

# 100-ounce Sierra gold nugget to be auctioned off in March

Carlos Alcala, Sacramento Bee, 1-5-11

Imagine a gold nugget the size of a small fruitcake.

Fred Holabird, a mining geologist, doesn't have to imagine, because a gold prospector brought one into his Reno office in 2010.

Holabird remembers shouting, "Oh, my God!" or something similar, but unprintable in a family newspaper.

"I made some exclamation that was very, very loud," Holabird said Tuesday.

Holabird will auction what is now dubbed the Washington Nugget in March.

The stunning piece of gold was literally turned up from the ground near the town of Washington in Nevada County. It weighs nearly 100 ounces.

Current prices would make that gold worth about \$135,000, but Holabird believes that the intact nugget is the biggest California nugget in existence and could be worth as much as \$400,000.

That's a fruitcake that won't be regifted.

To understand how it was found requires a little background.

The gold in this lunker – as large nuggets are known – was formed in the same way as the little flakes that panners find. Gold was created as part of the underground processes that created the Sierra, and gradually was eroded out and washed downstream.

The Washington Nugget was part of an ancient riverbed with rocks that eventually cemented together, including the bones of prehistoric rhino- and hippo-like mammals, Holabird said.

Hydraulic miners took all the gold they could out of those deposits 150 years ago.

"This ended up being a little piece that got missed," said Holabird. "This was a chance thing."

Early last year, after storms eroded tailings off the cemented conglomerate, a property owner – his name is not being revealed – went out exploring.

"They got a huge reading on the metal detector," Holabird said.

It took heavy equipment to knock the nugget out of the ancient bed.

The nugget's discovery has been known in prospecting circles, but it hasn't produced any rush akin to that of the 1850s.

"It's like winning the lottery," said James Hutchings, president of the local chapter of Gold Prospectors' Association of America. "They (prospectors) realize they're probably not going to get the big one."

The rise in gold prices has prompted a few people to go out and try to find the bits of gold that are still out there.

"They don't realize looking for gold is hard work," said John Clinkenbeard, California's program manager for mineral resources.

The mining companies that do that hard work aren't going to spend huge amounts on the slight odds that they might find such a lunker.

"It truly is not one in a million," Holabird said. "It's one in a billion."

The Washington Nugget's finder brought the lunker to Holabird for his assessment. He researched the nugget's origin and that of others like it.

"I tried to find out if any of the big ones still existed, and they don't," he said.

It's not that this one, at just over 6 pounds, is any kind of record. Nuggets with far greater weights – as much as 25 pounds – have been reported, though most are gold quartz rocks, not true nuggets, which have eroded out.

Nuggets bigger than 100 ounces exist from other countries, too, such as Australia.

However, any true nugget that big from California has been melted down to bullion or coins, Holabird believes.

Holabird considers it his job to preserve Western mining history.

To that end, he once helped the Sacramento Public Library's archives acquire a handwritten letter from John A. Sutter, owner of the land where gold discovery set off the big rush.

"Fred, when we talked, he said, 'I'd really rather have this go to an archive library,' " recalled Clare Ellis, then the librarian in the Sacramento Room.

Holabird gave the library enough time to raise the \$7,500 to buy the rare document. And, shrewd businessman that he was, he sent it to Ellis to hold until the money was raised.

"Once I had it in my hot little hands, I had to have it," she said.

Anyone desiring to have the Washington Nugget in their hot little hands will have to wait until March 15, when it's auctioned. The auction site, when determined, will be announced on Holabird's website, [holabirdamericana.com](http://holabirdamericana.com).

It is on display at a Florida coin show this week, and in Long Beach in February, Holabird said. If he can find a suitable place in Sacramento before March, he will display it here, as well.