

WXPost

# Victorio Peak's Elusive Treasure

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"Gold is where you find it."

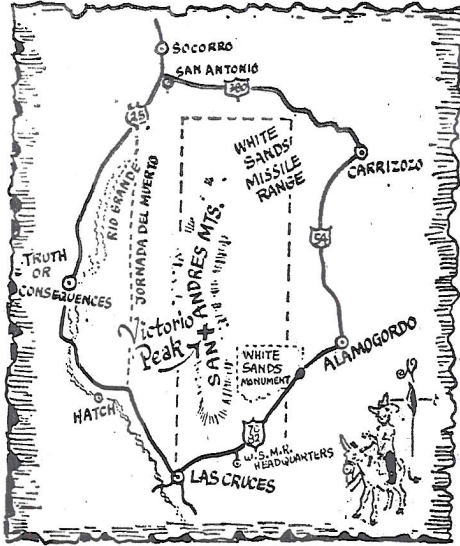
—Old Southwest U.S. cliché

By Sandy Rouser

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Take an oblique 18th-century Spanish document, persistent legends of a renegade Franciscan priest and his lost gold mine, marauding Indians, enslaved Indians and, in this century, at least one shooting death.

Combine with a crudely smelted, candy-bar-sized pound of metal, about half of which appears to be gold, a secret group of around 50 gold hunters represented by flamboyant criminal lawyer F. Lee Bailey, and you have, well, maybe nothing. Maybe 18,000 gold bars "stacked like cord wood" or 40 cubic feet of gold, or up to \$226 billion . . . or maybe nothing.

Gold fever is a consuming and highly contagious disease. It's become epidemic in this mountainous desert state, and is even creeping up on skeptics who have grown up hearing — and dismissing—stories of buried treasure, hidden gold mines, secret caches of gold and jewels from Montezuma, from Emperor Maximilian, from Indian bandits.



The Albuquerque Tribune

A map of the White Sands area.

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The germs of the latest waves of gold fever here surfaced, of all places, in John Dean's testimony before the Watergate committee in June 1973. Dean reported a March 1973 meeting

between F. Lee Bailey and then U.S. Attorney General John Mitchell at which Bailey said he represented a group of clients who knew where there was a cave filled with about 100 tons of gold bullion on Victorio Peak, a mountain in the San Andres chain, well within the borders of the White Sands missile range in South-Central New Mexico.

Bailey wanted federal immunity for his clients for unspecified crimes committed in connection with the treasure —presumably involving illegal possession of gold or trespassing on proving grounds or both. He also wanted help in getting the U.S. Army to permit his clients to enter the grounds, guarded by the Army, and remove the gold.

He still hasn't gotten his permission, but his efforts have:

- Involved the attorney general of New Mexico in a controversial contract under which the state (which leases White Sand's 4,000 square miles to the U.S. Army) is to receive 25 per cent of any treasure in exchange for state immunity to the Bailey clients, and help in getting on to the grounds.

- Provoked a law suit filed on behalf of the widow of a chiroprapist-miner who allegedly found the treasure in 1937, only to lose it again when a misplaced dynamite blast caused a rock slide, and who was, years later, shot to death by a mining partner in an argument over some of the gold bars.

- Given renewed credence to some of the more persistent New Mexican tales of buried treasure.

- Produced a roster of potential claimants to all or part of the treasure (if it exists) ranging from the Mexican government to alleged descendants of a lost colony, to descendants of 19th-century Apache chieftain Victorio, after whom the alleged treasure site is named.

- Excited estimates of the value of the treasure ranging from \$250 million to \$226 billion. If it is there at all.

*"In seven languages, seven signs, and language in seven foreign nations, look for the seven cities of gold. Seventy miles north of El Paso del Norte in the seventh peak, Soledad, these cities have seven sealed doors, three sealed toward the rising of the Sol sun, three sealed toward the setting of the Sol sun, one deep within Casa del Cueva de Oro, high noon, and receive health, wealth, and honor."*

—from a manuscript allegedly recovered in 1937 on Victorio Peak, from the lost Soledad Mine of Father LaRue allegedly written by LaRue in 1797.

