Off and on for 46 years, Henry Wilson has been trekking over the Colorado desert of Southern California in quest of the lost Pegleg gold—the black nuggets which according to legend are exposed on the top of one of three hills. Despite his many disappointments, Henry believes the essential facts of the Pegleg story. And here is the evidence on which his confidence is based.

**Lost Pegleg Gold is not a Myth**

**By HENRY E. W. WILSON**

I first read the story of the Pegleg mine in the Los Angeles Express of July 13, 1900. Very much the same story, with additional commentary, was written by Charles Michelson and published in the Munsey Magazine for December, 1901.

At that time I had no thought of going to the desert to seek this lost treasure, or for any other purpose. But I met, by chance, Frank Hike, who told me he was going to drive a team and wagon to the desert of the Lost Pegleg in October, 1900, and offered to take me with him. I accepted the invitation, and quit a good job in Los Angeles to search for riches on the Colorado desert.

Hike did not believe the Pegleg story, but had found rich dirt in a canyon of the Santa Rosa mountains, and he was making the trip to relocate the claims.

We drove by way of Lake Elsinore, Temecula, Warner’s ranch, Julian and Borrego spring. Before we reached the Santa Rosas, Hike was forced to abandon the trip for family reasons.

However, not far from where we were camped when he turned back, lived John Collins and wife and three children. When Hike left me I moved my camp close to their home in Coyote canyon, and from that point began my long search for the Lost Pegleg.

I bought a burro, and as Collins owned four of them we had a good outfit. We followed Indian trails around the end of Santa Rosa mountains where we both got our first view of Salton sea, which was then virtually a dry basin with the New Liverpool Salt works in full operation near the northwest end. I remember stopping at the edge of the salt field and using some of the salt to season my food. On the same trip I picked up the bowl of a small pipe hollowed out of pumice stone. It had two holes in which to insert stems, and I wondered, and still do, if it was intended to be used as a peace pipe to be smoked by two persons. There was no evidence it had ever been used.

There is much pumice float between Salton sea and the Santa Rosa mountains, but it is in small pieces. On the northeast side of the sea along the Southern Pacific railroad I have seen large chunks of pumice, while at the southeast end is an entire butte of pumice and obsidian. There is widespread evidence of ancient volcanic action in this area.

We found no mineral deposits worth locating, and after a three-month search I returned to Los Angeles. However, every winter for the next three years I returned to the desert to continue my explorations with Collins. We looked the desert over very thoroughly—the Borrego badlands to the south of the Santa Rosas, the Fish creek and Carrizo mountains, Vallecito and Mason valley and as far west as Campo.

We traveled over desert mountains and followed Indian trails. We slept on the sand under the stars until the lure of this indescribable region of solitude and pastel colored hills became so deeply rooted that neither of us ever got over it. We became rich in camp experience and Indian lore, which Collins obtained from the Indians living at San Ignacio reservation.

The chief of the latter group, Bernado Segundo, since deceased, was a well-educated and very intelligent Indian who spoke good English. I met him on two occasions, and liked him. Collins talked with him often. One of the subjects he discussed with Collins was the fish traps we found near the old shoreline of ancient Lake Cahuilla. These traps have been under water since 1906 when the Colorado flowed in through an emergency intake of the Imperial irrigation system and filled the basin.

These traps were enclosures shaped like a mule shoe with the opening on the land side, and were made of fairly large rocks. As Bernado explained it, the fish were stranded in these enclosures when the level of the sea dropped, as it often did. Many people have confused the Indian fish traps with the circles of rock which the Indians piled up at the base of their circular hogans. But it is easy to tell the difference if one remembers that the traps were oblong with their opening away from the sea, while the hogan bases were round with the opening facing the sea. The latter generally are on higher ground.
From many sources we heard stories of lost mines, buried gold and other legendary treasure, but as to finding anything with which to buy beans, we drew a complete blank.

In the fall of 1903 I gave up the hope of bringing into town a million dollars worth of nuggets from their well-hidden resting place, and it was not until 1920 that the old urge caught up with me again—and it has never left.

Since then I have made many trips—sometimes with companions, often alone. I have seldom failed to interest listeners in my story, and have raised more than one grubstake just by talking, for I always had plenty to talk about. The Pegleg story which led to all my wanderings may be told briefly as follows:

About the year 1852, John O. Smith, known as Pegleg Smith, journeying from Yuma to Los Angeles by way of Warner’s ranch, attempted a short-cut across the desert. He was familiar with this part of the Southwest, having been a horse-trader and guide.

Somewhere in this desolate region he climbed one of three hills, on the top of which lay a quantity of black lumps of metal which Smith took to be copper. He picked up a few for his collection of curiosities. Arriving in Los Angeles he showed his “native copper” to a mining friend who pronounced it pure gold. Though coated with black desert varnish, the nuggets were the real thing beneath the surface.

