?) Plunkett and Ed Allen. We climbed the high peaks, hunted, fished the streams; saw bear, cougar, mountain sheep and deer in abundance. There were a lot of elk tracks. We were there about ten days, but only found a little placer gold.

On April 18, 1892 myself and F. Lancaster came in again and located some placer claims on the Jarbridge River and Pine Creek which was later prospected by Lyte Owens, H. Lauer, William Thomas, Arthur Green and myself. We did not find sufficient gold to pay off sinking as deep as water permitted us, but then and since have always thought some good placer would be found if a large pump could be used and bedrock reached and prospected. About this time William Perkins came in and prospected for several years with small results, always finding some color, but not in paying quantity.

In the fall of 1907 (Author: Research and county records indicate Winters was a year off in his dates, the year was probably 1908.) I met Dave Bourne at Mountain City and told him of finding some placer in a gulch which is now named for him.

In the spring of 1908 (1909) he came in here and started sluicing the gravel and, in following some streaks out from the creek, discovered a ledge of gold ore of pay values. Later that summer (August 19) he found the outcrop, near his original claim, which showed very rich ore and was the cause of the stampede into Jarbridge.

During the summer of 1908 (1909) John Escalon crossed the range from Charleston and found the outcrop of the Pick and Shovel ledge about two miles from Bourne's strike. Neither knew the other was in the canyon for weeks."[17]

Bourne's claim, the North Star group, and Escalon's Pick and Shovel were the only outcroppings; all the other mines had to be opened by trenching, then

panning the dirt. Escalon, a French miner, was one of the few Jarbridge district prospectors who ever made any money on their claims. In January, 1910, about four months after his discovery, he sold the Pick and Shovel to C.G. Winters of Twin Falls, Idaho for a reported $250,000.

Jarbridge had finally made it into the big time as a mining camp. Before the pounding of the mills and explosions from the depths faded about ten million dollars would be taken from the ground. According to records, there were, 433,880 ounces of gold mined totaling $9,337,026; silver production was 1,279,773 ounces for $770,537. At first, the ratio of gold to silver was about fifty-fifty, later it would drop to one-to-ten. The veins ranged upwards to thirty feet wide and most of the mines were located between 6,000 and 10,000 feet up on the sides of the rugged mountains surrounding the camp.

In September, 1909, Bourne filed on the North Star and North Star One, Two and Three. A week later he did the paperwork on two more, Reliance and Reliance One. His first filing started a deluge in the County Recorder's Office in Elko. Before the end of the year 71 claims had been filed, many with imaginative names. Flaxie was named after a race horse; Hidden Treasure undoubtedly in hopes of what the owners might find; and who knows where they dug up names like Negro, Pilgrim, Little John, Guess, and National? The girls were not forgotten with Minnie, Helen Gould, Myrtle, Martha, Stella and Henrietta. There was even a Carrie Nation, that little grey-haired hatchet-wielder who

Main street of Jarbridge in 1910 when it was still a tent city. Courtesy of Ward Morgan, Wells.
destroyed several Kansas saloons in the name of Prohibition. Some of the other mines were tagged with Buster Brown, Pan, Metal Monument, Little Tom, Mountain Maid, Taft (William Howard Taft was president at the time), Arizona, Cold Spring, Duffy, Climax, Bunker Hill, Snowstorm, Snowshoe and Jarbridge Chief. Probably the most descriptive name was Hard Scrabble, followed by Long Hike which suggests a hard walk up the mountain to the mine.\textsuperscript{25}

Elko's \textit{Free Press} carried the first local mention of the new camp when it published a letter from C.J. Nelson. He said the Bourne and Escalon claims showed excellent prospects and that merchants in Twin Falls were trying to get the camp’s business by putting up $5,000 to build a road into the place from the Idaho side. Nelson stated that the ore body was identical to that at Goldfield, Nevada. He added, in a postscript: "Written in camp on a tomato box and the small piece (piece) of candle is burning out."\textsuperscript{26}

P.W. "Walt" Davidson wrote:

"At the time of the strike, my partners Charlie Nelson and Norman Bettcher and I were prospecting on McDonald Creek. When we heard the news we decided to make a trip to the area."

That fall, in the early part of November, we loaded up our buckboard with beds and supplies enough to last two weeks, and, taking a saddle horse, started out for the new strike. We planned to travel as far as possible with the wagon, then pack in the remainder of the way, as there was no road into the area at that time.

After crossing the Diamond A Desert we took the old Deer Creek Ridge trail, established camp, then continued on to Jarbridge by horse.

However, when we reached the head of Deer Creek Ridge, we met three men with a four-horse team and a dead-axe wagon (one without springs). They had cut a road through the timber, straight up and down across Deer Creek. We decided to follow their tracks as far as we could down the steep trail. Traveling down the grade was a difficult undertaking.

It was far too steep to hold the wagon with a rough-lock or brakes, so we cut down a quaking aspen tree and, leaving the leaves and branches on, tied it to the back of the wagon. I rode the tree down the grade, thus holding the wagon back so that the horses had to pull to get down the steep incline.

Farther along the trail we met three prospectors leading their saddle horses which were loaded with bedrolls. They were going back to Twin Falls for the winter, but planned to come back in the spring.

We finally made it to Dead Man's Springs which is less than a mile from the present site of Jarbridge. That night, six inches of snow fell and it looked like winter had set in for sure.

We spent the next few days exploring and examining the district. In the week we remained there we located a group of claims known as the Success, which lay adjacent to the Pick and Shovel.

