

## Treasures of Owens Valley

By John Wardle Dixon  
*Desert Magazine* – October 1967

GOLD FROM different areas varies in characteristics caused by impurities in the gold and by the way the gold has been deposited. The old mint in San Francisco usually could tell the origin of the gold just by looking at it. An old prospector once told of taking some gold there to sell. When asked its origin, he said, "The Mother Lode."



"It did not come from the Mother Lode," he was challenged.

The prospector then admitted that the gold had come from Owens Valley. "That is better," said the foreman of the mint.



Thereby hangs the tale of a lost Owens Valley gold deposit, as told by Mr. John Gorman. There is gold around Lone Pine, California, that white man has never found, Gorman claims.

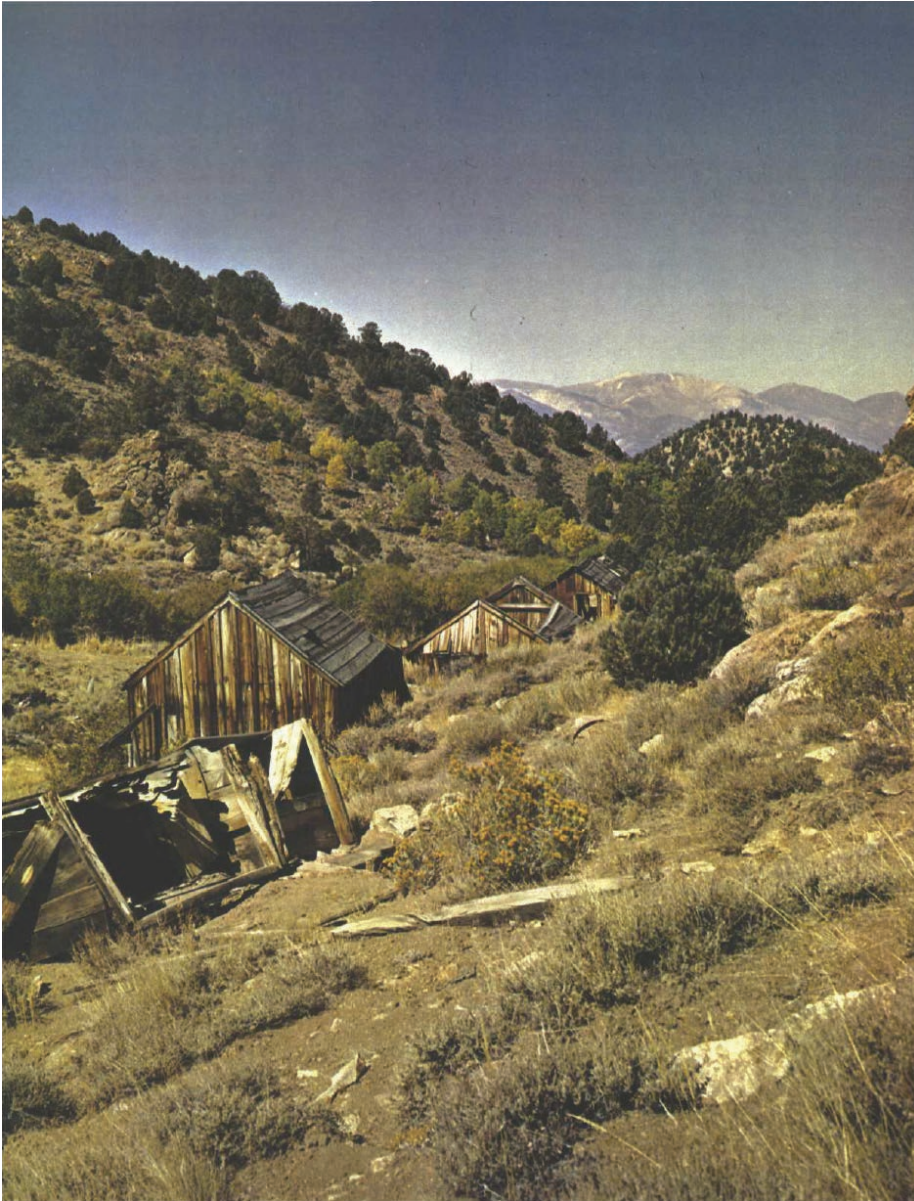
It was prior to the days when selling liquor to the Indians was prohibited and Lone Pine was celebrating. During the afternoon, a Piute brave became quite boisterous. When the saloon keeper decided not to serve him, the Indian responded by breaking up the furniture and glassware until he was seized, sobered up, and made to understand he must pay for his damages.



The next morning the Piute departed, but on the following day he returned with a buckskin bag containing more than enough placer gold to pay for his damages. When the men in the saloon asked where he got his gold the Indian wouldn't tell, so they told



him the gold was not enough. Then they tried to follow him when he went for more. The Indian slipped by their vigil, however. When he reappeared with more gold they tried to send him for more again, but he refused. In later years he admitted that he hadn't gone far, but he would never divulge his source.



