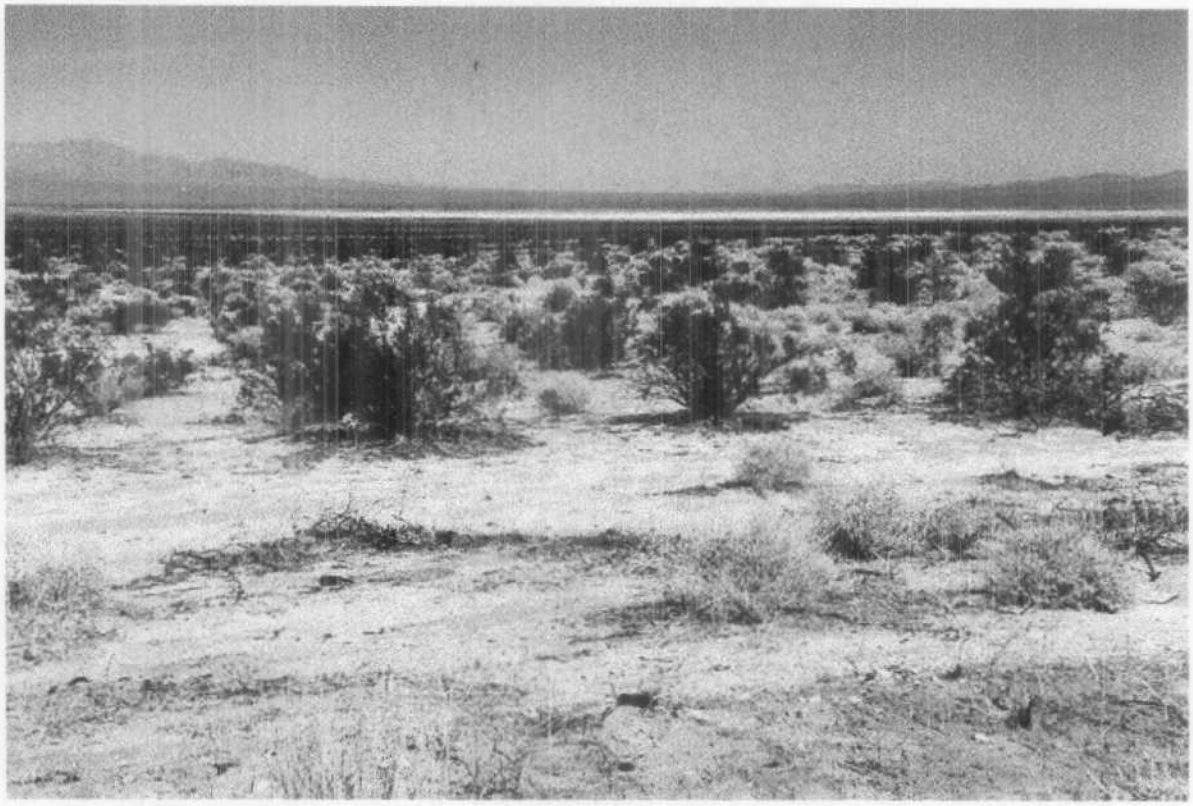
Lost Treasures in the Desert?



In the distance is Danby Lake (Dry), North of Desert Center, CA. It appears bright white because of the solid evaporites left behind.

Introduction

Welcome to the Desert! In the American Southwest lies a vast region of moderate-to-extreme desolation encompassed by the Sonoran Desert, the Mojave Desert, and the Basin and Range Province. Die-hard folks (mostly from the East coast and the South, but some from abroad) over the past five

centuries have explored, exploited, prospered and profited from the land of the West. However, some have been lured by the sheer thought of gold prospecting towards an easy life. In most cases, though, amateur treasure hunters failed to make ends meet. Those who did find anything of value were not guaranteed the pleasure of living off their finds. A good number of prospectors -- after encountering good luck in making a strike, ventured out again to find their horde and extract greater amounts with more provisions -- and were never seen or heard from again, their secret of desert treasure lost forever.

But sometimes not. All too many lost gold mine stories stem from a similar kind of event: a staggering, dusty, sunburned, near-dead prospector arriving in an outpost town with a sackful of ore, confiding his information on his deathbed to an equally gold-struck person. Not surprisingly, the confidant almost always never finds the site. Thus, a lost gold mine legend is born.

