THE MINES ... In 1900, gold worth more than $18,000,000 was mined in the Cripple Creek District. That was the peak year. Then almost 500 mines were operating with some 8,000 miners creating a monthly payroll of $900,000.

The Portland Mine, alone, employed 700 men and worked them in three eight-hour shifts. For a short time, Jack Dempsey was on the Portland's payroll. Of the District's mines, the Portland was the largest and the richest. Over a fifty-year period, it produced gold worth over $60,000,000. Standing on Battle Mountain, just above Victor, the Portland's buildings and dumps sprawled over 180 acres. Its 3,200-foot shaft was the deepest in the camp.

The Cresson, halfway between Victor and Cripple Creek, was the District's second greatest producer. In 1914, the field's richest discovery was made there. A small cavity on the 1,200-foot level produced four carloads of ore worth almost $500,000. Some of it was worth as much as $50 a pound!

The Cresson's "treasure chest" was locked off from the other parts of the mine with a vault door. Armed guards stood by while it was worked out. The ore left the mine in locked boxcars and guards stayed on the train until it reached the mill in Colorado City.

Cripple Creek gold produced thirty millionaires. Winfield Scott Stratton, a Colorado Springs carpenter, was the first. After fifteen years of prospecting, he struck paydirt on July 4, 1891, and called his claim the Independence. Stratton took over $4,000,000 out of his mine before selling it to a London Company for $11,000,000. The Independence ultimately produced more than $28,000,000 worth of gold.

One of the Gold Camp's principal mines was located right in the very heart of downtown Victor. While land there was being leveled off for a hotel building, rich ore was discovered. The hotel plans were junked on the spot, and the great Gold Coin Mine came into being.

The Pharmacist Mine in Altman was also discovered by pure chance. Not knowing where to start digging, the druggist who made this strike, threw his hat in the air. He dug where it fell, hit a rich vein and became one of the District's millionaires.

The Cash-On-Delivery Mine in Poverty Gulch gave Spencer Penrose his first great wealth. Penrose's C.O.D. profits were wisely invested in milling and other mining enterprises, and in 1918, he built the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs. Other of the District's better known mines included the Elkton, Ajax, Golden Cycle, Anchoria Leland, Gold King, Strong, El Paso and Isabella. And there was the Moon Anchor, Christmas, War Eagle, Ocean Wave, Wild Horse, Joe Dandy, Conundrum, and Sitting Bull: 500 mines with 500 names!

Cripple Creek was known as a "Three Dollar Camp" because no miner was paid more than that for his day's work. However, by "high-grading", men made a good deal more. "High Grading" was the stealing of the very richest ore. The miners carried it out in their lunch buckets, pants cuffs, hats and pockets. There was always a ready market for "high-grade" ore in Cripple Creek and Victor.
The Eagle Sampler Gold Mine was served by four levels of railroad tracks. One passed through the ore house.

Gold Coin Mine; of the 350 men at the mine, some worked on the surface.

Deep in the Half Moon Mine. Over 8,000 men were employed by Cripple Creek’s gold mines in 1900.
Battle Mountain above Victor produced gold worth over $125,000,000. The Portland, Independence, Strong, and Ajax were all located here.

El Paso Mine, halfway between Cripple Creek and Victor. Deeper than Empire State Building, it had over 33 miles of railed underground diggings.

Lunch time at the Dr. Jackpot Mine. Ore was shipped in locked box cars.

As late as 1938, the Cresson Mine worked well over 100 men.

The Mary McKinney Mine in Anaconda

The C.O.D. Mine in Poverty Gulch.
RAILROADS ... At the turn-of-the-century, the gold camp was served by three different railroads and two electric interurban systems. As many as 58 passenger trains a day arrived at Cripple Creek's stations! The District's first train arrived on July 1, 1894. This was the narrow gauge Florence and Cripple Creek Railroad. It steamed up Phantom Canyon from Florence to Victor and then through Elkton and Anaconda to Cripple Creek — a climb of about 5,000 feet over 40 miles of steep, winding grades.

Known as "The Gold Belt Line," the Florence and Cripple Creek ran three passenger trains each way on a daily schedule between Florence and Cripple Creek. Slender little Pullman cars left Cripple Creek every night a 9:00 to arrive in Denver early the next morning. At 1:30 every morning another Pullman train left Colorado Springs for the Gold Camp. It was called "The Cripple Creek Special."

