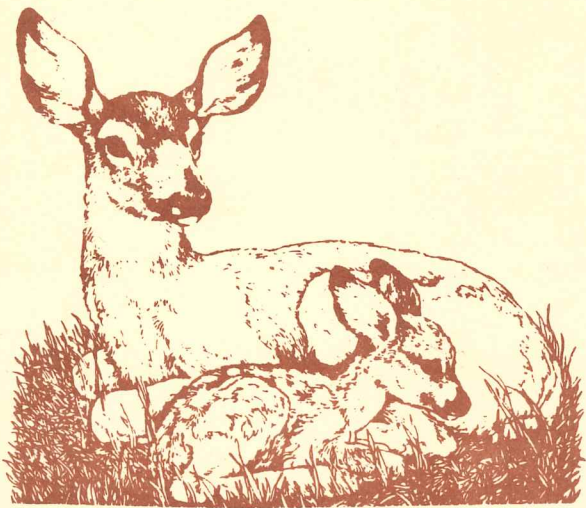


# GULCHES OF GOLD

## A History of the Wildernest Area

by Mary Ellen Gilliland



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## A History of Wildernest

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### Introduction

Wildernest, with its woodlands, meadows and streams, rises above the tranquil Blue River Valley, forming an area rich in high country history. Fur trappers, Ute Indians and gold-seeking prospectors all penetrated its forested slopes and left behind an intriguing history—a story recorded here to enhance your experience in this mountain retreat.

### Indians and Explorers

Nomad Ute Indians who camped along the Blue on a migratory route from the present Grand County over Hoosier Pass to South Park saw the gold. An early explorer witnessed the use of gold bullets in a battle between the Utes and Arapahos.

The short, stocky, dark-skinned Utes, skilled hunters, probably stalked antelope and elk in today's Wildernest area. Buffalo roamed the Blue Valley until the 1860s, and the Utes, expert in the use of the bow and arrow, harvested the huge beast near here, using the meat as food and the remainder of the animal—hide, horns, sinew and bone—as a virtual dry-goods store of sundries. Buffalo fur blankets, skin tipi covers

and bags, horn glue and sinew thread are a few examples.

Among Summit County's earliest white explorers came Colonel John C. Fremont, the famous "Pathfinder" who camped along the Blue River near today's Silverthorne in June, 1844. His journal, published and still available in libraries today, details his impressions: "We halted to noon under the shade of the pines and the weather was most delightful. The country was literally alive with buffalo."

After lunch, Fremont discovered a site where three rivers met, the spot that would become Old Dillon, just beyond the present "glory hole" on the Dillon Dam Road.

### The Trappers

Other white men had penetrated the remote reaches of Summit County before Fremont, but they were not the kind to keep journals. They were the beaver men, trappers who lived isolated, primitive lives in the high country seeking lucrative pelts. These trappers certainly

worked on the high ponds in Ryan and Salt Lick Gulches, today's Wilderdest area, because the terrain proved perfect for the thickest possible beaver skins. High altitude meant heavy fur. The lush, below-timberline location with plenty of aspen, willow and columbine (the beaver's favorite "munchies"), guaranteed a high beaver population.

Dillon, reputedly the site of "La Bonte's Hole" on early 1800s maps, probably provided the scene for the trappers' annual summer spree, the colorful rendezvous. La Bonte, an 1840's trapper, probably worked the area's many beaver ponds. Beaver still live in Wilderdest today. Their tranquil ponds, high in the subdivision, command a beautiful valley view.

Like the Indians, the trappers knew about the gold glittering in high-country creek sands, but kept the news quiet, lest their tranquil beaver ponds be disrupted.

### **How the Gold Got Into the Rock**

Six hundred million years ago, the Pre-Cambrian granite of the Gore Range above Wilderdest took shape. Long before the present Rocky Mountains existed, an earlier Continental Divide range formed and rose to staggering heights. In a giant trough that stretched across a large Western region, including Colorado, an inland sea formed. Except for its loftiest peaks, much of an ancient Summit County area lay underwater for 65 million years.

Motorists driving the Dillon Dam Road can view a geologic record of this Cretaceous Sea displayed on the road cut just beyond the south end of the dam. Morrison Formation erosion deposits and Dakota sandstone beach sands are layered in the rock.

