

The New York Times

The Legendary Treasure of the White Sands Missile Range

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Special to The New York Times

WHITE SANDS, N.M. — Lost treasure stories are a dime a dozen in the Southwest. But when the Army, Air Force, the White House, Congressmen, New Mexico's Governor and F. Lee Bailey and dozens of other lawyers get into a single treasure saga, only confusion and rumors remain cheap.

After 35 years of localized dispute, the Great White Sands Missile Range Lost Gold Treasure Affair has blossomed into a national mystery. The cast of characters ranges from John W. Dean 3d to Geronimo and the vocabulary is marked by "double" as a prefix—as in double-cross, double-talk and double-dealing.

Gold Bars

Dozens of people claim a piece of the action—that is, gold bars and treasure said to be hidden on the missile range and worth from a few million dollars to \$1.5-billion. Four major groups of claimants accuse the others of trying to cheat them out of it.

The Army, which controls the missile

range, insists there is no treasure and has never been any. It has banned treasure hunters from the range since 1963. This has led to charges that military officers have stolen, are stealing, or are preparing to steal the treasure for themselves.

Dangerous unexploded 20-mm. shells from Phantom jet target practice dot the range, the Army insists. Claimants charge the Army purposely booby-trapped the area with the shells, yet almost weekly a few fevered treasure hunters sneak through helicopter and horse-mounted Army patrols to search.

Mr. Bailey, who represents 50 unidentified claimants, says that with a helicopter and a half an hour he can lead officials to 292 gold bars, for openers. But in August, the Army turned him down, saying he deserves no more favored treatment than some 300 others who ask each year for permission to enter the missile range to search.

"I know, they all claim they can go right to it in two hours," said Bennett Ferdig, a

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The New York Times/Gary Gulsinger

Mrs. Ova Noss, a claimant to the supposed treasure, shows a sword she says came from the hiding place of the gold. At right is her daughter, Mrs. Letha Guthrie.

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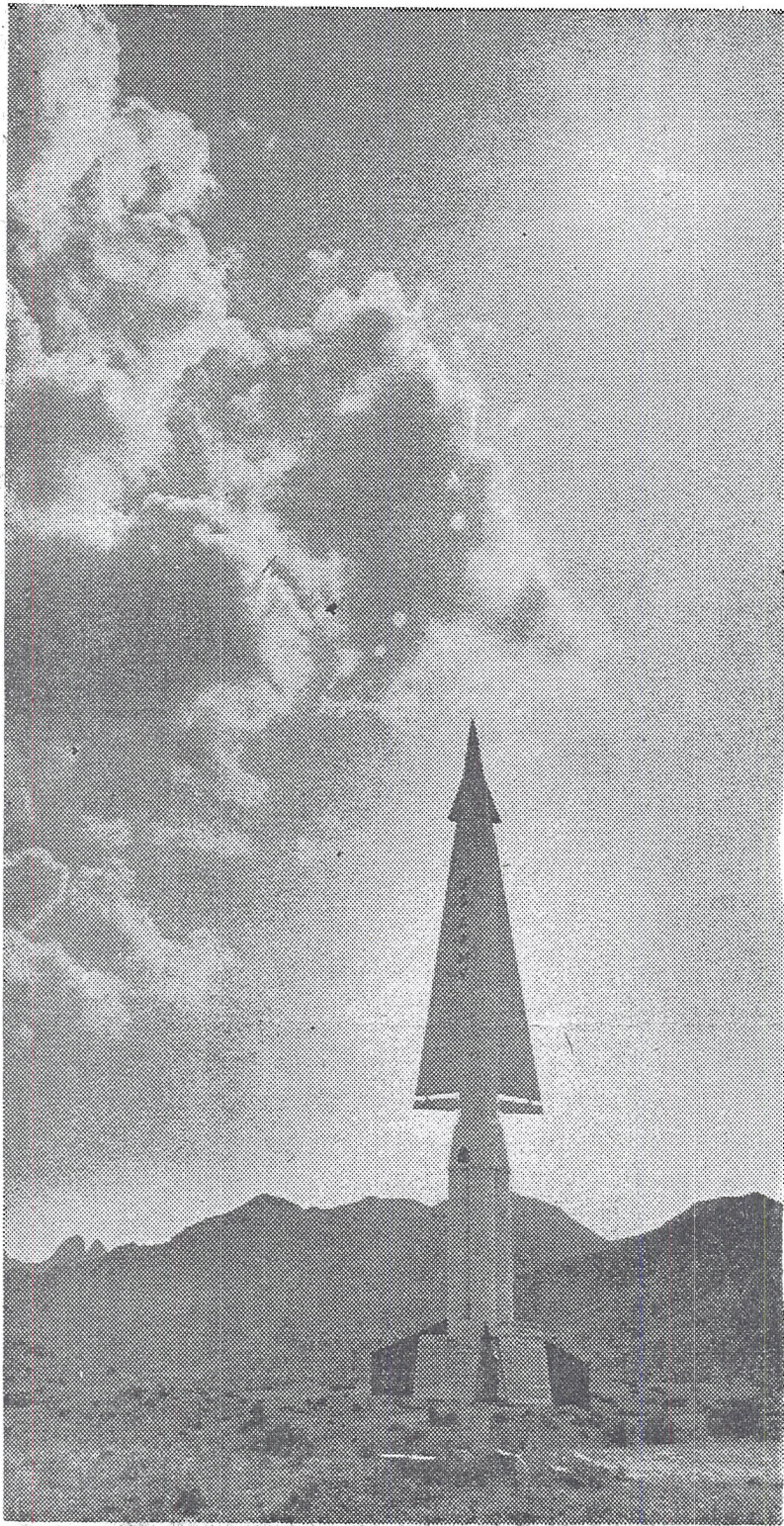
retired civil servant who was in charge of real estate at the White Sands base for 15 years. "I've heard that story at least 500 times. As far as I'm concerned, I've got more gold in my upper bridge than is in those mountains."

