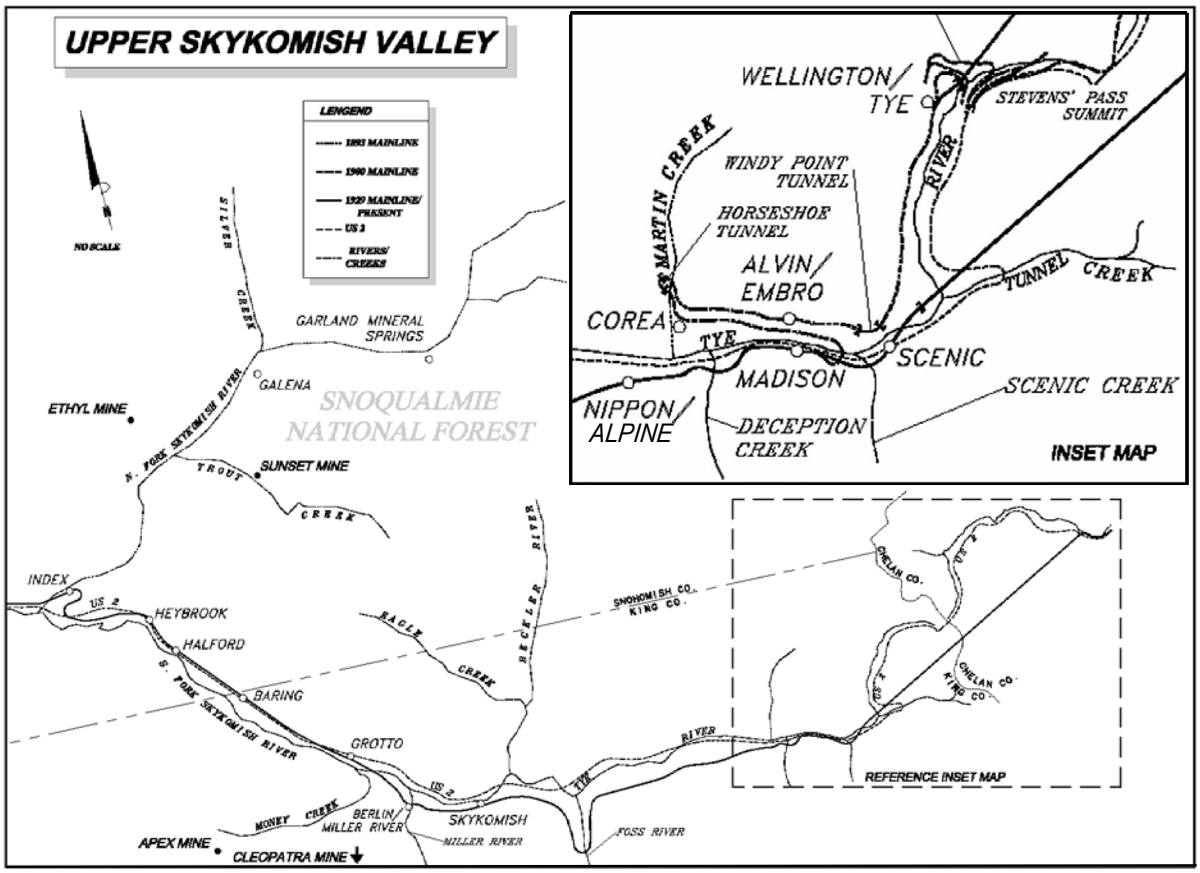
More Than a Century Ago

Skykomish Valley Was a Very Active Place

Without dedicated scholarship it is doubtful one could come up with remotely accurate figures, but the population of upper Skykomish Valley 110 years ago was very likely 12 to 20 times what it is today, quite likely exceeding 10,000 people.

Within years of completion of Great Northern Railway in 1893, there was a "town" every few miles along the tracks, and most had at least a mill and a depot at its beginning. While the railroad was being built timber was cut and put to use within a mile or two of where it had grown for buildings as well as ties, beams, and trestle and tunnel supports on the railway. Part of establishing a mine required a sawmill as well for buildings, crossties for trams, and support beams in tunnels. Upon completion of the railway, huge numbers of laborers were needed to clear snow in winter and to cut timber and build snow sheds in summer. In addition to larger sawmills nearly all communities had shingle mills at various times.

