

TREASURE TRAILS of the OLD WEST

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OF KOKOWEEF 47

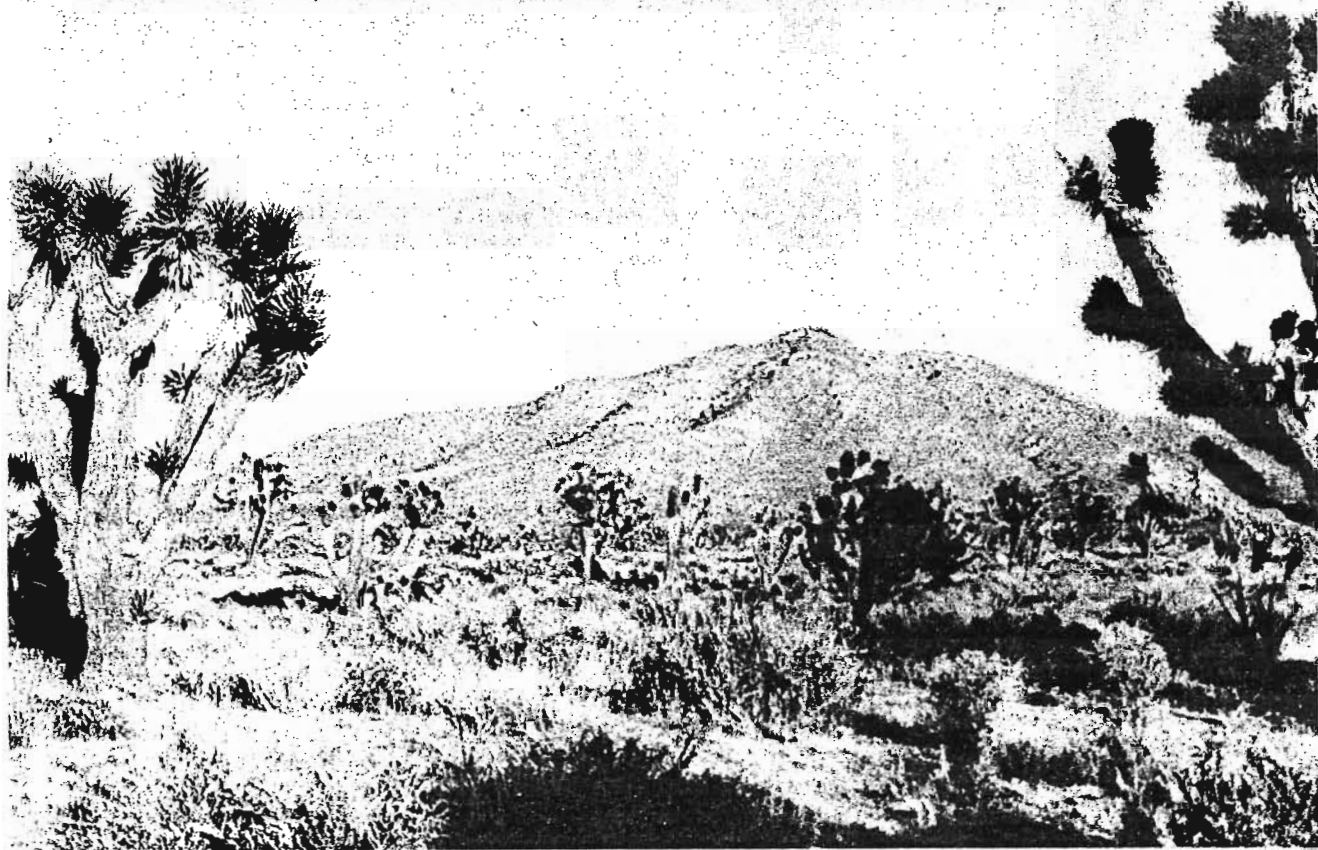


NON-FICTION

ALL STORIES

TRUE!

Cover Artist: EUGENE SHORTRIDGE



The western side of Kokoweef Mountain. The Carbonate King zinc mine is at the left of the top, opposite Dorr's entrance on the eastern slope. Kokoweef Cave is at the lower left. Kin Sabe Mine is at the right below branch of Joshua tree (peculiar to the Mojave Desert).

