

The Legend of the Kokoweef

By Bob Ausmus

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Tales of lost mines or buried treasure commonly create a fascination. And when a story such as the "Kokoweef River of Gold" has persisted for more than 60 years, neither proven nor disproven, it has certainly attained the status of a legend.

The saga of Kokoweef, as it has evolved during those six decades, has become virtually as complex as the labyrinth said to be contained within the mountain itself. Numerous people through the years have been associated with attempts to locate the fabled riches, and elements ordinarily found only in mystery novels are involved. Missing persons, Indian superstitions, bearded and heavily armed prospectors guarding against claim jumpers, courtroom drama, and death itself have all become a part of the Kokoweef legend.

Nearly a century ago, three Paiute Indian brothers were said to have first discovered the caverns and followed them down to the fabulously rich sands of an underground river. George, Oliver, and Buck Peysert, as the story goes, then returned with lumber for constructing a sluice box, and within six weeks produced \$57,000 worth of gold from their placer mining operation. But George met with a fatal accident in the river, Buck and Oliver were unable to recover his body, and the giant cavern became his tomb.

It is said that the surviving brothers never returned for more gold, either because they were forbidden by tribal law from reentering a sacred burial spot, or were merely postponing a return trip to prevent greedy white men from following them to their hidden source of riches. Years later, however, they revealed their secret to a good friend, a white man named Earl M. Dorr, whose father owned a ranch in Colorado where they were employed. And in 1934 Dorr not only told the Peysert brothers' story, but embellished it with an amazing tale of his own fantastic exploits in the depths of Kokoweef, which had occurred some seven years before he decided to make his story public. The details were given in a lengthy affidavit dated November 16, 1934, sworn to by Dorr, and later published in the California Mining Journal. Thus began the Kokoweef legend, as we know it today.

Rising more than 6,000 feet above sea level in the Ivanpah Range, Kokoweef Mountain has appeared on some maps as Ressler Peak, named for early-day

300.4 prospector L. P. "Pete" Ressler. The highly-mineralized area in and near the Ivanpah Mountains has supported much mining activity during the past hundred years. Just after the turn of the century Standard Mines Company shipped several thousand tons of copper ore, containing gold and silver, to Salt Lake City smelters, with shipment made via mule team to the railroad at Cima. Standard's mining camp, near the copper deposit, housed a hundred men and, in the words of Robert Geer of Las Vegas, a long-time mining man in the area, the camp even included a "house of rest and relaxation for the unwed miner."

Shortly after Dorr told the story of Kokoweef in his affidavit, three partners formed the Crystal Cave Mining Company to search for the gold. But it was with some difficulty that Steve Kelly, William Marker, and Herman Wallace were able to negotiate a lease with Ressler, whose claims still covered much of the mountain bearing his name.

Dorr had declared that he and a civil engineer named Morton descended 2,000 feet from the mouth of the cave. At that point, his affidavit indicates they discovered a canyon from 3,000 to 3,500 feet deeper, making a total depth of 5,400 feet from the cave entrance.

"We found the caves divided into many caverns," his declaration states, "all filled and embellished with stalactites and stalagmites. One, the largest, is 27 feet in diameter and hangs 1,510 feet into a 3,000 foot canyon, perpetually washed by water flowing down over it and falling into dark canyon depths."

He described a flowing river at the bottom of the canyon "which rises and falls with tidal regularity," and swore that they spent four days following ledges along the canyon walls for a distance of eight miles. With their pockets filled with rich gold-bearing sand, just as described by the Peysert brothers, they were returning to the surface when Morton became ill. Two prospectors camped nearby helped get him down to the car at the foot of the mountain, and Dorr hauled him to town for medical attention.

Realizing that the two men who helped him had seen the rich sand, Dorr rushed back and dynamited the entrance to the cavern, sealing it at its narrowest point to protect his treasure. While he was in the cavern he believed he had seen daylight through a second opening, and he counted on later using this entrance, which was unknown to anyone else. But

numerous fissures and crevices existed, most of them filled with rocks, and his 30-year search for the second entrance was a failure.

The two prospectors who helped him carry Morton down the mountain were never seen again. This led to speculation that they may have been inside the cavern searching for the gold when Dorr sealed it shut with dynamite, possibly entombing them forever, along with Kokoweef's first victim, George Peysert.

Kelly, Marker, and Wallace, attempting to reach the underground river canyon by tunneling into the base of the mountain, instead ran into a zinc deposit said to assay 32 percent, with eight to ten ounces of silver per ton. Carloads of zinc ore, a strategic metal needed in World War II, were shipped from the Kokoweef deposit for processing at Picher, Oklahoma. Steve Kelly acknowledged that Kokoweef had paid off for them in zinc, if not in gold!

