

## Is That You a-Knocking, Tommy?

*by Dennis Payton Knight*

They followed the Cornish and Welsh miners who brought their skills to America to shovel and pickaxe silver and gold buried deep inside Colorado's mountains. Tommyknockers, all of two feet tall, skinny and greenish, mischievous, with glowing red eyes, have saved the lives of many a western miner. They toil unseen alongside the workers, knocking on walls to give warning when a life-threatening collapse is eminent. Not only do they save lives, but often, using a different knock, lead miners to a rich vein of ore.

But they were not so benevolent, those tommyknockers who came in the 1890's to the Mamie R. Mine at Cripple Creek during the last, greatest Colorado gold rush. They staked claim to the mine outright, and their incessant knocking so terrified the naturally superstitious miners they all left and refused to go down again.

The owners had to close the mine, but then brought in new workers, less superstition and thirstier for gold. No sooner than the Mamie R. resumed operations, however, unusual accidents began to take lives, leaving their spirits lurking behind.

It is said that once, a miner named Hank Bull heard a voice like that of a small boy coming from a new tunnel that hadn't yet been braced. Ignoring warnings, he rushed concerned into the tunnel. Moments later, the miners heard Bull scream as the tunnel collapsed on him.

With that tragedy, several miners quit the Mamie R. to work in less dangerous occupations. The mine continued operating with minimal crews who reported hearing voices and whispers where no one was. Frequently, a dark human-like shape would pass, then just as soon disappear.

The miners brought ore out of the mine using buckets lifted by a windlass. A bell would ring three times when the bucket was filled alerting the crew to hoist it up. After Bull's demise, the bell would often ring, and the bucket was cranked up only to find it empty.

Another accident followed in November 1894 that involved the same windlass. It was not uncommon for a bucket to fall when a rope would break, but this time a loaded one fell on a miner's head crushing his skull. And yet there were no signs the knot or rope had failed. Following that, Hank Bull's ghost would often appear in the deepest nooks and crannies of the Mamie R.

The event that put the Mamie R. out of commission forever was on Christmas Day, 1984. The mine had flooded, and the miners spent their Christmas hauling out buckets of water. Three men were working the windlass when suddenly, the system didn't just break, it flew apart. One of the windlass operators became tangled in a rope that tightened so quickly he was decapitated.

The miners went home, and no one would ever again work there. In January 1895, the Mamie R. Mine in Cripple Creek closed for good. Was it the tommyknockers who did her in?