TREASURE CAVERN OF KOKOWEEF MOUNTAIN

Is there a wide, deep river, its banks rich with incredible placer values, flowing through a cave under the Mojave?

The big man hunched his heavy frame and bent his broad shoulders to scan the wet sand under his feet. The bright light from the miner's carbide lamp on his cap caught the yellow gleam of gold flakes, "coarse" gold and small nuggets worn smooth by the erosion of the stream that trickled in the bottom of the cavern. Here was the blackest of utter darkness not known on top of earth, for he was many hundreds of feet beneath the hot sands of the Mojave desert.

The miner filled a bag with the heavy "black sand" dotted with yellow sparkles. Then he helped his ail-

ing partner up through the labyrinths, the many tight passes, the devious crawlways, up the long torturous climb to sunshine again.

The miner was Earl P. Dorr whose troubles began almost as soon as the two men reached daylight. Other prospectors were there and reports are conflicting as to what happened. There was misunderstanding. Later, Dorr apparently wished to avoid the subject. But his secret was out. He had a sample of fantastically rich placer gold from the depths of the cavern, the only sample that has been seen.

It was not that someone else

could not have found the way down through the darkness, lowering by rope ladders from chamber to hanging rim to pit so vast that his light would not reach its curving walls. How it came about that Dorr lost his cavern and its contents is a story of confusion told further on. He closed the route he had followed. Other ore was found on the surface bringing on a rash of staking claims. Dorr believed another access to the cavern existed, but so many difficulties assailed him that he never found it.

It was in 1944 in Los Angeles that I first learned of Earl Dorr's

By HOWARD D. CLARK



Down inside the first room, but high up inside Kokoweef Mountain, is this massive flowstone of lime, calcite, gypsum and other minerals. White cave snow (gnome's milk) grows on the ladders. But the route to the golden river far below, through miles of chambers and crawlways, is blocked.

to a gold buyer who allowed me at the rate of \$18 per (troy) ounce. Two and one-half lbs. of this black sand I sent to John Herman, assayer, whose assay certificates (published) show a value of \$2,145.47 per (cubic) yard with gold at \$20.67 per ounce. (Note: That was the mint price of gold before it was raised to the present price of \$35 per troy ounce in 1934. His value would be correspondingly greater now.)

"7. From engineering measurements and observations we made I estimated that it would require a tunnel of about 350 ft. long to penetrate to the caverns, 1,000 ft. or more below the present entrance which is some three miles distant from my property.

"8. I make no estimate of even the approximate tonnage of the black sand, but some estimate of the cubical contents may be made for more than 8 miles and minimum depth is never less than 3 ft. . . . maximum depth . . . we do not know."

Is Dorr's story so out-of-the-world? The first man to go back to civilization with word of the geysers in what is now Yellowstone Park was "crazy as a hoot owl"—or so he was told. Can there be a stream of cool, life-giving water flowing over golden sands in a vast, deep cave beneath the Mojave desert? It's enough to whet the imagination.

Many a thirst-crazed gold seeker has left his bones on this blistering surface. About 60 miles north is the panorama of Death Valley. Fremont had made a path a few miles from here a century before. Earlier, the wilderness man, Jedediah Smith, had trod the trackless hummocks in 1827 with his crew. Still earlier, Fr. Gages in 1776 led his party a few miles to the south while the muskets of the Revolution boomed far in the east. The first thought of every one of these from dawn to dusk was of water—scanning the valleys for green brush, the desert willow, any sign where men and animals might camp and live another day.

How Dorr learned of the caverns reads like a fiction writer's pipe dream. As a boy on his father's ranch in Colorado he was a friend of Indians nearby, a playmate of the Indian children. In appreciation, two of the elders told Dorr the tale of a tragedy.

These two and a third brother had known through tribal history of a great cave in a desert. The three had climbed into it to a great depth by

Kokoweef continued

story in the course of research for my book, "Lost Mines of the Old West." The *California Mining Journal* of November, 1940 had published Dorr's report of his discovery in the form of an affidavit sworn by him before a Notary on November 16, 1934. I obtained reprint rights from my friend, the late publisher J. P. Hall, and started looking for Dorr. Here are the principal portions of Dorr's sworn statement:

Earl Dorr's Affidavit

This is to certify that there are located in San Bernardino County, California, certain caverns. These caverns are about 250 miles from Los Angeles, California.

