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Prospector has big plans for Big Minerals, C

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By BRUCE WESTFALL
Albany Democrat-Herald

SWEETHOME, Ore. (AP) — If you haven't heard of Big Minerals, Ore., that's because it's a town that hasn't been born yet.

But Sam Downs, a 55-year-old commercial fisherman and gold miner, says Big Minerals is bound to be Oregon's newest city just as sure as he's found Quartzville's mother lode under a small mining camp 40 miles northeast of Sweet Home.

The mining operation is the most active in the Sweet Home Ranger District, according to Forest Service officials.

That's probably because Downs and two partners claim they've discovered a monster of a gold vein "deep under the

ground" near the confluence of Quartzville and McQuade creeks.

It will take a town, an electric-generating water wheel, a company store, log drawbridge and heavy-duty mining equipment to get it out, he says.

Downs says he's willing to live here the rest of his life to try. He already has invested four years in McQuade Creek, reading the signs of a big strike. The evidence was everywhere, Downs recalls.

There was iron oxide in McQuade Creek and huge fir and cedar trees leaning away from each other where he says the vein was pushed up about 700 years ago.

"The mother lode is there," he says expansively. "If it wasn't I'd be someplace else."

Last fall, Downs said he finally uncovered the trail in the bottom of McQuade Creek. Using small suction dredges, Downs estimates he, his partners and contract miners took 30 to 40 ounces of gold out of the stream bed in the last year.

Still, Downs says the gold in the creek is only the smallest residue of the riches that must lie underground. "Nobody kicked it out of the sky," he exclaims. "It's down there. The devil's got it all."

He believes he found what earlier miners missed because "they didn't know how to mine. You can't know anything about it unless you live gold mining and die gold mining," he says.

Downs has two partners, Fred Smith, 68, a retired logger, who staked out some of the original

claims, and Carl Utzinger, 60, who owns an excavation business in Astoria. Between them they have 15 placer and hardrock claims over about 80 acres with names like the "Big Mack" and the "Sam-O".

Utzinger and others helping with the claims are working "on the come," according to Downs. They're lending their time and equipment to a cause they hope pays handsomely.

Downs believes it will.

Though his barrel chest has slipped with the years, he claims to be vigorous enough to have spent more than a year by himself hauling boulders out of McQuade Creek following the iron oxide vein, which connotes gold.

Marv Lang, a forester with the Sweet Home Ranger District, says Big Minerals Inc. has the

right to explore for gold under an 1872 mining law — as long as the work is environmentally sound.

"It's hard to leave the environment like it is and tear up the mountain," said Downs. "But we're trying." So far, the Big Minerals mining operation has met Forest Service standards, Lang said.

Up to now it has been relatively small and self-sufficient.

Downs, his partners, and sons, Benny and Frank, have used timber cut off the mining claims to build shelters and supply shakes and shingles.

They've dammed a portion of Quartzville Creek and channeled it through a flume that eventually will spin a seven-foot water wheel to provide electricity, they say.

They have built a suspension

footbridge over Quartzville Creek, and drawbridge up McQuade Creek.

As for a town, Downs says he wants to dig a foot-deep tent camp before the tunnels to the vein.

And they'll build a town with a population of 500, Downs says.

Asked how he will finance those plans, Downs says he doesn't take a spec-

More speculation, you've got to believe a mining contract will split the pro-

Inspector has big plans for Big Minerals, Ore.

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They've dammed a portion of Quartzville Creek and channeled it through a flume that eventually will spin a seven-foot water wheel to provide electricity, they say.

They have built a suspension

footbridge across Quartzville Creek, and plan a 60-foot long drawbridge to carry equipment up McQuade Creek.

As for actual mining, they want to dig a six-foot-square, 800-foot-deep test shaft in the main camp before digging a series of tunnels to search out the gold vein.

And they plan to build a small town with a store for the miners. Downs says could number "50 to 500."

Asked how the partners will finance those plans, Downs is circumspect, saying only, "It doesn't take money to do it, if you've got enough guts."

More specifically, Downs believes a mining company will do the major excavation under a contract with Big Minerals to split the profits.