The only placer gold known to exist in this area is in Mazuka Canyon, but it would have been impossible for the Indian to have traveled that distance overnight, in addition to crossing the Owens River which he would have had to accomplish. Then too, the gold from Mazuka Canyon shows more stream wear than the gold the Indian brought. Gold such as he possessed has not been found around Lone Pine since the 1870s, when this occurred.

A number of well-authenticated nuggets have been picked up in Owens Valley. S. G. Gregg found one in Little Pine Creek which he sold to the government for \$160. Two nuggets were found northeast of Bishop in a spring east of Chalfant's Valley. The writer has seen these. They were well-rounded nuggets with stream abrasions. None of the surrounding rock for miles on either side showed gold like this. During the 1930s, a John Arnie brought in a nugget from the Mazuka Canyon. It was about the shape of the first three fingers on a man's hand and was worth about \$300 in gold. The peculiar thing is that it came from the top of the hill. Other gold was found in Mazuka Canyon,

but it was in small grains and found on the other side of the ravine. No other large nuggets are reported from that area. This writer saw Arnie's nugget, too. It was abrasion-polished and a beautiful specimen.

The lost treasures of Owens Valley are not always found in mines, however. Ned B. Smith, who in the 1870s was the foreman on the Nancy Brady which plied between Swansea, Head of the Lake, Cottonwood and Cartago, tells this one.

"We had started in from Swansea on a windy afternoon, skirting along the north end of the lake to Head of the Lake, then fuming south along the west side of Owens Lake when the boat bucked like a bronco as the wind

hit it broadside. We thought the wagons and trailers on the boat were secure, but the pitching was so violent one of the trailers slid over the side, landing in the water with its tail end sticking in the mud and its tongue protruding above the water's surface. It was impossible to salvage the trailer wagon on that trip, even though it contained a load of bullion that had been sent from the Swansea smelter to be loaded on the wagons at Cartago.

"The next morning we came back from our run, taking provisions and freight that had come in on other wagons at Cartago. From there we went to Cottonwood Creek and to Head of the Lake. As we passed, we could see where we thought we had lost our trailer wagon. It was not impossible to pull the trailer back onto the steamboat, but all of the bullion had slipped back into the lake and the water was about 12 feet deep. There was no way to retrieve the bullion from those saline waters. Ever since, people have hunted for this treasure. Tales are told of a shipwreck, but they are untrue."

Nothing was ever found until the early 1930s. Then a Piute squaw brought in one of the ingots of bullion that she had found down in the old lakebed, now dry. The ingot was displayed in the Dow Hotel in Lone Pine for several months.

Somewhere in the northeast corner of the old lake bed there is still treasure buried in what used to be the mud of the lake, for it has never been found.

There were other objects of great value lost in the deserts of Inyo County. In the early part of this century a prospector named Mark Kerr went looking for ore "float" in the canyons on the east side of Saline Valley. Mark had just arrived from San Francisco and among his belongings were eight rolls of 1909 S.V.D.B. pennies in their original mint wrappings. Someone had told him that the mintage would be small for that year and the coins might increase in value. Near the end of his prospecting trip, he remembered that the pennies had been in his pack when he packed his belongings on the burros at Dodds Spring in the southeast corner of Saline Valley, but when he checked his packs in the lower Warm Spring canyons, the pennies were not in the kyacks. Because he had unpacked two or three times between Dodds Spring and Warm Spring, he didn't consider it worth his time to go back and search for them.

Years later, however, people started collecting pennies and the price of the 1909 S.V.D.B. pennies soared to great values. Mark thought about looking for them, but the area was so vast he didn't attempt it.

Somewhere in the desert sand of east Saline Valley there is hidden quite a treasure.

The most sought after lost mine in this area is the old Cement Mine near Mammoth and Mono Lakes. Authenticated evidence suggests that a rich deposit did exist. The cement was said to be filled with gold, like raisins in a pudding, and one small sack of ore produced \$25,000 in gold. In his book, *Gold, Guns, and Ghost Towns*, W. A. Chalfant related the authenticated facts and Mark Twain also mentioned it in *Roughing It*. Official records state that the gold was there. Thousands of people have looked for the gold-laden cement in vain. The old Mammoth, May Lundy and Bodie mines were discovered by prospectors searching for the lost cement mine, but these were all gold in quartz veins. The "Cement Mine" was gold contained in a red cement-like material.



*Cerro Gordo, famous old mine of Owens Valley.*

A new slant was introduced by "Indian Ed" of Benton, California, as he was known to the white people. While reminiscing about the days before the white man came, he told of the Indian's fear of possessing gold. "Yes, it was a long time ago, " he recalled. "I was only a small boy, but I went with some adult warriors to see the white man digging. We stayed hidden, but we watched all of the time. Nobody knows where the place is now." Old Ed was silent for a minute or two, "Many have looked," he continued, "but they look too high up, way too high. The place is now buried in willow and birch."

Somewhere in the damp willow and birch area at the headwaters of the Owens River, there is some exceedingly rich "red cement," probably of volcanic tuff origin.