The Lost Dutchman Legend

BY ROBERT BLAIR

ONE HOT June day in 1931 a sixty-five-year-old man, crippled, and walking with a cane was guided into the lonely reaches of Arizona's Superstition Mountain by two cowhands from a neighboring ranch. Adolph Ruth, a retired civil servant from Washington, D. C. was not a greenhorn prospector; he had in fact broken his leg some years earlier while searching for a California mine which, ironically, may have been the Lost Pegleg. Though the fracture had been a bad one, Ruth did not forswear his interest in lost mines; he knew little of the Arizona mountains, but he had what he thought were compelling clues to the location of a famous gold mine within the Superstition range.

When two weeks had passed and the elderly adventurer did not return, searching parties were formed and the mountains were scoured. It was six months before his ultimate fate was discovered. First a skull, then later a skeleton, was found. The personal effects and physical evidence proved the remains to be those of the unfortunate Ruth. News accounts of the discovery contained much speculation that the explorer had been near to finding the famous Lost Dutchman Mine.

The mention of the fabled mine, plus the horrifying fact that the victim had apparently been beheaded, resulted in extensive press coverage of the event. With the death of Ruth, the modern legend of Superstition Mountain was established, and continues to grow with subsequent killings and shooting affrays in the years since, for it is the astonishing number of murders, some of them unsolved, that has given the Superstition story its added dimension of danger and mystery. The American West abounds in legends of lost mines and buried treasure, real and imaginary, but nowhere, perhaps not even in the Klondike of Dangerous Dan McGrew, have so many men apparently lost their lives.

A rigid orthodoxy binds the telling of tales of lost mines. The plots are as stereotyped as soap opera stories, and the many variations on the Lost Dutchman theme embody all that is typical in Western dramaturgy: white bearded prospectors, treacherous Indians, perfidious white men, lost gold, stolen maps, with murders, massacres and mystery enough to satisfy a whole generation of television writers.

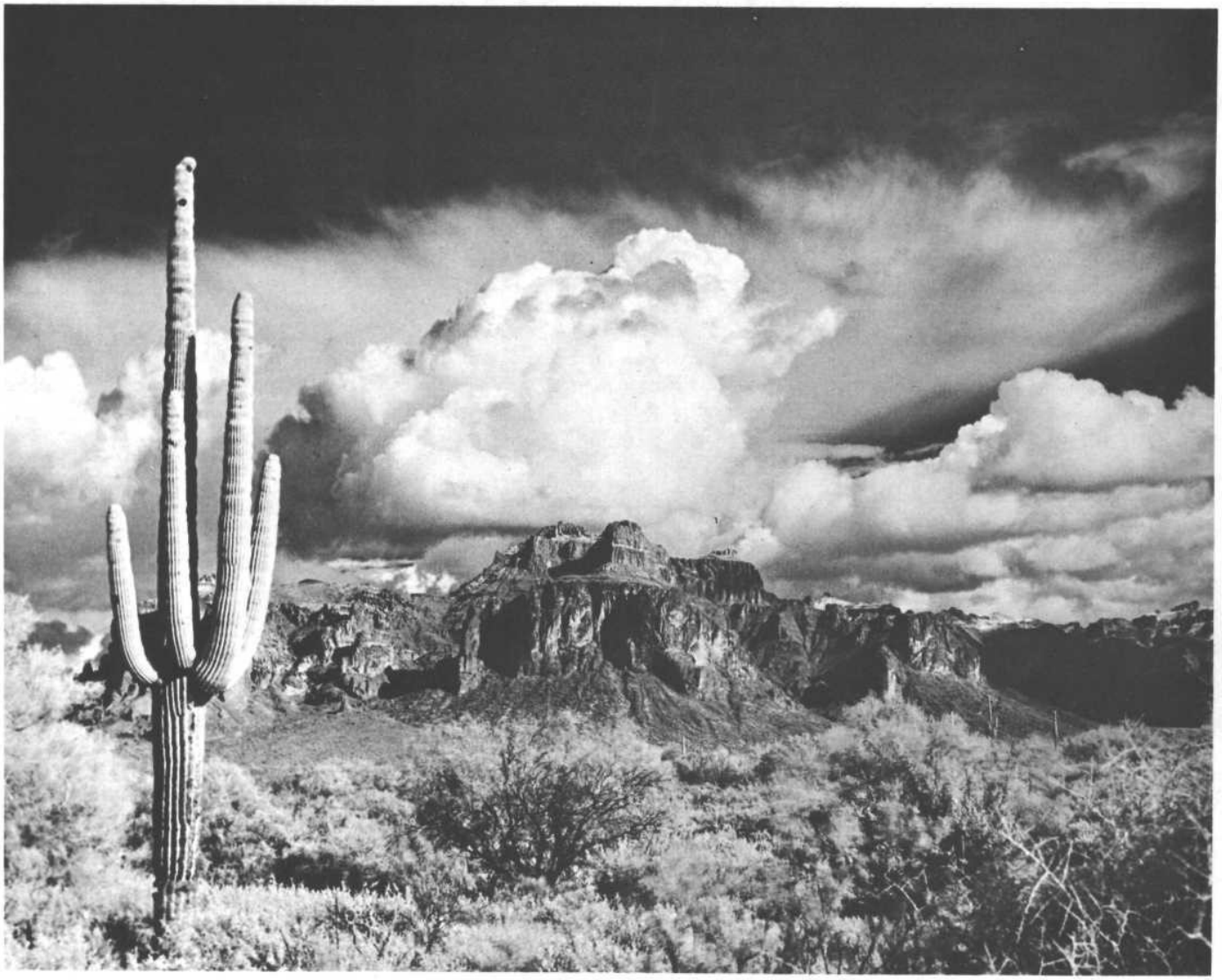
The "Dutchman" was actually a German immigrant named Jacob Walzer, known locally by a variety of names such as "Old Snowbeard," or simply "Jake." He died in 1891, and is buried in an unmarked grave in a Phoenix cemetery after thoroughly mystifying the residents of that city for over 20 years. It was Walzer's practice, particularly after partaking liberally of Phoenix beer, of boasting about his rich mine in the Superstitions that focused attention on that particular range as a possible gold site. His stories, embellished and distorted by succeeding generations of tale-spinners, have become the legend of the Lost Dutchman.

