

The Lost Cement Mines

By Walter Chalfant



THE GEOLOGIC story of Mammoth Canyon is as turbulent as the history of its settlers. The canyon, in the eastern flank of the High Sierra, is dominated by gray Mammoth Mountain, 11,034 feet, coated deep with a frothy pumice that mantles the slopes and ridges thereabouts. At one point in the canyon is a geyser, sometimes hardly more than a boiling, steaming caldron, sometimes a feathery column of water and steam thirty to eighty feet high. Unbearable heat can be encountered by digging to a shallow depth in the neighboring hills. A little farther down, another geyser pours its volume into the bottom of a stream and fumaroles appear along the banks.

A few miles to the northeast, the Mono Craters range raises its twenty symmetrical cones, one to a height of 9,000 feet. They are for the most part coated with pumice, ejected from molten masses far below. At two points lava poured forth in great rivers and cooled in dense black masses terminating in abrupt cliffs. With all the other outpourings came a flow of material which hardened into tufa covering many square miles. All these volcanic forces have either ceased or greatly diminished.

Near the summit of one of the cones a pine tree reached a diameter of four feet before it succumbed to age and the elements. Comparison by ring counts with trees of equal diameter felled by loggers established its age as 450 years.

Westerly from the heights, creeks tumble to join the San Joaquin River and add to the volume it pours over eighty-foot Rainbow Falls. There too is the Devil's Postpile, a hill of basaltic columns which has been created a National Monument. Sixty-two lakes can be counted within a radius of twenty-five miles.

But Mammoth won at least coast-wide attention in 1878 and 1879 not for its 'ts natural attractions but for the mineral wealth in its hills. What led up to those discoveries was the hunt for the "Lost Cement Mines."

Versions of the finding of what became known as the "Lost Cement Mines" differ only in minor details. Mark Twain, in *Roughing It*, says that three German brothers, escaping from an Indian attack on the plains, reached the Sierra at the head of Owens River. There they 'found a ledge, "as wide as a curbstone," of rusty, reddish cement, two-thirds of it pure gold. Taking out about twenty-five pounds each of the ore, they covered up the ledge and resumed their journey. Two of the three perished in the mountains; the third won through to a west-side mining camp, physically and mentally deranged by his sufferings. The few fragments of ore he still retained created great excitement. He refused to go back but gave to one Gid Whiteman a description and a crude map of the region. Then began the search for the fabulous treasure. Twain's account, published in 1872, was confirmed by a pioneer who was connected with the hunt.

Writing in 1879 from Mammoth, where probably there were men who had shared in the great hunt, J. W. A. Wright, the *San Francisco Post* correspondent, gave the following version:

The find was made by two men who had been with a California-bound train which came across the southern deserts. They left the train and reached the Sierra at the head of the Owens River. The year is stated as 1857. In traveling through what they described as "the burnt country," they sat down to rest near a spring or stream. Here they observed a curious-looking rock and began pounding it up. They saw in it a quantity of what appeared to be gold. One insisted that it was gold; the other laughed at him. The believer took about ten pounds of the stuff with him. They crossed the rough mountains successfully and followed the San Joaquin River down until it brought them to Millerton. The one with the gold became consumptive and went to San Francisco for treatment. He hoped to return to the treasure, but became so ill that he had to give up the idea. Having no money with which to pay the physician who had taken care of him, a Dr. Randall, he gave him what ore he had left, a map of the country, and a description minute in its particulars.

Dr. Randall arrived at old Monoville in the spring of 1861. He engaged men to accompany him to what was called Pumice Flat, now said to be eight miles north of Mammoth Canyon. He located a quarter-section of land there, near what became known as Whiteman's Camp.

Randall came back the next year, and employed Gid Whiteman as fellow prospector and foreman and a force of eleven men. From that time Whiteman became the foremost figure in the search that was still maintained when Wright's letter was written in 1879. With his map as a guide he and his men prospected the entire 160 acres. They found reddish lava or cement. Specimens shown by Randall were undoubtedly rich in gold; many reliable people who saw them declared them at least half composed of flakes of the precious metal. It is now supposed, said Wright, that these were pieces of the ore that the dying man had given him; but, as the man had told nothing, the impression was that he had found it in his late prospecting.

A tremendous excitement was the result. Prospectors poured out of Aurora and Monoville day and night. Never was there a greater furor about a mining find. During the whole summer of 1862 hundreds of prospectors hunted for the red cement; but they found nothing like it. From 1862 to 1879 not a year passed but from one to twenty parties spent part of the summer searching for the treasure. Some of the men abused the doctor and said that he was a humbug; others thought he was an earnest believer in the existence of such a ledge. Wright says of the Twain account: "The real facts of the original find were not so well known then as now. Friend Mark was giving us humor rather than history."