Some New Mexican historians deny that there is any record proving that Father LaRue—also referred to as Padre LaRuz—ever existed at all. Still,

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Associated Press

Ova Noss, whose late husband found these relics in his search for the treasure.

ERWIN COMMITTEE HEARINGS, BOOK 3, P. 1001, PARA. 3



the story persists. And at least one New Mexican historian, author, and mining engineer, Henry I. James of Albuquerque, claims to have found confirmation of the LaRue story buried in ancient Mexican church records.

Son of a rich French nobleman, Philippe LaRue, goes the legend, was handsome, adventurous and distraught over a disastrous love affair, when he joined the Franciscans and came to Mexico in 1797. He was assigned by the church to lead a small colony of peons near the village of Chihuahua.

Now stories get muddled. Some of them picture LaRue as benefactor of the colony, leading "his people" to a rich gold vein, the Soledad Mine, he heard about from a dying soldier he befriended. Others see him as a renegade adventurer using Indian slaves to mine the ore. What is clear, though, is that he did not, as his vows required, tell church authorities either that he was moving his colony or that he had discovered a gold mine.

He and his 40-family colony were eventually massacred by Spanish dragoons, in the early 1800s, but managed to conceal the mine—or the treasure from the mine—so artfully that it stayed concealed until, perhaps, 1937. If, in fact, it really existed.

Milton E. (Doc) Noss was a hot-tempered, sometimes foot doctor, hunting guide, miner, barroom brawler and, some believe, an accomplished con-artist. He spent time in prison in New Mexico, was arrested at periodic intervals, once for impersonating a federal officer, and several times on a variety of drunk and disorderly charges.

In 1937, while leading a deer hunting party on Victorio Peak he stumbled upon a shaft hidden under a flat rock. Later, he and his then-wife, Ova, returned to the shaft, he managed to climb down to the bottom where he discovered a series of caves hundreds of feet below the surface.

According to interviews over the years with Ova Noss, one of two widows left by the ill-fated miner, Noss found quantities of jewels, Wells Fargo chests, old church relics, swords, Spanish smelting kettles, old coins, guns, boxes of letters and manuscripts which, reportedly, he eventually burned to prevent possible verification of other claims to the treasure. He also found 27 human skeletons, some mummified, some bound in a kneeling position

In a year-old interview with writer-historian Howard Bryan, of The Albuquerque Tribune, the now 78-year-old Mrs. Noss, who lives modestly in a trailer in Clovis, N.M., described how her late husband told her of "thousands of bars" of what he believed to be pig iron. At her insistence he hauled out some of the treasure and some of the bars, which, she said, turned out to be gold. (Over the years, however, at least some of the bars from the Noss discovery proved to be mostly copper.)

After several years of painstaking removal of the

treasure by hand, bit by bit, Noss attempted to dynamite a blocked passage, but succeeded only in producing a cavein that once more sealed the treasure within the capricious mountain. Noss spent years seeking backers and grub stakers to help him relocate the treasure, and he did manage to hide much of what he had removed before the cavein. Meanwhile he divorced Ova Noss and remarried.

The first Mrs. Noss continued to work at claims herself, and has spent most of her life since trying to persuade officials to let her continue her search. (The White Sands area was effectively closed to the public when the Army took over in 1955.)

Mrs. Noss apparently took possession of some alleged relics from the trove which she showed to Howard Bryan about a year ago. As for Noss himself, he was shot to death in 1949, still seeking his lost booty. The mining partner who shot him was later found to have acted in self-defense.

Last week in Santa Fe, Ova Noss filed suit against the Bailey group, New Mexico Attorney General David Norvell and others, in an effort to protect her claim to the treasure, which she believes is clearly the same as that described by Bailey and his unnamed clients. The second Mrs. Noss, who lives in Texas, also has legal counsel and also claims the bulk of the treasure.