Seventy million years ago, the earth's crust shifted. A massive upheaval crumpled the old mountain range and, over eons, the present Rocky Mountains formed. The 600 million year old Gore Range rock remained. But it cracked in a mosaic of fractures and received molten intrusions of gold, silver, lead, zinc and copper. The boiling liquid minerals surged up from the cauldron of the inner earth during this massive disturbance. The old sea-floor sedimentary rock was honeycombed with molten solutions of gold and silver bearing rock.

### **Wilderdest Placer Claims**

The discovery at Salt Lick Gulch led to new placer claims in the Wilderdest area. Placer mining, distinct from "hard rock" or lode mining, involved separating loose "free gold" from the dirt, sand or gravel in which it lay. In fact, the subdivision sits smack on top of two large claims that stretched up toward 12,777-foot Buffalo Mountain. The lower claim, the old 155.18-acre North Side Placer, had its eastern boundary near the Wilderdest sales office-tennis recreation complex. It rose all the way to the Treehouse condominiums area. Northside Placer shared a boundary

with the 150-acre Poplar Placer which reached up Ryan Gulch to an imaginary line joining two opposite trailheads, the South Willow Creek and the Lily Pad Lake trailheads.

Two smaller groups of placers flank Wildernest. In Mesa Cortina, working east to west were the 62-acre Royal Red Bird, the lower and upper Ryan Gulch Placers, and the 55.73-acre Royal Buffalo Placer, which was patented in later years. The patent registered claim ownership in governmental records, and remained effective for a certain number of years. The Royal Buffalo patent, dated July 30, 1924, by W.W. Byron, shows these claims were worked after most in Summit County had played out. In lower Salt Lick Gulch were the Anna D., Anna E. and Anna F. Placers, south of the Silver Queen East complex, and the Cutty Sark, Burgundy and Tokay Placers, south of the Buffalo Mountain townhomes. Hikers and cross-country skiers traverse these claims on the Prospector and Placer Trails.

The Claret and Sauterne Placers, roughly south of Poplar Circle, lay just east of the point where the Columbine and Placer hiking trails meet, above Salt Lick Creek.

The Wildernest sales office straddles the upper boundaries of the old Twenty Grand Placer and just northwest of that was the Bashore Placer, below New Lamartine.

Glaciers carved and scraped the mountains. Note Buffalo Mountain's glacial cirque, for example. The cirque, an amphitheater-like depression, was gouged out by the ice

at the head of a glacier. The glaciers crumbled the rock, releasing gold nuggets, flakes and grains, and exposed veins. The Ice Age left huge layer of glacial gravels all over Summit County. The gold-rich Blue River near Breckenridge flows over gold bearing gravel that is layered to depths of 45 to 90 feet. The gold-bearing gravels in Salt Lick Gulch, bordering Wildernest are high terrace gravels deposited by a moving river of ice.

Prospectors struck gold on Denver's Cherry Creek in summer, 1859. Soon gold seekers scrambled over the craggy Continental Divide and discovered Colorado's first Western Slope gold on the Blue River on August 10, 1859.

News of gold leaked out. By June, 1860, when heavy snows blocking the high passes had disappeared, Summit County swarmed with frenzied gold seekers. Among them came a thoughtful man and skilled hunter, Edwin C. Carter, who would become one of Summit County's most famous sons and a respected Colorado pioneer. It was probably he who first discovered gold in Salt Lick Gulch in the early 1860s. The story, told by *Colorado School of Mines Quarterly* writer Dr. Ben H. Parker, Jr., goes like this:

A Breckenridge hunter in Salt Lick Gulch near Dillon shot a deer. While cleaning it, he discovered that fine gold particles coated the animal's front teeth. Leaving the deer, he tracked its footprints in the snow. The trail led to Salt Lick Creek. He washed a pan of stream

sand there and discovered placer gold!

The facts point to the possibility that Salt Lick's gold discovery belongs to Edwin Carter. For one thing, mining records show that Edwin Carter owned, with others, the 1,300-acre Salt Lick Placer. The placer's yield pleased owners. In 1873, for example, mining statistician R.W. Raymond reported on Salt Lick: "The ground is good and water abundant. The yield during the past season has been about one-half ounce of gold per day per man."

