

Mercury in Historical Gold Mining Artifact

ADEC was contacted in 2013 by the Hope and Sunrise Historical and Mining Museum about a flask containing mercury they had on display. DEC recommended that the mercury be disposed of. The following story is an account from Diane Olthuis how they acquired the flask and a brief history of gold mining in the Hope area.

There was a gold rush to Turnagain Arm starting in 1896. Sunrise City was the supply center for the Sixmile Creek drainage. In the summer of 1898, Sunrise City had 800 residents. One of those miners, John Anthony, continued to live in the area until he died in 1928. He was in his 70s. The last resident of Sunrise died in 1939. What was Sunrise City is now on private land and can be visited only with permission. There are no standing buildings at the site. It is on the National Register of Historic Places as an archaeological site.

In the 1990s, a Hope neighbor invited my husband and I to his house to show us something that he thought would interest us. Anthony was known to be very thrifty and rumored to have gold hidden at his cabin. When my neighbor was a young man, probably the 1950s, he was bottle hunting at John Anthony's Sunrise cabin. In addition to several identical pain medicine bottles, he found a 14" rusted steel flask. He kept the flask without opening it, but wondered if it held Anthony's gold. My husband wrenched the cap loose and poured about a cup of mercury into a bowl. There was no gold. We chatted about how mercury was used by early miners to separate gold from gravel and sand. Then he gave the flask to me to donate to the local museum. The flask has been sitting at the Hope and Sunrise Historical and Mining Museum ever since. It is such an uninteresting looking object that museum visitors almost never ask about it. The flask could be mistaken for a weight. I find it hard to believe that there aren't more of these in Alaska as many miners used mercury at the turn of the last century.

The best description of the use of mercury in gold mining that I've read is in a novel manuscript the Hope Museum has. A woman who lived in Hope in the 1910s wrote the story based on her early Alaskan experiences. In it, the main character witnesses a young pregnant woman being warned to stay outside of a tent while her husband and his mining partners heated some mercury to extract the gold. The pregnant woman was too curious, came close to the fumes and quickly died.



Photo and history of mercury flask provided courtesy of Diane Olthuis with the *Hope and Sunrise Historical and Mining Museum*