After locating the claims we returned to Mountain City where I remained for the winter working for Tom Stinton to get a grubstake for the next summer's supplies. My partners, with my brother Jack, loaded up a four-horse wagon and the buckboard with supplies to last the winter and set out for Jarbridge.\textsuperscript{27}

In December there was news that Jarbridge was snowbound and that the best way to get there was 110 miles from Elko to Gold Creek, then 30 miles by horseback, ending with only a 15-mile cross country hike.\textsuperscript{28}

By the middle of January, 1910, there were 40 tents and cabins housing 250 men (that's about six men per shelter) in the place which was located on Forest Service land.\textsuperscript{29} This offered a couple of major problems. The local forest ranger had to issue permits to build cabins or erect tents on the lots; but worst of all, no booze could be sold - a calamity in a mining town.\textsuperscript{30}

Bourne, too, had problems. Ralph Herbert of Elly and W.S. Enslo claimed they had grubstaked Bourne and he reneged on the deal. They threatened a court battle, but, evidently, did not take any action.\textsuperscript{31} Less than a year after he discovered the rich ledge, Bourne sold his 17 claims to the North Star Mining and Milling Company of Boise.\textsuperscript{32}

In February Bourne was quoted in a Los Angeles newspaper as saying, "There are $27,000,000 of gold ore in sight," a statement which caused a stampede to Jarbridge. Within a few weeks there were 1,500 men in town, all hoping to strike it rich.\textsuperscript{33} When they saw the blatant overstatement of Bourne's remark many packed up and left. In a few weeks only about four hundred remained, 50 working in the mines and the rest out climbing the hills and rocks prospecting.\textsuperscript{34}

Pack animals, pouring in at a rate of thirty to forty a day, brought in most of the camp's supplies from Twin Falls.\textsuperscript{35} Flour sold at $15 a hundred pounds, canned goods were 60 cents to one dollar a can, and potatoes went for 15 cents a pound.\textsuperscript{36} Town lots were going for $300 each - not for sale - that was the going rate to pay a permit-holder for use of his land. There were two stores, two assay offices, three eating places and a barbershop.\textsuperscript{37}

Chester Laing told this story:

"In April, 1910, Tom Tennie and his brother were freighting beer in down Deer Creek Grade. They used three six-horse outfits. One of the loads tipped over and the whole load of beer tumbled down the steep mountainside. There were barrels all over the valley."\textsuperscript{38}
Jarbridge, like any other wild mining camp, soon had its first killing. Al Miller, irate over an argument about property ownership, fired through Robert Bearn's tent and solved the problem existing between them.39 Davidson wrote:

"In early March, 1910 I returned to the new camp to find that a typical western gold rush and boom had taken place during the winter. Excitement prevailed! Prospectors, miners and get-rich-quick promoters had drifted in. The town had mushroomed into a roaring camp practically overnight.

Prior to this time the place had only one cabin. This was owned by 'Muggins' Ferris who prospected a little and later became the camp's mail carrier.

Following the general pattern of mining camps, Jarbridge was a tent town first. By 1910, many of the tents had been replaced by lumber and log cabins.

Building materials, mining supplies and merchandise of all descriptions had to be moved in by pack mules and horses. The rate for transporting freight was one cent per pound per mile.

In the spring of 1910 a large restaurant stove about eight feet long and weighing 800 pounds after every removable part was taken off was brought in on a stretcher suspended between a horse and a mule. They walked, one ahead of the other, down the steep trail.

Frank Dodd was an early pack-drain operator. His string of 20 mules transported the greater part of freight into Jarbridge at that time. Later, a road was built along Dodd's pack trail and, upon completion, freight could be brought in by wagon from Idaho.40

By March there were three stores, four lodging houses, two butchers and seven more eating places added to the business community.41 There was even talk of forming Jarbridge County — a population of ten thousand was predicted. Their plans included allowing Tuscarora to be part of their new county. This was, of course, just a lot of exuberant hot air escaping at the bragging sessions and they soon picked up their tools and went back to the business at hand, promptly forgetting the grandiose scheme.42

They couldn't be censored for their optimism. The future looked great, with new strikes made almost every day and lots of high grade ore was waiting for shipment. Some of the first discoverers had already sold their claims to large companies, but others were holding out for exaggerated prices. Actually, they were having a problem they refused to admit existed. The ore, especially in rhyolite, required some pretty sophisticated treatment in a mill to extract the gold and no one had built such a facility as yet. Shipping costs were eating away what small profit there was.43

About this time the residents petitioned the Secretary of Agriculture to have the 10½-acre townsite surveyed and released from Forest Service lands.44 The process took a year to accomplish, but the following March, in 1911, the thirst of many suffering men would be eased when, finally, they could buy booze. Permit holders were given first priority to purchase the town lots.45

Helen Wilson was brought to Jarbridge in July when she was just six-weeks old. She claims the distinction of being the first white child brought into the camp.46

Logs had been placed on the road to widen it so that the wagons could be kept on the trail. Her mother and older sister rode double on a horse down the grade. Her father felt that riding the wagon down would be too hazardous and paid a man $10 to carry Helen in his arms as he walked down the steep incline.47

July Fourth was a big day in 1910. Miners and the few women in camp turned out to enjoy picnics and games. Northern Hall was decorated with greens and
the dance floor treated with wax finely shaved from paraffin candles.48 The celebration saw the beginning of a tradition that lasted for years. Men would "call" the creek with gold specimens and allow the women to pan, and keep, what they found.49

Irene Sprague Murphy told how she was a mischief-maker as a child:

"One of my favorite pastimes was bathing burros in the town's water supply. I used to go along with my grandfather when he freighted from Twin Falls. The trips would take two weeks and I would arrive home with stringy hair, sunburned and covered with dirt accumulated over a two-week period, but it was fun.