The news quickly spread, and Smith was followed to San Bernardino where he outfitted for a trip that was to make him rich beyond his wildest dreams. Taking three or four friends he left in the night for the new El Dorado. Later, all that was left of Smith and members of his party were found on the edge of Salton basin. Smith was never heard of again.

A few years later a discharged soldier from Fort Yuma made a journey over about the same route, climbed the hill, and discovered the same black nuggets. He knew gold and took as much as he could carry to Los Angeles. Then, like Smith, he returned with two companions to get more. As far as is known, he never relocated the three hills, and a few years later the three bodies were found in the foothills of the San Ysidro mountains 30 miles west of Salton sea.

Nothing more was heard of the “burned black gold of the Pegleg” as it was spoken of in those days, until about 1876 when the Southern Pacific railroad company was building its line. One day an Indian woman staggered into the railroad construction camp at Salton, nearly dead of thirst. After being revived she related how she and her buck started from the reservation at the head of the Rio San Luis Rey to go to the Cocopah reservation near Yuma. Their canteen leaked, and her man had died of thirst. She wandered two days in search of water. Once she climbed one of “tres picachos” and from there saw the smoke of the construction train. She showed a bandana full of black nuggets, giving one to the engineer in charge of the camp. Then she resumed her journey and was, never seen again.

The fourth and last time the black gold was actually known to have been found on the three hills was a few years later. A half-breed working on Warner’s ranch appeared one day, after a trip to the desert with a quantity of black nuggets. When the coins he got in exchange for them ran low he disappeared and eventually returned with more gold. He covered his tracks well, and the secret source of his wealth remained undiscovered. On one or more of these trips he took his wife Carmelita with him. When he finally was knifed in a brawl, more than $4000 in coarse gold was found in his bunk.

When Carmelita was questioned, and offered a share if she would lead others to the gold, she said: “We left early in the morning, camped at the ‘Spring of the White Ledge,’ and when the sun was so high (pointing to the sky), we would be where the gold was.” Her questioners never found the gold, nor does history reveal they even found the spring.

Collins and I believed we located the
spring in an almost inaccessible part of the Santa Rosa mountains in 1920. It was good water which seeped from a wide ledge of feldspar—the white ledge.

On one of the halfbreed’s trips to the desert he was met by Tom Cover, former sheriff of Riverside county, who was hunting horse thieves. Cover and a friend named Russell drove out to the desert some time after the halfbreed’s death. At the place where they had seen the Indian they separated, Russell driving the team to an appointed meeting place while Cover proceeded on foot.

Cover was never seen again. Russell returned to Riverside and although Mrs. Cover offered a reward of $5000 for the recovery of her husband’s body, no trace of it was ever reported.

In 1902 I went to Riverside and interviewed both Mrs. Cover and Russell. The latter told me that when he and Cover separated, the sheriff had a nugget of gold from the Pegleg mine, and a map of its location.

It will never be known how many lost their lives in the search of this legendary treasure, but according to the reports which have come to me during the 46 years I have been interested in this lost treasure, the number is very great. Water is scarce in that region, and the terrain is so rugged as to make travel impossible except to a man with a sure-footed animal.

However, that such a deposit exists hardly can be doubted in view of the recurring evidence which has come to light during the 94 years since Pegleg Smith made the original discovery. Gold from it has been coined into U. S. money, according to good authority. In my opinion the story is in no sense a myth as in the case of many of the lost bonanza tales.

Until this gold is rediscovered, if it ever is, the Pegleg deposit of black nuggets will remain one of the unsolved mysteries of the Southwest.

The Colorado desert of Southern California as of 1900. The circle encloses approximately the area in which the author of this story has carried on his search for the lost Pegleg gold.

**SUNSETS . . . . . Picture Contest**

Colorful sunsets are one of the many enchantments of the desert country. Often the cloud formations are so bizarre as to make excellent black and white pictures—and those are the ones Desert Magazine is seeking for its November prize contest.

First prize is $10, and second $5, and for each non-winning picture accepted for publication $2.00 will be paid. Pictures must reach the Desert Magazine office by November 20, and the winning prints will be published in the January issue.

HERE ARE THE RULES

1—Prints must be on black and white, 5x7 or larger, printed on glossy paper.

2—All entries must be in the Desert Magazine office by the 20th of the contest month.

3—Prints will be returned only when return postage is enclosed.

4—Contests are open to both amateur and professional photographers. Desert Magazine requires first and full publication rights of prize-winning pictures only.

5—Time and place of photograph are immaterial except that they must be from the desert Southwest.

6—Judges will be selected from Desert’s editorial staff, and awards will be made immediately after the close of the contest each month.

7—Each photograph submitted should be fully labeled as to subject, time, place, Also as to technical data: shutter, speed, hour of day, etc.

ADDRESS ALL ENTRIES TO PHOTO EDITOR, DESERT MAGAZINE.

THE DESERT MAGAZINE

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