THE ORIGINAL GEOLOGIST

While perusing some literature concerning the mining days in the San Juan Mountains of Southwestern Colorado, this description of an early day con man was encountered. Because he referred to himself as an original geologist, we thought you might enjoy this excerpt from the story of "The Stewart Placer," which is one of the famous "lost gold mines" of the San Juans. This story and many others are contained in the book entitled "Golden Treasures of the San Juan." All of the following is a direct quote; see footnote.*

It remained for George W. Oprey to introduce a new and refreshing element into the quest for the Stewart Placer. Oprey's whole idea was comprehensive and different, very different, from anything that had ever been heard of before.

Oprey was a stout, stocky man of medium height, wrote a good hand, and had a fair education. He posed as a professional prospector and claimed to be an "original" geologist. He qualified on both counts: As a prospector, his "pay streak" was on top of the ground, and it made no difference to him whose pocket that pay streak came out of - old maid school teachers, honest farmers, or gullible, professional men, they were all the same to Oprey. He staked mining claims all over the country but never did a "lick of work" on any of them; and his explanations of the geology of the district were certainly original - very original. Oprey showed up in the San Juan mountains along the Continental Divide around the upper reaches of the Rio Grande, in the middle Thirties. Where he came from, Oprey alone knew. He used the famous mining town of Creede as a base from which to operate. He established a series of camps, supply stations he called them, high up near timberline for sixty miles along the Rio Grande side of the Continental Divide - from Spar City to Beartown. He had no pack stock of his own with which to transport his supplies back into the mountains, so he solved his problem by the simple expedient of inducing men who did have to pack his stuff in there for him. In return for this service Oprey would "stake in" these fellows on some of the "really rich discoveries" he was going to make. And those discoveries would be made "just as soon as I can complete an analytical study of the original geology of this fabulous domain." Oprey always referred to his study as being of the original geology but never as being an original study; and always the whole country was a fabulous domain. Oprey never seemed to have any difficulty in obtaining packers.

Oprey, in fact, was mighty generous in his "staking in" other persons on the "truly wonderful" mining claims he would discover. All anyone had to do to "get in" on them, was to put up a "grubstake," and a minor sum that, he pointed out, would be an infinitesimally small amount when compared to the stupendous returns that could be had from just one rich "discovery." And with his new approach, his fresh and different concept of the geology of the "domain," Oprey was going to make, not just one "rich discovery," but many.

Oprey seemed to have had a "good line," because he always had plenty of grubstakes.