Below are my favorite yarns passed down over the ages. Most have likely been altered by storytellers to increase their mysticism and campfire excitement. But a good deal of these have a solid, unrefutable grounding. Enjoy!

The Lost Pearl Ship

Local Indians, from the coast to the Rockies, rarely considered gold precious enough to covet. After all, they reasoned, there is so much of it in the hills, that there was more than enough for anyone, even if it was worth something. When the Spaniards arrived to the deserts of the west in the 16th century, they're passion for the stuff was the amazed wonderment of Native Americans. Unfortunately, the invaders tortured the Indians and stole from them whatever gold they had. Tribes tried to tell these bearded people that it was easier to go into the mountains and playas and pick up the gold rather than extract it from the Indians.

But the Spaniards were not always hostile. Many Spanish captains engaged in trade with Indians along the Baja California shores. In 1615, a captain by the name of Juan Delturbe had just enjoyed a lucrative bartering

mission along the western coast (of what is now Mexico). For explorers of the day, finding a secret passageway to and from the Atlantic from the Pacific (other than sailing around the world, or south around Tierra del Fuego), represented an enticing challenge. The ship sailed north into the Gulf of California, through a narrow, mountainous strait, then into a vast inland sea. His crew sailed around the sea, but found no waterway to the east.

Meanwhile, a flash flood had apparently choked their entrance, and for weeks Delturbe desperately tried to find the entrance in which they came, but never relocated it. The ship was abandoned (along with its loot) somewhere on the shores of this body of water. The party hiked south into Mexico proper until they reached a Spanish settlement, after agreeing to eventually return to the site to recover their goods. A return expidition waws never planned, however, as Delturbe apparently was unable to raise funds for another caravel.

The body of water in question, is likely the recurring natural lake that forms in the Salton Sink. It is thought that Delturbe had sailed up the delta of the Colorado River, and sailed into a spillway that lies below sea level, known as "Lake Cahuilla", which was once much larger than the present-day Salton Sea. The shoreline extent of Lake Cahuilla is not known, making the exact location of the shipwreck rather nebulous.

The only addendum to this lost treasure story comes from a 1775 story of a DeAnza expedition herder on his way to the mission at San Diego. After trekking out of Yuma for several days, he encountered the ruins, and pocketed as many pearls as he could carry. Over the years, he and his Indian guides made many returns to the desert to locate the decaying caravel (and its remaining treasure), but with no success.

Where the ship lies today is thought to be a vast area extending north-south from the Santa Rosa Mountains to the Cocopah Mountains, and east-west from the Anza-Borrego highlands to the Chocolate Mountains. The geographic expanse of the lost ship's location is the largest extent of all but one lost treasure story in Southern California -- the Legend of Pegleg's Gold.

Pegleg's Lost Gold

A little chunk o' land in the Chuckwalla Mountains east of the Salton Sea.

As this story is also the most famous of its kind in this region, it has also been infected more by misinformation than fact. So many sidebars and coincidences have been added on by ranchers, travelers, drinkers and prospectors that it is very difficult to ascertain just what happened in 1852.

The man in question is John O. Smith, a one-legged horsetrader who traversed the desert from Yuma to Los Angeles. One thing is for sure: somewhere off the trail, he discovered heavy black stones that "lie atop one of three dark hills". Pocketing a few pieces of what he reckoned were interesting native copper samples, he later had them investigated by an assayer/friend in Los Angeles.

The samples were pure gold nuggets, covered with "desert varnish."

Unfortunately, it is at this early stage of the tale that then branches off into many different endings. It is generally accepted that he immediately struck out for the desert to reclaim more.