Business was good. The Florence and Cripple Creek paid for itself the very first year it operated. The line continued to run until 1912, when a flood in Phantom Canyon washed out much of the road. The second railroad into the District was the standard gauge Midland Terminal. It served Cripple Creek for over half a century, starting in December, 1895.

The Midland Terminal traveled up Ute Pass over the Colorado Midland Road from Colorado Springs to Divide. There it struck off south into rugged mountain country to Gillett. From there, it continued on to Cameron, over 10,260-foot Victor Pass, through Independence to Victor. Then it passed through Elkton and Anaconda before reaching the big three-story brick depot at the end of Bennett Avenue in Cripple Creek. It was 55 miles to Cripple Creek from Colorado Springs by way of the Midland Terminal. The trip took a little over two hours. A round trip coach ticket cost $2.50.

The Midland Terminal operated four trains a day to and from Cripple Creek. Passengers for the District could leave Colorado Springs every morning at 3:30, 8:35 or 11:15. Or they could take the evening train. Trains left Cripple Creek for Colorado Springs every morning at 2:40 and every afternoon at 2:25, 6:30 and 8:15. The "Cripple Creek Flyer" provided Pullman service between the two cities.

As long as the District's ore had to be hauled to the processing mill in Colorado Springs, the Midland Terminal held on as a freight line. But the building of the new Carlton Mill near Victor in 1949, eliminated any need for a rail line, so that year, the Midland Terminal passed from the scene.

It was five years after the arrival of the Midland Terminal before the third line pushed up from Colorado Springs to the District. It was named The Colorado Springs and Cripple Creek District Railroad, but better known as "The Short Line." Starting on April 12, 1901, it operated two passenger trains a day each way over standard gauge tracks.
This was the most direct and the most scenic route into the Cripple Creek area. For "The Short Line" headed right out over the hills from Colorado Springs for the District. Heralded from the start as a marvel of railroad engineering, the 45 mile line fast became one of the West's greatest tourist attractions, serving the District until 1920.

Besides the fast and frequent passenger trains that operated within the District, there were two electric trolley systems. They provided day and night service to all the cities in the camp and to the principal mines. The High Line Electric made a six-mile run between Cripple Creek and Victor by way of Midway. At one point, it reached an elevation of 10,487 feet.

The Low Line Electric also connected the camp's two big towns and served Elkton and Anaconda. Trains ran every 30 minutes over this road. The fare was 50. Both trolley systems halted operation in 1922. After the railroads were dismantled, most of the old grades were converted into auto highways. The Florence and Cripple Creek road became the Phantom Canyon auto highway. The Gold Camp Road was built over what had been the Short Line. And, Colorado State Highway 67 uses several miles of old Midland Terminal grades between Divide and Gillett. 
Last train out of Cripple Creek, 1949

Midland Terminal RR approaching Cripple Creek

Short line passenger train (circled) between Cripple Creek and Victor

District yards for the Florence and Cripple Creek, just below the Strong Mine in Victor

Drawing of electric interurban system between Cripple Creek Districts

Electric trains made regular stops at all leading mines. High Line car shown at Portland.
RED LIGHTS ... "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" was often heard on Myers Avenue in Cripple Creek. And it fit, for this was one of the largest and most boisterous of the Old West's red-light districts. Between Third Street and where it played out at the mouth of Poverty Gulch, Myers Avenue was lined with variety theatres, dance halls, saloons, gambling halls, parlour houses and cribs. It churned 24 hours a day with free-spending miners who were out for a good time.

There were two schools of thought on Cripple Creek's red-light district. Some argued that the "tenderloin" made it safe for the District's "decent" women to walk on the streets. A Cripple Creek Baptist minister was one who saw no good at all in the shabby section. One Sunday morning, he told his congregation:

"It is disgraceful that our street cars must pass down Myers Avenue, where a decent woman is ashamed to be seen. Whenever I pass through that district in one of the cars, I make a monkey out of myself to keep the people's attention off the street's shocking sights."

The "shows" within the variety theatres were even more shocking. To drum up business, the managements of Crapper Jack's, The Red Light, The Bon Ton and other places sent their bands out to parade up and down the Avenue just before show-time.