My folks built a house of whiskey and beer bottles, laying the bottles on their sides and covered them with concrete. The house was destroyed by the big fire."

(Author: Rene Murphy kept a chunk of concrete imbedded with bottles which had a place of honor at her home in Jarbridge. She frequently showed it to visitors who came to see her and Pat.)

On August 6, the Commercial Club was organized with 60 members. It served, over the life the camp, as a chamber of commerce, social club and theatre.51 The log building, which cost $2,000 to build, had a "floating" dance floor.52 It is one of the few remaining buildings and is still a meeting place for residents.

The men were so proud of the floor they laid that they could not even bear the thought of having their hobnailed boots marring the finish. They covered the entire floor with a canvas. The tarp had eyelets along the edges and these fastened to hooks along the wall. Only when there was a dance was the canvas unhooked and rolled out of the way.53

Townsmen witnessed the first wedding in Jarbridge in August when mine owner Michael Pavlak took Matilda Bell as his wife.54 A month later Pavlak shipped the first ore out of the camp, 110 sacks averaging $2,000 to $3,000 per ton.55 With money in his pockets and more than a little help from some Nebraska capital, Pavlak hired W.T. Morgan to build the first mill, a cyanide operation. He announced that the building would be 75 feet by 175 feet, located on the bank of the river directly at the mouth of the mine.56 Author: A small community developed there and was called Pavlak. It was about two miles south of Jarbridge.

When Morgan received his contract Johns was in Visalia. On December 27 Jim wrote to Spieran who was in Bingham. Johns said he was building a house at Lindsay, was hunting duck and quail every Sunday and, when not working, hunted every day.57

In his letter Jim said:

"If I could make up my mind to settle down I would not look for a better place (Visalia) than this. I've had all kinds of inducements to do so in a business way, but I have turned them all down, there is always some other place that looks better. I have been longing to go back there (Australia) again."58

Just three weeks later he was writing George again, telling him about the trip into Jarbridge and asking him to come and help build the mill. Jim said the lumber was all 'hein stuff', fell on the property. He described the canyon as being similar to Bingham, with the sun shining in for about six hours a day.59

On January 30, 1911, he wrote:

Pavlak Mill shortly after completion. It was the first mill in Jarbridge Canyon and its construction brought Jimmy Johns to Jarbridge. Courtesy of Lillian Johns, Los Angeles.

The bottle house in Jarbridge. Irene Murphy was the small girl wearing a light coat. Courtesy of Irene Murphy.

First school in Jarbidge. Courtesy of Mamie Hunger, Carson City.

"I wonder if you would care to come in here, it's a pretty tough camp at present but I think it is going to be a crackjack. You would have to go to Buhl, Idaho and take the stage from there. Stop off at Twin Falls and find out from the livery people who is freighting merchandise to this place and send your tools and bedding with them, only bringing enough to work with until the bulk arrives.

I think I explained the way we are living, the grub has been real good so far, but there are very few comforts aside of that. I would like you to come in because I think there is a chance to make some money. This camp was given a black eye last winter (Bourne's false statement of $27,000,000) but they have the goods here and a person can buy into some real good things cheap and I have been promised a trip from the right quarter when there is anything doing.

Now don't tell any of your friends if you are coming, just bring what you absolutely need and say nothing. Don't leave anything to buy here though as stuff is terrible dear."

H.E. Colby, a physician, moved into town but wasn't too sure about remaining. Things were a bit slow when he arrived during the winter and he had about decided to move on when the citizens got together and collected a fund to support him during the times.

The camp was still experiencing the effects of its remote location, a problem that would haunt the place for the life of its mining activity. The roads were extremely poor and freight rates remained high. The local stage, at this time, was operating on runners in below zero temperatures. The fare from Twin Falls was $10.

During the first week of March the stage brought in a Japanese laborer and townpeople put up an uproar and were planning to run him out of town until they found out he was just passing through on the way to visit a brother on a ranch.

In April the Elko Free Press announced that light rigs were taking only two days to make the trip from Deeth to Jarbidge. From the first of the year to April, 36 more claims were filed, but this did not mean that the camp was a success. On the contrary, many newspapers carried notices telling people to stay away, that there were plenty of miners, but no work.

In July a road from Deeth costing $11,000 was near completion and impatient miners closed the mills and mines and devoted a couple of days to finishing the job.

Several prominent Elkoans promptly motored to Jarbidge for a "get acquainted" party, leaving Elko at 8 a.m. and arriving in camp at 6:30 p.m.

George was injured during his first summer there and was sent to St. Mark's Hospital in Salt Lake City where an eye was removed. He and another carpenter were boring a hole through a large timber and his co-worker asked him to look beneath the timber to see if the bit was coming through. When it broke through George was hit in one of his eyes. The accident caused a long period of recuperation, frequent visits to physicians and employment elsewhere for George.

While George was in the hospital, Jim wrote:

"Things are going quietly along here nothing very exciting happening. This mill is all but finished. I am putting in a big elevator and buckets and am almost sure it will have to be covered before they can run the mill.

(George) Wingfield the Goldfield mine owner was here again after the Bluster in fact. I believe he wants all that section of camp but he is not liberal enough to do business with these people.

The camp population is increasing rapidly, Jim Duncan added seven to the population and seems awfully proud of it, the little red burrow (burro) has a little red colt just the image of
herself.