Renown Pegleg researcher Henry Wilson believes that Smith simply disappears forever. Another version claims that he was a prolific drinker. This branch has him frequently staking out for the desert to retrieve more gold when his propensity for the good life in coastal towns finds him penniless. Yet another spin has him never returning to the strike; Smith

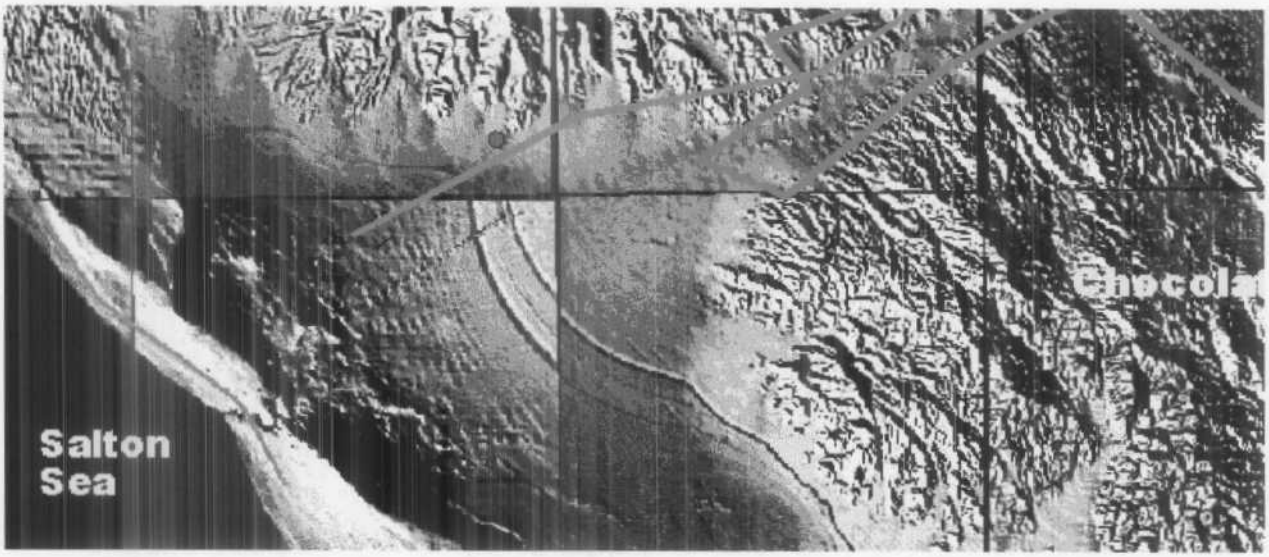
then lives out the rest of his existence in taverns up and down the coast, spinning his colorful story of lost gold treasure for patrons willing to pay him in whiskey (Bailey, 1947).

Adding confusion to the matter, it later surfaces that another "Pegleg" Smith -- this one a Thomas O. -- prospected his own mine in the Chocolate Mountains.

Many possible routes can be imagined through the desert. Narrowing down where John Smith indeed made a strike is difficult due to the population of dark buttes that, legend has it, most believe was along a major trail. But which one? The two prominent paths of the day were the Old San Bernardino Road and the Butterfield Stage Road (The Bradshaw Stage Trail wasn't established until 1862). The spacial extent bounded by these routes is staggering, and the description of three black hills is satisfied multiple times along each trail; so much so that one begins to wonder what geographic definition exactly qualifies the necessary condition. John D. Mitchell, on a meteorite-hunting expedition in the 1940s, pocketed a few heavy black stones -- but didn't have them looked at for another 30 years. They too were varnish-covered gold, and he claims to have found them somewhere in the Orocopia or Chocolate Mountains.

Until definite evidence shows otherwise, the Lost Pegleg Mine is just that -- lost.

Lost Gold Ore Along the Tabaseca



The Bradshaw Route today delineates the northern border of the Chocolate Mountain Gunnery Range administered by the U.S. Military, just south of the Orocopia Mountains. It traverses perhaps the most desolate area of the desert, and many travelers avoided it completely.

Others found the trail by accident -- and found gold. Such is the story researched by Harold O. Weight in the July 1955 edition of Desert Magazine, of a man known only as "Slim". A miner in the Glamis area, "Generous" Tom Clark, gave Slim forty dollars in gold, and encouraged him to venture into the Chocolates to find his fortune. From the account, as told by Eugene Conrotto in his book, "Lost Desert Bonanzas", Slim was probably not very skilled with pack animals, and the burros he hired out of Glamis were prone to wandering off every moment he rested.