One of Myers Avenue's saloons was a huge German beer garden where miners were served schooners of beer while being entertained by an honest-to-goodness German band. Then there was the Opera Club, Old Yellowstone, Swanee River, Last Chance, the Abbey, Miner's Exchange and one called the Dawson Club. A shooting took place there one night and it was reported this way by the Cripple Creek Times:

"An inquest was held at Lampman's morgue today over the body of James S.F. Roberts who was shot last night at the Dawson Club on Myers Avenue. Thirteen witnesses testified. They were comprised of girls of the half-world, the Dawson Club piano player, the bartender and members of the police force. One of the witnesses said that as the man lay on the floor dying some of the crowd urged him to the bar for a drink."

In the alleys behind the Myers Avenue joints, there were several opium dens. These 1900 newspaper stories tell of still another kind of life the red-light district knew then:

"A hop joint' in the small brick building behind the Red Light Dance hall was raided at noon today. The room was elaborately outfitted. The accounts kept show that the den was well patronized by people of Myers Avenue."

"Another opium den was raided yesterday. The police, for several days, have been watching the apartment of Lizzie Moore. Yesterday, the captain noticed three women go there at 6:00 a.m. After a quarter of an hour, the captain tiptoed in to find the women and the proprietor reclining on a Turkish rug, hitting the pipe."

While there were many "houses" on Myers Avenue during the boom, it was the Old Homestead at 353 that always enjoyed the finest clientele of any brothel in the gold camp. From the day it opened, this posh house was the playground of the mining kings. Others had to find their pleasures in the less elegant places on "the row." There were plenty to choose from. In 1900, in the same block with the Old Homestead, there were four others — Laura Bell's, the Mikado, Nell McClusky's, and the Royal Inn. The Boston was a block away on Myers and the Parisian was on Fifth Street.

In addition to the fancy houses, there were scores of one-girl cribs. Most of them were strung out in Poverty Gulch for about a quarter of a mile. The cribs represented a progression of races. First, there were French girls, then Japanese, Chinese, Mexican and Negro.

The cribs were flimsy two-room affairs that fronted right on the dirt street. Each had a narrow door and tiny window. The crib girls solicited from their front doors. The shacks they lived in were
identified with their names: Kitty, Eva, Dolly, Frankie, Doe, Dot, painted on the crib's door.

There was still some life on "the row" as late as 1914. That was the year Julian Street was in Cripple Creek to get material for a travel series he was writing for Collier's Weekly Magazine. When the story appeared, the people of Cripple Creek were furious, for Street wrote about nothing but the shabby red-light district and its few sordid inhabitants. Some weeks later, Cripple Creek "honored" the writer by officially changing the name of Myers Avenue to Julian Street.

"The Row" in early Cripple Creek. One-girl cribs may be seen beyond the "houses".

In the district, in 1900, there 150 saloons ... 73 in Cripple Creek. Most faced Myers Ave., "sin street".

Arrow points to the Old Homestead, center of Cripple Creek's notorious red-light district.

Grave and headstone of Pearl De Vere, Madame of the Old Homestead who died in 1897.
END OF AN ERA ... After 1900, the District's production and population both began to decline. The first cause was the labor war which lasted for a year and a half and claimed 33 lives. It was called in August of 1903, by the Western Federation of Miners over a Colorado City mill worker's dispute. The strike idled 3,550 men and brought about the complete collapse of organized labor in the gold camp.

After the labor problems had been worked out, a long period of consolidation began. The mergers eliminated jobs and forced many out of the District. Then water trouble developed. Pumping it up out of mines that were as deep as 3,000 feet proved too expensive. There was only one thing to do; drain the whole mining district.

In 1911, the three-mile Roosevelt Tunnel was bored back into the gold field. It lowered the water level in many mines and increased production. Thirty years later, the six-mile Carlton tunnel drained the District still deeper. About 150 mines continued shipping ore until World War I closed them. By 1920, only forty mines were operating, with their annual production down to $4,000,000. In another ten years, it was down to about $2,500,000.

The District experienced quite a boom when, in 1934, the price of gold was increased to $35 an ounce. Many mines reopened. By 1936, 135 of them were shipping ore once again, and production was back up to more than $5,000,000 a year. When World War II began, 100 Cripple Creek mines were operating. But by 1945, less than 20 were being worked, and, for the first time since the year of the discovery, production slipped to under $1,000,000.