Between Index and Stevens Pass in the early 1900s there were communities at Heybrook, Halford, Baring, Grotto, Berlin (Miller River), Skykomish, Foss River, Tonga, Nippon (Alpine), Madison, Scenic, Martin Creek, Corea, Alvin (Embro), and Wellington (Tye). Most of them had post offices, general stores, boarding houses and bars, and some had dance halls and perhaps other "houses" as well. Baring, Grotto, Berlin, Skykomish, Nippon, and Wellington all had schools.



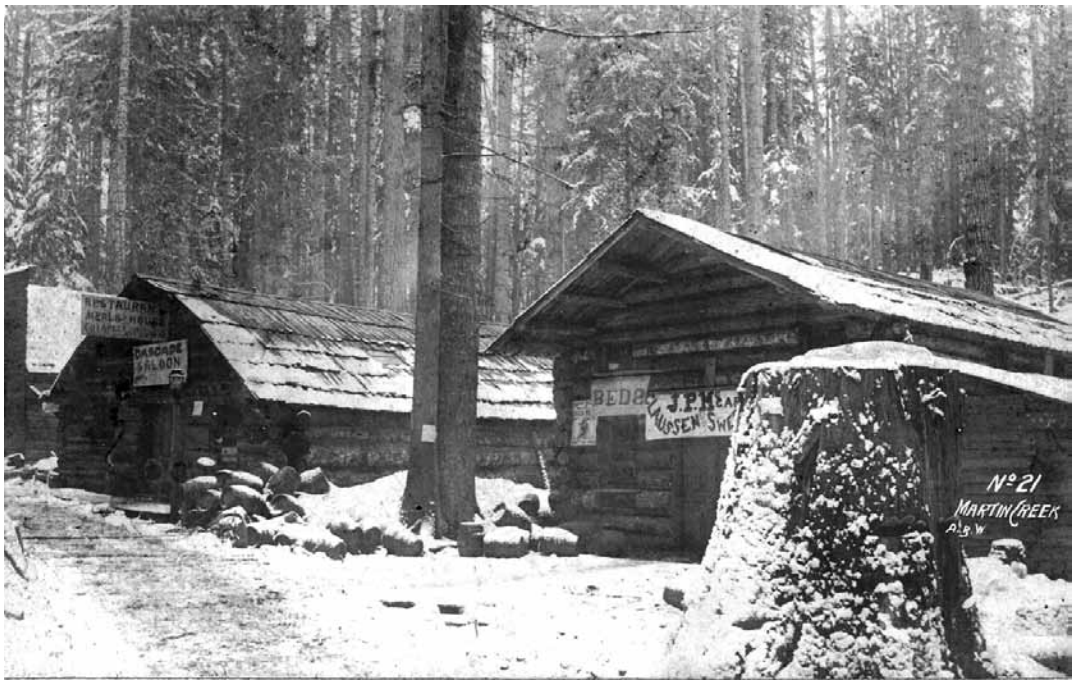
All communities in the inset are ghost towns today. After the 7.8 mile New Cascade Tunnel opened in 1929, the sawmill at Alpine closed. A few Great Northern Railway workers stayed on at Scenic into the late 1950s, but there are very few year-round residents more than a mile east of Foss River these days.

Index had been a boomtown for years. The finds of galena (lead ore) and copper in the 1890s brought as many as a 1,000 prospectors to the North Fork of the Skykomish, and among the growing numbers of businesses was an assay office.

Index, Halford, and Baring also had significant stone quarries. Portions of the State Capitol in Olympia are made of Index granite, and the cornerstones of many buildings in Seattle, Spokane, and Everett came from the valley. Index Granite Company alone employed 70 people year round, and for a significant portion of its life the "Baring Hotel" operated by Skykomish founding father John Maloney was a boarding house for quarry workers.

