

A photograph of a desert landscape featuring rocky, layered hills and several tall, thin cholla cacti with small red flowers. The scene is captured in warm, golden light, likely during sunset or sunrise. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

# 'LOST' GOLD MINES

Are They Really? BY SALLY BENFORD





A MONSTROUS BROWN CLOUD of dust loomed on the horizon as a legendary miner named Perkins rode his horse north of Quartzsite toward the Planet Mine where he worked as superintendent. New to the area and unfamiliar with Sonoran

Desert dust storms, Perkins continued to ride into the growing brown swirl until he could no longer see beyond his horse's nose.

In a wasteland of sand, where one dune looks like the next, Perkins decided to sit down and wait out the storm. Seeking refuge

from the dust and sand that blinded him, Perkins stumbled into a rock ledge that provided him with some shelter from the howling wind.

As he sat facing the ledge, the miner broke off a few rocks and examined them. Realizing that he sat next to a quartz ledge streaked with gold, Perkins stuffed the nuggets into his pocket and scrawled some notes. Unable to discern his exact location, he unbuckled his six-shooters and laid them in the sand to mark the spot.

After the storm passed, Perkins, weak and disoriented, held onto his horse's tail as it staggered back toward the mine. But within a few hours, Perkins was dead, half-buried in the desert dunes, probably not far from the rich ledge of ore. Several days later, when Perkins' horse showed up without its rider, a search party of Planet miners set out to find their boss. They found his body, his pockets filled with the gold ore and notes describing his find. By all accounts, he had become lost and died from dehydration and exposure.

According to legend, countless prospectors have circled the area looking for Perkins' gold quartz ledge, but have yet to find it. Known as the Lost Six-Shooter Mine, perhaps it remains buried, along with Perkins' guns, until another storm uncovers it.

Many lost Arizona mines still lure treasure hunters, who, like prospectors of the past, believe their searching will pay off. Some spend their entire lives looking for legendary gold mines.

Arizona lays claim to the world's most famous lost gold mine, the Lost Dutchman Mine. Named in July 2000 by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the world's greatest mysteries, the Lost Dutchman remains the most sought-after gold mine of all time. Since 1891, the legend has lured thousands of people to Arizona's Superstition Mountains to search for prospector Jacob Waltz's fabled mine.

If anyone knows the extent to which Arizona's lost gold mines entice would-be

miners, it's Nyal Niemuth and Diane Bain of the Arizona Department of Mines & Mineral Resources. Niemuth, an agency mining engineer, and Bain, its public information officer, have seen their share of treasure hunters over the past 20 years.

Regarding the Lost Dutchman, Niemuth said, "I get a phone call every week from someone who tells me they've found it."

He refers callers to the Forest Service, which has jurisdiction over any treasure trove found in the Superstition Wilderness. As far as finding the legendary gold mine, Niemuth explained that no one can stake a mining claim within federal wilderness

a 1940 description of the property, which listed its location as "15 miles southwest of Salome in a rolling to hilly country. Reached by a good desert road."

Bain, who's written an agency publication titled *Gold Panning in Arizona*, said some mines have been lost simply due to the vastness of Arizona's outback and the secretiveness of old-time prospectors.

Bain explained that although a mine may carry an intriguing name like the Lost Dutchman, it isn't necessarily "lost."

"Today we may know some of those old lost gold mines by a different name," she explained.

Indeed, a 1992 *Arizona Highways* story by Rick Heffernon speculated that the Lost Six-Shooter Mine might be the modern-day Copperstone Mine, one of Arizona's top-producing mines until the gold market bottomed out in the 1990s.

Lost Dutchman aside, many modern prospectors believe the truth about Arizona's lost gold mines has been buried in years of folklore, fables and fabrications. Dusty library books and cryptically drawn treasure maps tempt gold hunters with

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areas, so the agency doesn't encourage Dutchman hunters.

"Even if someone did find Waltz's mine in the Superstitions, they can't even get to the first step in filing a claim," Niemuth said.

Although the agency develops Arizona's mineral resources by providing field investigations, technical research and information, it also stores files of research materials on lost mines, which it makes available to the public.

"We can't spend a lot of time with maps and files on lost gold mines, but we don't mind if people come in to do that. In fact, we should probably be their first resource," said Neimuth.

Bain said people come in carrying old mining claims or stock certificates, found among a deceased relative's belongings, hoping that the papers are worth something. In most cases, the claim has such elusive boundaries that it's impossible to pinpoint an exact location. An agency file labeled "Belmont Veteran Mine" contained

romantic tales as rich as the shiny stuff itself.