Ernest Eiser sent back east, to Montgomery Ward I think, but he accuses some heart and hand society and got a girl out, intentions matrimonial, but when she saw Ernest she got cold feet and declared it off there and then. When I saw her I got a cold shudder down my back. See, but she's a crook. She looked as if she might be a twin to Deafy the mucker only her face is about six inches longer and slightly more in growing. She walks with her shoulders (shoulders), and looks old enough to know better but never had a chance to learn. She also has that far away look I've heard you speak of, in fact she a complication of looks each set for a position of observation. Fat George has acted as chauffeur since she hit camp and he certainly is not desirous in his duties he has had her up to Millers twice now and the boys have done the best to entertain her. Poor Ernest, if I had a bunch like that handed me I would climb the highest flagpole on the tower and jump."

A few days later, Jim wrote George again:

"It certainly is a hard blow for you and I know that you will bear it with the same grit that you showed the day the accident happened.

I have to get very busy up on the Flaxie this winter. It has every indication of being the biggest thing in this camp... I am satisfied it is a winner and a handsome one.

This mill (the Pavlik) is not running yet. That classifier over the crusher did not answer the purpose so we had to take it out and are waiting for a trommel which will put us in order.

Judge Ray and Howard Rummel made the richest strike in the camp right across the creek from our claims. They say it cuts through our ground but it must be some two or three days under the surface as there are no indications of it and what we have is too quiet and go prospecting for the possibility.

I got a letter from my sister, it appears that I am soon to be Uncle Jim. See more responsibilities. I think I'll donate a silk hat to Palmer (Jim's brother-in-law), he'll need it. It will assist his dignity."

Late in 1911 the mill opened and Mike Pavlik employed over a hundred men in the mine and mill. The first three days of milling produced a ten-pound bar worth $2,400.64

Flexing its muscles as a brash young gold camp, the town offered a purse of $100,000 for the upcoming Johnson-Flann-prize fight. The promoters eventually turned down Jarbridge's offer because of the camp's inaccessibility.65 Jack Johnson retained his heavyweight title, holding it until 1915.

Wingfield continued nosing around the camp in 1912 and optioned three or four mines, but soon lost interest. On one of his deals he missed the big lode he was searching for by only five feet.66

Johns, by this time, had started working for Harry Ditts who had leased the Flaxie group from the Hodge brothers.67 Richard and Roy Hodge had, less than a month after Bourne's first discovery, filed on Elmore, Elmore One, Flaxie and Flaxie One. In November, 1909 they had added the Hidden Treasure, then the Hard Scrabble in December.68 Flaxie was located about a mile east of the townsite, almost straight up the mountainside.69

In June Jim received a note from Morgan:

"It is up to you if you wish to consider the offer (from the Hodge brothers). I think they can be bought out cheaper than $2,000. $2,000 each would make them think pretty hard I think. They need money awful bad."70

Evidently Johns and Morgan had gone in with Ditts and the Elko Free Press noted that a big strike had been made on the Flaxie by its leasers and that samples of the ore could be seen at the Palm Saloon in Elko.71 A month later the editor said the mine was showing good and that Johns and Ditts were
placing a horse winze on the shaft in order to go deeper. The partners claimed there was free gold visible to the naked eye in the 250-foot drift at the 80-foot level.

Johns wrote to Spieran, who was away at the time:

"I have to go down this evening after powder so I thought I would drop you a line. We are going ahead slowly but the ground is coming in soft but it is standing without timbers so we ought to make good headway from now on. They made a nice strike at the O.K. last week, 3'6" of ore that pans good right across. The ledge cuts through the Buster so old Miles got drunk on the strength of it, said he would give 10 cents a share for all the stock they could get him."**

On June 24, Jim posted another letter to George:

"We are making fairly good time on the tunnel. I think we will make 100' by the end of the month. I wrote Morgan telling him I thought I could make him $2,000 clear for his end. He sent me agreements to give me half of his one third to pay his debts. Robinson the assayer thinks he has a man who would pay $3,000 but his man won’t be in for two weeks yet and we need money. Send us some dough as soon as you are able."**

(author’s note: While reading the letters I felt Jim was bleeding, or even conning. George for money. Johns, after going into the Flaxie partnership, began almost every letter with the great prospects of the mine, then ending with another plea for cash. In the end when Flaxie was sold, Jim dutifully and willingly gave Spieran half the proceeds.)

In another letter Jim wrote:

"The tunnel is going along fine we made between 80 and 90 feet last month and were 8 shifts shy we are in splendid breaking ground. It takes a lot of powder though, about 4 boxes per hundred feet. They seem to think that big things are going to happen before this month is up. We got the horse again, faster than a pig. Ben Ward brought him up to us. I am going pack up a couple of boxes of powder with him tomorrow."**

Wistfully, on July 20, Jim penned:

"...if only someone with money would come in and start something they would rush us but we don’t get any more visitors than the pest house."**

In 1913 the initial rush was tapering off rapidly. Many had come to see El Dorado, but left disappointed. Those remaining operated on a shoestring capital, not wanting to admit that it would take a great deal more money than they had to properly develop the mines.