"Accompanied by a mining engineer, I visited the caverns in the month of May, 1927. We entered them and spent four days exploring them for a distance of between eight and nine miles. We carried with us altimeters and pedometers to measure the distance we traveled and had an instrument to take measurements of distance by triangulation, together with such instruments . . . to make examinations, observations and estimations.

"Our examination revealed the

following facts:

"1. From the mouth of the cavern we descended about 2,000 ft. There we found a canyon which, on our altimeter, measured about 3,000 to 3,500 ft. deep. We found the caverns to be divided into many chambers, filled . . . with the usual stalactites and stalagmites besides many grotesque and fantastic wonders.

"2. On the floor of the canyon there is a flowing river which . . . we estimated to be about 300 ft. wide and with considerable depth. . .

"3. . . . there is exposed on both sides of the river from 100 to 150 ft. of black beach sand which is very rich in gold values. The sands are from 4 to 11 ft. deep. This means there are about 300 to 350 ft. of rich bearing placer sands which average 8 ft. in depth. We explored the canyon sands a distance of more than 8 miles finding little variation of the depth and width of the sands.

"4. I am a practical miner of many years of experience and I own valuable mining properties nearby which I am willing to pledge and put up as security to guarantee that the statements herein are true.

"5. My purpose of exploring the caverns was to study the mineralogy in order to ascertain the mineral possibilities of the caves . . . in person with my engineer by expert examination. . .

"6. I carried out about 10 lbs. of the black sand and panned it receiving more than \$7 in gold. I sold it

the light of their torches. Far down was running water and in its sands was much gold. Bags were filled and carried out, but once with their torches failing, one brother had fallen from a great cliff and perished. Reports have it that they had profited from previous operations but, respecting tribal tradition, they would not return to the tomb of the lost brother. They drew maps for the boy as Indians have done for ages, whether in symbols on rocks or skins. The white boy would grow up and then he might go and find the riches.

It sounded like fable of legendary lore, but the boy did grow up. He kept the maps. He became an experienced mining man and eventually found himself on the scene. Right here comes a coincidence so far-fetched that it still makes me scratch my head. Skeptics have rated the Indian story as pure romance, casting doubt on the whole Dorr episode. I have news for them.

On an exploration trip in another Western state, I was with a small crew of mining men led by one of our advanced scientists, scouting for a certain strategic mineral. The scientist had covered ground known to me so I told him the Dorr story in the course of bull sessions in camp. He had not heard it, but many years back on a mineral survey in that region he had completed his project and gone to the whistle-stop railway station nearest Kokoweef mountain for departure. It happened that two frustrated Indians were there with a leaking bag of black sand and gold. He helped them pack it securely and gave directions for taking it to Salt Lake City for assay and sale. The Indians were anxious only to get away from there and never came back.

That's what the scientist told me in 1948. Checking the time factor with the elderly scientist, it could well have been the two Indians of the Dorr story—or how many other coincidences can we admit? I hate to stretch the coincidence business further, but the mineral search by our party was being made for the mining company which employed Earl Dorr and through it I became acquainted with him.

My first contact with Earl Dorr was by mail to his spot on the desert. He replied in a letter in a bold hand and good penmanship that he would like to meet me. Next he wrote with the office typewriter, rather laboriously but with no doubt at all of his opinions of "drug store"

miners, always signing "E. P. Dorr." At the moment I was much involved with mysteries of the Lost Padre Mine, in another direction, so in a temporary exchange of letters he wrote information as specific and consistent as I have known. It was as consistent when I heard it in person.