In it usual telling, the mine was originally discovered by the Peralta family of Sonora, Mexico. Working in the vicinity of Superstition Mountain in the 1840s, they are thought to have developed a number of highly productive gold deposits. With the pending transfer of southern Arizona to U. S. jurisdiction in 1848, the Peraltas are said to have assembled a large number of Mexican workers in order to recover as much as possible from their mines before the territory became overrun with Americans. Unluckily, the sudden appearance of such large numbers of men and animals caused the fierce Apache residents of the region to conclude that their mountain stronghold was being invaded.

Shortly after the arrival of the large

These prehistoric petroglyphs have been called treasure symbols by uninformed persons. They were here long before the Dutchman.

The Superstitions in a dramatic mood.



mining party under the command of Miguel Peralta, Apache bands began a series of merciless raids. The Mexicans, unable to withstand the massive assault, fled frantically with their pack mules and their gold, attempting to reach the safety of the flatlands at the northwest end of the Superstition Range. They were cut off, so the story goes, and died virtually to the last man after a pathetic last stand in a steep box-canyon at the northwest end of the mountain.

After this massacre of 1848, the Indians held the mountains uncontested for nearly 20 years, though a few adventurers reportedly found encouraging signs of gold during this period of Apache occupation. Several fanciful anecdotes relate to this time, with references to Weaver's Needle as a conspicuous landmark near the alleged gold strikes. For one improbable reason or another, none of these latter finders ever returned to file a claim.

Jacob Walzer appears in the story in the late 1860s after reportedly having worked for a time at the great Vulture Mine in Wickenburg. With a fellow miner named Weiser, he made his way southeast towards Florence, Arizona, now the county seat of Pinal County. Somewhere along the way the two Germans are preseumed to have found the fabled gold deposit, a strike of such incredible richness that milling was not required—the gold could be recovered by hand-crushing and sorting methods!

According to one account, the two partners worked their mine in peace until about 1879, when the unpredictable Apaches struck once more, this time killing Weiser. (Other sources intimate that

old Jacob murdered his partner, later placing the blame on the Indians.) Walzer managed to escape from the mountains after first carefully concealing all signs of the mine.

Crushed in spirit following the death of his partner, Walzer settled in Phoenix, returning to the gold mine only a few times to retrieve portions of the caches of selected ores which he and Weiser had accumulated during happier days. It is reported that when the old miner set out for the mountain, some 40 miles way, he was followed by hordes of Phoenicians bent on discovering the location of his celebrated mine. Somehow, the foxy Walzer invariably managed to elude his pursuers, and return to the city with a fresh supply of gold.

After his death in 1891, friends of old Jacob tried without success to follow the few vague hints and clues that he had given of the location of the great bonanza. Some accounts describe a map originally given to Walzer's housekeeper, but later stolen. Dozens of bogus copies of this "map" have been sold over the last half century, some for hundreds of dollars, some for lost lives.

With the unexplained killings in the decades after the Dutchman's death, the legend has come to include other fantastic details, such as an assertion that an Apache curse hangs on Superstition Mountain, causing death to overtake those who venture too close to the location of the lost gold. Some have contended that Apache tribesmen actually work the mine, but are careful to dispatch any outsider who ventures close to their operations.

