

Miners on a mission

Mountain legend is their obsession

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By Gary Polakovic The Press-Enterprise
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MOUNTAIN PASS, Calif.

On a dreary stretch of Interstate 15, carloads of gamblers flush with hope race to Las Vegas to strike it rich, ignoring the weathered sign on stilts pointing to distant **Kokoweef** Peak where the true riches lie hidden.

A rutted road leaves the highway and heads into the Mojave Desert wilderness where legend holds the Matterhorn-shaped mountain contains a colossal cavern that harbors a river of gold.

Heard of the Comstock Lode? Chump change. Black Hills gold fields? Peanuts. Pikes Peak? A bust.

Riches beyond comprehension wait for the taking at **Kokoweef**. Enough gold to fill rail cars, or buy a casino, or even Las Vegas. Forget digging and scraping. Gold litters the black, sandy banks of the underground river, or so the story goes.

Incredible as the story sounds, **Kokoweef's** legendary wealth is as irresistible as the tales of El Dorado were to Spanish explorers.

The man who said he discovered the river in 1927 lost the secret passage, spent his life trying to find it and died. Since then, an assortment of dreamers and misfits have continued the search. Today, Nevada-based Crystal Cave Mining Co. drills and blasts the mountain.

Never mind that miners have unearthed but fossils, deadly gases and a few minuscule flecks of gold after nearly 70 years. Never mind that seekers have sacrificed their credibility for believing such a tale. Some spent their savings. Others paid with their lives. Conviction counts more than results in this quest.

The true believers are undaunted, however, confident they will mock the mockers once they discover the bonanza. After years of blind alleys, they say vindication is near as they close in on the elusive cavern entrance, gateway to the river of gold. Beyond skepticism

It's high noon at the **Kokoweef** Caverns base camp, a shanty town of faded trailer homes, cactus and cannibalized truck parts. The peak towers overhead. Red and gray tailings spill from its slope, the rubble from six tunnels drilled up to a quarter-mile inside.

Camp is quiet after a weekend of activity and the treasure hunters cool off inside a cabin. A knobby stalagmite fragment from a **Kokoweef** cave rests on the floor, two metaphysical paperbacks are on the table. Seated next to them is John Rathburn, a true believer.

Rathburn, 62, has spent 30 years hiking the Mescal Mountains searching for the golden river. He has spent all his money, lived in a cave for five years and says he will die before he quits. In a past life, he says he was a mean Indian, but for now he lives in an RV at Whiskey Pete's hotel and casino, about 15 miles east at the state line with Nevada.

Rathburn is intense and his searing blue eyes reflect little patience with doubters. "How do I know? Because I know that I know that I know that I know that in my heart it's there," he says, rocking forward with each affirmation and waving his index finger. "I have seen it in my dreams and in my mind."

Dreams are the booster shots that propel the **Kokoweef** operation beyond skepticism. Conversation in the cabin meanders, but never strays far from Earl P. Dorr, the original dreamer and the only person who claims to have seen the river of gold.

Dorr heard about **Kokoweef** from a pair of Indians at his father's cattle ranch in Colorado.

Legend has it **Kokoweef** means hollow mountain, or cave of dripping water, or water in the mountain or something like that. The details have grown fuzzy since Dorr's time and searchers do not fret over particulars.

Dorr spent four days in a cavern 3,000 feet tall - 10 times larger than Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico - and walked eight miles along a subterranean river, filling his pockets with 10 pounds of sand laden with gold. His recollections are contained in a 1934 affidavit.

But when he reached the surface, two other prospectors were waiting, so Dorr blasted the cavern entrance shut, entombing the men. Or not. Who knows? Years later, three others died at **Kokoweef**, one in a helicopter crash and two stricken by fumes in a cavern.

Dorr spent the rest of his life searching for the cavern entrance before he died in 1957. Dorr said he made his discovery in 1927, a relative said it was in 1931.

Kokoweef's owners acknowledge they know little about Dorr, but details do not get in the way of the quest.

Outside the cabin, Frank Heilig repairs a busted truck as sweat beads beneath the brim of his camouflage hat. He knows the river of gold sounds fanciful, but he searches anyway, chiseling and hauling rock as a volunteer for the Crystal Cave Mining Co.

