Strange tales of mysterious lost treasure are told around desert campfires, but perhaps none is more weird than the story of this deposit of black gold, guarded by swirling clouds of poisonous dust. Like the other lost mine tales appearing monthly in the Desert Magazine, this one is repeated as it was told to the author, without claim as to the authenticity of any detail.

By JOHN D. MITCHELL

SOMEWHERE in the Bullion mountain country on the desert between Bagdad and Twentynine Palms, California, in the center of one of the many dry lakes known to exist there, stands a small black mountain in which there is said to be located, in the form of a chimney, another of the many lost mines of the Southwest.

The outcrop of this chimney has been broken down by erosion over a period of many thousands of years, scattering quantities of gold nuggets over the barren ground around the foot of the mountain and among the rocks upon its sides. The nuggets, like the rocks and chunks of brown hematite of iron with which they are found, are all worn smooth.

The old nuggets are covered over with a thin film of manganese oxide and can be distinguished from the hematite only by their darker color and greater specific gravity.

While many men, most of whom were Indians, are reported to have seen this deposit, few of them have returned from the desert to tell the tale. Among the few said to have reached the mine and returned were two Indians and one white man.

One of the Indians traded some of the black nuggets in Yuma. Peg-Leg Smith was in Yuma at the time and immediately started out to search for the mine. Whether Smith ever found the deposit is problematical. He lost the Indian's trail somewhere near Cottonwood springs, in San Bernardino county.

Some time later Peg-Leg was found unconscious from hunger and thirst. He died in a coast hospital several days later without telling anyone where he found a large black gold nugget found in his possession. It is possible Smith may have found the nugget by the skeleton of another prospector who had reached the mine and died of heat and thirst on the way out.

For many years after the death of Peg-Leg Smith, strange stories continued to come out of the desert telling of dead Indians and large quantities of black gold scattered over the desert at the foot of a small black mountain in the center of a dry lake bed somewhere northwest of Cottonwood springs.

Many years later a white man arrived in San Gorgonio pass and stated he was going to seek the lost deposit of black gold.

Enlisting the aid of a partly civilized Indian who was less superstitious than other tribesmen he cached food, water and grain for animals at intervals across the desert. After many months of preparation the two men set out across the desert in a buckboard pulled by two small Mexican mules. They camped each night at the stations where food and water had been stored and after several days arrived at rim rock where the mesa dropped off abruptly almost a hundred feet and then sloped to the floor of a valley stretched out into the distance as far as the eye could see.

A narrow crevice was found in the steep wall and through this the mules were led down to the valley below. The buckboard was then dismantled and lowered over the cliff by the use of a windlass and long rope that had been brought along for the purpose. After loading the buckboard with food and water they again set out across this lower plain. After traveling two days their progress was halted by drifting sand dunes that blocked the progress of the mules and the wagon.

As the chimney-like mountain was now looming in the distance, it was decided to unhitch the mules and ride them the balance of the way. As they approached their destination they came upon a skeleton near which was an empty water gourd and a small pile of black gold nuggets.

Gathering the nuggets they continued to the foot of the black butte.

The igneous intrusion which formed the mountain was a jumbled mass of black heat-seared rocks interspersed here and there with large and small chunks of brown hematite of iron. Scattered around the foot of the mountain on the hard ground were thousands of small nuggets all worn smooth like the rocks and iron with which they were found. When the film of manganese was scraped off beautiful yellow gold was disclosed.

Near the base of the mountain were thick beds of a yellowish powder that was kept in a constant state of agitation by the winds that swirled over the little valley in which the pinnacle stood. The summit of the peak was cone-shaped and full of kaolin and smooth pieces of hematite of iron. The hot rays of the sun beat down into the little valley and, reflected by the varnished rocks made it almost like an oven.

As the mysterious yellow dust settled on their perspiring bodies it burned like fire, and when breathed into the lungs it almost choked them.

Since it would be impossible for them to remain for any length of time in such a place, the two men gathered as many of the gold nuggets as they could pack and after several hours arrived at the buckboard with gold they estimated to be worth $65,000. Before reaching the outer edge of the desert again their throat and lungs were parched from breathing the poisonous yellow powder and the skin of their hands and arms began to peel off. They finally reached civilization more dead than alive. It was many months before they recovered.

The proceeds of the trip were divided equally between the two partners. The white man purchased a small ranch in California. Neither of them ever made another trip to the valley of gold, but upon his deathbed a few years ago the white man told two old friends the secret of the black gold that is said to be guarded by the mysterious yellow powder and by the fierce heat of the desert itself.