

River of Gold or Touch of Fever?

by

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A 1930s prospector said a Mojave peak hid waterborne ore. Some are chasing his dream.

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KOKOWEEF PEAK, Calif. — The earthen ridge rises 6,038 feet from scrub brush and sand, an unspectacular summit were it not for the legend: a river underneath, overflowing with gold.

At least since the 1930s, leather-skinned prospectors have chased the tale to a mining shantytown at the base of the peak, on the edge of Mojave National Preserve, where the cheeriest structure is a pink shed that bears the warning "Keep Out."

Today a hard-bitten crew of treasure hunters huddles in plywood homes, enduring icy winters and roasting summers. Their big-city neighbor is an apt one: Las Vegas, about 75 miles away, which also welcomes dreamers happy to risk savings and sanity.

Kokoweef -- a name believed to stem from Southern Paiute words meaning "gopher snake canyon" -- lures its own kind of gamblers, though these days barely enough for a hand of seven-card stud: a military surplus merchant, a cocktail waitress, a retired construction manager and a few others.

Their quest, however, comes with this caveat: It consumed Earl Dorr, the brusque miner who fathered the legend -- and who may have concocted it for his own nefarious ends.

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The bleak sands of the Mojave conceal a bounty of treasure. Native tribes pocketed agate and turquoise long before Nevada's silver rush in the 1860s, which sent fortune-hungry miners scrambling into the Providence, Mescal and Clark ranges.

Tent cities sprouted in the sand. Some matured to communities of shelters cobbled from rocks and juniper poles -- with most towns building the requisite general store and saloon and sometimes a brothel.

Ivanpah, among the largest on the California-Nevada border, boomed to several hundred residents, but it and most smaller outposts went bust when the silver, copper or tin markets crashed.

The mining rush slowed to a trickle by the 1930s. Into this desolate landscape wandered Dorr, a prospector with blue eyes, a shoulder-holstered gun and "immaculate table manners," said his nephew Ray Dorr, 78, a retired contractor in Canon City, Colo., who is writing a book about Kokoweef.

Earl Dorr, born in the 1880s to wealthy Colorado cattle ranchers, traveled the Southwest in search of a mine that would make him rich. He would visit Ray's father in Pasadena, striding to the door in a Stetson hat with a sack of penny candy for the kids, whom he entranced with tall tales.

Along the way, Dorr either "discovered the richest gold deposit in the United States ... or he was the most imaginative liar in the state of California" his nephew wrote in a 1967 article for Argosy magazine.

Dorr told The Times in 1936 that he came across Kokoweef when he checked into a Death Valley tale that three men who stumbled upon the golden river had deposited \$57,000 in a Needles, Calif., bank.

Dorr told his nephew a different version: that he had befriended three Indian brothers who had discovered a river thick with ore in a Kokoweef cavern. After one brother plummeted to his death in the cavern, the other two refused to return to the mountain and told Dorr the tale.

The mountain, near the Ivanpah range, has three sizable, nearly vertical caves with limestone chambers: Kokoweef, Crystal and Quien Sabe -- Spanish for "who knows." In 1934, Dorr produced a sworn statement that said he and an engineer, whom he identified only as Mr. Morton, descended several thousand feet into chambers he called "one of the marvels of the world."

On the floor of a half-mile-deep canyon, Dorr said, he came across a river, about 300 feet wide that rose and fell as if it were breathing. The water receded to reveal black sand. Dorr said he panned it and found gold. Lots of it.

Dorr told The Times that upon returning to the surface, he dynamited the cavern's entrance to keep others from plundering his bounty while he filed a mining claim.

Within the next decade or so, cave explorers from Pasadena, curious about the tale, shimmied into a cavern and found "D-O-R-R" seared onto a wall.

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Dorr's statement was published in the California Mining Journal in 1940, and it has been the source of endless speculation ever since. Why would he write up such a strike when he went to such lengths to hide it? Yet, if he were telling the truth, weren't untold riches just waiting to be rediscovered?

Larry Hahn opts for the latter.

In the 1980s, Hahn, who owns a military surplus store in Las Vegas, became the latest in a series of folks to entrance investors with Kokoweef. He is a partner in Explorations Inc., which has leased land from a company that owns 85 acres near the mountain and has mineral rights to 300 more and would share profits from any cache discovered.

Hahn, 68, said he had coaxed 300 to 500 investors to chip in for drilling, blasting and zapping the mountainside with electric current to pinpoint where to drill.

His newsletters promise gold like a televangelist promises salvation: "It only takes that one lucky hole that is connected to the big void to show us the way," one newsletter reads.

On a recent afternoon at base camp, Hahn said the search seemed as feasible as dredging for gold doubloons. "But in this day and age, we don't have buried treasure; all of it's been found. This is the last frontier," he said.

