



## Panning for Gold

# Peter McCullough

(Not exactly) a gold digger

BY JOANNE MAI

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PETER MCCULLOUGH



**DRIVING HOME FROM THE CLAIM:** “I chose medicine for a lot of reasons, but I’d say some of the bigger ones are that I can think of are that I’m definitely a gift-giver—and medicine is the perfect career to have to constantly be able to give gifts, in this case, the gift of good health. I’m also a people person and love connecting with people and their stories. Medicine is perfect for that,” Peter McCullough said.

**W**hen you think of gold panning, you might think of a person trying to make quick money. Or maybe you picture scruffy gold panners in an Old West stream duking it out over any nugget they can find. Neither of those descriptions fit Peter McCullough.

McCullough, a fourth year medical student in the WWAMI program, shares his claim with others who want to learn how to pan for gold and precious stones. And he lets them keep whatever they find.

“Honestly, it’s exciting to find gold in nature,” he says. “But the best and most fun part about it is taking people up there and teaching them so they can have the same experience. It also gets a lot of people out who maybe aren’t sure how to do something like this on their own.”

McCullough isn’t from Wyoming. He grew up on a rural apple orchard in Washington State, until his family moved to the state capital of Olympia.

“I moved to Wyoming by myself when I was 17, and fell in love with it,” he says. “It’s been my home ever since.”

McCullough’s father was an infantry officer for 21 years.

“He had a degree in geology and it’s a huge hobby that was sort of passed on to me,” McCullough says. “I spent many

weeks in the field with him growing up searching for all sorts of interesting things: strange things, strange formations, dinosaur bones, and rare minerals.”

McCullough is one of seven kids. Some of his siblings were interested in geology too. Others, not so much.

“My father’s interest in geology was passed on to me and I spend a lot of my free time wandering washed out ditches or going down random canyons to see what sort of interesting

geology there is to be found,” he says. “I keep a couple gold pans in the back of my Jeep and usually find it hard not to stop at every body of moving water just to pan a bit and see what I might find.”

He has found a lot in Wyoming—and not just gold.

McCullough received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Wyoming Catholic College.

“In the interim years, I had a couple careers, including working for Wyoming Protection and Advocacy Systems doing abuse and neglect investigations around the state of Wyoming, and working in a traumatic brain injury unit for the state

of Wyoming,” he says. “And a three-year stint in the oilfield where I worked from being a roughneck up to being the lead field engineer for the region for Halliburton.”

**"I keep a couple gold pans in the back of my Jeep and usually find it hard not to stop at every body of moving water just to pan a bit and see what I might find."**



After that, he attended Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, studying both biology and chemistry so that he could apply to medical school.

Not only was he accepted into the WWAMI program, a joint effort through the University of Wyoming and University of Washington Medical School in Seattle, he was chosen as a Wyoming TRUST (Targeted Rural and Underserved Towns) student through the University of Wyoming. He's assigned to a city, Thermopolis, throughout medical school and spends most of his rotations there.

"I'd like to go into rural family medicine," he says. "It's one of the few ways you can really be 'full spectrum' these days. It allows you to practice Ob-Gyn, work in the ER, do a variety of procedures, see pediatrics patients all the way up to geriatric patients, and establish long-term longitudinal care with families. Some of the physicians I know in Thermopolis care for three generations of patients in the same family."

Before working in Thermopolis, McCullough spent much of his time in Lander. It's there that he first tried panning for gold.

"I found gold in the canyon where my claim is a little more than three years ago—right before I started medical school," McCullough says. "I was taking some time off from everything before school started and wanted to try a new hobby, so I went and bought a couple of gold pans and hit the mountains with a friend looking for gold."

"I found this very remote stream and started digging holes in all sorts of random spots without any luck," he says. "I headed back to Lander and did some reading on where to look for gold and how to pan properly. I went back the next day and changed my strategy. Within the first few pans, I found a pretty little nugget and just about had a heart attack. I didn't know what



Peter McCullough's brother Benjamin McCullough found a large piece of gold on the claim. He had the gold made into an engagement ring for his wife, Grace.

"My younger brother Ben is probably the most interested besides me (in geology) and spends a lot of time up at my gold claim. He actually made his engagement ring for his now wife from gold from the claim," Peter McCullough said.

to do with it or even if it was legal to keep it, so I went back to town again and asked a friend in Lander for advice."

They looked at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) maps of the area.

"He told me about staking a claim," he says. "The area was unclaimed, so next thing I knew I was up there finding the corners of two 20-acre sections of land and pounding stakes into the ground to mark my claim."

McCullough filed with the BLM and the stake was his.

"It's hard to say how much gold we've found because I've had scores, if not hundreds, of people up and I let everyone keep

what they find," he says. "Sometimes we don't find a whole lot. Other days we find all sorts of pickers (pieces you can pick up with your fingers) and even some nuggets (pieces that are larger than pickers)."

"My city is Thermopolis, so over my years in medical school I've gotten to know the clinic and hospital there very well," he says. "I was always telling the nurses and doctors and staff about my claim and then eventually realized it would be great to get some of the people up there who were interested in (panning)."

You might think he asked one or two people to join him. Nope.

"I invited the entire hospital and clinic," he says. "A whole ton of them showed up with their families and friends. Some people came the night before and camped and panned through the night."



Peter McCullough and his niece at the claim.





## Panning for Gold



Benjamin McCullough, left, Mary-Frances Deucher, and Peter McCullough react to a massive piece of gold that Deucher found.

The party grew even larger.

"The next morning a huge group came in trucks, Jeeps and quads," he says. "We set up shade tents and blankets next to the stream and I gave a big lesson on where to dig for gold and how to pan, as well as the geology of the area and some history as well—there was a pretty large battle between settlers and Indians in the area about 150 years ago."

McCullough says most everyone brought their kids along.

"It was a ton of fun," he says. "They'd pan away and eventually get bored of it and start to slow down, and then one of the kids would find a piece and they'd have renewed feverish energy and start digging and panning like crazy."

The gathering lasted most of the day.

"We had a nice lunch out there and quite a few groups went exploring and fishing in the small stream," he says. "There's also some nearby mines that were abandoned that we did some history lessons about—how the mines worked, how to remove gold from hard rock, how the miners lived and survived there."

One of the participants was Jason Weyer, DO, who had never panned for gold before.

"It was the first time for the entire group," he says. "Growing up in Wyoming, I was superficially aware of the gold history in the South Pass area."

Dr. Weyer decided to do some research before heading up to McCullough's claim that day, and learned about the area from its settling to the present, as well as some tips about how to pan for gold.

"Peter provided an open, inclusive invitation to the staff of the clinic and hospital from Thermopolis," Dr. Weyer says. "I was initially surprised that he was willing to teach a large group how to pan for gold."

But Dr. Weyer says he learned that it wasn't the first time McCullough had entertained such a large group at his claim.

"We had a group of about 20 people," Dr. Weyer says. "The day was a beautiful, calm, blue sky Wyoming day."

McCullough provided all of the equipment, Dr. Weyer says.

"Peter did an excellent job teaching us where to look for gold, how to pan, which made the day exciting and successful," Dr. Weyer says. "Afterward, I studied deeper into the history of specific streams in the South Pass area, and then other places in Wyoming where gold has been found."

Dr. Weyer hasn't been out panning again, at least not yet.

"I purchased the necessary equipment and researched the active gold claims in the area to determine access points," Dr. Weyer says. "It was a very memorable experience and I look forward to going back again next year."

So did he find anything?

"Did we find gold?" Dr. Weyer says. "Yes, and some garnets. How much? That's a secret..." 



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