The Flaxie operation was no different. Newspaper accounts continually proclaimed that the Flaxie was the big thing in Jarbidge, reporting the ore value and shaft depths with an occasional mention that they were running on "short money" which caused a slow-down in operations. One account stated that Joseph F. O’Byrne was busy assaying and plotting the Flaxie and had told the reporter that the new strike should return $105,000 in profits.**

By now George was in Lark, Utah and Jim wrote:

"Well I own one sixth of the Flaxie. The Hodges arrived here on the 15th inst. and gave us a deal two days later. The Hodges want to do some developing so doses Harry and I and we think we can ship enough ore to pay for it. We got out some small chunks that are more than half gold. Ritchie Hodges is here unmarried with us he is an awfully nice fellow but not much..."
with a muck stick (shovel). The weather is fierce again, it has blown a blizzard for four days now and it is bitterly cold. Less sampled our showing two weeks ago and halfed it for Bruneau, couldn't wait for the Hedges to hear. Everybody here wants us to sell, if the extra 100' is as good as this level we will all have all the dough we will need for our lives. I think it will be better.

Send a little money George if you can spare it. I'm awfully short."

On June 1, Jim wrote:

"I think we will be the biggest operators in camp this summer as I don't think the Alpha will do much. We have had some delay with our incorporation papers or we could have started working by now and three men's work doesn't make much of a showing in a place the size of this. We will work 20 men when we get going. They got a patent for the Kaiser claim where our house stands and Parks the coon tells me he can give me a deed to the lot any time I want it.

We have a newspaper man in camp hence the notoriety we are getting. He was up here (at the Flaxie), I let him take a specimen when he got it out in the light it knocked him off his perch.

The camp is very dead hardly anybody working but everybody is hopeful and cheerful and get drunk on the slightest excuse. There is plenty of booze (boozes) in camp but no powder and very little grub."

From newspaper accounts it appears that the only highlight of the year was the Fourth of July celebration when everyone in camp took part in races - foot, potato, horse and slow burro. Jim brought a bag of the new Flaxie ore, dumped it in the creek and "stirred the blood of the old timers with paning." Letters from O'Byrne to the Free Press indicated that about 250 people populated the camp. He noted that he had recently sold one of his inventions, a noiseless typewriter box, for $10,000; adding that he had invented a
dissolving bullet for animals."

George was still in Lark, Utah when Jim wrote:

"Your letter in hand check enclosed which was very acceptable at the present time. It selling the 1000 to you me bunching money and telling you of our having got a shipping that will go $10 a pound. Such is the case however, we went after that rich stuff and got 7 sacks of it but it won't average as high as that, about $5,000 a ton I think. We would have had more of it by now too but we got driven out by the bad air.

The leaves are turning yellow again and I can sniff snow already, we are fixed better for winter this year however and I don't dread it much. There were some people from Elko here today and when I showed them the rich stuff their eyes do bulge, I'll send you a small sack of it.""

On November 3, 1913:

"O'Byrne is up surveying our ground for the patent. Everything is fine and dandy. I am trying to get out to Salt Lake the latter end of the month. I must get my teeth fixed or else I'll have nothing but gums.""

(Author: The Plat lists August 6, 1915 as the date the patent, No. 486299, was issued for Flaxie and Flaxie One.)

Jim had good news in a December letter:

"I just got a check for $1,009.27 from the smaller for 3,863 lbs. of ore. They gave the gross price at $580.87 per ton. Makes everybody here feel pretty good."

In January Jim was not as optimistic:

"We did not accomplish much in the stock selling. However this is not going to interfere much with our plans as our Cripple Creek (Colorado) partners are going to build the mill on a bonus, the only thing will have to shorten up in developing and we have enough money in the treasury to keep Jonnie and myself in grub and powder for at least 12 months, so Jonnie is taking stock for his wages (wages) and I am getting credit on the books for mine.

Harry (Dills) traded some of his stock for a team, wagon and harness and he gave me a bill of sale for the outfit which is worth $450. I sent the team out to Twin Falls to winter, if I can't find work (for) them I will sell them. Harry also sold enough of his stock to take him to Denver for the Christmas (holidays) where he went to make up again with his wife. He still owes me about $200 and I guess I'll have to wait until the property produces to get it as I never expect to see Harry again and I don't particularly want to.

Now George I am going to ask a favour of you. Old Jack Griffin has been a particular friend to me when we were struggling with that tunnel. He is about all in and has to have an operation performed right away. I told him that possibly you could let him have $100 or $150 until I could raise the money to pay you back, he needs about that much to take him through."

Big plans were in the offing in February:

"It (a mill for the Flaxie) consists of a Blake crusher, 5 stamps, platen, patent amalgam traps, Dorr classifier, and Dorr pulp thickeners for both slimes and sands. The mill is a 3 section affair... and will cost about $15,000 to erect.

Harry is in Denver. Got married again to his former wife. They had a great mask ball here last night. These people here haven't much money but they certainly have a good time, it must be one continual round of pleasure as everytime I come down there there is a show of one kind or another on and they make me very welcome always."

In the next few letters Jim's most common and favorite subject is planning the mill, always keeping his optimism high. The plant was not built in 1914; in fact, components and equipment did not arrive until the first of September.
1915.

Jim, in his letters to George in March and April, thanked Spieran for money and cautioned him not to sell the Hodge brothers’ personal stock, but to sell the new issue; otherwise, it would be a "hard knock to our efforts." 101

Evidently there was some sort of misunderstanding and, possibly, George was tired of constantly shelling out cash to Jim. Johns mentions that there has been a lack of confidence on both sides, saying that he thought he had told Spieran that the price of the stock had been raised, adding that "the mine is a sure winner." 102

In 1914 Nevada was the fourth largest gold producer in the nation and was first in silver, but it wasn’t from the mines in Jarbridge. 103 Most of the production was from the camps around Tonopah and Goldfield. Not a great deal was happening in Jarbridge except that a few miners were barely hanging on, investing every spare penny into their mines.