The center of interest is Victoria Peak, a 1,500-foot hill in the San Andres Mountains on missile range land about 25 miles northeast of Las Cruces. There are four major stories on the treasure's origin, said Mr. Ferdig, adding, "The trouble with treasure stories is that there's always a little truth in them."

One story involves a Jesuit missionary named Padre LaRue whose band of 40 gold-mining families was massacred in a punitive raid by Spanish soldiers in the early eighteen-hundreds. Another concerns renegades who robbed the Monterey Mint in 1743 and were in turn attacked by Apaches. A third story asserts that Geronimo hid Apache booty in the area.

And a fourth story, pieced together recently by Howard Bryan, a reporter for The Albuquerque Tribune, centers on another Apache war chief named Victorio. He bolted from the Mesquero reservation in 1879 and camped near Victoria Peak while plundering the countryside and raiding Wells Fargo stagecoaches.

Things got complicated in 1937, when Milton E. Noss, a self-assured chiroprapist with a string of arrests for drunk-

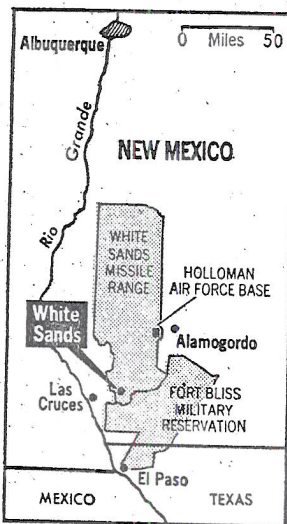


One of the missiles set up, with descriptive signs, at White Sands



Victoria Peak, foreground, in the San Andres Mountains on the White Sands Missile Range, is said to hold the hidden gold

U.S. Army



The New York Times/Oct. 13, 1973

eness, theft and practicing medicine without a license, said he had found the treasure. He was shot to death in 1949, but his first wife, Mrs. Ova Noss, now 77 years old, insists she was with him.

"It was on Nov. 7, we had 11 families on a hunting trip and I was doing the cooking," she said in an interview at her daughter's home in Clovis, N. M.

She said her husband, called "Doc," had come back to the camp that night and secretly told her of lowering himself with ropes down a crevice on Victoria Peak into caverns laden with coins, jewelry, guns, swords, letters, 27 human skeletons, and hundreds of metal bars that turned out to be gold.

Three days later the Nosses went back, and in the months that followed, Noss hauled gold bars, one at a time, with enormous effort up the narrow passageway, according to Mrs. Noss's daughter, Mrs. Letha Guthrie of Clovis, who said she was also there part of the time.

After more than a year's effort, he took five bars to the Denver Mint. Holes were drilled and it assayed at \$20.67 an ounce, said Mrs. Noss. But, she said, mint officers confiscated the five bars and gave her husband a receipt for \$97,000.

'I'll Get Eleanor'

"Doc was trying to obey the law but they grabbed our gold," Mrs. Noss said, "He blew up. He said I'll get F.D.R., hell, I'll get Eleanor."

Neither the Denver Mint nor the Federal records center in Denver, which has copies of gold receipts for that period, could find the Noss receipt, spokesmen there said.

