

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Nugget Gene barely survived search for gold

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George Wheeler agreed to a grubstake, in the usual legal 50-50 share basis. By definition, a grubstake was an amount of material, provisions or money supplied to an enterpriser by a prospector for ore, and this case gold, in return for a share in the resulting profits. Wheeler had been interested in searching for gold ever since hearing an unlikely, and newsworthy, tale of a lost desert gold mine. With the grubstake he would find it.

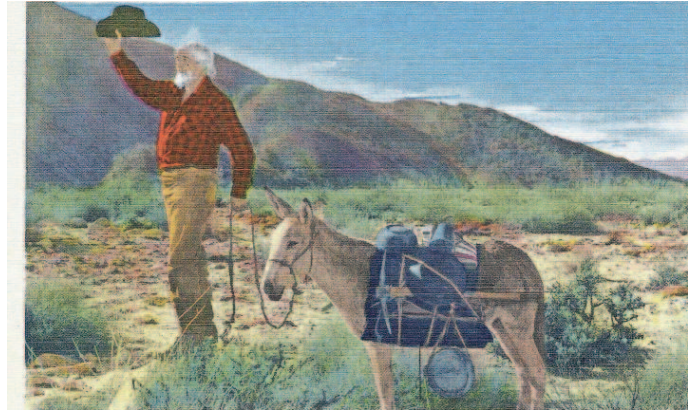
As the publisher of the Palm Springs Villager Magazine, Wheeler set about sleuthing to run the gold mine story down. No one particularly associated the Coachella Valley with that sort of treasure, yet lore indicated there was gold "in them thar hills," specifically the rugged Santa Rosa mountains, and Wheeler in the fall of 1951, was now in pursuit.

In the October issue, The Villager "dispatched a hardened, experienced desert prospector...in search for the lost gold mine described in the exclusive story published in the September issue."

The September article detailed the life of an ancient prospector who, on his deathbed in St. Louis in 1877, scribbled a map of a veritable El Dorado, a mine so rich in gold, it was unimaginable in the desolate desert mountains. Golden nuggets were said to be as plentiful as plain rock, strewn about to be had without the help of a pickaxe.

The Villager story caused a stir by printing the deathbed map. "Nugget Gene," the fictitious name for the prospector Wheeler would eventually grubstake, was hanging around Twentynine Palms on his way to Northern California gold country in search of his next strike, when he heard the news. He had stopped for a cup of coffee where people discussing the article on the lost mine. "He listened for a few minutes, drank his coffee and walked out with the statement he was going to find that mine. He drove directly to Palm Springs" to find the Villager office.

"He told Publisher Wheeler that he had studied the map printed in the mag-



The Desert Rat Prospector is hunting for the Lost Peg-Leg Gold Mine near Palm Springs in this color postcard. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

azine and that it was unquestionably the work of somebody who knew the country in detail. He said that he had spent months in the Santa Rosas and portions of the map area were almost inaccessible. He intended to go back and try to find the mine."

Nugget Gene left Palm Springs in his 1937 Chevrolet on the 150-mile journey to Clark Lake, a few miles outside of Borrego, where he planned to make his base camp and then hike into the jagged mountain area beyond.

"His first objective is Rabbit Peak, highest mountain in the area, the elevation of which is 6666 feet. From this vantage point he will study the terrain from the map printed in The Villager. From the deductions made he will go over the most likely possibilities of a gold location and explore the areas foot by foot."

It was a fair bet he'd find something. Nugget Gene was mighty experienced in tramping around the desert mountains looking for gold. The Villager reported, "He has two advantages over many of the typical prospectors in that he is under 50, tough and hardy and as well has had a university education in mineralogy. Tuberculosis sent him into the hot, dry desert country and now he has but one ambition and that is to find gold."

He'd previously struck it rich by discovering the White Sand Mine near Randsburg, immediately selling his interest for \$18,000, a tidy sum. In grubstaking Nugget Gene, Wheeler was taking a risk, but the story of the search would produce literary gold in the pages of The Villager whether or not the mine was actually found.

In venturing out, Nugget Gene was also taking a considerable risk. Going into the rough country alone, he had assigned days "to report to authorities either personally or by means of signals." He had with him his old car, sufficient food for two weeks, but a reserve of only 5 gallons of water. At times he might be as far as 15 miles from any known water supply. "At these times he will carry oatmeal, canned milk, crackers and peanut butter with him, as well as a canteen of water."

The effort was deemed foolhardy as the terrain was so treacherous. Wheeler even printed a warning: "Authorities have requested The Villager to warn curious persons on the dangers coupled with any efforts to search for the lost gold mine in the Santa Rosas. From Clark Well near Borrego toward the mountains the approach is first a rocky bajada and then an area of shifting dunes, impassable..."

It continued, "bad windstorms shift the dunes over the trail toward the mountains and which is no more than ruts in the sand. The canyons leading to the upper levels are of precipitous sliding rock, very dangerous to other than experienced climbers. Up to this time, at least, there is no know area where water is obtainable and only the most experienced can possibly travel the network of canyons without becoming hopelessly confused."

The warning ended ominously, "Those who do enter this area should leave word of intentions with someone dependable."

Nugget Gene, the hardy and hardened prospector, barely survived his journey into the mountains in search of the mine. At Clark Lake, he found "good water from the old well, but was nearly overcome from thirst and hunger during the following three days when he headed into this rugged, rocky, mountainous country."

"Nugget Gene found absolutely no trace of any moisture in this region following a hot summer. He decided that before the search for gold was undertaken it would be necessary to have a source of water. Therefore, he turned to the canyons near Rabbit Peak and spent more than two days looking for water rather than surveying the terrain for the likely location of the lost mine. His three day and three night trip, covering 35 to 40 miles of the roughest going in the west, was accomplished with meager food and 2 quarts of water."

Nugget Gene reported on the trip in excruciating detail upon his return to civilization, making for riveting magazine copy. Surviving on a swig of water, a desiccated prune and a bite of oatmeal, even he thought the journey exceptionally arduous. Another expedition would have to wait for the next issue of The Villager. On this trip, he'd abandoned all thought of riches in favor of life-sustaining water, proving it truly more precious than gold.

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