

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

The Superstition Mountains

By: Jim Taylor

Southeast of Phoenix, Arizona there rises out of the desert floor a sharp, rough mountain range known as the Superstition Mountains. Long famous as the location of the "Lost Dutchman" gold mine, the range was in earlier days a holy place of the Apache Indian. "The Dutchman" I should note, was not lost. Supposedly the mine where he got his supply of gold was lost. Whether the mine actually existed or not has been a matter of hot debate for years. I have been told, by people who lived in Arizona during the 1880's and 1890's, that "the Dutchman" actually worked at the Vulture Mine in Wickenburg, Arizona and that he was high-grading the ore. It is said he would pick out some of the best for himself and sneak it out of the mine. They told me that he got past the security at the mine by keestering the gold nuggets. Supposedly he made up the story about finding an old Spanish diggings in the Superstition Mountains to cover himself and his influx of wealth.

Whether he was actually high-grading ore or not, the Superstition Mountains were the location of much Spanish mining activity over the years. Earlier in the 1900's there was still a lot of evidence of their working in the mountains. Some of this evidence was in the form of arrastras and crude smelters that could be found. Most of these have been picked apart long ago by prospectors looking for gold dust or ore that may have been left in them. An arrastra was a place where the ore was crushed. Usually it was a round, trough-like area where a large stone was drug around by a burro or slaves in order to reduce the ore to a crushed form so it could be melted and poured into ingots. The smelters that I knew of were built on the canyon floors and usually had a long mud chimney going up the side of a cliff. The ore was not really well refined. Dad knew a man who had found a cache of Spanish bullion in the Superstitions. He allowed Dad to cut the end off of one of the bars he had found. The bars were made up of a small percentage of gold and silver with a higher percentage of lead and tin. The miners who had crudely cast them apparently wanted the ore in a form that was easy to transport. Once they got the bars back to Mexico [or wherever they were destined for] they could be refined further.

Some of the Indians said they worked "all one winter" covering up the mine shaft and hiding all traces of it. Thus the mine became "lost". However there are still lots of Spanish "sign" in the mountains. I was well acquainted with Jim Hardy, who was born in 1875 in Phoenix, Arizona and who died in 1978. Jim was a part-time prospector as were many in the early days. He told me of a time in the 1920's when he grubstaked an Indian. The man wanted to repay Jim and asked him what he would like. Jim told him he wanted to see a Spanish mine in the Superstition Mountains. The Indian agreed and at a set time they packed off

into the mountains. Jim knew where there were some rocks with odd markings and they started there. The Indian interpreted the markings, saying that one set of symbols indicated the direction to a mine, another to water, another to a placer working etc. They followed the symbols for the mine until they came to a certain area. Standing on hilltop the guide pointed out a rough square, the corners marked by 4 Saguaro cactus with the tops cut off. He said that when you measured between the 4 corners, at the point where the lines intersected a mine was located, but that it had been buried. Jim told me they worked for several days digging up the mine and uncovering it. It turned out to be a tunnel that descended at a shallow angle for about 50 feet, with two side tunnels. He said the mine was worked out. There was no ore remaining in it, the vein it followed having played out. He described some artifacts that were in the mine. The Indian insisted that they leave it all as it was and cover the entrance back up.

Jim showed me how the markings in the cactus would indicate a trail or directions to specific locations. My Dad and I once followed some such markings to a modern mine located in the McDowell mountains near the Verde River northeast of Phoenix. The markings pointed directly to a "notch" in the mountains 10 or 15 miles distant. When we made our way there we found a working mine in operation. We spoke to the gentleman working the mine and he said he had discovered an old Spanish or Mexican mine there and had developed it. The markings we had followed pointed us directly to the mine. And from quite a distance away. Since the Saguaro cactus lives for such a long time, many of those that the Spanish marked are still in existence and the trails can still be followed if one knows what to look for.