After crossing the Chocolates at Heyden's Well, Slim proceeded due north until he came across the Bradshaw Trail. Proceeding west, Slim twice had to retrace his steps eastward to recover the burros. Exhausted, the prospector decided to bolt west to one of the towns at the foothills of the Orocopias. Somewhere off the trail, between Chuckwalla Spring and Dos Palmas, Slim rested and noticed that the interesting dirt around him was bright red, and (perhaps more out of curiosity than anything), filled a sack of it and loaded it onto a burro.

Upon assay, the bag yielded $120 of gold dust. But the arduous roundups apparently took its toll on old Slim, and he was unable to recover. Upon hearing of his friend's condition, Clark rushed to Dos Palmas, but Slim died before his arrival. Waiting for him, however, was an envelope in which a third of Slim's find -- and a crude map -- were enclosed.

Tom Clark's own mining operation was lucrative enough that he probably never used the map. However, in 1942, an 84-year old Clark disappeared in the wilderness somewhere between Blythe and Los Angeles, taking the secret -- and the map -- to his death.

It is believed that Slim found the ore near the Tabaseca Tanks.

Black Butte Stash

About 34.5 miles east along the Bradshaw Route from its intersection with State Route 111, a trailhead begins that winds northward into the Chuckwalla Mountains. About 3.5 miles in lies Gulliday Well. Passing it and continuing on the trail is particularly difficult, due to the number of floods that periodically cascade out of the hills.

The route is now impassable and hardly discernable. According to a story told by Delmer G. Ross in his book, "Gold Road to La Paz -- An Interpretive Guide to the Bradshaw Trail", an unknown prospector hid two sacks of gold nuggets along one of the old trails that traverses the Chuckwallas.

The Lost Frenchman's Bull Ring Mine

Another tale along the Bradshaw Stage is just as colorful. As many lost gold mine stories begin, fate plays the first hand. An unnamed Frenchman and two others were shipwrecked along the Colorado River in 1862. Announcing to his companions that he was intrigued by the stark mountains to the west, he decided to leave the two and investigate.

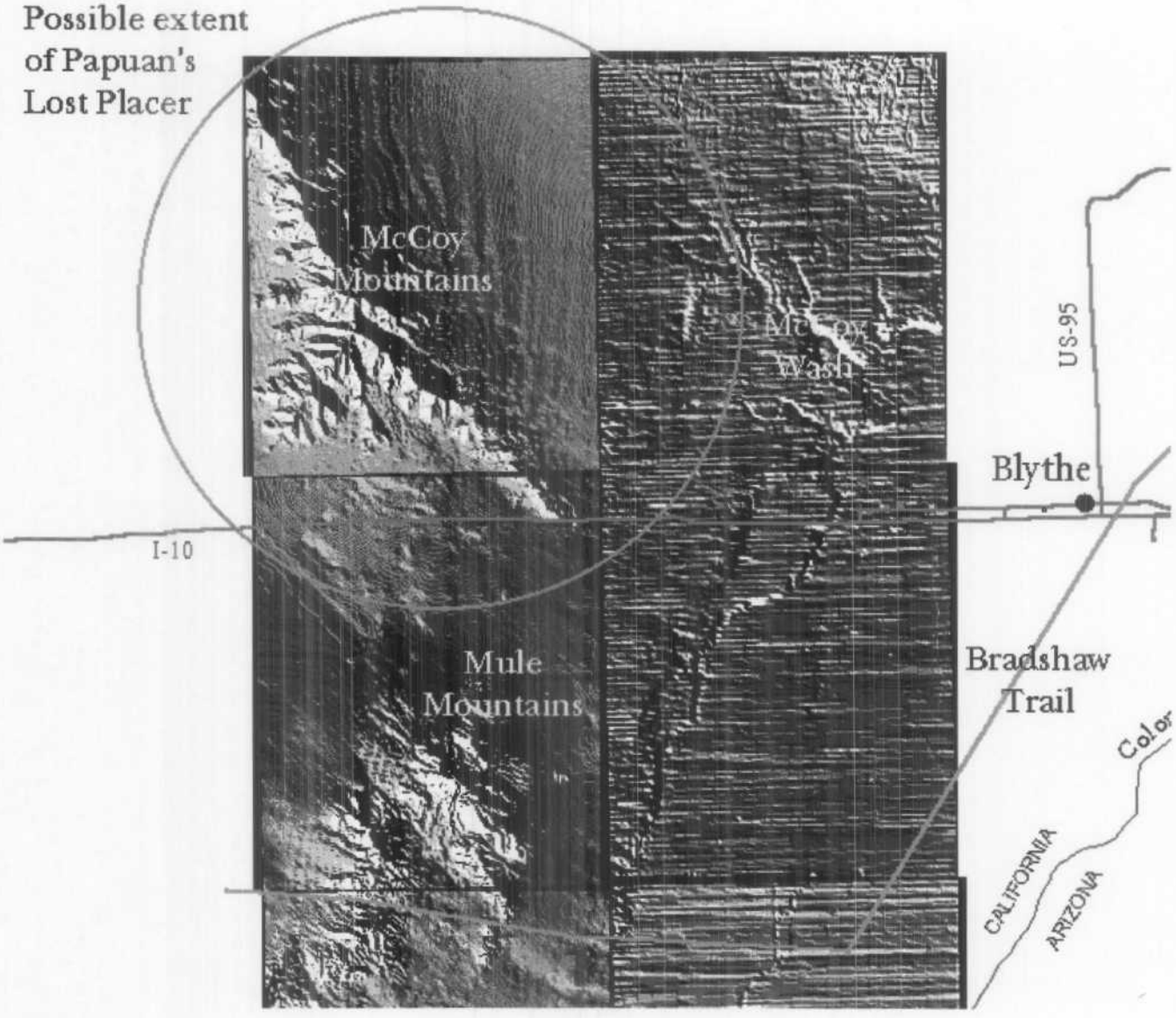
After anywhere from ten to forty miles inland, he is said to have found gold in a foothill canyon. He took just a sack of nuggets, enough to transport him and his ore back to his home country, then covering the site. Before leaving, he confided the location of his mine to another countryman, who, after successfully locating it and taking his share, invited his friend to help himself. This third man, Tom Dumans, was unable to find the shaft covering, which was fashioned from boat timbers, with one log fastened with a thick, brass ring.