In May the newspapers carried an announcement saying that a new vein had been struck at the 300-foot level in the Flaxie and was assaying at $587 a ton, 104 which sounds very similar to the $580.87 the company received six months before from the smelter.

At a stockholders meeting on August 31, Richard Hodge was elected president, O’Byrne as vice president, Roy Hodge as secretary and Jim was given the job of treasurer and superintendent. It was reported that there were 600 tons of ore on hand at $33 a ton. A quick bit of arithmetic reveals a value of $19,600, not a tidy sum at all for years of hard labor, particularly if divided by several stockholders after expenses were subtracted.

In December, Jim wrote:

"We are in the middle of one of the worst storms that Jarbridge has known. Just one continual blizzard nearly every tent in town is blown to ribbons, we haven't had mail for a week.

I don't think it is possible to start anything until the first of June as it will be July before we are able to get any timber off the hill. (Jim was referring to construction of the mill.) Have you got any money or can you keep it going until we get over our mill and water them. You know you stand half with me. If you can't do it I will sell the team and wagon. I would like to keep the outfit though as we will need it badly in the spring." 105

At this point Jim’s letters were pessimistic, but tempered with a little optimism, revealing that he was tired and frustrated at trying to make the mine a producer. . . at the same time, he didn’t want to give up.

"I have had an offer from the Alpha super of their mill and tramway. I hardly think it possible to raise enough at the present time to build the mill we planned so we will have to do the best we can." 106

"We are still in a rut and prospects are not very bright just now for getting out. The test sample we sent Alpha turned out alright they saved 7 1/2% but we found out the costs that we could not afford treatment charges.

I've got a little grinder fixed up quite a little mill in fact it will grind out 500 lbs a day and I am grinding out some of the rich stuff. I've got to make money somehow." 107

"We took out $650 in six days with the little grinder, in fact we did so well that I induced Joe O'Byrne to put money enough to get us a little 3 stamp affair 250 lb stamps and we are now getting ready to erect it. We will put in the cabin we are living in and move the top cabin down to live in. I think we will be able to turn about 3 tons a day so by this time next year we ought to have enough money to build a big mill." 108

Jim, with a two-horsepower engine, a laboratory crusher and an assayer's pulp grinder, all of which cost him $75, processed 60 ounces of gold in six days and received $840 for his efforts (Jim reported only $650 to George). That was the extent of the little mill's operations; the equipment was intended for laboratory testing and the six-day run was just too much labor for the apparatus.

Although Jim and his partners in the Flaxie were not happy with results to date, there appeared to be, in newspaper accounts, a cheerful outlook in camp. Flaxie was trying to raise $40,000 to build a mill and offered some pretty good inducements to investors, but a poor national financial condition helped sink their efforts at raising money. 109

In conflicting newspaper accounts it was stated that 70 men were working in the Jarbridge mines and, in the next breath, that the town claimed a population of almost two thousand. 110 A disgruntled mine owner could have given the reporter the first statement and the second might have come from a Commercial Club member.

"We got the mill in yesterday (September 2, 1915) and got it up this hill. I guess we will get to run about the end of the month. If you want to work at the mill you can, there will only be $4 a day in it but I ought to be better than rolling around out there. If you have $50 to spare I wish you would send it to me at once, it will take all the money I raised to finish the mill and I am as poor as a rat." 111

George took Jim’s offer of a job and moved to Jarbridge. Their letters, of course, ended except for one last missive on August 11, 1919. Jim was in Seattle, George was still in Jarbridge, and Jim was still asking for money.

"The Flaxie Mine Co. is undercutting against the Ekora Mines Co. are trying to get on the
North Star ground. If their patent goes through we will lose almost all our Hidden Treasure claim.

Now George, there is not money enough in the treasury to pay the cost of the suit, so Roy (Hodge) is asking us to pay our share. We have 84,000 shares so our proportion will be $84.80. Will you mail him a check for half that sum. I am doing likewise.*****

Elkoro Mining Company, part of Yukon Gold Company, which, in turn was a Guggenheim interest, entered Jarbidge’s mining scene in 1913 and had attempted to get control of the Flaxie a couple of times. They were able to lease Flaxie in 1922 and held the property until they pulled out of the canyon in 1937. In 1939 John Ensunsia bought the mine for delinquent taxes and immediately sold it to George who owned it until his death in 1964. Pat and Irene Murphy purchased the Flaxie in 1967. 115

George continued living in Jarbidge and served as its constable for many years (1946-1964). During his badge-wearing days the place was relatively free of crime. Some said it was out of respect for George; a more realistic

Jim and Lillian Johns shortly after their wedding in 1918. Courtesy of Mamie Hunger, Carson City.
answer was that the camp was a near ghost when Speiran took over the duties of the badge. Old timers still remember George and his dog walking the almost-deserted streets. He was 83 years old at his death, which was caused by uremia, in October, 1964. He never married.

Jim married Lillian Sellers in Salt Lake City on February 13, 1918. They moved to Seattle where he worked in the Hazard Company shipyards constructing concrete ships. He received his naturalization papers in 1921. Lillian, although born in Lander, Wyoming, was also required to take out papers at the same time because she was married to an alien. He died of cancer on April 5, 1961 at the age of 85.

Johns sold his Flaxie stock in 1922 and held to his 50-50 deal with Speiran and paid him his part of the sale of 94,800 shares. The amount they received is lost in memories and misplaced records, but it probably was not a large sum — both continued working for wages and neither left a large estate.

