

Superstition Gold

by Jim Taylor

It was nearly 50 years ago. I was a teenager, full of myself and ready to take on the world. The Old Man and I had been prospecting in the Superstitions for a couple years and had made a few minor strikes. Now it looked like we were gonna hit the big one!

We left the vehicles at First Water, loaded our packs and hiked the trail to Boulder Canyon. The day was bright and sunny but cool, the February sun not heating the canyons and rocks nearly as much as it would in a few months. There were four of us in the party, myself and the Old Man, my friend Bobby and his dad. We had supplies for a week along with picks, shovels, a single-jack and some hand drills. We also had plenty of dynamite, caps and wire. All of us were loaded, our pack-boards riding heavily on our shoulders. We had rope, a tarp, bedrolls, cooking gear and food. Everyone was armed and carried extra ammo. There were places in these mountains where people often shot first and asked questions later. It paid to be ready. While we carried water we didn't have as much as we would have carried had it been June or July. This time of year the canyons all had water running in them. It had been a wet winter and we were grateful for it. I had an old H&R .22 double action pistol on my belt and carried a Spanish-made copy of the Winchester Model 92 leveraction rifle in .44-40 caliber in my hand. It was my favorite gun. The Old Man packed his .44 Magnum Ruger single action in his belt holster. Bobby carried a 12-gauge pump shotgun while his dad had a Remington bolt action 30-06. We were pretty much ready for anything, but hoping we would not have serious need of them. To say we were loaded is an understatement. I was just past my 14th birthday and felt I could do most anything. The Old Man took me up on it. It was good for me, although I did not always appreciate it at the time. A few years later when I humped a pack and a heavy rifle for Uncle Sam it didn't bother me as much as packing into the mountains!

The trail into Boulder Canyon was fairly wide and pretty flat. It was used by a lot of tourists who wanted to hike into the Superstitions for a day. Going was easier than I expected with our heavy loads since we stopped every once in awhile and leaned back against a big rock to take the weight off our backs. We did not see another soul, though that does not mean we weren't seen. Anyone who spends some time in those mountains and you will get the feeling that there are "watchers" ... someone who is keeping an eye on you. Sure, that sounds crazy unless you've been there. As you hike along all you have to do is look around. The country is so rough and jumbled up there could be an army hiding within stones throw and you might never know it. And then there are all those upright columns that from

a distance look like people standing there. Perhaps one or two of them really are? Without looking at each one through a good pair of binoculars you will never know for sure.

The day wore on as we walked and eventually the trail led us down into the bottom of Boulder Canyon. There we stopped for a bite to eat and to enjoy the cool water and the shade. With the backpack off I felt light! The Old Man said to not to wander off too far as we would not be staying long. We still had a way to go.

Our destination was a large deep canyon to the north. Well, not the canyon itself, actually, but the far rim of it. There the Old Man and Bobby's dad had discovered an old Spanish digging. They had been nosing around in the mountains and on one of their forays had found some markings, which they'd followed. The markings had led them to an old digging that they'd inspected and where they made their discovery. What the original miners had been after was a quartz ledge that was just full of "wire" gold. The quartz had "threads" running through it that were pure gold. And it was just full of it! The out-cropping was about twelve feet wide by maybe fifteen feet long and varied from what they could see of it, from eight to sixteen inches thick. The quartz was extremely hard. The original miners had driven a small tunnel underneath the ledge and then up to it and had tried to take it out that way. The Old Man said you could see the marks where they had tried to drill it with hand drills.

The reason they had approached it that way was the ledge itself hung out over the edge of the canyon, some three hundred feet or so above the canyon floor. You could get on top of the ledge, but there just was not any place to work. Whoever had driven the tunnel had thought it out pretty well. They started down lower and ran the tunnel up at a slight angle. This would make the removal of all the rock and ore easier than lifting it up. With ropes it could be dragged out and down the hillside to be crushed and then later on, smelted.

Well, Bobby's dad and the Old Man had poked and pried around enough to know that tools and equipment were gonna be needed. They made a list of what all they figured it would take, realized they would need some slaves to carry it all, and recruited Bobby and me. So here we were.

After an all too-short rest we loaded up and went north up Boulder Canyon until it turned. The Old Man led the way up out of the canyon and over the ridge in front of us, holding to a northerly course. He was like a mountain goat! I was huffing and puffing and mumbling bad words by the time we got to the top. Another short rest and down we went into the canyon on the far side. The hills were steep, boulder-

covered and while we went maybe a half mile if you measured from point A to point B, we probably walked a mile doing it, weaving in and around the boulders and washes and brush. By late in the afternoon I was tired, my feet were sore and I was getting grumpy. The Old Man looked back at me once and said, "What's the matter with you kid? You getting weak?" Made me angry, he did, talking to me like that! I said, "NO!" and pushed on harder, determined to show him I could take it.