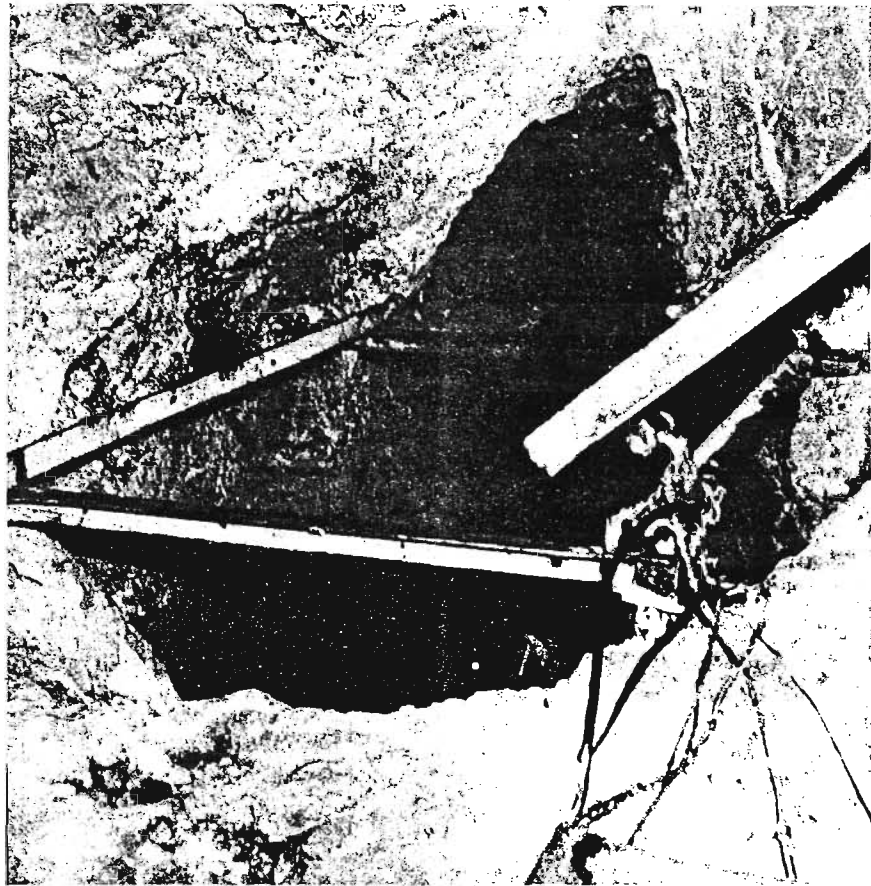
"I worked and tried to get help to open up the old entrance," he said, "so we could get back down on the fault where the placer sands lay 3,000 feet below the lime formation and three and a quarter miles from the cave entrance. There is no fault on the side of Kokoweef that I know of, but three and a quarter miles underground from the cave entrance, traveling through caves until we got below the lime formation, we came out on a shelf rock on the side of the fault which is 3,000 feet deep. We came across a fracture in the side of the fault. Water ran down through it into the canyon.

"We let ourselves down from one shelf to the next until we got to the bottom of the fault with plenty of placer sands. Even on the shelf rock were one to two feet of rich sands. Yes, there is a fault 900 feet lower

than the opening I went down in (but) full of dirt washed into it for ages."

Again he repeated with a slight addition: "I found a way to get down through 1800 feet of lime caverns... on down into a fault in granite and quartz underlying the lime formation. The lime is 1800 feet deep (with) caves down to a fault which is 300 to 500 feet wide... 3,000 feet deep... Don't let them kid you, there's gold in the caves. It all lays below the lime formation and on the shelf rock on the fault walls and on the bottom."

I found Earl Dorr working as one of the half-dozen employees of a mining company operating a small pilot mill on the desert out of Victorville, California. This miniature of the giant mills used at working mines to crush and grind ore was operated for test runs on sample batches from various places to determine their values. Dorr had cut his teeth on mining. "I was running hoist at the age of 18," he said, "for Winfield Scott Stratton on the Independence mine in Cripple Creek, one of the richest." Enough said.



This opening, about six feet wide on the steep eastern side of Kokoweef, is said to be the one used by Earl Dorr to gain access to the underground cavern. The author entered this vertical passageway.

Any miner who could boast initiation in fabulous Cripple Creek, Colorado, was presumed to know his rocks. During the period of my association with this company where Earl was a respected worker, I talked at length with him and ate with the entire personnel at one table.

Earl has passed "over the divide" (preceded by the mining engineer, W. P. Morton) since those days of 1949-50. The validity of his personal story depends upon two factors: Earl Dorr's knowledge of mining, of earth formations and characteristics, and upon his general reliability.