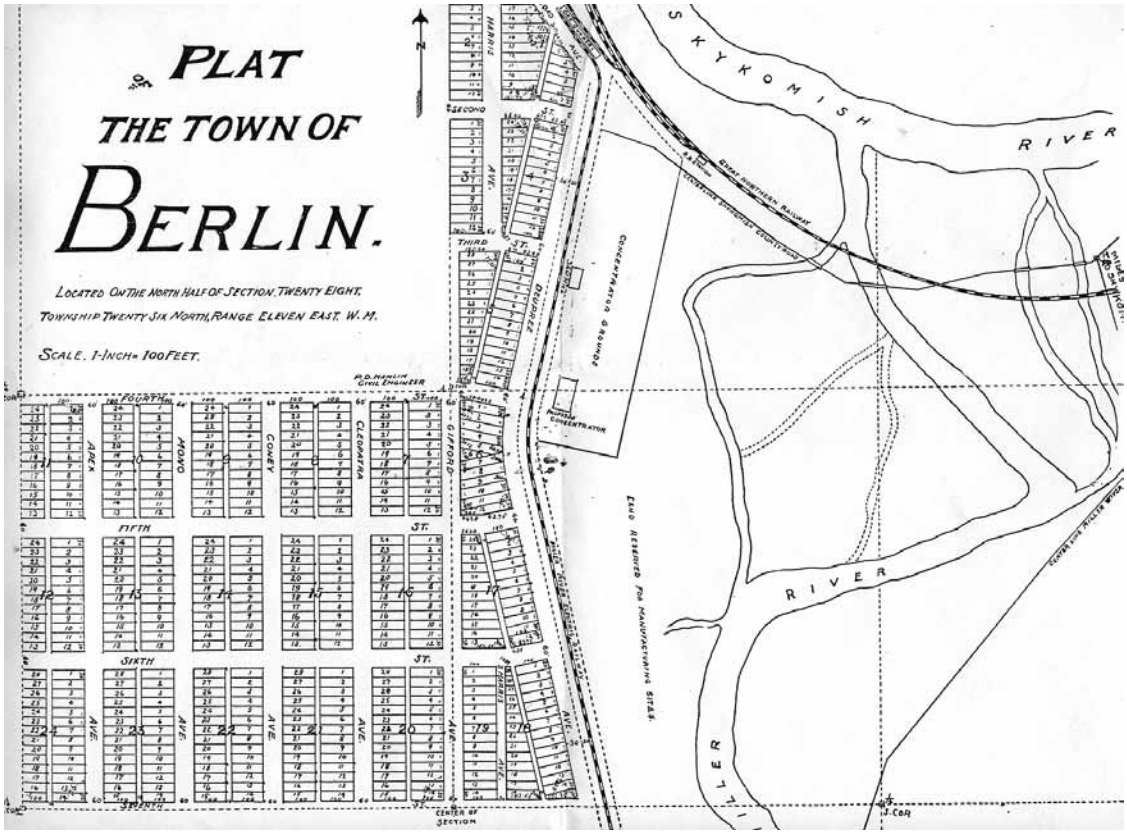
In that era every creek bottom and sidehill in the upper vally was combed by prospectors hoping to strike it rich. By 1897 there were 30 active mining claims in Miller River Valley alone, and the adjacent Money Creek Valley had six more. It was widely reported the Apex mine above Money Creek produced $80,000 worth of ore in 1901. There is speculation some of the figures of successful claims may have been inflated now and again in order to sell mining shares back east, but without doubt thousands of people were involved in prospecting and mining in the early decades.

Most valley towns grew organically, or haphazardly, with buildings and services arriving as needs dictated. While the railroad was being built bunk houses, or sometimes bunk tents, sprang up to be quickly followed by dining faciilities, perhaps a company store and a saw mill and businesses to meet the needs of the workers. Martin Creek, a construction camp which did not survive long after the railroad was completed, became a major "watering hole" during its short life. The rail line switchbacked through the area, so the right-of way passed west, east, and west within a few miles. The camp was not directly on any rail line, but at a central point where workers could be dispatched to various right-of-ways as needed.



The creek was actually Marten Creek, martens being slender, agile, mostly carnivorious mammals, smaller than a racoon but larger than a weasel, common in the coniferous forests of the Cascade Mountains once upon a time. It is unclear when the name morphed into Martin Creek, but the hotly contested 1892 election likely turned all those laborers, and voters, at Marten Creek into a precinct, spelling be damned. However it was spelled, the camp was gone well before 1900, but the precinct lived on until at least the1950s.