Only the most devout trundle up Zinc Mine Road, a tire-busting path that zigzags past boulders and Joshua trees about a mile from where long-extinct coelurosaurs imprinted what might be the state's only dinosaur tracks. The occasional hand-lettered sign reassures that the path peters out at "Kokoweef" -- a graveyard of sagging buildings and rusting mining equipment.

At the plywood-and-pallet home that he built, one wall plastered with his great-grandfather's claim certificates for a gold mine, Randy Stenberg, 59, a retired construction manager, tends to his dreams.

His wife, Bernice, 50, a cocktail waitress at the MGM Grand casino in Las Vegas, had dismissed Larry Hahn as a huckster who had blinded her husband with a fable. But nearly 15 years ago, the Stenbergs descended from their 13th-floor condo near the Las Vegas Country Club for a tour of a tunnel that miners had chiseled.

Hahn's pitch was simple: "If you hit it, you're talking about the biggest thing that ever happened."

The couple threw in about \$1,000, inspecting their investment on weekends and scraping rock and debris from the mine. It wasn't until four or so years ago that they settled at base camp, where electricity churns from solar panels and, for about two hours a day, a generator.

Residents fetch water from a pool that seeps from rocks in the Mescal range. One neighbor, a retired factory worker in her 70s, plans to spend the rest of her days staring at the spindly Joshua trees that hem in the hodgepodge of structures.

Randy Stenberg passes time slogging through one 1,200-foot tunnel into Kokoweef Peak and gazing at the zinc mine's ballroom ceilings and relics of miners past, such as a leather jacket and a V8 juice can ossified in dust.

"Gambling's for fools," he said recently from a frontyard whose sole decoration was a pink flamingo. "I don't consider this gambling -- looking for something that's possibly there. You'd go down in history with it."

The miners under Hahn's direction long ago abandoned the sometimes dodgy work of blasting Kokoweef with dynamite. They instead poke at the mountain with more inventive tools, including microphones that help measure sound from small explosions to see if it pings off ore.

The latest novelty is a drill. It is as tall as a two-story home and topped with a skull-and-crossbones pirate flag. Several miles from base camp, the machine labors six to eight hours a day, burrowing deep into the dirt. The rationale: When the drill hits nothing, it will have found the cavern, or the path to it.

Geologists scoff at the legend, saying Kokoweef Peak could never harbor such a deep cave or a raging underground river. The desert is too dry. The amount of gold said to be packed into the riverbed -- at least 50 tons, by Dorr's estimate -- is too great. Not even Gold Rush miners in the Sierra Nevada foothills unearthed such a cache.

Paleontologists working with the San Bernardino County Museum dug at Kokoweef Peak in the 1970s, recovering more than 200,000 animal remains, including fish bones. Birds had carried the fish from the Colorado River, scientists determined, but some miners took them as evidence that Dorr's golden river -- and its mother lode -- existed.

"If it would have been there, this guy would have mined it all and be rich as can be," said Ted Weasma, a Mojave National Preserve geologist.

Dorr's nephew and at least one prospector who has lived at Kokoweef are convinced that Dorr pulled a bait-and-switch on his fellow miners -- signing the sworn statement to attract investors without giving up the gold's location or even guaranteeing that he had found it.

The prospector may not have shimmied through a small hole near Kokoweef's Crystal Cave but elsewhere in the Mojave, said Ralph Lewis, 54, an electrical apprentice who has distanced himself from Hahn's operation and is writing a book about the legend.

As evidence of such a subterfuge, both men point to a mining shack Dorr built, about 8 feet wide with a double bunk -- not in the Ivanpah Mountains, but in the nearby Mescal range. Lewis, who lived in Kokoweef off and on for a quarter-century, is convinced that this is the so-called Dorr Peak, depicted on rudimentary maps as providing a second path to the underground river.

Dorr's lifelong search for another route to his treasure gnawed at him, especially after the legend piqued a mining company's interest in the 1930s. Its workers discovered zinc and gave up on the gold. Dorr claimed that the zinc mining had destroyed routes to his horde.

"I got the wrong class of men, all talk -- the class we old desert prospectors call drugstore miners. It was too big for them -- too big a thing," Dorr told author Howard D. Clark after the firm ditched its plans to find gold.

"I stuck as long as I could, until I was eating cooked watercress, chipmunk soup and sagebrush tea. I starved out and had a light stroke, which put me on my back for a whole year," he said.

After deserting the shack in the Mescals, he worked as a shipyard welder, then as a watchman at an Adelanto tungsten mine. The prospector died in the 1950s, his pan empty.

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Treasure map?

Miners have flocked to Kokoweef Peak, a remote 6,038-foot mountain in the Mojave Desert, since at least the 1930's, when a man named Earl Dorr produced a sworn statement that he had discovered gold in a river underneath it.

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Source: "Adventure Is Underground" by William R. Halliday