The first can be dismissed at once. For the second, one seldom sees a man more emphatically forthright. A native outdoorsman, he clung to an era, sadly gone, when a handshake between two unlettered prospectors binding an agreement made far out in the boondocks was fully legal in a court of law. He was revengeful at sharp practices which we pass lightly as "good business." He probably took occasion to implement this attitude in return for attacks. A story he told me is reminiscent of his independent do-it-yourself spirit. Once when young he was jobless, broke, without prospects. Taking rifle, bedroll, a bag of salt and his horse, he trekked to the tall timber where he shot deer, dressed the meat and hung it to dry for "jerky." A ready market for dried venison took care of him until things got better.

Of course Earl Dorr was embittered at the dizzying turn of events which followed his discovery. He sought financial backing to develop the placer gold. Investigators found zinc ore on the mountain and at length a mining company went to work on values in sight rather than any unseen. At this juncture Dorr snorted: "They never heard of that country 'til I took them out there. Besides, I got the wrong class of men, all talk—the class we old desert prospectors call drug store miners. It was too big for them—too big a thing."

It's small wonder that Dorr fumed at fooling with an ore worth only about ten cents a pounds (in which he had no share), while those very operations damaged access to the incalculable bonanza beneath their feet. "Every time they put in a

round of shots on the zinc," he complained, "it shook the whole mountain. Caves caved in and blocked the way down. The way I know this, I was down and rocks fell all around me."

He had previously put in a shot of his own to block passage which could have been reopened, but he claimed that general destruction was too extensive.

"I stuck as long as I could," he said, "until I was eating cooked water cress, chipmunk soup and sagebrush tea. I starved out and had a light stroke which put me on my back for a whole year. Parties are using my story to promote their deal, only made richer every time—even blind fish and real live spooks."

The cavern story attracted those hardy adventurers known as "speleologists," or "spelunkers," who dote on jawbreaker terms and go underground because it's there. Call them "cavers," for short. They will climb into a cave at the drop of a rock. If they can't hear it bounce or splash, they're in business. To offer a challenge a cave should be at least on the scale of Tom Sawyer's or perhaps Grand Canyon with a roof. A group of these fans for inner space came to Kokoweef mountain. Their story is told by Dr. William R. Halliday, prominent in the National Speleological Society.

With permission, a horde of cavers and company swarmed in during the autumn of 1948. Various cave structures and cracks had long been known. The Kin Sabe, partly opened by oldtimer Pete Ressler, was blocked with debris as Dorr had said. The party settled on Crystal Cave by way of entrance through a door kept locked by the mining company. A descent led to a chamber with the expected flowstone—and Dorr's name, which he had smoked on the wall with his carbide lamp.

Descending again they came to another room, also with Dorr's name in soot. This was the trail's end so they didn't have much fun. But in an alcove was a line of what looked suspiciously like the residue left by the burning of a fuse. The flowstone there was shattered. The cavers were given to wonderment as to why Dorr would set a charge there unless to protect something important below. I'm bound to say that I join in that thought.

A geologist warned the cavers that such a cave as Dorr described is geologically impossible, that such don't exist! But regardless of expert

opinion, the cavers will always be intrigued with the thought of what might—just possibly, might be beyond that point. Could Dorr have been right? After all, he wasn't just theorizing.

I have ample respect for the science of geology and for those who practice it, generally speaking. But there are geologists and "geologists," on the firm authority of members of that fraternity themselves. They do not agree on broad principles or even in specific cases. One does not have to be in the wide open long before seeing certain solemn pronouncements put to flight by uncooperative facts. Nowhere is this more evident than in determining the occurrence of water on the desert, to cite a single example. It has been amusing on many an occasion. Not to underestimate expert knowledge, we just may not have all the answers yet. And some stories are too big, as Dorr said.