We had climbed several ridges and then dropped down into a large canyon that ran to the northeast. We followed it for a couple miles as it snaked back and forth through the hills. The going was rough with no trails to follow. At one point the Old Man stopped and Bobby's dad said, "There it is." We looked up at the sheer rock wall in front of us and wondered where "it" was. They informed us that we would take a break, have a bite to eat and then climb up to the top of the mountain in front of us! The prospect of that climb did not make me feel any better, but it sure was nice getting the pack off. I laid down in the shade and in about two seconds I was asleep. Bobby told me later I was snoring. I don't know, all I remember is the Old Man shaking me awake. He handed me a sandwich and a candy bar and as I munched he told us to that we needed to climb to the top before dark. I didn't much feel like it but heck that was what I signed on for. Once we finished eating we loaded up and started out.

The first part of the climb was pure torture. It seemed almost straight up. A few minutes and the muscles in my legs were burning. I had to stop and let them rest and catch my breath, standing bent over at the waist to keep from falling backwards with all that weight on my back. The good thing was everyone was feeling the same! There was no talking; everyone just concentrated on getting up that mountain. About the time that I figured I couldn't take it much longer we topped out on a fairly smooth ridge that ran at a shallow angle up to the top. From there on it wasn't bad. At least it wasn't bad compared to where we had just been. We pushed on and as the sun was setting we were on top of the cliff we had been looking at from down in the canyon.

While the Old Man and Bobby's dad set up camp, Bobby and I collected firewood. "Firewood" is more of a generic term. We gathered up whatever we could burn. Cow chips, dead cholla cactus wood, the rods from the insides of Saguaro cactus. It all was burnable and we used it. I even gathered up some Palo Verde, though I hate burning it since it smells like cat pee when you burn it. But we needed firewood so it went into the pile. I was plumb worn out by the time we turned in for the night. I laid down on my bedroll and was out, snoring again I guess.

The next thing I know it's daylight and coffee is boiling on the fire and the Old Man has some bacon frying. All of a sudden I was starved! I tried to get up but my legs wouldn't work right. Bobby laughed at me from his bedroll...until he tried to get up. I guess our muscles just weren't used to doing that hard of work. Both of us were stiff and sore for the next couple days. Looking back I am sure the Old Man was too, but he never let on or complained about it. He had a job to do and went about doing it. That was his way. I hope a little of that has rubbed off on me. Anyway, after we ate we carried the tools to a rise just above us, near the edge of the cliff. Bobby's dad led the way to the tunnel, then went in ahead of us to make sure there weren't any snakes or other critters already there. The tunnel wasn't very big, just enough room for one man to work, so we took turns looking at the vein at the end of it. Their idea was to try to drill into it from the bottom using the single jack and the hand drill. Two guys crowded close could do it, one holding the drill and the other the single jack. They were anxious to get at it so that left Bobby and me free to run, as long as we remained within calling distance. Our main job would be to "fetch". We would take them whatever they needed.

For the next few hours we explored the mountaintop we were on. We climbed up and looked at the top of the quartz vein where it was exposed. You could see gold in it! That was exciting. The pounding went on and on in the tunnel and from time to time the Old Man or Bobby's dad or both of them would come out for a drink of water and to clear the dust from their lungs. I took it that the work was not going well. When they stopped for lunch they explained that the quartz was extremely hard, not like the almost rotten stuff that broke up easily. They could not drill into it at all. They could flake off some by beating on it directly, but they were not making any progress at all as far as actually getting any quantity out. They decided to change their approach somewhat. What they now figured on doing was drilling into the softer rock right next to the vein, setting a charge and blowing it out.

I thought that was a great idea! I have always liked explosions and figured this was as good an excuse as any for setting one off. Bobby's dad had it worked out that they would drill three fairly shallow holes about two feet apart. They would put a stick of dynamite in each hole, then blow that out and that should expose the side of the vein as well as break it up. We would all work on pulling the ore out of the tunnel and then, if we could get enough of it, we would break it up and try to extract as much gold as possible and pack that out for further refining. After a break they went back into the tunnel to set the charges and Bobby and I started getting real excited about the explosions.

In about an hour they had the charges set and had run the wire out the tunnel. We all stood off to the side while the Old Man got the battery out. He made sure everything was clear and then touched the wire to the battery terminal. There was a muffled WHUMP from the tunnel, a bunch of dust blew out the mouth of the tunnel and that was it. I was disappointed. It didn't make much noise at all. I asked the Old Man, "Is that all it does?" and he said, "It does plenty." Well, we stood around for a while waiting for the dust to settle and as soon as it did Bobby's dad headed back into the tunnel. He was barely out of sight and we could hear him cussing. Boy did he turn the air blue! The Old Man headed into the tunnel to see what was going on. He was real quiet and I knew it must be bad. Turned out that the charges they set collapsed the tunnel! Caved it in back to within ten or fifteen feet of the mouth. There were tons of rocks filling it. Both of the men were quiet when they came out of the tunnel. You could tell they were upset. Bobby and I looked at each other and we both knew to keep quiet and out of the way.