I have spent much time in Arizona attempting to authenticate these legends. I have been through the files of the two Phoenix dailies, and have interviewed the coroner in Apache Junction, Judge Norman Teason. I have talked to mountain guides and wranglers, to local law-enforcement officers, and to members of the Sheriff's Posse of Pinal County. Further, I have been the length and breadth of the mountain area itself, both on horseback and afoot on seven different occasions.

Taking the various facets of the Dutchman tale in sequence, one might first ask whether the area was ever productive of gold. The answer is yes, for there are two formerly active mines within five miles of Apache Junction, the Mammoth and the Bluebell, which can be seen today. Neither is in the mountain area itself, however.

Did the "Dutchman," Jacob Walzer, actually exist and did he have gold? Again yes, in both instances, though he probably had only small amounts of gold to augment his meager income during the last years of his life in Phoenix. Walzer, it will be recalled, had worked at the Vulture mine in Wickenburg and it is likely that he was oliged to leave his employment there in some haste because of the strong suspicion of the mine operators that he was "high grading" the better ore samples for his own purposes. It seems probable that when he eventually sold these pickings, he used the Superstition story as a blind to cover the actual facts. Walzer died poor, and it is hard to believe that he would not have patented any claim he had and thus lived the good life as did his fellow-immigrant, Henry Wickenburg.

What of the hundreds of murders? Who has been, or is now responsible for such wholesale slaughter? By careful searching, I can find proof of approximately 21 actual homicides, and of these there are about a half-dozen still unsolved. I could find no real evidence that anyone had been beheaded, though skeletal remains have in some instances been found widely scattered. It must be remembered that man does not have the desert to himself; the coyote, the skunk, the rat, and the mountain lion have large appetites and though they will not attack a living man, they most assuredly do not respect the dead.

In his recent book, *Hunting Lost Mines by Helicopter,* writer - adventurer Erle Stanley Gardner wrote that he had been informed of more than 350 unexplained deaths in the Superstitions, but some of these could have been due to exposure, accident or natural causes.

As for the Indians, there are no North American tribes, including the Apache groups, who appear to have engaged in gold mining. I can readily believe that the Peraltas had their troubles with the Apaches, but no lawman whom I have interviewed has the least suspicion that recent Superstition murders were committed by Indians.

Are the mountains then safe enough? Though I have never encountered any difficulty personally, I have met a few citizens in the back country who did not seem altogether saintly, and some had the unmistakable glint of madness in their eyes. The Superstition region is the only place, outside of a Hollywood sound stage, where I have seen prospectors actually wearing side arms or carrying rifles.

It is probable that most men who have come to grief in the mountain have been victims of the familiar hazards to be confronted in any remote desert mountain area; snakebite, exhaustion, sunstroke, coronary disease, thirst, or accidental injury. I could find no documented instance where a party of men or even just a twosome, has sustained gunshot wounds. Virtually all of the murder victims have either entered the area alone, or had become separated from their colleagues.

If ordinary caution is exercised, there should be small risk for a party of healthy and intelligent adults venturing into the region. Certainly the beauty of the countryside is unsurpassed and completely unspoiled. Traveling the canyon trails, you have the sensation of timelessness, of being in another, and happier, century. Even in a state celebrated for its spectacular views, it would be hard to find more impressive mountain scenery or more varied desert flora.

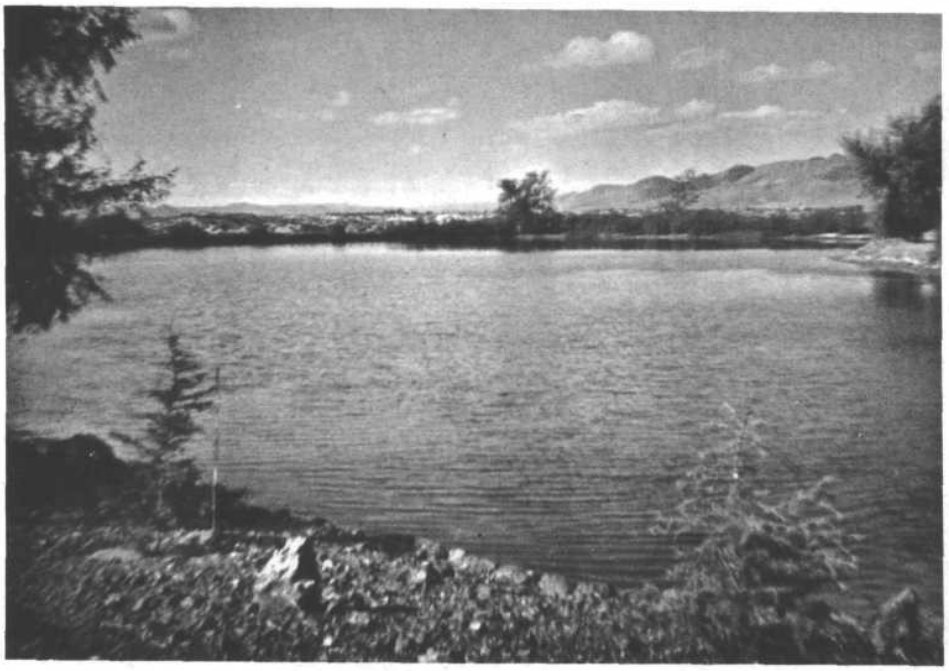
By any standard, the ideal method of seeing the inner canyons of Superstition is on horseback, accompanied by guides from nearby Apache Junction. Since no form of motorized transport is permitted in the Wilderness Area, the choice is either to walk or ride a horse. I have tried both, and I vote for the saddle rather than the boots, though either way one may acquire blisters one place or another.