In the 1960's an eccentric black opera singer by the name of Celeste Jones took up residence near Weaver's Needle in the heart of the Superstition Mountains. Weaver's Needle is actually all that remains of an ancient volcano, the outer part having weathered away leaving the lava core. It is named after a trapper, Pauline Weaver, who was one of the first white men to discover it. Since it can be seen for many miles from certain angles it makes a perfect point to pilot from. Anyhow, Ms. Jones was convinced there was treasure in the Needle. She fought with other prospectors in the mountains and several of the conflicts resulted in people becoming shot.

An old-time prospector from Iowa named Ed Piper killed one of her Mexican hands after the Mexican threw a .30-30 down on him and said he was going to shoot him. As the Mexican was cussing him, Ed drew his .45 S&W and shot him 3 times, then walked the all-day trip into Apache Junction and turned himself in to the Sheriff. The Sheriff investigated the site of the altercation, ruled that it was self-defense and let the old timer go free. When asked about the shooting Mr. Piper commented that if you are going to shoot someone, you should shoot first and talk later.

Dad and I were in the mountains prospecting on the day when Jones killed

a geologist she had hired to check out the Needle. She kept the Sheriff's Posse at bay all day long but eventually gave up. Last I heard she went to an asylum for the mentally deranged. I was told that there was a large iron cross placed on the top of Weaver's Needle in the late 1800's. Supposedly Ms. Jones took it down. The assumption was that whatever direction the arms of the cross had been pointing was significant. Of course, that information is long lost. The story is that the Catholic Missions in southern Arizona and northern Mexico had hidden their Church treasures in the Superstition Mountains during an Indian uprising. The Needle being prominent from south of the border, supposedly it figured in somehow with where the treasure was hidden. As in most all treasure stories, no one ever made it back to recover the treasure. Quien sabe?

The list of those who have lost their lives in the Superstition Mountains is quite long - just in 1900's! Up into the 30's and 40's headless bodies were discovered in various places. Even today the mountains are a foreboding place, as wild as they were when the Spanish explorers first pushed into them. It is said that Indians still guard some of the sacred places and will kill anyone who desecrates them. I do not know about that, but I do know from personal experience that the feeling of being watched can be quite strong at times, especially when you are down in the bottom of a canyon with terrible rough terrain all around and above you.

And even after all these years someone still shows up from time to time with a map that shows the location of The Mine. So far none of these have worked out though there has been a lot of money sunk into several of the efforts. The pull of treasure has attracted some real characters over the years. I remember once in the early 1960's we were hiking out of the middle of the Superstitions, heading out to First Water on the west side of the range. As we came up the trail we met a man in a business suit, tie and all. I mean, even carrying a briefcase He was purposefully striding along like he was going to a meeting at the office down the street. The only thing is that he was at least 5 miles from the nearest building and that was a cow shed! The one thing about him that was out of the ordinary for a businessman was the 9mm Luger he had strapped on his hip in plain view. He passed us with a nod and went on down the trail, heading into the remote heart of the mountains.

That there is gold in the area is easily proven by the Goldfield Mine to the west and the Silver King Mine to the east. Millions of dollars were taken out of these mines, especially the Silver King. The trail from the Silver King Mine to the stamp mill at Pinal is worn knee-deep in solid rock by the wheels of hundreds of ore wagons. The foundations of the stamp mill and what is left of the old town can be found near the end of the runway of the airport of the town of Superior. All that was left the last time I was there were some half-crumbled foundations in the weeds and a large pile of broken whiskey bottles where the old saloon had stood.

Today one can drive an air-conditioned car to the Don's Camp at the foot of the



Superstition Mountains. There the Peralta Trail will take you on a breath-taking climb of several miles and several thousand feet until you reach Fremont Pass. You will know when you are there, for spread out at your feet is a panoramic view of the heart of the Superstition Mountains, with Weaver's Needle looking so close you could almost reach out and touch it. Once you make the climb you will know it was worth all the effort. As you stand there, looking down into those rough, forbidding far-off canyons you will feel the pull. The siren song that says, "There's treasure here!" Lord help you if you listen to it, for you will never be the same again.

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