Good evidence exists that such red cement rich in gold as that described was found in 1862 during Dr. Randall's search, though not by him or Gid Whiteman, and possibly not on his 160 acres, by two men of their party who concealed the fact and used the discovery for themselves alone, securing thousands of dollars from the ledge. According to well-authenticated statements all that prevented them from taking out more were the events of the Owens River war and the death of the finders before they could avail themselves of their valuable but dangerous knowledge.

Wright asserts that at least seven men were known to have been killed by the Indians while looking for the cement during the Indian war. Other statements agree as to the number of lives the search cost but indicate that some of the murdering was done by white men. Without detailing all the treachery and bad faith that developed at one time or another, let us tell of one Farnsworth, who figured in a further story of the cement mines.

Farnsworth met a man named Robert Hume in Carson, Nevada, and learned that he had some money. Farnsworth showed him rich quartz from a Mariposa County mine. He said it had come from the head of Owens River; if Hume would go with him, and would put up the money for a small mill with which to work the claim there, he could have a half interest. Hume accepted, and took with him \$700 to be used toward buying

the mill in Mariposa. Not long afterward Hume was found murdered and suspicion centered on Farnsworth, who thereupon disappeared.

Now comes the amazing part of this story, for which the sole authority is the letter of the correspondent, Wright. His writing on subjects which can be checked appears to be quite accurate.

Late in May 1869 two men giving their names as Kent and McDougall arrived in Stockton, California. They remained only long enough to outfit with horses, wagons, and provisions. They went to where the San Joaquin River leaves the foothills, arranged to leave their wagon and horses at a supply station there, and engaged a guide and pack stock. They told the station keeper they had friends in Mono and Inyo whom they wished to visit. The guide, an Indian, returned later with the pack animals and said he had taken the men to the pumice mountain (now Mammoth Peak). Their visit was repeated every year to and through the summer of 1877.

Late in 1877 a man fell senseless and paralyzed on a San Francisco street. Prior to his ensuing death he told a father confessor that he was McDougall and that he had become acquainted with Kent, who said he knew of a good thing in California. Kent wanted to go to the place, and engaged McDougall to accompany him on a guarantee of \$1,500-a-year payment.

McDougall related that when the guide had taken them to the vicinity of the pumice mountain they went a short distance north and established a camp on the San Joaquin side of the mountains. Kent said they were not far from what he believed to be one of the richest gold deposits in the state. He had found it in 1861, but the Indian war and other things had prevented him from reaping benefit from his knowledge.

The two began to build a rough cabin in a secluded spot, north of the old Indian trail that crossed the pass. To reach it they followed along the base of the range. Going up a small stream they crossed a second creek just below where it rushed down the mountain in a cascade. It fell over a peculiar little grotto in reddish lava. This grotto was a symmetrical concave, oval in shape, about five feet high, four feet wide, and three feet deep. A thin clear sheet of water poured in front. A small amount of fertile soil had accumulated at the bottom, and in it grew tufts of grass and other plants.

Their cabin was at length erected about twenty rods from this fall, facing eastward. Here the mountain rises precipitately, at an angle of over seventy degrees, toward the top of the pumice mountain, which towers four thousand feet higher. About eighty or one hundred feet up, a terrace gradually slopes back and is thickly covered with evergreen and undergrowth. The stream is only four or five feet wide at the fall, but below it spreads to fully twenty feet. (These particulars are reprinted for the benefit of "cement" hunters of the present day.) Camp made, Kent and McDougall cautiously crossed the great divide to the headwaters of Owens River. After searching, Kent identified certain landmarks and found a reddish ledge rich in free gold, though not very wide.

They took out gold to the amount of \$40,000 that summer. They ran this into bars of about \$2,000 each and distributed it among their packages when they moved out, in order to avoid exposing any of their treasure. When they left they covered the marks of their work and hastened to San Francisco. Kent paid McDougall the money due him and transferred the bulk of the gold to Chicago. McDougall told how the secret work was continued until the summer of 1877, and declared that they took out each year from \$25,000 to \$50,000's Worth of gold, amounting in all to from \$350,000 to \$400,000.

On the return of Kent and McDougall in 1877, Kent heard of the location of the Alpha and other claims at Mammoth and that a town was being built up. Satisfied that the whole country around there would soon swarm with prospectors, McDougall and Kent hastily secured as much gold as they could, thoroughly hid the traces of their work, and departed.

Who was the man that McDougall had served? Was it Farnsworth, returned to garner the profits of the discovery that he and Hume had made; and for which, together with the money that Hume carried, he had murdered his associate?

Excerpt taken from *Tales of the Pioneers*
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