



For those who have nerve enough to tackle it, a ladder makes a steady enough footing through a narrow passage in Crystal Cave, on stony Kokoweef Peak

UNCHARTED CAVERNS

By PHILIP JOHNSTON

UNDER the gray wilderness of Southern Nevada and Eastern California lies a vast system of caverns whose labyrinthine corridors and huge, vaulted chambers are more extensive and spectacular than anything of the kind known to the world.

Through the stygian darkness winds a river flanked by deposits of black sand agleam with gold dust, representing wealth exceeding that of Croesus.

And this lost world may soon be accessible to all who desire to enter its rocky portals.

Thus run tales of sun-bitten desert rats who, for decades, have quested for minerals in the wasteland. The facts are all on their side, they aver, and time will inevitably vindicate their claims. Geologists have listened with crossed fingers, pondered the evidence, and shaken their heads dubiously, but with a conspicuous lack of vigor. The most learned of savants have been mistaken; therefore caution should be blended with wisdom!

A symposium of factual accounts dealing with caverns known to exist in the area east and south of Death Valley might offer an imposing array of evidence supporting the prospectors' theory. Shallow caves have been found in the massive limestone flanking the Spring Mountain Range, west of Las Vegas. In the Ivanpah

Range several caves are located, most notable of which are Crystal Cavern on the east side of Kokoweef Peak, and Kokoweef Cave, on the opposite side of the same mountain. Trains passing on the Union Pacific Railroad, some twenty miles to the south, cause a deep, sonorous rumbling plainly audible in these caverns. Though not explained by scientific observers, less erudite desert folk cite this as proof that these are openings to "a big cave" extending southward, which have been closed by débris.

Another well-known fact is pointed out as evidence that the subterranean river is more than a myth. Ivanpah Dry Lake, a broad playa many square miles in extent, straddles the California-Nevada boundary south of Jean. It is the lowest portion of a large hydrographic basin, and receives all drainage from a wide area of mountains and desert. In this respect it resembles scores of other dry lakes throughout the Southwest. But unlike its prototypes that hold water, often for weeks at a time during seasons of heavy rains, Ivanpah Dry Lake is a veritable sieve. Even when heavy precipitation sends roaring floods down the mountainsides to spread over the flat surface to a depth of several feet, after one or two days the water has vanished completely. The cause of such a strange phenomenon is found in numerous "sink holes" through which the impounded water flows underground.

Several caverns of extensive size are known to exist in the Providence Mountains northwest of Fenner, of which at least two have not been explored. Joe Diamond, a colored prospector living at Barnwell, tells of entering one of these underground chambers on the east slope of the range. Before he had gone fifty feet, however, a swarm of bats fluttering in the dim light around his head sent him scurrying into the open. He vows that never again will he venture into such a place!

Still more terrifying was the experience of J. E. Mitchell when he attempted to learn the extent of a cave located near the old Bonanza King Mine. A rope tied around his waist was paid out slowly by two men, while the explorer made his way cautiously through chimneys, galleries, and chambers far below the surface. At a depth of some four hundred feet, while he was being lowered into a room so large that he was unable to discern bottom or sides with the aid of an electric torch, the rope jammed into a crevice, and Mitchell dangled at its end like a spider suspended by its web. After long and frantic efforts, his assistants succeeded in freeing the rope; but during much of that time, Mitchell was unconscious from the mingled effects of discomfort and terror.

But Mitchell's interest in desert caves has not been futile. Four miles south of the Bonanza King are two caverns described in *TOURING TOPICS* for September, 1933. Believing that the public would be interested in these weird underground workshops of nature, he made them easily accessible from Highway No. 66, by opening a road northward from Essex, a distance of twenty-three



Whether or not there are fabulous riches stored away in the desert caverns, as old-timers assert, their beauty and magnitude are enough to warrant exploring them. Above is a scene in Kokoweef Cave. Right, nearby Crystal Cave

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miles. Acting as custodian and guide, Mitchell treats visitors to an underground excursion for a nominal fee. Belief exists in some quarters that Mitchell's caverns, once fully excavated and explored, will prove to be entrances to the hypothetical big cave under the Mojave Desert.