Later, when miners turned to the hydraulic mining technique at Salt Lick Placer, they retrieved \$30,000 in gold in one season. In today's inflated dollars, the equivalent would be \$210,000. And that's only dollar equivalency. Yesterday's gold was worth \$17 to \$19 per ounce. In 1980, gold values soared to over \$500 per ounce.

The Salt Lick Placer and others in the area above Silverthorne lay in the Wilkinson Mining District.

#### **Edwin Carter, Miner/Naturalist**

Edwin Carter, Salt Lick Placer owner, gained fame not from gold, but from his achievement as Colorado's most famous naturalist. Carter assembled the unrivaled Rocky Mountain bird and animal collection that spearheaded Denver's Museum of Natural History. Carter's brilliant taxidermy work has been viewed by well over 30 million museum visitors.

The "log cabin naturalist" worked for decades in a tiny cabin at 111

North Ridge Street in Breckenridge. He constantly walked the hills, studying wildlife habits. He snared and stuffed buffalo and bobcat, grizzly and grouse, along with rare birds, which he presented in their nests filled with delicate colored eggs. Tens of thousands of specimens resulted from his life's work, including American and Golden Eagle specimens. The naturalist refused to sell, at any price, items that he could not replace. Eminent visitors and scientists traveled to Breckenridge to view Carter's collection. He died in 1900 of poisoning from the arsenic used daily in his taxidermy work. His death came before the transfer of his work to the Denver museum was complete.

#### **Silverthorne: Old Placer Ground**

Across the Interstate 70 highway, the Fulton Concrete plant sits on the old Arctic Placer. The southern end of the town of Silverthorne rests on the Silverthorn Placer, a 159.5-acre former homestead patented as a placer claim in 1881 by Breckenridge pioneer *Judge Marshall Silverthorn*. The 48 year old Judge came west from Pennsylvania in 1859, a sick man. The pure mountain air cured Silverthorn and he brought his family to Colorado to try prospecting around Breckenridge in 1860. Breckenridge's beloved *Agnes Ralston Silverthorn* and her two pretty, black-eyed daughters, *Martha and Matilda*, helped the Judge launch his well-known Silverthorn Hotel in 1860. Nationally-known journalists who traveled to Colorado

to visit its fabulous gold mines stayed at the Silverthorn Hotel and praised its warm hospitality in their books and news articles. Marshall Silverthorn, Judge of the 1860s Miners' Court, managed to combine stern frontier justice with successful placer mining.

The story of the Judge's placer mining in this area stretches across many colorful years. In the 1870s, when most Summit County placers had played out and most of the prospectors had departed, leaving Breckenridge with only a handful of families, the spry Judge persisted in hunting for gold. He and his best crony, J.S. Roby, staked a claim in lower Ryan Gulch. Mining authorities regularly reported their progress. Frank Fosset in his 1879 *Gold and Silver Mines of Colorado* recorded \$800 earnings from Roby and Silverthorn's Ryan Gulch Placer.

Thomas Corbett's 1870 *Colorado Directory of Mines* had this listing: "Ryan Gulch Placer: Roby & Silverthorn, prop. 800 x 2800 feet of placer ground on the Blue, 13 miles from Breckenridge."

The two Ryan Gulch placers in Mesa Cortina were probably of a different vintage, although no information is available in Summit county records concerning discovery dates or owners.

The prospecting Judge had patented the Silverthorn Placer in 1881 and was again busy in today's Silverthorne in 1882 when he patented the 220-acre Willow Creek Placer, probably a combination at that time of the earlier 59.84 Willow

Creek Placer and the 159.9 Silverthorn Placer. An 1880s mining directory listed this placer as "located in 1870, patented in 1882. Owner M. Silverthorn, Breckenridge. The waters from the Ryan and Salt Lick Gulches belong to this placer."

These placers, in the Town of Silverthorne of today, lay in the Lake Mining District. The Silverthorn Placer, with its southern border in the Sav-O-Mat Store area and northern border near Annie Road, occupied the present town's southern limits. The Consolidated Blue Placer stretched above it, as did the Willow Creek Placer. A succession of owners held the Silverthorn Placer over the years, but 1960s owner rancher Clayton Hill used the land to launch the new town of Silverthorne, adding an "e" to the century-old Summit County name.

