

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN HUGH d'AUTREMONT AND BERNICE MCGEE

Bernice and Jack McGee had written an article, "Invitation to a Ghost Walk", that appeared in the April, 1966 issue of True West magazine. The article involved Clarence Mitchell's interpretation of the Peralta Stone Maps.

Hugh contacted the McGee's soon after the article appeared and complimented them on the article and related some of his own history in the Superstitions. He was in the Superstition Mountains working with a crew that Barry Storm had organized to search for the Lost Dutchman Mine in the winter of 1937-1938.

There were 23 letters from d'Autremont to the McGee's over a period of about 5 years (1966-1971). Only a couple of letters from the McGees have survived so it is frequently a one-way conversation. Since neither d'Autremont nor the McGee's were treasure hunters, that subject was seldom broached.

Hugh's son was a Green Beret in Viet Nam and there are two letters that he sent to William but he made copies and also sent them to friends and family. Bernice received one of these copies.

Hugh was interested in writing a book about some of his experiences and he received a lot of encouragement from Bernice. His first manuscript was something he called "Rails North" about his early years riding the rails as a hobo. That book failed to materialize but Hugh persevered and in 1971 his book "West of Dawn" was published.

In the preface of "West of Dawn", Hugh writes; "This is a true story with real people."

If you have a detective bent, you may see some minor discrepancies in the book and this correspondence, but getting a book published is not easy and the writer is always looking for hooks to create a book that flows and maintains your interest.

In these letters, we can gain some sense of d'Autremont as a person and for me, he comes across as a very down to earth individual who had a wide range of interests.

Hugh D'Autremont was born December 30, 1915 and died June 21, 1991 in Los Angeles, California.

Garry Cundiff – April 2, 2010

d'AUTREMONT - HELMS & ASSOCIATES

CONSULTING MECHANICAL ENGINEERS

6311 N. FIGUEROA STREET LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90042

255-7121

11 Mar 66

Jack & Bernice McGee,
c/o True West Magazine,
P. O. Box 3668,
1012 Edgecliff Terrace,
Austin, Texas, 78704.

Dear Friends:

Having read your story "Invitation to a Ghost Walk" I would like to say that I enjoyed this very well written article. It is not often that I have anything in common with professional authors but in this case I do, having spent considerable time in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona. In fact, each time I read a "Superstition" story I have the feeling that I should do one myself. Some day I may do so.

In preparing such an article, it is obvious that you have read considerable and have performed some research. It may be fortunate that my opinions were not known to you as I would hate the thought of discouraging some of your conclusions in any way. However, I would like to add to your knowledge (for what it is worth) in the following manner:

BACKGROUND:

In the winter of 1937 & 38 the Great Depression still hung like a blanket over the United States. I was just completing a temporary job with the Bell Telephone Company and was preparing to leave on an Archeological Expedition to Honduras. In retrospect I am still amazed at the number of promotion schemes afoot at this time. Most of them failed thru lack of capital. As our expedition was delayed I had time to investigate an advertized proposal to search for the fabulous "Lost Dutchman" Mine in the Superstitions. This was my first contact with Barry Storm, author, hobo and Jack-of-all-Trades. From Storm and other sources I learned of the Cliff Dwellings on Geronimo Head.

Armed with this data and a "Hard Sales" approach I negotiated a contract with the Curator at the L. A. County Museum for the excavation of the Kitchen-Middens and floors at these Cliff Dwellings, to maintain a proper log, and to ship my findings to the Museum C.O.D. monthly. I still am amazed that I was able to consummate this contract as I was completely without practical experience except in the Mining field. I think they were sold on my enthusiasm.

A young fellow from Wisconsin, Gene Holman, joined with me. I then combined expeditions with Storm and his party of two as they had the transportation. I planned to spend two or three winter months in the mountains. One of Storm's members was Walt Upton, an experienced mining engineer, with whom I became associated on a mining venture in Mexico the following year. It was agreed between Storm and myself that our missions would be mutually supporting but it didn't work out that way. I ended up doing all of the Archeological work and also helped on most of the prospecting. However, I enjoyed every bit of it.

PROSPECTING:

I will ignore my efforts at the Cliff Dwellings and describe the prospecting phase as it is more to the point. At this time, Barry Storm was a romantist and knew nothing of prospecting although in later years he turned out to be a fair mineralogist.