The tale thickens when, almost forty years later, a family traversing the desert from San Bernardino to Ehrenberg made camp along the Bradshaw Route. After establishing an evening-place, the two children, who played nearby before supper, declared to the father that they had found "a well with a ring in it". The man ignored this as fancy, never having heard of the lost mine story.

To his alarm three years later at a dinner party, two men had informed him of the tale after the father had demonstrated his children's imagination, case in point some fanciful brass -ring well while camping along a desert road.

The father and child were unable to retrace their steps to the Lost French Bull-Ring Mine. It is perhaps located in the Black Hills, Palo Verde or Mule Mountains.

Papuan's Lost Placer



This colorful story takes place just north of the Bradshaw Trail, before it hits Arizona.

Bill McCoy was both a wise prospector and a shrewd businessman. At Ehrenberg, across the Colorado River from modern-day Blythe, he owned a very successful store; travelers and desert residents insisted on trading there. His outfit was so successful that he had allowed himself much time to prospect the neighboring mountain ranges for gold. The McCoy Mountains were named after him; it is estimated that his claim yielded $75,000-worth of gold.

One of his customers, Papuan, a Papago Indian man who moved into the

One of his customers, Papuan, a Papago Indian man who moved into the area after troubles with the Apache, seemed to never lack in the yellow metal. It is said that his wife (a banished Mojave) had rewarded Papuan for marrying her by giving up her secret -- a large gold strike in the McCoys. McCoy himself tried everything to trick the Indians into yielding the location, but the two never revealed it.

Papuan had adopted a Mojave boy named Chinkinnow. Eventually, he was allowed to mine the gold find with his parents. After Papuan's death years later, the retired widow was befriended and wooed by a German prospector named Hartmann. His intention was as devious as McCoy's, but the method he applied was much more subtle. After much work, Hartmann failed to impress the old woman. But he did discover that Chinkinnow was still actively mining the unknown site. The German then tried to get into the good graces of Papuan's son, but to no avail.

Chinkinnow perhaps has the last laugh -- every time he was followed towards the McCoy Mountains, he disappeared, losing his trackers. Is it possible that he doubled back and made toward the Big Maria Mountains to his father's mine? Other accounts place Papuan's find in the Castle Dome Mountains across the river in Arizona.

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