By 1950, only four mines were operating. Then, in 1951, the new Carlton Mill was opened near Victor and the very next year, over 20 mines were back in business. For the next ten years, their annual production averaged about $1,500,000. The mill closed in 1962 when the price of gold and the increased cost of production simply made mining for gold unprofitable. For a while there was not much life in the mining community. With the 1976 introduction of the "heap leaching process" (see page 57), some activity did resume at the Carlton Mill and, once again, the District experienced a mini-boom.
By 1921, Cripple Creek is nearly deserted with a population of about 5,000.


Carlton Mill, between Cripple Creek and Victor. Now buried on site of Colorado's largest gold-mining operation.

Victor High School (now deserted) below Ajax Mine on Battle Mountain.

**ONLY YESTERDAY ...** By the middle of the century, tourism replaced gold mining as the District's leading industry. While there had been a trickle of Tourists over the years, it wasn't until the late 1940's they started coming in big numbers. By then, Cripple Creek had a real attraction!

In 1946, Dorothy and Wayne Mackin, an imaginative and energetic young couple, bought the old run-down Imperial Hotel and began its restoration. The following year, they opened the now famous Gold Bar Room Theatre in the Imperial's lower level and presented the first season of melodrama. That year, some 4,500 came. In a few short seasons, over 30,000 people were coming up to Cripple Creek every summer to see the Imperial's productions. What had started as old fashioned melodrama soon turned into classic Victorian theatre and the people loved it!

The town's future looked bright again. Other tourist attractions appeared. In 1953, the Cripple Creek District Museum opened in what had been the Midland Terminal depot. Victor's museum opened a few years later. Tours were offered through some of the mines. During the summer of 1967, the Cripple Creek & Victor Narrow Gauge Railroad began operating. A road was built to the top of Mt. Pisgah. Tours through ghost towns and past famous mines and mills delighted visitors. Gift shops and galleries filled old buildings in both Cripple Creek and Victor. Scores of houses were sold to "flatlanders" for summer homes.

The population of the District slumped to fewer than 1,000 by 1970. However, the summer-surge gave the economy a real boost. Mining continued to provide jobs for a few people all year. While the
place did not exactly boom during these mid-century years, neither did it collapse.

Floods of tourists continued to pour into Cripple Creek during the summer and fall months of the 1980's. But, towards the end of that decade, numbers began to slip a bit. After the autumn rush to see the golden aspen, very few people were seen on the streets of Cripple Creek. To complicate matters, the mining companies then involved in heap leaching* operations, were forced to reduce their numbers of employees. It didn't look good!

* A technology by which low grade gold ores are processed today. Mined materials are placed on a water tight pad and sprinkled with a chemical solution. As the solution percolates through the material, it dissolves the gold and silver. The metal laden solution is then processed to extract a gold dore. This gold-silver mixture is then shipped to a refinery for final separation of metals and marketed.

It was about that time a few Cripple Creek business people started talking in quiet little circles about how carefully controlled gambling just might be the attraction that could wake up the old place and keep people coming there all year. During the summer and fall of 1989, it became a hotly debated issue. While the town was divided, a straw vote indicated a majority to be in favor.

When 1990 dawned, the town's business people were pretty well organized behind a plan. But, first, the issue had to be brought to the state's voters. Members of the community worked through the summer getting the signatures of some 50,000 Colorado Voters on a petition to place the issue on the ballot of the next general election. Then, on November 6, 1990, 57% of the state's voters approved the amendment to the Colorado constitution legalizing limited gambling in Central City, Blackhawk and Cripple Creek, to begin in October of 1991. Investors invaded the place and property values soared. A building boom began. Cripple Creek, on the eve of its centennial, came alive again. Tourists, not miners, have crowded the streets of old Cripple Creek since the 1950's.

All photos below represent Cripple Creek as seen in early 1970.
For current views of Cripple Creek, see Gallery on web page.
Cripple Creek, 1967. Old Homestead Parlour House (white) shown on Myers Avenue.

Looking up Third Street in Cripple Creek. It was once the route of streetcars.

Victor, 1967, once a major Colorado town ... population 200

Victor’s Fourth Street ... Lowell Thomas began his career here (one story building).

Arrow points to Lowell Thomas house in Victor

Cripple Creek in 1970

Text and Image source: Cripple Creek, a Quick History, the World’s Greatest Gold Camp by Leland Feitz. Images from Denver Public Library Western Collection, State Historical Society of Colorado, and Pioneer Museum, Colorado Springs.