#### "Gulch Washing"

In the 1880s, miners tired of the unwieldy sluice box, rocker and Long Tom, all used to separate gold from its accompanying sand, rock and gravel through the use of running water. New technology, including development of the "Giant" nozzle, led miners to a more efficient form of placer mining, hydraulicking. Using water from ditches, pipelines or flumes, the miners could force heavy streams against gold-rich hillsides to flush out pay dirt. An example of the Giant nozzle stands on the Courthouse lawn in Breckenridge today.

Hydraulic mining arrived in a big way in Ryan and Salt Lick Gulches.

Edwin Carter and his partner, John J. Willoughby, developed nine miles of ditching and a half-mile flume for the Salt Lick Placer, which they worked with two hydraulic Giants with water from the Ten Mile Creek.

Judge Silverthorn's Ryan Gulch Placer was also equipped for hydraulics in the 1880s. But the claim wasn't producing. H.C. Burchard's 1883 *Report of the Director of the Mint* on precious metals detailed the claim's problems: "The Ryan Gulch Placer has likewise been idle, litigation being the cause. This property is well supplied by hydraulics, and if sufficient water could be obtained, the property would be equal in production to any in this district."

Mrs. Silverthorn died that year, 1883, and a grieving Judge Silverthorn closed his Breckenridge hotel and moved to the Denver home of his daughter, Matilda Silverthorn Wilson.

#### **Why Those Red-Earth Scars?**

When the old placer titles in Salt Lick Gulch expired, the big Buffalo Placer Mining and Milling Company moved in. The company built a wooden flume from North Ten Mile Creek and launched a hydraulic mining operation that created the big red-earth scars visible on the Prospect Trail and from Interstate Highway 70 as it climbs the grade west from the Silverthorne Interchange. The Buffalo Placer's flume can still be seen on 10,800-foot Chief Mountain's rocky shoulder as the flume crosses from the North Ten Mile valley. Look for it from the south Frisco Interchange on-ramp as

you enter I-70 heading toward Dillon-Silverthorne.

Lemual Kingsberry managed the Buffalo Placers operation from its Dillon headquarters. County records show the company in operation as of October 12, 1891. The company ran into a major snag after completing its expensive flume when ranchers on the Lower Blue pointed out their ownership of North Ten Mile water rights. The company learned that you can steal a rancher's wife, but you'd better keep your hands off his water!

The oversight was resolved, however, and Buffalo Placers began hydraulic mining. A local newspaper, promoting hydraulic mining despite its environmental ravages, commented: "There is one steam-shovel company, Buffalo Placers Mining and Milling Company, in Salt Lick Gulch. There should be at least a dozen companies at work from the Ten Mile south of Breckenridge to practically the Grand River."

Colorado School of Mines researcher Ben Parker said Buffalo Placers worked as late as 1934 and extended operations to Ryan and Willow Gulches. County records show that the Buffalo Placers Company acquired the North Side and Poplar Placers in Wildernest on November 4, 1912. Water rights disputes and diminishing financial returns eventually caused the company's demise.

#### **Peaks of Silver**

After 1879, when prospectors discovered the first lode veins at

Leadville, and Will Iliff struck Breckenridge's historic Blue Danube Lode on Shock Hill, Summit County fueled from a lode mining boom. Soon lode mines sprouted like June wildflowers on the craggy slopes of Buffalo Mountain and neighboring Red Peak. The Wilkinson Mining District began to rate headlines. On June 8, 1882, the *Denver Republican* announced astounding assay reports on Buffalo and Red Mountain silver lodes—ranging from 50 to 800, 5,000, and as high as an unbelievable 21,000 ounces of silver per ton!

"I have never seen as many rich veins with the same amount of development in 20 years experience," the *Republican* correspondent reported:

"Having no axe to grind, and holding no interest in the following named mines, I simply mention the facts as I found them: The Joe Brinker lode assays 200 to 7,000 ounces silver. . . Comet lode assays 191 ounces silver. . . Silver Mint lode assays 232 ounces of silver. . . Lady Godiva assays 225 ounces silver. . . Snow is disappearing fast, and there are hundreds watching and waiting to get in here as soon as they can with animals. Parties are waiting in Dillon, Frisco, Breckenridge, Kokomo and Leadville to go in this district as soon as the trail is open. . . There is great excitement being created over the rich discoveries. . ."