*"The numerous stories of lost mines in the Southwest make interesting reading but generally are nothing on which to base a legitimate mining venture. Disregarding all folklore and fable, the existence of an ore body exposed in Victorio Peak by the caverns . . . there . . . is not only possible, but highly probable."*

—from a report filed by a New Mexico Bureau of Mines field engineer, Oct. 8, 1948.

The Noss discovery—and there have been enough witnesses to bits of the treasure including some who helped Noss lug bars and relics from the caves to lend strong credence to its existence—was not a mine, although the geology of the area is conducive to the existence of gold veins. (Frank DiLuzio, executive assistant to New Mexico Gov. Bruce King, and among the most skeptical state officials regarding the new treasure claims, points out that there have been many explorations for gold in the area. "There's no reason geologically why gold couldn't be found, except there wasn't any," he said.)

What Doc Noss apparently did find was a hiding place for somebody's treasure. Some historians are convinced that because old maps show Father LaRue's Soledad mine about 50 miles away from the Victorio Peak, Noss actually found the hidden treasure of the Apache, Victorio himself.

Regarded in some Southwest Indian communities as a leader greater than either Cochise or Geromino, Victorio was an Apache chieftan who eschewed reservation lines and, for almost a decade in the 1870s managed to keep the U. S. Cavalry in Southern New Mexico en-

gaged in some fruitless effort after another to protect the area from Victorio's guerilla-like raids on soldiers and settlers. Indeed, it was known that the peak that now bears his name was a favorite hiding place for his followers, and because some of the Noss relics go back only to the 19th century, the trove is likely Victorio's as Father LaRue.

Possibly, some believe, Victorio found the Soledad treasure and simply added his own loot, accounting for the LaRue documents and the Spanish kettles allegedly found by Noss.

The cavalry caught up with Victorio and his band of about 300 warriors in April, 1880, and wiped them out to the man.

Last week, at the request of Gov. King for evidence, representatives of the Bailey group produced what they said was a sample gold bar sawed from a larger piece from the horde. State officials sent the one-pound of yellowish metal to metallurgists at Los Alamos who, with possibly the world's most sophisticated equipment, are attempting not only to assay the metal but the carbon-date, and determine where and when it came from. (Preliminary tests showed about a 55 per cent content. Other test results are due soon.) State Attorney General Norvell says he has reason to believe the Bailey group has "some credible evidence" that there is treasure on White Sands, and that they can find it. The state has recommended that the Army give the group "12 daylight hours" to recover the treasure.

Lawyers for Mrs. Noss and others speculate that Army personnel stationed at White Sands at one time or another stumbled onto either the main treasure cave or the treasure retrieved and rehidden by Doc Noss just before his death. There are many rumors and some evidence that Army personnel have found at least part of the treasure. In her suit, Mrs. Noss charges that at least some of Bailey's unnamed clients "have at various times... entered the area of said Victorio Peak and have seized, unlawfully taken and carried away unknown quantities of the ... treasure ..."

The story of the treasure is managing to wrest some space away from impeachment on the front pages of Southwest newspapers. It has preoccupied state officials and has become an issue in New Mexico's current political campaigns. Since first word of the latest rediscovery of the lost treasure surfaced last year, the estimated value of the treasure has escalated proportionally to the escalation of the price of gold on foreign markets.

Nevertheless, some state officials privately speculate that the whole thing may be a hoax. Others are willing, even eager, to give the group a chance to prove it is not. The Army, badgered for years by treasure seekers who never found anything, and expressing concern at dangers from the hundreds of "live warheads scattered

around the area have so far expressed reluctance to permit search. But the fever is in the air.

On a recent local TV talk show, a woman listener called in to enthuse "why,

with all that gold, New Mexico could secede ..."

Meanwhile lurking in the background are area representatives of the U.S. Treasury Department—watching, and waiting.

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