

Not yet 'Eureka!' // Miners search for a legendary cavern said to be filled with gold // lifestyle

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{SOURCE:+}

A river of gold runs beneath the California desert.

Billions of dollars in glittering flakes and nuggets lie waiting for anyone who can find the secret passage leading to an underground river a mile beneath the surface. That is, if you believe the stories of an old miner named Earl P. Dorr and what has become the legend of **Kokoweef** Peak.

Plenty of people do believe. Some are longtime prospectors. But there are also scientists, engineers, mechanics, actors, business owners, emergency workers and more.

Larry Hahn, who runs a large surplus store in Las Vegas, Nev., has been pursuing the legend for more than a quarter century. He heads up Explorations Inc., a Las Vegas company that he says has more than 1,000 investors.

Some have put thousands of dollars "down the hole," as Hahn puts it. Some are only in for a few bucks.

All have put their faith, to some degree, in an affidavit Dorr filed in 1934 detailing his trip 2,000 feet underground to a cavern that dropped another 3,000 feet into the Earth. At the bottom of this cavern, which Dorr said went on for miles, ran a river. Its banks were blanketed with black sand infused with gold.

Dorr reportedly blasted his passage shut shortly after discovering the gold. He couldn't get claim to the cave he used as an entrance and wanted to protect his discovery, the story goes. He reportedly spent the rest of his life seeking investors to back him in finding different access to the subterranean river.

Since then, a regular succession of treasure seekers has attempted to find Dorr's original route. People say **Kokoweef** Peak - which rises just south of the Mescal Mountain Range, across a valley dotted with creosote and split grass near the California/Nevada state line - is where Dorr found his original passage. It has been shot full of exploratory tunnels over the years.

Hahn first came here in 1977, after a customer at his Las Vegas store told him about the gold legend. In 1984, he formed his first mining company, leasing **Kokoweef**

Peak from the family that has owned it since 1935. It was to be a short-term operation.

"I said, 'We're only looking at this for five years,'" Hahn recalls. By then, he was sure they would be pulling up buckets of gold.

Instead, they were still looking at dirt.

Sixteen years later, the gold remains elusive. The fever, however, seems as strong as ever.

About 100 investors, decked out in more-than-casual desert-cool clothing, attended a recent annual meeting at the mine. Filling their plates at a picnic-style buffet that included chili, hamburger casserole and potato salad, the treasure seekers mingled in mining camp's comfortably air-conditioned wood-framed meeting hall. They shared their stories about Dorr - some conspiratorial, many of them contradictory - and ideas about the best way to find the gold.

Some of the proposals were conventional, others more imaginative. One man was busily promoting his "Star Trek"-based theories and discussing highly classified government research on time travel.

The prognosticators ranged from Sam Boyer, 89, a nuclear physical chemist who worked for NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, to Tanner Wallace, 15, great-grandson of Herman Severe Wallace, the man who established Crystal Cave Mining Co. in 1934. All were united by a common belief that something - whether gold, an underground river or a spectacular cavern - is beneath this bleak landscape. Many feel the discovery of one or all of those possibilities is just around the corner.

UNDETERRED `DREAMWEAVER'

Hahn has a more tempered approach. The mountain has taught him patience. It wasn't an easy lesson to learn, especially when he thought he and his crew were on the right track back in the late 1980s.

"We drove a tunnel along a major fault," Hahn says, where there were openings from 6 inches to 2 feet wide. "It looked extremely promising. {hellip} Well, it pinched off." But Hahn - some of his investors call him the "Dreamweaver" - remained undeterred. Each time he hit a roadblock, he came up with a new plan. In recent years, the company has been doing geographic mapping, using electronic resistance to peer into the makeup of the landscape beneath the valley at the foot of **Kokoweef** Peak. Hahn and others believe the mythical cavern lies somewhere beneath the valley. In the past two decades, Hahn estimates the company has poured more than \$2 million into the operation. Investors volunteer their time to do much of the work, which is not without its dangers. Two men with Hahn's company have died in mining-related accidents.