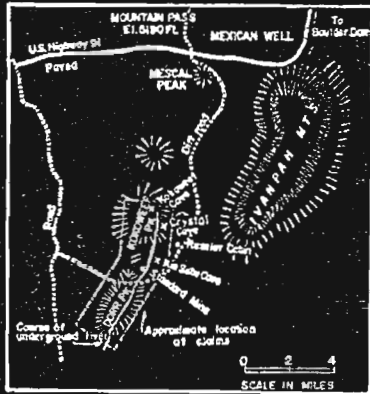
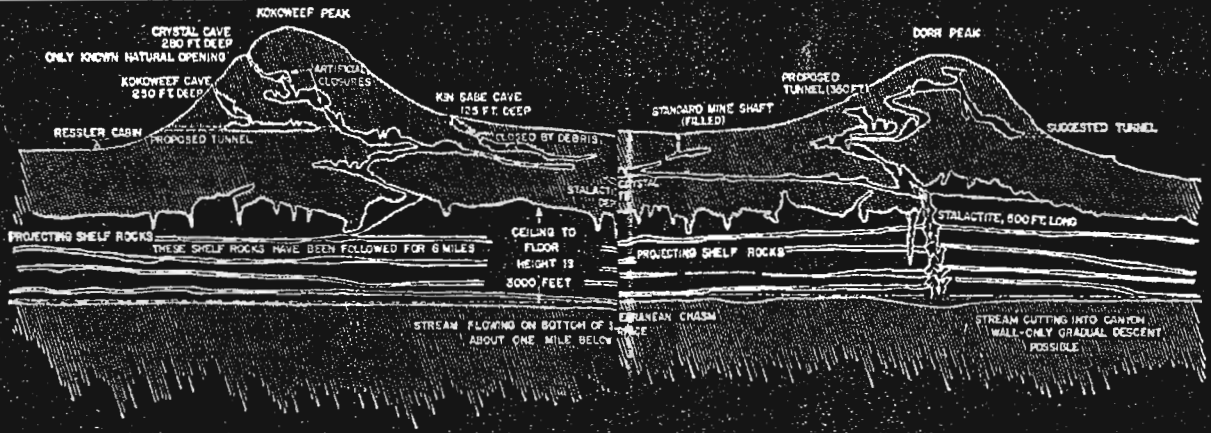
Cowboy Jim White found Carlsbad Caverns, a wide open hole that anyone could look into and watch the bats swarm out. He had to make a career of convincing the world of its existence. It took him an incredible twenty years, while people in the town 30 miles away said: "The hole is in your head—the bats too."

Reality or pipe dream? Mention the Dorr cavern in the area and people turn faces away to laugh. Some told me that Dorr's name is mud to them. What of Dorr's affidavit? In an argument it's only natural to ignore a point difficult of answer and seize upon the seemingly ridiculous. It's unlike anyone in his right mind to swear falsely and demand that he be caught doing so. It's most unlike Dorr, whatever his other failings.

Also, it's unlike a practical miner to spend years in exhausting body and finances on an imaginary adventure. And the fact of the black sand placer—where else did it come from when he was seen carrying it out of the cave? Again, you don't fool a prominent assayer by "salting" a sample, meaning to load it with a mineral that doesn't belong.

However, some are not skeptics and that brings us to Kokoweef mountain, one of the Ivanpah range, as of today. In sight from it is the throbbing freeway connecting Los Angeles with neon-lit Las Vegas about 60 miles eastward. Gone are

Treasure Trails



The Cavern of Gold beneath Kokoweeff Peak and nearby ridges. Original drawn by Herman Wallace, Jr., under the instruction and per-

sonal supervision of L. P. Dorr. Redrawn by A. Kelners, and used through the courtesy of Herman Wallace, Sr.

Schematic drawing of the fantastic underground cavern was done under Earl Dorr's personal supervision. Note that in one place the huge cavern is shown to be 3,000 feet from floor to ceiling.

the pathfinders and lonely men of pick and pan, their world goods atop a burro. Gleaming vehicles cover in hours the miles that required weeks and give no thought to the misty bands which passed this way and vanished into the sunset. Neither the ancients with dry tongues or those without a care have had a thought of abundant water in the darkness below, not to mention an El Dorado that would make Midas a penny pincher.

As this is written, I have returned from Kokoweeff mountain and found new life there with the situation under control. A serious group holds claims covering the critical area and is engaged in development toward eventually attaining those depths. They expect to reach the river which Earl Dorr said is flowing through sands laden with fragments and nuggets of native yellow placer gold. Obviously, members of this group are firm believers in the Dorr story. They have learned much about the local geology which lends encourage-

ment and, they hope, some confirmation of their belief.