Jarbridge's gold and silver never, to any extent, found its way into the pockets and coffers of the little miner; from 1913-1937, Elkoro produced $7,833,174; 1917-1922, Elko Prince Mining Company recorded $1,358,501; Bluster Consolidated made $74,374 between 1916 and 1929; Alpha and Success were both below $17,000. Speiran, in 1936-1937, produced $5,962 from 575 tons out of the Flaxie. Evidently, the Flaxie, during the time it was operated by Johns, Ditts, the Hodge brothers and Morgan, did not have any significant production. At best, according to records, the most it could have produced was less than $8,000...total.

As an illustration of production differences between the small operator versus the large, monied corporation; prior to 1917 when the big companies began serious production in Jarbridge the best year was only $73,173, in 1917 the yield jumped to $573,651, a rise to more than 750% of the previous high! During the big company era the figures never dropped below $350,490 and ran as high as $851,047. In 1918 and 1919 the Jarbridge district was the biggest producer in Nevada.

During the Elkoro and Elko Prince days the earlier ballyhoo of a rip-snorling gold camp disappeared from the newspapers while the big mines and mills quietly reaped profits...but little canyon town was not dead, not by a long shot.

In March, 1916 the bachelors of the camp appealed to newspapers asking them to help with a serious problem — lack of women. One Reno woman did show up and married Robert Knight, a local miner. There was an all night wedding dinner with most of the locals present.

There were now five mills in camp and 200 men on the job, but the place was still suffering from its remoteness. Freight rates were sky-high, but Jarbridge citizens had an unique plan which worked, for awhile. Five to eight tons of coal, grain and flour were shipped in monthly by U.S. Mail parcel post. It was, most certainly, a cheaper way, but it darned near caused the local mail stage drive to have a cardiac arrest.

In December, 1916 Jarbridge gained another kind of notoriety when it be-
came the setting for the last horse-drawn stage robbery in the nation.

Mamie Hunger, a resident of Jarbidge at the time, said this of the holdup:

"My father, Henry Kessinger, brought his family to Jarbidge in 1910 and opened a hotel and boarding house.

In the fall of 1916 a dance was held at the Commercial Club to raise money for the campaign to re-elect Senator Key Pittman. The price of admission was according to the weight of the patron— one cent per pound. I was chairman and Ben Kuhl assisted me in weighing those attending. The dance, I recall, was a howling success.

It was only a few months later that Ben Kuhl was convicted of robbing the Jarbidge stage and murdering the driver, F.M. Searcy.

As I remember it, the night was December 5, 1916 during one of the worst blizzards to occur that winter.

Site of the tragedy was the north end of town at a point where the road had been cut through the mountainside. As the stage passed the cutoff, the bandit jumped down on the top of the stage behind the driver and shot him through the head and then held him in an upright position and drove the horses into the willows which lined the creek a short distance farther on.

When the stage was late my father grew excited as he came into the hotel to report the stage had passed Three Creek, (Murphy's) Hot Springs and Swanson's hotel, but still had not arrived at the post office. He felt something was wrong and grabbed his Winchester and, along with me, began forming a search party.

Defying the storm, which was whirling through the canyon and town, we located the stage in the willow clump a few hundred yards off the main road and only a quarter-of-a-mile from the center of town.

Still slumped in his seat was the driver with a round bullet hole in the back of his head, fired at close range. The horses, still in the traces and tied to the willows, were plastered with snow and shivering in the cold.

The mail sacks had been sliced open and mail scattered about in the snow. A large consignment of money to the Cramely and Walker Bar and Cafe, along with some smaller amounts, was missing. My brother-in-law Jimmy Johns was deputized to follow Kuhl and a man known as 'Swede' who were prime suspects since they were spending money too freely in the saloons and treating everyone, which was not natural for them.

The next day a coat was found under a bridge with a lot of small change in the pockets. There was a small tear in one sleeve. The coat was identified as belonging to Kuhl. Nearby also were the paw prints of an old dog that lived around town and was everyone's friend. He was, as we all knew, a special friend of Kuhl, and near these prints was a discarded mail sack.

The upshot was that Ben was arrested, tried and convicted of the robbery and murder and sentenced to life imprisonment in the state prison at Carson City. Throughout the trial and subsequent imprisonment he maintained he was innocent of the crime.

The strange thing was that the bulk of the missing money was never found. I have often asked myself, did someone else commit the crime or was the money buried and never found?"

Author: Ben Kuhl, in a trial which was unique in that it was one of the first where palm prints were used as evidence, was convicted and sentenced to death. A week before his scheduled execution date he met with the state parole board and, hoping for clemency, confessed the details of the crime. His sentence was changed to life imprisonment.

Jarbidge was snowbound for several weeks in 1917. Snow on the pass was claimed to be 50-feet deep. Citizens were on short rations and the mining companies were forced to lay off many workers. Another worry plagued the miners who still held claims; they were concerned that they might not be able to hold on to their claims if they were drafted to fight in World War I.

When the snow finally melted a new industry supplemented the town's economy. Idaho was dry and Jarbidge was the nearest place where thirsty Idaho residents could buy a bottle of the hard stuff.

In 1918 and 1919 the camp was Nevada's biggest gold producer, but that fact was overshadowed by war news in the newspapers.

During 1919 Elko received electric power over a newly-constructed system from Idaho Power Company. The townpeople wanted to hook into the lines, but Elko turned them down and kept the power for its own use, a decision which would haunt them after the big fire in November.

Bob Knight told about the fire:

"This was during prohibition which, by the way, I feel was one of the greatest catastrophes to befall the United States.