He heard about the mine at a Soldier of Fortune convention in Las Vegas last year. Heilig, 43, wears military-style clothing, drives a green camouflage-paint truck, feels

awkward in society and says he specializes in "security." These days, though, he dreams of gold.

"It's here, we just have to find it," said Heilig, fixing his gaze on the mountain. "I had a dream one time I was under the ground sleeping alongside a river running with gold. I'd like to be down there now because if I was I'd be there quite a while and they'd be shipping food down to me."

Major world attraction

Business is brisk at Hahn's Military Surplus store in North Las Vegas and owner Larry Hahn is busy peddling boots, knives and tales of **Kokoweef** gold. He runs the Crystal Cave Mining Co. from his store, the outfit that has been probing for the secret passage for 17 years.

Hahn says he has spent roughly \$1 million on the exploration, much of it from investors. He says the gold in the river may be worth \$158 billion, maybe \$1 trillion. So far, about 350 investors have chipped in, mostly ordinary people from across the West.

Hahn has big plans for **Kokoweef**. Tourists will flock to see the river of gold. He will turn the dusty base camp into a resort hotel. Bullet trains will whisk people to the mine. A rough sketch of a movie script is in the works. He plans to buy Whiskey Pete's.

"This will be a major world attraction. There will be nothing bigger than **Kokoweef**, I guarantee it," said Hahn, who formerly worked as a maitre d' for 18 years on the Vegas strip. "Most people think too small in life. That's their main problem."

But first Hahn must find the river and that's no easy task. Some **Kokoweef** faithful say it stretches from Canada to the Gulf of California, others say it runs from near Salt Lake City to the Pacific, or it sneaks under the Rocky Mountains from Texas. But they all agree the main branch flows under **Kokoweef** Peak, exactly where Dorr said he saw it.

Bill Herkert, 78, of Barstow knows it is there. He saw it in a boyhood vision as he sat under a tree in New Jersey nursing a licking he got from his dad. After World War II, Herkert opened a Yermo truck stop and acquired the **Kokoweef** mine from a man who got it from a member of Butch Cassidy's Hole-in-the-Wall gang, who got it from a preacher's son, who heard about it from his father, who read Dorr's affidavit. Herkert is certain that recent seismic tests at **Kokoweef** will reveal the cavern that leads to the river within six months.

"I've spent a lifetime chasing this adventure and we're getting so close," Herkert said.

Other miners chuckle when they hear the legend of **Kokoweef**, which is widely recited across the desert vastness.

"P. T. Barnum said there was a sucker born every minute and that's what's kept it going," said Bill Mann, owner of the Brubaker-Mann Co., a decorative rock mine near

Barstow. "Someone would come in, work awhile, leave and someone else would come in. I think they're mining the investors."

"Miners are perennial optimists. We're all searching for the bonanza, just a few more feet in the tunnel and you're going to hit pure gold," Mann said.

But shouts of Eureka! may never reverberate from **Kokoweef** Peak. The golden river that captivated people's imagination for so many years probably does not exist, scientists say.

"The idea of an underground river is for the most part something of a myth," said Stephen W. Wheatcraft, hydrogeologist at the University of Nevada, Reno. "That definitely is not true. You just don't get underground rivers in the Great Basin."

Desert heat sucks rain from the ground nearly as fast as it falls, giving the terrain its parched and puckered appearance. Some water soaks deep into the ground, where sand and gravel hold it like a sponge. Drippings sometimes form pools or rivulets in cavern bottoms, but not enough to form a 300-foot-wide, trans-continental river, Wheatcraft said.

No matter. Statements like that ricochet off the **Kokoweef** miners. Hahn says he knows Dorr told the truth about the river of gold because desert downpours must feed underground rivers. How else could Dorr have walked along the river of gold?

"I could care less about what anybody thinks," Hahn said. "The true believer believes. I'm going to have the last laugh."

Art: PHOTOS;MAP

Caption: David Bauman

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1.The **Kokoweef** base camp, a shanty town partially made up of wooden structures moved from Hoover Dam site in mid-1930s. The base camp at **Kokoweef** Caverns, in the San Bernardino County desert near the Nevada border, circa 1942.

2.True believers like Jim Serill are confident that, after years of blind alleys, they are closing in on the elusive **Kokoweef** cavern entrance, gateway to the river of gold.

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