As their guest I was escorted to the mountain. With a crew member we climbed a dizzying zigzag trail no wider than my feet to a lofty perch where an entrance had been used by Dorr long ago. Pausing on the way to gasp for breath, I could see the works of the world's only major rare earth mine on Clark mountain across the freeway to Las Vegas, and the snowcap of Mt. Charleston in Nevada. On reaching the hole, I saw it covered by the huge iron door frame that Dorr had packed up those rocky steeps on his powerful shoulders. That must have called for superhuman effort. Even to lift it off the dangerous opening is a man's job.

Then with the assistance of my comrades I climbed down a series of ladders in the tight, vertical passage to the darkness of what they called the "first room." A narrow hole in the bottom and the head of another ladder told of more dark regions below but this one was convincing

enough. Not being a speleologist I was satisfied with taking photographs and my exit.

Sizeable stalactites found in big rooms testify to the vast age of the caverns. Given an undisturbed stream gushing through uncounted miles of gold-bearing strata during ages of time, you have practically perfect conditions for the accumulation of black sand and placer gold on a scale difficult for the mind to comprehend. All of the stream placer known to mining has gathered where it was found through erosion and concentration by the action of water. However, in the usual occurrence on the surface of the earth it has suffered interference on the part of constantly changing nature and has had only comparative moments of geological time to gather in great quantities, spectacularly rich as some have been.

In the face of certain opinions, the possibility of caves of huge size in this region cannot be dismissed light-



Climbing the eastern side of Kokoweef Mountain to Dorr's entrance. Distant Clark Mountain, at the extreme left, is the site of a "rare earth" mine.

Kokoweef continued

ly. The limestone formation is factual. Caves of interest to explorers exist far across Nevada adjoining on the east. Only about 30 miles south is Mitchell's Cavern, now a California state park. Impressive as it is, its full extent is not known. For water on the desert we have military bases farther southwest using water enough for small cities. Rumor has it that with no surface water at all, and a mere trace of annual rainfall, the sources are subsurface rivers coming from far to the north.

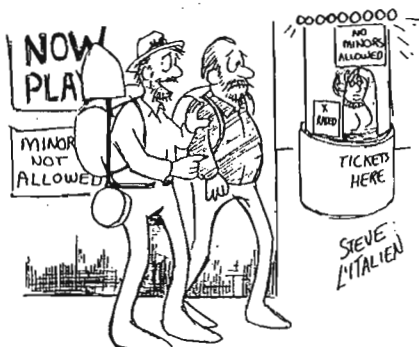
About 12 miles south of Kokoweef, near the outpost of Cima, and only a hoot and a holler in distance, is a ranch well that breathes! Water rises and falls in it audibly. Just why the well gargles is not explained, but Dorr spoke of a tidal effect in the cavern river. I took that one with salt but now I wonder.

Meanwhile, scientists are interested in such caverns as this one in limestone of the Permian age, esti-

mated at 150 million years old. A university geologist utilizes a new time clock, thermoluminescence. The unvarying temperature of 60° at Kokoweef enables him to test deep cave formations never affected by solar heat. It has to do with the escape of trapped electrons when rock never before warm is heated. Another, a cave biologist, investigated a nearby cave with floor-to-ceiling height of nearly 200 feet, declaring that air movements infer an extensive interconnected cave system.

Specimen collectors, curiosity seekers with hearts full of larceny, and born vandals steal and wreck equipment including facilities left for their convenience. Two of them went down the shaft I entered and set off a large order of dynamite. In their haste or greed they failed to delay going back until the toxic fumes had dispersed. They were found much later. These pests follow the national pattern, the despair of all highway engineers and park maintenance men as well as owners of private property. Stories grow and become alluring as Dorr had said. In one published account unconcerned with facts, the story had it that a syndicate operates the cavern mine and Dorr just leans back and watches the gold roll in! Earl would have liked that.

Kokoweef remains a continued story with chapters yet to be written, but not too soon. Preliminary development work is naturally inconclusive. But if and when the denouement of the drama comes by way of time and toil and vindicates Earl Dorr, the succeeding chapters will fill a volume—and several banks —Howard D. Clark



"We can't go in there—the sign says 'NO MINERS ALLOWED!'"