Here's a surprising new slant on Pegleg

Did Pegleg's Gold Belong to Peralta?

by Robert Buck

A FORTUNE in black gold nuggets found in a remote area of Southern California's vast desert wasteland was claimed by an anonymous writer who told his story in the March, 1965, issue of DESERT Magazine. Is this the final chapter of a story which began more than 150 years earlier?

At the time the above story appeared, I was winding up several years of research on early California history to establish the origin of an ancient mine on top of an oak wooded hill on the south rim of the Calaveras River several miles upstream from Jenny Lind. While history credits the discovery of gold in California as being found in a mill race at Sutter's mill by James Marshall in January, 1848, this ancient working provides proof that gold mining was carried out in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada many years prior to that discovery.

The old mine aroused my interest first because I wondered how it acquired its local name, Spanish Mine, and, secondly, because on my initial visit to it in the summer of 1939, I observed a huge white oak growing amidst the rubble which couldn't possibly have been there when the digging was done. White oak is a slow growing tree and this one measured 26 inches in diameter. By counting growth rings of oaks of similar size, which had been cut, I determined this one to be from 110 to 125 years old.

A third reason for my interest was the discovery of a half-ounce gold nugget, part of which was covered with a black coating, which lay exposed where it had weathered out of the rubble of the dump. Judging from the age of the tree, I placed the age of this mine in the early 1800's—long before the discovery of gold in California. Perhaps this truly was an old Spanish mine!

Researching California history from 1775 up to the time it became a part of the United States resulted in fascinating
bits and pieces which, when tied together, revealed more. The first in line in history pertaining to these Sierra Nevada foothills referred to an expedition led by Captain Fernando Rivera, commander of presidios, who traveled along this way in December, 1776, and named four rivers in the area—one of which was the Rio de la Pasion, since been determined to be the Calaveras.

The next mention of Spanish military in proximity to the Calaveras area is an account of a band of soldiers led by Luis Peralta in pursuit of a band of renegade Indians who had waylaid and attacked Padre Pedro de la Cueva from San Jose Mission while he, with three soldiers and some mission Indians, was visiting a village 10 miles east of the mission. One soldier and three Indians were killed. Peralta then pursued the renegades past the Rio San Joaquin, finally catching them. In the ensuing battle, 11 Indians were killed and 30 captured. This was in January, 1805.

History is indefinite as to how far across the San Joaquin this band of Indians was pursued, but food for thought is the manner in which the Rio de la Pasion was renamed the Calaveras. Calaveras is the Spanish word for “skulls,” and early pioneers named this river “Cala-veras” when they found several skulls along the lower reaches of the stream.

The interesting part about this bit of history, however, was the name Luis Peralta. Being familiar with western mining history, the Peralta family of Sonora, Mexico, came to my mind. This is the Peralta family credited with the discovery of fabulous gold mines which later became lost, one of them believed by many to be the Lost Dutchman in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona. But this was in later years than our story, so let’s get on with it.

It was a warm summer evening and the sun was setting in the western horizon. Sargeant Luis Peralta sat on a boulder near the top of an oak wooded hill in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada of California. The year was 1806. He accompanied a party led by Ensign Gabriel Moraga, sent by the military governor of California to explore the inland area. The party had chosen this oak wooded hilltop on the south canyon rim of the Rio de la Pasion as a camping place because of the splendid view of the area to the west and north. Moraga made mention of this as he wrote in his diary that evening.

Luis was tall and leather skinned. His muscular frame and sparkling brown eyes belied his age of 52 summers. Except for the graying of his hair and mustache, he would have been taken for a much younger man.

Having tethered their horses and pack animals and finished their evening meal, the group prepared to bed down for the night while Luis sat on a rock and gazed across the valley. His thoughts turned to his boyhood in far off Sonora and he wondered about the well-being of his only brother, Miguel, who was 11 years his junior. Recently he had received news of the death of their father. Miguel must be busy with the running of the rancho and mining enterprises which were now his to control. Luis must correspond with him, he determined. It had been over 30 years since he’d left the family hacienda to join De Anza’s expedition to the north and subsequently been promoted to Sargeant and transferred to the San Francisco Presidio.

As Luis sat there reminiscing, he idly kicked the loose gravel at the base of the boulder with the toe of his boot. Noticing an odd looking black pebble, he examined it. Instinct told him this was no ordinary pebble; it was heavy and water worn. He removed his knife from its sheath and scratched it with the point. The black coating fell away and revealed a dull yellow metal. There was no doubt about it. He held in his hand a black-coated nugget of gold.

Scratching in the gravel exposed a few more black nuggets. His first impulse was to shout to his compadres; but, no, on second thought he decided to say nothing of it. Here was a potential bonanza. He might be able to return sometime in the future and dig out a fortune. Concealing the nuggets in his pocket, he arose and wandered over the hilltop.

Here a freak deposit of water worn gravel crowned the entire top of the hill. Deposited in an ancient age, this had once been the bed of a mighty river. Upheaval of the earth’s crust and erosion had left this piece of ancient river channel high and dry. Luis’ eyes, as he wandered about the hilltop, visualized a fortune in black-gold nuggets.