The basic plan was established by Walt Upton: This was simply to cut samples in every gulch in the mountains right down to bed rock. These diggings were stored in canvas sacks, numbered and taken to Base Camp in Boulder Canyon (we lived in a cave) where they were panned out for color each night. Our water was dipped out of pot holes in the nearby dry stream bed of Boulder Canyon and was our only source of water in that area. The point of this program is that it didn't matter whether the Peralta gold veins were covered by the Apaches or not. If they existed at all, natural erosion over great periods of time would result in a downhill flow of decomposed vein matter and its resulting gold particles would be deposited at low points in the arroyo's and watersheds. Once we located a concentration of color at any site, we would work uphill to the feed point by trial and error ditching and panning, no matter how deep.

The canyons we worked were all watersheds from Weaver's Needle as we were assured by Storm that the Peralta veins were in that vicinity. These canyons included Boulder, Needle, La Barge, Peters, Whitlaw and Tortilla Creeks. The facts are that rarely did we find a pinpoint of gold, even in the most favorable locations. It is true that "gold is where you find it" but these results merely confirmed our original opinion that this section of the Superstition Mountains was not favorable to lode deposits. To begin with, the only granite we found were huge boulders in canyons which were the remains of morains from the "Wisconsin" ice sheets that must have picked them up in the Four Peaks Country to the north and deposited them in the local canyons. It is true that granite formations can lie under the sedimentary "Country" rock and fractures from the collapsing dome of a batholith will pass thru the overlying material but we found no evidence of such on the surface except for 2 huge quartz dikes, each about 70 yards wide, in parallel, and about 1/4 mile apart; strike 300° and a 0° dip. This material ran about 50¢ per ton and obviously was of no value.

Our real interest in these dikes, however, was that they were a lead in that often (in such instances) side fractures of much smaller widths lead off at an angle. Mining history has several examples where these tributary veins (not necessarily formed at the same time of the original dike) are filled with commercial ore. Walt and I explored the entire length of both sides of each dike and found no evidence of secondary fracturing. The dikes were firm with little or no overburden adjacent so that our hope that the "Seventeen Peralta Veins" emitted from these dikes was abandoned.

INTERFERENCE:

Upon entering these mountains we had been advised by Storm to be armed with revolvers for protection. I felt personally that this was a waste of money and was an expression of Storm's romanticism. I was only half right in that what we really needed were rifles. There were at least two "kooks" living in the mountains who trailed us everywhere we went. We found the same prints each day on our return to Base Camp wherever we had crossed a sandy stream bed. I saw this bearded pair only once where going up-wind and dropping down to a saddle below Spanish Mesa (which you call Black Top Mt.) They carried rifles and upon seeing our party disappeared in haste and we could not track them. I can only guess at their motives.

At this time, the town of Mesa still had a hitching rail on the front street. There was no habitation any nearer to the mountains other than the Sweetwater Ranch. During this era, there were a lot of "wanted" people in Arizona. These mountains made a good hideout. Also, over the years, many crackpot prospectors had spent a lot of time looking for the "Lost Dutchman" mine and may have felt we were pre-empting their rights. After I left the mountains (Upton and Storm remained) I received a post card from Upton who advised me that they were fired upon but gave little further details.

Incidentally, I remember putting the fear of God into 2 quail hunters from Mesa when I stopped them at gun point to check their boot prints against the peculiar markings of the ones that had been trailing us. No telling what stories they carried back to town about a tall bearded desperado!

TRAIL SIGNS:

I had observed several "Spanish" rock markings including "Sunbursts" and "Oro", all of which were located for me by Barry Storm. Your article goes into these markings to great extent so I will pass on to you an experience:

Our party normally split in 2 sections for a particular day's mission. Gene Holman and I, on one particular day, were after fresh meat (a Javelina or a rustled Sweetwater Ranch steer) and were coming back via La Barge Canyon empty handed. We saw a man on a side hill among some rocks. Thinking it might be one of the "kooks" we stalked him, taking advantage of every bit of cover. It turned out to be none other than Barry Storm who was chiseling "Spanish" signs into a huge rock. We backed away without his seeing us as we did not want to embarrass him.

Later, I had occasion to critically analyze some of these signs. In Barry's presence I would take a knife or a nail and scratch into the nicks so as to see if it made a contrast with the lighter color within the original nick. It didn't. Storm's comment was that it took a lot more than 100 years for the sun to bake the nick to a darker color. I never had the opportunity to check this with the Indian Petroglyphics but, as you can see, I had reason to doubt his statement. I was with Storm when he added chalk to some of these signs prior to photographing them. The chalk, of course, gave greater contrast and made them more identifiable in the photographs which were later used in his book "Thundergod's Gold", the basis for the film "Lust for Gold" starring Glen Ford and Ida Lupino. Note that I am not saying that Storm made all these signs as we only saw him making one of them.