Ironically, the land that produced and houses Arizona's gold also conceals it. Desert sandstorms, searing heat and water-parched terrain have played key roles in Arizona gold legends. Add in avenging Indian war parties, sketchy directions and mislabeled maps, and you begin to understand why Arizona has its share of lost gold mine stories.

Most lost-gold accounts share a familiar theme: A stranger staggers into town, his pockets filled with gold, telling tales of quartz ledges laden with rich gold veins or golden nuggets lying on the ground — there for the taking. Usually, the prospector spends the better part of the evening and his gold at the local saloon drinking whiskey, awakening the next morning with a hellacious hangover and permanent memory lapse. That is, if he makes it out of the desert alive in the first place.

Take ole Sam Whitley, for instance. In

1894, Whitley prospected gold in Mohave County, Arizona's third-most-productive county for gold. Prolific treasure hunter and author Thomas Penfield wrote in his book, *A Guide to Treasure in Arizona*, that while prospecting, Whitley came across a deposit of gold that was said to have assayed for \$35,000 a ton. Back in town, Whitley told two friends that the deposit was within 2 miles of Sitgreaves Pass in the Black Mountains, not far from Oatman.

A few days later, the prospector loaded up his supplies and set out toward his find. After traveling down the trail a way, Whitley realized two men were following him. He pulled out his gun and started shooting. With bullets flying in all directions, Whitley succeeded in killing the two would-be claim jumpers right then and there. Unfortunately, in the process he was fatally wounded and died soon after, taking the location of the gold to his grave.

Arizona boasts an abundance of unique mineral deposits from one end of the state to the other. For centuries, since the Spanish conquistadores searched the territory for the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola, legends of vast riches beneath Arizona soil have kept treasure hunters' dreams alive.

Mine names like Vulture, Gold Road, Eldorado, Congress, Crown King and Bonanza fill volumes with Arizona's gold-mining history. But other names, like Lost Black Maverick, Lost Apache, Lost Soapmaker and Lost Jack Rabbit spur interest in fabled Arizona mines. Even Geronimo may have used stories of a hidden gold mine in an attempt to trick American soldiers into bringing him back to Arizona after his capture. In his book, Penfield wrote about Geronimo's lost gold mine.

According to Penfield, while a prisoner at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Geronimo begged to return to his homeland before he died. He tried to strike a deal with soldiers there that in return for his freedom, he would lead Army officers to his hidden gold mine, purportedly somewhere near Sycamore Canyon in Yavapai County. The officers opted not to give the cunning Apache a chance to escape, so Geronimo never again stepped foot in Arizona, and died near Fort Sill in 1909.

Fighting Indians sometimes led to gold discoveries. In the April 1983 issue of *Arizona Highways*, James Cook wrote about a well-authenticated legend concerning gold found in a spot called Squaw Hollow. In 1864, King Woolsey, a veteran Indian fighter, and Judge John T. Alsap, a respected Arizona pioneer, led an expedition in search



of Indian warriors near Bloody Basin.

After a few days, the group encountered a band of Apaches and a battle began. Outgunned, the Apaches retreated, and Woolsey's party set up camp at Squaw Hollow. Recognizing the area as a good spot for prospecting, some of the men fanned out to search for gold. According to Alsap, they returned with the richest ore he had ever seen. It had been taken from a ledge that the men said contained an abundance of gold. Before they could make their way back to their discovery, the Apaches came back with reinforcements outnumbering the white men. Woolsey's party hightailed it back to Phoenix, keeping the location of the ledge a secret. Alsap wasn't with the men who found the gold, so he wasn't sure of its whereabouts. Years later he searched for the ledge, but never found it.

If lost gold mines do exist in Arizona, Niemuth said, they're most likely located in western Arizona, an area known for gold deposits. A map hanging on the wall in

**[PRECEDING PANEL, PAGES 12 AND 13] The wild and forbidding landscape of the Superstition Wilderness provides the setting for legends of Jacob Waltz's gold and the Lost Dutchman Mine. ROBERT McDONALD**

**[ABOVE] The lost gold of a murdered miner reportedly lies secreted within 2 miles of Sitgreaves Pass, shown here, in the rugged Black Mountains near Oatman. TERRENCE MOORE**

Niemuth's office shows significant gold occurrences in La Paz, Mohave and Yuma counties, not too far from where Sam Whitley and the miner Perkins took their chances on finding gold and paid dearly.

Yet as long as legends of Arizona's lost gold mines stay alive, those who are willing to risk desert storms, sweltering heat and treacherous terrain will keep searching. And, who knows? Maybe one day some lucky prospector might stumble across a pair of six-shooters half-buried in the sand—and uncover the key to untold riches. ■■

*Sally Benford enjoyed researching Arizona's lost gold mines, but plans to leave prospecting to the pros. She lives in Peoria.*