The Buffalo Mountain Silver Mining Company, incorporated December, 1881, ranked as one of the area's biggest developers. Frisco mining men ran the company, with seven 150 x 1500 foot lode claims on Buffalo Mountain and Red Peak. C.C. Royce, president; A.C. Graff, vice president; H.E. Hoffman, secretary-treasurer; and George Roth, manager, had supervised excavation of four tunnels by 1883, according to the Colorado Mining Directory.

A.C. Graff owned Graff's Hall in Frisco, built in 1880, and he once led Kokomo's 1879 brass band. His century-old hall now stands in Dillon housing the Three Rivers Rebekah Lodge and D & L Printing.

Buffalo Mountain Silver Mining Company claims included the Winona, Chicago, Wild Cat, Hancock, Garfield and Washington on the north slope of Buffalo Mountain, and the Fairmount on the south slope of Red Peak. Evidence of these mines should be visible on the Wheeler-Dillon Trail that crosses Buffalo's north slope.

The Colomar Mining Company also worked the area. The *Summit County Journal* reported in April, 1929, that the Colomar log headquarters at the center of Middle Willow Creek was "busy as a hive," surrounded by a tent community from June to October.

### **Old Mine Cabins**

Many of the ruined cabins hikers discover along the Buffalo and Red Peak trails once belonged to Buffalo

Mountain Silver Mining Company or to Colomar. John P. Scarff built the first year-round cabin in the South Willow Creek area, according to old Kokomo's *Summit County Times* (the County's first newspaper) April 29, 1882. Mr. James Murdock and Mr. J.P. Scarff were "the first to winter up in this high section of country to date." Miners had to sturgle through a 250-inch snow-fall the next season, with snow as deep as 30 feet in the canyons.

"But we experienced no serious trouble from either snow or cold" reported Mr. Scarff. His snowshoes (miner's skis), twelve feet long and four inches wide, transported him wherever necessary.

Another miner working at the head of South Willow Creek was Frisco's long-time postmaster, Louis A. Wildhack. Wildhack located his 150 x 1500 foot Wildhack Mine in August, 1882. Assays ran 50 ounces of silver per ton on the "2½ foot wide fissure vein with an eight inch pay streak."

A particularly rich mine on Buffalo, the five-acre Treasure Vault, averaged 500 ounces of silver per ton, according to the June 16, 1897, *Denver Republican*. The Treasure Vault was patented in January, 1887, by Marvin Burger and Harold Horn. Its production average of 500 ounces of silver per ton is impressive. Assays often pointed to staggering richness of a sample, but it was *production* that put cash in mine owners' pockets.

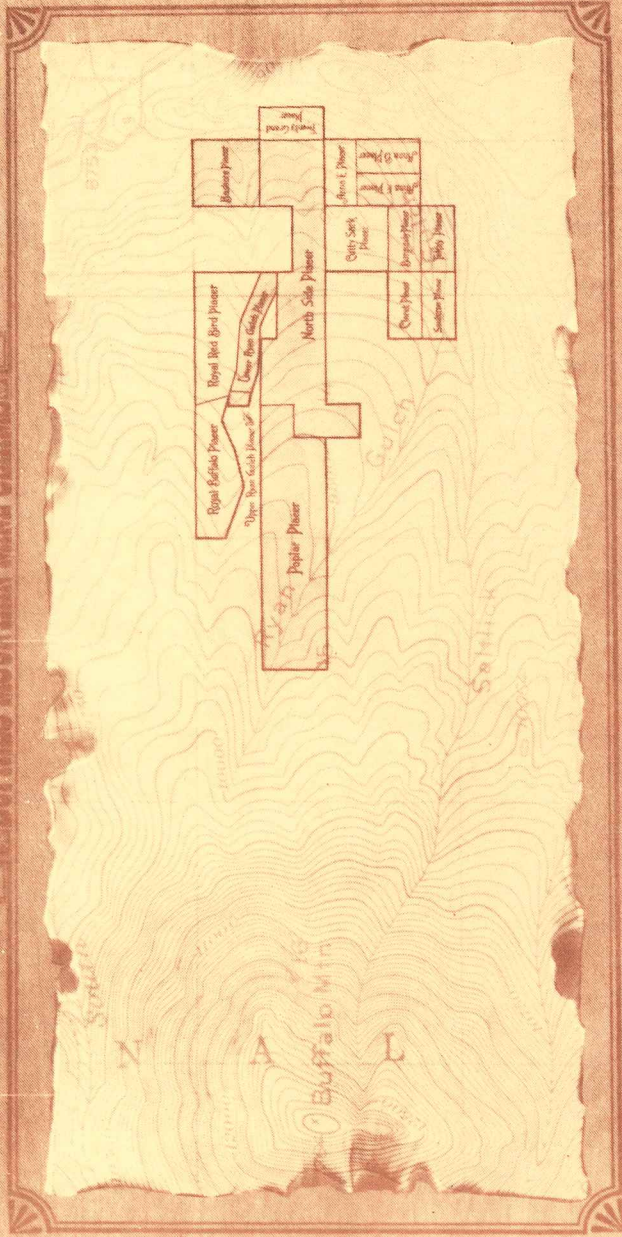
This history of Wilderrest and its neighbors, the gold and silver sea-