Through a restless night, he debated what he should do. By morning he had reached a decision. He would convey the news of this discovery to his brother, Miguel, in far away Sonora. Together they would mine these newly found riches.

Don Miguel Peralta sat on the patio of his hacienda in Sonora enjoying the cool of an early evening. It had been warm for late October and he was weary and troubled. The silver deposits which had produced so much wealth for his family appeared to be nearly depleted. He considered organizing a prospecting party to explore some of the wild desert areas to the north.

As Don Miguel pondered, a horse and rider appeared in the gathering dusk. As the rider drew near, Don Miguel could see both rider and horse showed signs of having traveled far. He bade the stranger welcome and offered the hospitality of his home.

The traveler drank from an olla which hung in the shade of the patio roof. "I have come from that country far to the

Looking to the east from top of hill near Jenny Lind. Arrow points to general area of Old Spanish Mine.
north which is called California," he said. "I seek one Don Miguel Peralta. I have news of his brother."

"Seek no further. I am Miguel Peralta. What can you tell me of my brother? I have not seen him for 30 years."

"This, Senor Luis asked me to put in your hands." The courier handed Don Miguel a letter and a small black coated nugget about an ounce in size.

Don Miguel anxiously opened the letter from his brother. It told of the exploratory missions, of the Indian skirmishes and of that great country called California. Then, in detail, Luis wrote of his discovery on the oak-covered hill beside the Rio de la Pasion. "Here is a fortune in gold," he wrote. Let us make plans to mine this discovery.

Don Miguel examined the black pebble he'd nearly forgotten in his anxiety to read the letter. Scraping away the black coating, he saw the yellow gleam of gold. But, how strange, he thought. He'd never before seen black gold.

"The bearer of this letter," wrote Luis, "I have taken into my confidence, Pedro was with our party when we made camp on the hill by the Rio de la Pasion and is familiar with the area. He will guide you to the place. Vaya con Dios."

Don Miguel immediately organized a party of his best men and outfitted them for the long journey north. In early spring of 1807, guided by Pedro, Don Miguel's caravan of miners and burros followed De Anza's trail of 1775. For days on end they plodded through miles and miles of cactus, sage and sand, grateful for the cool weather of late winter between watering places. Eventually they crossed the Tehachapi mountain range and fell down into the great inland valley of the Tulare in Sonsin the bag in the hills of the Colorado Desert in March of 1955, he found two small hills covered with black nuggets on or near the surface. Working quietly and secretly, he gathered a fortune over the next 10 years.

Reactions to his story were varied. Some congratulated him, others doubted the authenticity of his story. One reason for doubt, it appeared, was the description of the deposit itself—it just wasn't natural, they said, for gold to occur in this manner. But they overlooked the fact that the gold may have been scattered over these hills by some other means? Is it possible that this is what became of the cargo of the ill-fated Peralta expedition?

About the year 1829 (some accounts say 1852) a trapper-trader named Smith, who'd acquired the nickname of Peg-leg, took a short cut from Yuma across the vast Colorado desert to Warner's ranch and became lost. Climbing a small black butte in order to re-orient himself, he noticed some small, heavy black pebbles strewn over the surface of the ground, thinking they were copper, he filled his pockets. When later examination proved them to be black coated gold nuggets, the legend of Peg-leg's black gold was begun. Smith was never able to retrace his steps to the small black butte.

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PEGLEG GOLD
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been screened. Near the top of one, where the rain had washed a spot clean, I found a half-ounce gold nugget entirely covered with a black coating. It was then my friends confessed they’d found two similar nuggets on a previous visit. However, they’d carried several pans of gravel to the river and panned them with no results.

The cut bank around the crown of the hill had caved to the extent that the underground portion of the workings were barely noticeable, but the top of one of the coyote holes was still evident. Analyzing the workings, we concluded that the gravel had been worked dry, but there still could be overlooked gold in the gravel piles.

World War II intervened, so it wasn’t until the fall of 1946 that my friends completed plans to re-work the gravel of the Old Spanish mine. Transporting a high pressure pump and pipe down the river to the location, they set up sluice boxes on the side of the hill. Pumping water from the river, the leavings of the Peralta party were sluiced. While I cannot say how much gold they recovered, I did see some of it—all in the form of nuggets from the size of a match head to that of a walnut. No fine gold was found. And, nearly all of it was coated with black. I know of no other occurrence of gold like this along the Mother Lode. It is more common to find fine gold and few nuggets. Black coated gold, however, has been observed in various places throughout the area, but never in much quantity.

Although chances of finding a black nugget at these old workings today is remote, anyone who would like to visit the old Spanish mine will find it on the south side of the Calaveras River in Calaveras County approximately six miles downstream from the Hogan Dam near Valley Springs. There’s no road and although the area still retains much of the wilderness atmosphere that met the eyes of Moraga’s party in 1806, it’s now private property and permission should be granted before you enter onto it.

When I started digging into the history of the Old Spanish mine, I had no idea of a connection with the lost black gold of Peg-leg Smith. But when I read of the fortune in black gold nuggets strewn over those small hills in the distant Colorado Desert, I felt I was re-reading the final chapter of an episode of California history that can be answered in no other way.

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