There are only two feasible routes leading into the inner reaches of the mountain. The southeast approach via well-marked trail is known as the "Don's Route" and involves a fairly steep climb for about three miles. At the northwest end of the range a habitation known as First Water Ranch marks the start of an easy trail that winds for approximately seven miles up to the Needle. At the western slope of this imposing spire is a permanent spring and a pretty glade suitable for either camping or a lunch stop.

The latter trip is an easy and thoroughly pleasant one by horseback, and can be completed, in and out, in one day. It is the prefered route, in my estimation, for women and older children, providing of course they are able to sit a horse. Overnight forays and hiking away from the marked trail is definitely man's work, and for those sound in lung and leg.

However you go, the trip is worthwhile. And, in spite of evidence which suggests the Old Dutchman was a high-grader rather than the possessor of a secret mine, there's enough doubt to take a chance on finding it yourself. Who knows? You might sumble on one even the Old Dutchman didn't find! □

If you've always dreamed of your own desert lake, go to



the strange desert world of Silver Valley

By Betty L. Ryker

THE WORD "desert" is defined as "an arid, barren tract incapable of supporting life without an artificial water water supply." Silver Valley, at Newberry in Southern California, resembles a desert. Its terrain consists of sand, volcanic ash, dry lakes, a lava flow, mesquite and tumbleweeds. Yet its water-table lies only from six to sixty feet underground. This phenomenon was known to primitive Indians some 20,000 years ago and even in historic times the area was named "Water" when the Iron Horse wormed its way West. Later it was renamed Newberry, but it is still a railroad water stop.

No one really knows why this small valley, 80 square miles, boasts such an abundance of water. Some say it's the Bentonite clay which forms a deep, wide bowl underneath and contains the run-off of centuries of rains from surrounding mountains, along with natural springs. That the Mojave River goes underground near Barstow, 18 miles west, and continues throughout the area, could also account for the natural reservoir.

During a recent three-day exploration of this region I heard of caves in the rugged south rim of the Newberry Mountains. They had been used by prehistoric Indians who left artifacts. Bones of the Giant Condor and small three-toed horse had also been found. Directions to these caves were confusing and, aware of a maze of little canyons flowing into larger ones, I knew my chances of finding it alone were slim.

At my headquarters, the Sidewinder Cafe on Highway 66, I learned that the closest route was to leave my car at Echo Ranch and head straight up the wide mouth of the canyon afoot. This couldn't be missed, I was assured, as it was the only opening. When I asked if Echo Ranch was occupied, a gentleman sitting down the counter sort of smiled and said he thought it was. There was only one person living at the ranch at present—a caretaker—himself. And he would be happy to direct me toward the mountain.

With such an auspicious beginning, my guides, Jack Hutchison and his big dog, Prance, led me to the wide canyon. Jack had been there years ago, so had a vague idea of its location. But time and erosion change many things, even light and shadows make a difference and the light this morning was diffused with gathering clouds. We followed washes, cluttered with boulders, and many times Prance chose the better path for us to follow. But we did take one wrong turn into a blind canyon where crumbling shale provided little or no footholds and we had to descend by the seat of our pants.

We were rewarded around the next outcropping where a great rock guarded the entrance to a cave. Eons ago it had been the facing of the cave, but some earth movement evidently created a schism and this piece of mountain now leaned precariously over our trail. From the other side, I touched it, expecting it to go crashing down. But it didn't.

The cave itself was not big. It intruded into the mountain some 25 or 30 feet, growing smaller as it receded, and the passageway circled around to return to the front on a higher level of flooring. The ceiling was black with the smoke of ancient campfires. Outside we found remnants of excavation materials used by archeological expeditions, so the cave had been explored before.

As we descended the alluvial fan that