Through the years following World War II, the phantom Kokoweef riches continued to intrigue many people, and countless gold-seekers explored the region. During the early Sixties, interest in Kokoweef increased even more when news stories reported claim jumpers and a near shoot-out on the mountain, later followed by a lengthy court battle.

Prospector Charles O. Thompson, a former high school track star at Corona, California, then a resident of Llano, sought a court injunction to prevent others from doing exploratory work with a drill rig. He charged that their activities were an infringement on claims owned by him and his partners, as well as other properties he had leased from Crystal Cave Mining Company.

The case, entered as No. 111534 in Department I of the San Bernardino County Superior Court, was heard by Judge Archie D. Mitchell, and pitted Thompson against a group headed by the late Emmett J. Culligan, developer of the soft-water process that bears his name. Culligan's group, including his close associate, James L. Hoffman, later worked for two years in that part of the East Mojave, often drilling miles from Kokoweef itself, in an effort to establish the course of the underground river. On the Robert Cowell property at Cima, more than 12 miles from Kokoweef, their drill punched a "blow-hole," where the current of air coming from it indicates that another opening exists.

Deciding that the water-well rig wasn't going deep enough, Culligan brought in an oil-well rig from Long

300.4 Beach, but still had no success in locating the river. He then made an effort to obtain, from the U.S. Army, a chemical he referred to as "red smoke," hoping to force it down the Cima "blow-hole" and then fly around with a helicopter to locate other openings. But his plan fell by the wayside when he couldn't get the cooperation of military authorities.

Culligan always insisted that his interest was in the Kokoweef water, not in the gold, and he outlined an ambitious plan to dam the river, thereby forcing the water to the surface to create flowing springs in the desert. He was known to have held a life-long interest in both water chemistry and underground rivers. His business had been sold long before, and he was a man of advanced years, walking with a cane, when he began his Kokoweef explorations, a project in which he eventually invested some \$75,000.

Meanwhile, Thompson had encountered serious tax problems. G. Leon Gregory, San Bernardino County tax collector, had filed a lien against all his personal and real property in both San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties (which included his home at Llano), on the basis that Thompson owed more than \$5,000 in back taxes on several thousand acres of mining claims on the federal lands of Kokoweef. Thompson, who believed that the taxing of non-producing mining claims was both illegal and unfair, led a protest demonstration against the practice. Newspaper stories in 1967 included photos of the Thompson group picketing the Hall of Records, and were responsible for bringing renewed interest in the Kokoweef legend.

During the mid-Sixties, for a period of several weeks, Cima's Postmaster received numerous inquiries by mail from people all over the country who wanted information about a well at Cima with a water level that rose and fell with the tides. This was rather astonishing, considering the fact that there had never been any water at Cima except by hauling. Even the railroad had hauled water for more than 60 years, for domestic use by its employees as well as for the steam locomotives that were in use prior to 1947. Cima residents would have been overjoyed to have a well of any kind, even one that wasn't subject to tidal fluctuations! The source of the ridiculous story was finally traced to SAGA MAGAZINE, apparently dreamed up by an imaginative writer as a spin-off on the legendary Kokoweef water.

Writer Ray Chesson, who visited Kokoweef several

times during the Sixties, usually came away with the feeling that his party, and all other strangers, were viewed with suspicion by claim holders. "We felt we were being eyed through 30-06 rifle scopes," was the way he expressed it. But as the decade ended, the warring factions at Kokoweef seemed to gradually fade away.

By 1972 a new group, calling itself the Concave Mining Company, was doing additional Kokoweef excavating. Dick Hernandez, president of Concave, made no effort to deny their objective. Quoted in the San Bernardino SUN-TELEGRAM in October, 1972, Hernandez said, "Our chief goal ... is to find the gold." To help defray their expenses, Concave conducted tours through the caverns at \$2.50 per person.

By this time, scientific interest was becoming aroused in a different kind of Kokoweef treasure when it was learned sediment in the caverns contained invaluable fossils. Paleontologist Bob Reynolds, curator with the San Bernardino County Museum specializing in Earth Sciences, has described the find as "possibly the most definitive deposit in the East Mojave."

"We've removed more than five tons of sediment from 45 feet below the trestle, 200 feet into the cave," Reynolds said, "and we are still in the process of identifying millions of bone fragments." Already identified, he said, are such animals as the brush ox, dire wolf, large and small camels, horses, marmots, bats, shrews, and birds. Reynolds praised Hernandez and his associates for their careful removal of the sediment to help preserve the fossils, which are believed to date back at least 10,000 years, and possibly to the Pleistocene times of the latest ice age.