Fearing a Federal swindle at the time, Noss returned to Victoria Peak, carrying out gold bars and hiding them, Mrs. Guthrie said. Then, in 1942 or 1943, she isn't sure, he tried to blast the tunnel bigger in order to haul up more gold bars at one time. He used too much dynamite, and the cave collapsed, sealing in the treasure.

"But before that happened, he must have hauled 500 or 600 bars of gold out of there and hid them," contended Mrs. Guthrie.

Some were sold on the black market, some were stolen but others remained hidden during the next seven years when Doc and a bevy

of partners attempted to dig back into the caverns, she asserted.

"You just couldn't trust anybody and still can't," she said. "And we were poor and I guess a little dumb. But even the nicest people we'd take in, they'd see gold and go berserk."

One partner, Charles Ryan, shot and killed Doc on March 5, 1949, in Hatch, N. M., after an argument. Acquitted on grounds of self-defense, Mr. Ryan testified that Doc had promised him 51 bars of gold in return for his \$27,000 investment.

Meanwhile, Noss's mining claims (for talc as a disguise) expired in 1948, and Mrs. Noss renewed them in her name. Noss divorced her, charging desertion. Mrs. Noss now says she never heard about the divorce and as-

serts that she is his legal widow.

Another woman, now Mrs. Violet Yancy of Fort Worth, says she married Noss in 1947, that she is his legal widow, and that he gave her 76 per cent interest in the treasure.

To further complicate things, rumors swirled about various factions smuggling some of the gold to Mexico in light planes. And on March 4, 1949, the day before Doc was shot, a small plane crashed near Victoria Peak killing the pilot and severely injuring Marvin Beckwith, son of the first Mrs. Noss. The family declines to discuss the incident now.

In 1955, the missile range was expanded and the Army closed Victoria Peak to outsiders. Mrs. Ova Noss said

she had filed papers retaining mineral rights in case the area opened up again.

In 1958, Leonard V. Fiege, then an Air Force captain stationed at nearby Holloman Air Force Base, and three other men, contended that while deer hunting they found a cave filled with gold bars. After three years they were given permission to go back to Victoria Peak and look, accompanied by the missile range commander, Maj. Gen. John G. Shinkle, military policemen and Treasury agents.

"We wanted to lay the matter to rest once and for all," said General Shinkle, who is now retired and lives in Cocoa Beach, Fla. "We gave him a lie detector test beforehand and it was apparently successful but he couldn't find anything."

In the meantime, Mrs. Noss said her "spies" illegally visited the peak and found military men excavating it. She called her lawyer, Philip Koury, of Kansas City, who phoned General Shinkle. Mr. Koury asserted that the General first denied the search was on but admitted it later when sworn statements from the "spies" were produced.

Captain Fiege could not be located.

In 1963, the Army consented to another search by a Denver mining company sponsored by the Museum of New Mexico. About \$250,000 was spent, core holes were drilled, seismic tests were taken, and nothing was found. But the matter would not rest.

Chester R. Johnson Jr., a museum archeologist at the time who wrote the official

report of the treasure's history, says the 1963 search was inconclusive because, for example, seismic geophones do not work well near the surface.

He also asserts that military security officers censored out of his report all references to military searches for the treasure. Mr. Bryan, The Albuquerque Tribune writer, said he had gone through a chunk of Mr. Johnson's memorabilia recently and found both the censored and uncensored drafts of the report. Mr. Fertig denied that the report had been censored.

Mrs. Noss and Mrs. Guthrie, meanwhile, say that they had heard about the 1963 search and rushed to the base, arriving the day before it ended. They insisted they were photographed, finger printed, harassed and not al-

lowed to go near the search area.

"They were searching in the wrong place," Mrs. Noss said. "The Army put those fellows in there blind knowing they wouldn't find anything."

The saga faded back into obscurity until the Watergate hearings, when John Dean, the dismissed White House counsel, testified before the Ervin Committee that F. Lee Bailey had approached John N. Mitchell, then Attorney General, for help in retrieving 292 bars containing 60 per cent gold and 40 per cent copper from the White Sands range.

Mr. Mitchell is said to have forwarded the matter to the White House.

Mrs. Noss believes Mr. Bailey's clients to be mili-

tary officers and perhaps some of her husband's old partners. Mr. Bailey will not say, but Mrs. Noss and her dozen or so partners have filed a \$1-billion Federal Court suit charging that the Government, the Secretary of the Army, several military officers and 200 John Does were conspiring to bilk her out of the treasure.

Representative Harold Runnels, a Democrat whose district includes the White Sands range, has proposed a joint Federal-state search for the treasure. He carries in his wallet a photograph of gold bars and old coins next to a flashlight he provided. One group of claimants took the flashlight and provided the photo as evidence that they knew the location of the treasure.