ming its nearby gulches and mountain slopes, concludes with the following list of the old lode mines in the area's Wilkinson Mining District.

Joe Brinker	Mount Fairy
Comet	Sullia
Silver Mint	Anglo Saxon
Ruby	U.S. Grant
Elva	Fairmount
Lady Godiva	Evening Star Lode
Mayflower	Olive Lode
Silver Vault	Treasure Vault
Defiance	Hoodoo
Wildhack	Winona
Black Prince	Chicago
Copper Chief	Wildcat
Knickerbocker	Garfield
Harvest Queen	Washington
Boss Tweed	

If glittering flecks in the creekbed or a gleam in a trailside rock catches your eye, look again. There is "gold in them thar hills."

## This is a detailed topographic map of the Buffalo Mountain Mine Claims. The map features numerous contour lines indicating elevation changes across the terrain. Several mine claims are outlined in black and labeled with their names: "Royal Red Bird Placer", "North Side Placer", "Upper Bear Gulch Placer", "Lower Bear Gulch Placer", "Popeye Placer", "Royal Butte Placer", "Buckskin Placer", "Honey Creek Placer", "Rocky Fork Placer", "Rocky L. Placer", "Rocky R. Placer", "Crest Placer", "Sagehen Placer", "Sagehen No. 2", and "Sagehen No. 3". A prominent peak is labeled "Buffalo Mtn.". The map is framed by a decorative border, and the overall color scheme is sepia-toned, typical of historical geological or mining maps.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Mary Ellen Gilliland

Ms. Gilliland has been writing all her life. She wrote for school publications in high school and college, and then went to New York and worked on a limited-circulation business magazine called "News Front." She was also an associate editor for "Family Circle" magazine.

Mary Ellen is presently a freelance writer of stories and articles, and gives historical talks to community groups and convention visitors. Her list of published writings is impressive, but three which should appeal to those interested in Colorado are:

"The Summit Hiker" (hiking trails in Summit County, available in local bookstores)

"Summit" (a gold rush history of Summit County, available from Alpenrose Press, Box 499, Silverthorne, CO 80498, \$12.98 postpaid)

"Century of Faith" (history of 100-year-old St. Mary's Catholic Church in Breckenridge)

She also wrote a story for the Summit County Historical Society about local resident Lula Myers, whose restored cabin may be seen on the site of the Summit County Museum in Dillon.

This well-known local author, with her husband Larry, daughter Sheliah (16) and son Matthew (12) has made her home in the duplex area of Wilderndest since 1973, and has seen many changes since that time. When they first came here the upper end of Wilderndest (near Timber Ridge, Snowscape and Buffalo Ridge) was completely wild. There were many wide open spaces with fields of columbines, and thick woods, but few signs of civilization.

Mary Ellen's outdoor leisure activities include both cross-country and downhill skiing and hiking. She thinks the "natural beauty in Wilderndest is incredible" and likes our Wilderndest hiking trails.

She also had some good things to say about our Buffalo Mountain Metro District. She thinks Wilderndest roads are the best-maintained in the County, and really appreciates that they are cleared by 6:30 a.m. Coming from a 13-year resident, this is welcome praise indeed.