At the recent annual meeting, Hahn reported spending \$114,000 for the previous year. Much of that went to the purchase of drilling equipment. Hahn seems to place his greatest hope in drilling, but there are plans to begin tunneling again, an approach that had been largely abandoned in recent years.

Derek Conrad, 47, of Riverside, was pleased to hear that.

Conrad has plumbed the dream of gold deeper than just about anyone. He's been more than 250 feet deep into **Kokoweef** Peak, wiggling his way through 18-inch openings, descending 60-foot vertical walls, feeling that just around the corner, the passage would open up and he would be treading in Earl Dorr's footsteps.

"I'm a tunnel rat," Conrad says. "My job was to go where most of the normal people didn't want to go"

He was roped into the **Kokoweef** legend by a friend in 1988. For the next six months, he spent every weekend advancing the tunnel leading down from Crystal Cave. He dropped back to every other weekend for the next year and a half after that. Now, with no active tunneling going on, he visits the site a couple of times a year.

A manufacturing engineer, Conrad figures he's invested about \$1,600 in the operation.

"Its not like they ask for money every month," Conrad says. "I send \$50 here and \$50 there."

He doesn't regret his investment. He's convinced the underground cavern is down there. Much of that certainty is from spending time in the mountain's subterranean passageways.

"There was a lot of what you call breathing," he says of the mountain's caverns. Wind would be moving in or out of the mountain depending upon the time of day and the time of year. "That usually has something to do with a fairly decent-sized cavern system," he says.

THEY HAVE FAITH

Conrad admits that belief is the key.

"That's all it is," he says. "It's a matter of faith."

Some have as much faith in Hahn as they do in Dorr's tale.

"He has a presence and charisma that holds this thing together," says Bob Guillum, 49, of Temecula. "He believes it so strongly. I don't think it could have carried on this way without Larry."

Guillum, who works as a design engineer for a telecommunications company, says he looks at his involvement in the mine as half investment, half entertainment.

"I buy a lottery ticket every once in awhile, but I'm not a gambler," says Guillum, who figures he's invested about \$900 at **Kokoweef**. "I know there are people who have thrown their money away on crazier things. . . .I'm not thinking this is going to be my retirement."

When he first invested five years ago, his attitude was different.

"I had the idea, `Gosh, it's all going to hit in a couple of years,'" he says. "But you learn not to get too excited. You're in it for the long haul."

Just how long that might be? It depends on whom you ask.

Jeff Renel, 34, of Las Vegas, has watched the history of the enterprise. His father, Richard, was one of Hahn's early investors.

"Every year, everybody gets excited about something," Renel said at the annual meeting. "You always hope, but it's always the same story."

Despite that, he said, "I believe it's there."

And that's all Hahn needs to continue the quest. As long as there are dreamers whose eyes are drawn to the glint of gold, he will have investors. He's happy to welcome them.

"We'll take anyone until we find it," Hahn said of the treasure. "After that, I wouldn't take my own grandmother."

Art: PHOTOS; MAP

Caption: WILLIAM WILSON LEWIS III/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE / (1) Jeff Renel, 34, of Las Vegas, perches himself on a narrow rail gauge used for off-loading rock at **Kokoweef** Peak. (2) Exploratory mines run throughout Koloweef Peak because it is where legend has placed the entrance to passage that Earl P. Dorr once used to find a monumental "river of gold." Dorr is said to have blasted the opening shut to conceal his discovery. (3) Sam Boyer, 89, used to be a nuclear chemist for the Jet Propulsion Lab, but like many others found the legend of gold deep inside Koloweef Peak to be an unbeatable lure. (4) Larry Hahn speaks to investors during an annual stockholders meeting. Hahn first heard about the lost gold in 1977, and formed his own mining expedition in 1984.

Zone: ALL ZONES

Edition:

Section: YOUR LIFE

Page#: E01