That night the campfire was quiet. We ate, drank coffee and sat there looking at the stars. The coyotes were singing and it was just really pretty, but camp was pretty glum. Every once in a while Bobby's dad would say "DAMN" or some other word. He was really upset. The Old Man didn't say much but I could tell he was agitated. He was a thinker however and it was churning around in his mind, I know that now. We went to sleep and sometime late in the night excited voices woke me up. I looked up to see the Old Man talking to Bobby's dad and he sounded like a kid that just found a chocolate cake with his name on it. I couldn't hear what all they were saying but I was sleepy and dropped back off to sleep before figuring out what they were planning.

Come morning they explained over breakfast what they were planning. Seems the Old Man had gotten the idea in the night of setting charges on top of the vein and cracking it that way. They were going to have us haul water up from the canyon bottom so they could make mud. They were going to drill in on one side of the ledge up on top, set the charges and pack mud over them. The Old Man said the mud would help the dynamite blow down into the rock more. They figured on cracking it up that way. It would be more work getting it down to where we could work it, but it could still be done. That all sounded fine except for the part of hauling water up out of the canyon. We had drinking water. Why not use that? The Old Man patiently pointed out that we would get mighty thirsty without water to drink and that I just needed to set my mind on the job and do it. I had heard the lecture before and I just said, "Yes sir."

We made three trips down into that canyon and back up before the Old Man was satisfied. My feet and legs were reduced to jello. I was

sweating something fierce. Bobby had fallen once or twice and was scratched up pretty badly. Bobby's dad and the Old Man had drilled holes along the edge of the vein and were packing the dynamite in them by the time we finished the third water run. They had made as much mud as they could and while the Old Man set the charges Bobby's dad covered them with mud. It looked like he was packing a foot of mud over each charge.

Now the exposed part of the vein was roughly a "V" shape with the pointy part of the "V" pointing directly away from the cliff face. The wide end of the "V" ran parallel with the edge of the cliff. It was along the north side of the "V" that they had drilled the holes and set the charges. The Old Man ran about one hundred and fifty feet of wire over the top of the mountain and down to a rock outcropping where we all would hide when he touched it off. He got the battery from camp, made sure the area was clear and we got down in the rocks. I wasn't expecting much 'cuz I found from the first charge they set off that the explosion was mostly in the ground. The Old Man touched the wire to the battery and there was a HUGE explosion! Stuff went 'way up into the air, the ground shook, and then there was this loud rumble and growling-like and roaring that got louder and louder. The ground was shaking like there was an earthquake. Rocks and dirt from the blast landed all around us. I mean it scared me! Dust boiled up into the sky and for a time I wondered if it was the end of the world or something.

We all just stood there when it finally got quiet. No one moved. Finally the Old Man got up to take a look at what happened and it was one of the few times in his life I heard him say, "Shit!" You have to understand, the Old Man was not given to talking like that. When he said that I knew it was the end of the world! I stood up and looked and the world had changed. The edge of the cliff was now much closer to where we were than it had been. Bobby's dad was speechless, which was a new thing for him. Turned out that the face of the cliff peeled off and fell into the canyon! A few years later the Old Man told me they had set ten sticks of dynamite. I guess it was more than the mountain could take. Bobby and I spent time gawking at it all. It was quite a deal. The dust cloud went 'way up into the air and hung around for a long time. The Old Man and Bobby's dad climbed down into the canyon to see if they could find the vein but it seems that it was under tons of rocks and rubble. We were kind of happy 'cuz the sledgehammer, the shovels and most of the tools went down the mountain too and were gone and that meant we would be going home pretty soon.

When they climbed back up to camp Bobby's dad and the Old Man were tired, but they told us to pack up. While we were getting

everything together Bobby's dad grabbed the coffee pot and a skillet and flung them off into the brush, cussing. Then he stomped off into the rocks, just to be alone I guess. The Ole Man said, "Just leave the rope and the tarp" but other than that he didn't talk. He scattered the remaining groceries for the coyotes to eat, and being as the tools were lost our packs were a lot smaller! The hike out was uneventful. We were tired and sore, but it wasn't as hard as the hike in because our packs were whole lot lighter. I think I slept three days straight when we got home.

We never talked about it much. I knew the Old Man was disappointed. He had always wanted to strike it rich. This vein had been out in the open, just setting there where you could look at it. It looked like it was within reach. And then it was gone. Life is like that sometimes.