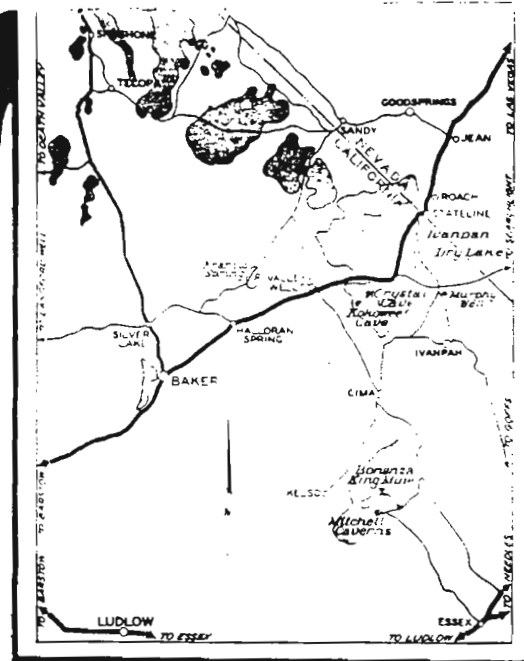
There is at least one man living in Southern California today who would take issue in the strongest terms with any "doubting Thomas" expressing a belief that stories of this vast subterranean realm are apocryphal. And his reasons appear to be excellent, for he has prepared an affidavit setting forth his astounding observations in the course of a three days' odyssey through passages of this great cavern. He is E. P. Dorr, miner and prospector, who has spent more than a decade prospecting in the Mojave.

Several years ago, he says, he was told of two brothers who, with a third man, had entered and explored the big cave. In its remote depths, they found a river margined with black sand that was fabulously rich in gold. Keeping their discovery secret they worked steadily for months, and recovered some \$57,000 in precious metal, which was placed in the **Monaghan and Murphy Bank** at Needles. One day, a member of this party lost his footing, fell into the river, and vanished completely. Obsessed with a superstitious fear, the others quickly abandoned their mine and never returned.

About fifteen years later, Dorr made inquiry at the Needles bank, and verified the report of the gold having been deposited there. Then he set out in search of the cave where it was alleged to have been found. Eventually he located the entrance, and made plans for a tour of exploration. Seeking to learn the form and extent of the cavern, he procured the services of a mining engineer to make a survey and prepare a map. Equipped with knapsacks containing three days' provisions, a theodolite, a compass, an aneroid barometer, and a quantity of dynamite and nitroglycerine to remove stalactite curtains that barred their progress, the two men started their long journey underground.

Traveling in a southerly direction, the explorers made their way through one corridor after another, emerging at intervals into great vaulted chambers where the ceilings were far beyond the range of electric torches. Through a wonderland of stalactites, some of which are described as being hundreds of feet in length, they continued their descent through this nether world. At a depth of two thousand feet they passed the limestone strata, and found themselves in a granite gorge whose sides were encrusted with an age-old deposit of lime that had been spread in solution over the massive wall.

Slow and arduous was the advance into the depths of this chasm. At the bottom—some five thousand feet below the surface, and eight miles from the point of entry—they came to the brink of a river that flowed silently, sullenly, through the eternal darkness. Along its banks were strewn deposits of black sand which proved to be rich in gold. Eventually, a sheer cliff halted their progress.



The principal known caves of the Mojave. The shaded area represents limestone mountain ranges

Desiring to protect his new-found wealth against claim jumpers until he could secure a valid title, Dorr returned to the cave within a few hours and dynamited two narrow passageways. The second one to be closed was a continuation of Crystal Cave, and the concussion at this point—which proved to be a fracture zone—displaced the formation above to such an extent that subsequent efforts to open it up proved futile. Sturdy timbers placed for protection were ground to matchwood under the impact of huge boulders that crashed against them; but fortunately this occurred when the tunnel contained no human occupants. Since that time, Dorr has confined his activities to another section of the mountain, where he hopes to sink a shaft that will break through the cavern's ceiling.

Abandoned by Dorr, Crystal Cave and its prototype Kokoweef Cave were secured under a mineral claim by L. P. Ressler, who sold an option on these properties to a Los Angeles syndicate.

Meanwhile, speculation is rife among the desert fraternity as to who will first crash the gates to the treasure house that nature has so long and jealously guarded.



The formation at the left, in Crystal Cave, looks not unlike a rabbit being strangled by a serpent, and the picture above resembles popcorn and icicles mixed. Likenesses are limited only by the imagination of the beholder