Since the mid-Seventies new Kokoweef gold-seekers have taken up the never-ending search. Currently, and for the past ten years, a North Las Vegas businessman, Larry Hahn, has headed a group known as "Explorations, Inc. of Nevada." Hahn, who owns an army surplus store, has organized a loosely-knit group of volunteers who share expenses and spend weekends mucking out potential crevices or doing tunnel excavations. And although the belief that the gold really exists is what keeps them going, Hahn now says that Kokoweef's greater value may eventually be as a tourist attraction.

Kokoweef Mountain, for whatever values may be hidden there, has cost a number of other lives since its

first victims were supposedly entombed there, and these deaths have given the site a "jinx" reputation with some people. During the Fifties two men attempting to blast an opening in the bottom of a deep fissure died when they were overcome by fumes. Some years later, a helicopter pilot was killed in a Kokoweef accident, and two other men working in the caverns lost their lives when their light plane hit a Joshua tree while taking off from a makeshift airstrip at the foot of the mountain.

Does the Kokoweef "River of Gold" really exist? Earl Dorr, who died in 1957, insisted to the last that his story was true. In a 1967 ARGOSY MAGAZINE article a nephew, Ray Dorr, formerly employed as an engineer at the rare earth mine at Mountain Pass, declared that either the story is true, "or Uncle Earl ... was the most imaginative liar in the State of California." Another nephew, J. O. Dorr, Jr., whose family was homesteading in Fourth of July Canyon, in the New York Mountains, at the time Earl Dorr made his fabulous discovery, seems to go along with the story.

Disbelievers point to the fact that even experienced spelunkers would have needed a back-up team just for the purpose of carrying sufficient rope and other equipment to make such a descent. But Dorr, with the help of only one man, was able to carry instruments, equipment, and enough supplies for a four-day stay a mile down in the bowels of the earth. Afterward, they add, the only person who could have confirmed Dorr's story then seemed to conveniently drop out of the picture. Among the doubters was Harold Bailey, manager of the Molycorp Mine at Mountain Pass, who declared there is no gold. "It's just a story," he said.

"There are those who knew Dorr and doubt very much that he could have ever found his way out of such a cave," wrote Ray Chesson in a 1966 article. "It is said that even above ground he could get lost walking from Kokoweef to Cima ... for groceries."

But despite these negative opinions, the believers in the Kokoweef legend may actually outnumber the skeptics, mostly because it's human nature to want to believe a story of this kind. Qualified geologists have declared that such a cavern could exist, and have mentioned the fact that Kessler Springs, south of Kokoweef, is unaffected by local drought conditions, indicating it could be fed by an underground river such as the one described by Earl Dorr many years ago.

- 300.5 * * Crossroad. Turn left (east). Detour sign indicates left. El. 5,250 ft. (0.1).
- 300.6 * * "Y." Bear left to continue east on fainter road. El. 5,280 ft. (0.0+).
- 300.6+ * "Y." Bear left 100 feet after leaving the good road. The Trail is in small wash. El. 5,280 ft. (0.2).
- 300.8 * Working mine (Kokoweef Caverns) with trailer visible on hillside right ahead. The Trail bears right to go more southeast. El. 5,315 ft. (0.1).
- 300.9 * Continue ahead. Ignore wash going left ahead. El. 5,330 ft. (0.1).
- 301.0 * Continue ahead. Ignore road left. El. 5,355 ft. (0.1).
- 301.1 * * Wash branches. Bear right between Joshua trees. El. 5,380 ft. (0.1).
- 301.2 Ascend hill. El. 5,414 ft. (0.1).
- Clumps of hedgehog cactus on rock outcropping to left as you start up the hill.
- 301.3 * * "T." Go left (southeast) down hill. El. 5,455 ft. (0.4).
- Barrel cactus and the old man cactus (Opuntia erinacea erinacea) are seen in this area on the slopes.
- 301.7 * Continue ahead. Ignore road right going toward canyon. El. 5,385 ft. (0.2).
- 301.9 Building ruin with arch on right 20 feet off road. El. 5,380 ft. (0.1).
- 302.0 * * "Y." Bear left. Mine headframe on right 100 feet off road. El. 5,345 ft. (0.0+).
- 302.0+ * Continue ahead. Ignore road right. The Trail bears left toward east. El. 5,340 ft. (0.1).
- 302.1 * Continue ahead (east) up steep hill. Ignore road right. El. 5,335 ft. (0.0+).

Blackbush community with Yucca overstory. Bunch grasses in this area are the Indian ricegrass (Oryzopsis hymenoides) and desert needlegrass. Cactus are beavertail, hedgehog, and buckhorn cholla. Other shrubs include greenfire, green Mormon tea, and turpentine broom. Desert marigold (Baileya multiradiata) and Fremont phacelia (Phacelia fremontii) are two of the annuals that occur along the Trail in this area.