The town of Berlin, two miles west of Skykomish where Miller River flows into the Sky, appears to have been an exception. In 1900 a plat map filed for Berlin offered more than 500 home sites, avenues and streets laid out in a grid pattern, space designated for an ore concentration facility, and "land reserved for manufacturing sites." Compared to all those side-hill communities that sprouted like patches of fireweed or fox gloves along the GN tracks, this was flat ground and real estate speculation of some sophistication. Four of the avenues were named Apex, Mono, Coney, and Cleopatra. All four were nearby mining claims, and Coney and Cleopatra were mining "groups."



By the time the town was demolished by a forest fire in 1906, it seems likely there was sufficient doubt the early promise of mining would be fulfilled, because Berlin was not immediately rebuilt the way Index and Skykomish were after their fires in the same decade. Berlin was renamed Miller River during WWI when anything German was decidedly unpopular.

For as much as it seems a reasonable assumption a place called Nippon might have been so named because Japanese laborers were involved, and the Wikipedia account about Nippon inaccurately repeats this myth, there is no evidence to support the idea. James Jerome Hill, "The Empire Builder," had international aspirations when he built the Great Northern Railway. It is far more likley names like Berlin, Nippon, Tonga, Corea, and Wellington were chosen to reflect the "international" character of Hill's enterprise.

Nippon was a particularly interesting case. For much of its active life it was essentially a company town operated by Nippon Lumber Company roughly half way between Foss River and Scenic seven-plus miles east of Skykomish. Even after the town name was officially changed to Alpine in 1914, because there was already a Nippon post office branch in Seattle, the lumber company kept the original name for many years and during WWI their timber production peaked at 600 rail cars per year.

Carl Lane Clemans was a principal owner of Nippon Lumber Company and by all accounts was a remarkable man. Prior to running the lumber mill he was a football hero and later football coach at Stanford from where he received a Masters degree, and he was also football coach at Univ. of Washington.

Nippon Lumber was organized as a normal business enterprise, but in many ways it operated more like a cooperative, with company management taking a real interest in the welfare and success of its people. The company provided housing to employees at no charge including firewood for heat. They offered banking services and easy credit at the company store. Clemans was said to take significant pride in the fact some employees had bank accounts that approached five figures and many went on to buy mills or farms or houses after working there.

Author Mary Daheim, whose grandparents lived in Alpine and whose mother grew up there, bases her popular Emma Lord mystery stories in Alpine, as if the town went on to survive and prosper, with Emma being the owner and editor of the town's newspaper, ***The Alpine Advocate.*** As it actually happened, however, when Great Northern's need for snow shed lumber ended with the new Cascade Tunnel, the mill closed and the town faded in the late 1920s. Some years later the Forest Service burned what was left to discourage transients, who occasionally started forest fires, from locating there, and "Alpine" largely reverted into alders, vine maple, and underbrush. Still, the spirit and sense of community Carl Cleman's small "Cathay" created lived on for decades after the mill and the town itself went away. The people stayed connected, held Alpine reunions, and inspired the daughter of a woman who grew up there to feel so close to what seemed to her a magical place called Alpine that she set a literary series there.

Some years ago Tim Raetzloff from Edmonds, WA, an SHS member and inveterate hiker of hills and old rail lines, caught "Alpine Flu" as he calls it and has attracted a modest following of friends and relatives to help him reapply a bit of flesh to the bones of the ghosts and trappings that once were Alpine. The Facebook page "Alpine, WA" has a collection of images and accounts of this storied hamlet and lists when Tim will be leading anyone who would like to join him on a visit to this ghost town.

Top: Ca. 1912 photo of mill workers at Alpine headed home carrying free "mill end" firewood that came with their free housing. Above: Alpine, ca. 1919. Freedom Hall, center left, was built in 1918 and could accommodate the entire town for civic events. The mill in the pic is the third on the site, the one in the top pic is the first mill which burned in 1913. A second mill burned in 1917. The third mill had an automatic sprinkler system. Per Alpine historan Tim Raetzloff, Victory Hall was almost too late to serve its original purpose of providing soldiers on troop trains a place to get off. An additional reason for building Victory Hall was because trains of the era did not have toilet holding tanks, so the odor and mess after a passenger train had been parked on the siding for some hours was unattractive. The railroad was the main street of Alpine, but also served as a passing track to allow a train to wait for one going the opposite direction to pass, thus "Victory Hall" provided facilites to keep the main street of Alpine unfouled.

This is an expanded version of an article by Warren Carlson originally written for *The Index Wall*