CONCLUSIONS:

Our party liked Storm. At no time did we want to say or do anything to damage his ego. (I later learned that this was impossible!) Never-the-less, with the possible exception of the Englishman, Fred Allan, we were reasonably educated, objective and rational people. We had many an opportunity to compare notes and formed several conclusions based upon minute study, investigation and familiarity with over 300 square miles of the back of the Superstitions. We had also heard so many of Storm's stories concerning the Peralta's, the Dutchman, Adolf Ruth, etc., so that it was literally coming out of our ears. These conclusions were:

1. It is geologically impractical and is actually impossible for the Peralta veins to be on any of the Weaver's Needle watersheds or we would have found the evidence at bed rock or in rock traps of the canyon low points. I have never met a real mining man that did not agree with me.

2. The historical evidence of the Peralta's and the Dutchman cannot be very well doubted. There was no question in our minds but that these findings were at what was later called Goldfield (down the watershed) on the Salt River. If not there, it must have been in the Four-Peak Country which is also geologically favorable for vein material. I know of no better place for the Dutchman to lead his trackers than into the upper Superstitions and then loose them.

3. In the last 100 years a lot of people have prospected this area or have hid out at the few springs. For divers and possibly diabolical reasons we believe that many of these trail signs have been added in recent times. For example: new maps are always turning up. During the Great Depression, one could buy several varieties in Phoenix, all of which led to a certain point at which the trail was lost. Most were too complicated to be the handiwork of a 19th Century Spaniard. In order to justify such a map sale, it was part of the deal that the seller act as a guide for which he was paid or at least got his grub. It is not hard to see that for such a map to appear valid it was necessary for the designer to create a route, mark Saguero's and chip rocks, all in such a way as to make them appear as ancient as possible. One can take solvable chemicals and coat new rock chippings to give it an aged appearance. Storm couldn't afford the cost or probably didn't think of it. Also, in order to build a reputation for a certain map and allow its validity to circulate thru the "grapevine", it proved smart to take a local citizen of good character (often a member of the Don's Club in Phoenix) on a free ride. This person could be easily guided to what he thought were his own conclusions. Having been in the mining business on and off for 30 years I have observed this "confidence" approach in several states.

4. We always believed that the Peralta Party (once they learned the country) used the route between Goldfield, by Weavers Needle, then south to Queen's River for very practical reasons: it was the only route on which they could be sure of watering their stock. The same applies to any other traveler and who knows who marked the trail?

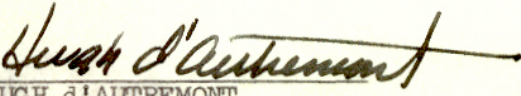
I would like to comment on your photo of the pot-holed rock (page 16). Your conclusion that these holes are the result of crushing ore by hand is in error when you stop to reconsider. First, if it were done so, the holes are too deep and allow no place for crushed material to set while crushing other unbroken rock. Second, how could volume be obtained? It would take a month for one man to crush a mere ton of ore. Even so, the labor and time required to cup out the pitiful results is simply too much for siesta-minded Mexicans. In that they had horses and mules it is much more likely that they constructed an Arrasta on the Salt River, having sufficient water, and used their mules to drag a rock over the ore while harnessed to the conventional center pole.

The explanation of the pot-holed rock can be found in Boulder Canyon and many other canyon carved in sedimentaries: First, a small rock comes to rest in an expansion fracture in the exposed bed rock of a stream bed. Next, a water flow stirs this rock so that it revolves around in this small trap and may even percolate. If it is washed out or worn out, another rock takes its place. In the meantime, the rock rounds out the hole and deepens it. Over millions of years, the stream bed may move a bit and erodes deeper in a new course. The old bed then decomposes and the rock containing the pot holes itself becomes a piece of float.

Please advise me where you found "acres of stumps". What kind of trees were they? The only sizeable trees I noticed were about 6 pines on Campbell's Bluff (Bluff Spring Mt.). We didn't explore the lower southern watersheds.

Having spent over 2 months in the Superstitions (on an unbalanced diet) there are many interesting experiences I have been thru and which would be fun to reminisce with you if you ever have the opportunity to visit myself and family in the Los Angeles Area. Please do.

Sincerely yours,


HUGH d'AUTREMONT

Hd'A:oh