There was a man by the name of Mickey Clifford who sold pop at his Bear Creek Bottling Works. I'm inclined to think he also made bootleg whiskey for the Success Bar. (Author: Mrs. Patterson's notes state that another old-timer told her that he thought Knight was the brewer.) Anyway, a barrel of the stuff blew up through the floor of the Success Bar, and, since the town had open gas lamps, an explosion and fire soon had the town in flames.

This was around eight o'clock on a cold November night and the wind was blowing a gale up the canyon. Burning tar paper was blowing to other roofs, then the wind would catch the fire shifted to the other side of the street.

There were 22 business establishments wiped out and several log cabins. Some of those consumed in the flames were the Success Bar, Mint Bar, Telephone Office, Picture Show House, Dance Hall, and the Dozier Restaurant. Mrs. McCulloch's barber shop went up in flames. We all called her Gerty Gerty and the men in town loved being shaved by Gerty-Gerty and her lady tattooing artists."

Some of the people were bitter, saying that the lamps would not have been there to spread the fire if Elko had allowed the town to use their electricity. The company then relented and permitted the camp to hook into their lines. The fire could have resulted in an even greater disaster because the town's winter supplies were stored in many of the destroyed structures, but the people were able to bring in replacement stores before the roads were
In 1920 the Elko Free Press noted that the major mines in the camp were Elko Mining and Milling Company, Jarbridge Treadway, Success Mining and Milling Company, Buster Mining Company, Pick and Shovel Mining Company, Winner, Red Dyke, Apex, Ben Hur Number One, and Ajax.\(^{136}\)

The Long Hike was always claimed as the best producer in the district and it produced even more that it had in the past when Elko connected the Long Hike with the Flaxie.\(^{137}\)

Population in the 1920’s had dwindled down to around two hundred people where it would remain until Elko closed operations in the 1930’s. In 1923 there were 90,000 feet of underground workings,\(^{138}\) which adds up to about seventeen miles of disappointment for miners like Jimmy Johns, his friends and partners, but a lot of money in the bank for the mining and milling companies.

Impartial statistics can tell the story of Jarbridge, but numbers and dollar signs cannot relate the dreams which were slowly choked to death by lack of funds; or the hopes of miners when they found “color” on their claim; or can figures tell of the sweat, work and bad air. Most had tenacity as hard as the rock they mined, but there is a time to quit and most did when they sold out or leased to the big mining concerns.

They could see the gold. They could smell the gold. They knew El Dorado was there! Hogwash! It was just dreaming, but what fun it was while it lasted.

How good was the district? Not bad when the big mills could churn away all day on a mass treatment basis, but deadly to the little man. When final figures were in production averaged about one-half an ounce or $11.90 per ton. It was enough to make Jarbridge the leading gold producer in the state a couple of times and third in Elko County’s mining history. Mountain City, with its copper from the Rio Tinto, ranked first and the silver camp of Tuscaraora took second place, but not by much.\(^{139}\)

Jarbridge today is a pleasant place to visit. Its setting in the deep canyon of the evil giant is beautiful. There are tall trees, mountain streams, wildlife, old mining buildings and cabins. Residents organize several weekend celebrations during the summer which bring in so many people that the place takes on the appearance of a boom town again. There are a few hardy souls who live there year-round and the population swells to around thirty or forty in the summer months and, on some days, visitors will number more than a hundred, especially during the hunting season.

It is a place where, for a day or so, one can walk in the past and faintly hear the shouts of the miners, the blasts deep in the bowels of the earth, and a steady pounding of stamps saying gold . . . gold . . . gold . . . gold.
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Howard Hickson
April 11, 1978

FOOTNOTES:
1 James Johns letter of January 21, 1911. Pat Murphy Collection.
2 Ibid.
3 Mrs. James Johns letter of May 12, 1972. Author’s files.
4 Mrs. Mamie Hunger letter of May 5, 1972. Author’s files.
5 Mrs. Johns letter.
6 Johns letter, January 21, 1911.
7 Frank H. Winters letter to Donna Dove, January 16, 1924. Edna B. Patterson files.
8 Unpublished notes by Edna B. Patterson taken while on a visit to Jarbridge with members of the Northeastern Nevada Historical Society, on July 21, 1958.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Eko Free Press: January 22, 1901.
13 Ibid.
15 Winters letter.
16 Eko Free Press: January 22, 1901.
17 Winters letter.
18 Ibid.
22 Ibid., p. 54.
23 Ibid., p. 89.
25 Ibid.
30 Northeast Frontier, p. 523.
32 Reconnaissance, p. 73.
33 Ibid., p. 15.
38 Patterson notes.
40 Davidson manuscript.
42 Ibid.: March 18, 1910.
43 Reconnaissance, p. 15.
44 Northeast Frontier, p. 623.
45 Eko Free Press: March 24, 1911.
46 Patterson notes.
47 Ibid.
49 Ibid.: July 26, 1910.
50 Patterson notes.
52 Ibid.: January 13, 1911.
53 Patterson notes.
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Elko County Recorder's Office: interview with Esther Skelton on March 21, 1972 and author's research of documentary.
Harris, Jess C.: Sheriff, Elko County. Interview with author on March 16, 1972.
Johns, James: Letters to George Sperian from 1910 to 1919. Irene (deceased) and Pat Murphy Collection.
Johns, James: Letter to Roy Hodge, June 12, 1922. Murphy Collection.
Murphy, Pat and Irene: residents of Jarbidge who loaned the Johns letters, answered questions and wrote letters to the author in 1971, 1972 and 1973. Present owner of Flaxie mine.