

The Search for Adams Diggings Lost Gold

Part II

By Anne Groebner

The search of Adams' Diggings Lost Gold continues with new clues as to where the gold is. In the last issue, I had just started my search and now I have taken several more trips in search of the twin peaks and the zig-zag trail. I'm not really searching for the gold...there have been hundreds of prospectors, outlaws and foxy Grandpas, much more knowledgeable than I...who have searched for it. I am just picking up the pieces of the stories behind the gold...and there are so many stories. Many prospectors died searching for this gold. Many hardened mountain men left the comfort and safety of their homes, leading horses and burros packed with supplies and rations, in search of the gold and, not only never returned, but their bodies have never been found. They believe that Billy the Kid, after his so-called faked death, wandered the area in search of the gold using the alias "Walk-About Smith." This has been a legend for over a century and the inspiration for the 1960's movie "McKenna's Gold." Some believe the gold was already found and removed; others believe that the placer gold may not be out there anymore but that the motherlode has never been found.

When they first traveled to Sno-Ta-Hay Canyon in search of the gold, one of the landmarks that Adams repeatedly talks about on his route to find the gold is the twin peaks that their guide, Gotch-ear, pointed to from the top of a mountain. It is not known exactly which mountain they were standing on to see these landmarks. Many of the mountains, rivers and divides were not mapped out or named until years after his expedition. Some say it was Baldy Peak but author Ralph Reynolds (*Die Rich Here*) says he believes it was Rose Peak and, quite frankly, I trust Reynolds because of his 60 years of research in his area which is where he grew up. So, I traveled to Rose Peak, located along the Coronado Trail, to see for myself.

Lee Nuzum and I left Pinetop and drove up State Route 260, through McNary, past Sunrise and Greer toward Springerville, stopped for gas and a couple of bags of blueberry almonds (only found in Springerville) and then headed to Alpine. After 24 years, this route is still one of my favorites. I never tire of the incredible scenery and wildlife viewing. Once we got to Alpine, we stopped at the Alpine Ranger District and picked up some maps and talked to the ranger about Rose Peak. She told us that we wouldn't miss it and that there was a campground at the trailhead.

Rose Peak is located about 20 miles past Hannagan Meadows Lodge along State Route 191, sometimes referred to as the "Devils Highway" (previously Hwy. 666) or the Coronado Trail. Legend says Francisco Vazquez de Coronado and his entourage traveled up this road/trail to Zuni Pueblo in 1540. He was searching for the lost Seven Cities of Gold (Cibola) but never found them or any gold... and although, in past years, there have been numerous successful mines in some of the areas he traveled, his expedition was a failure. I thought it was pretty ironic since, like Coronado, we too were searching for lost gold.

If you like adventure, incredible scenery and dangerous, twisting, nail-biting, edge-of-cliff roads, then I would recommend driving the Coronado Trail. Just make sure your brakes are in good shape. It is the only way to get to Rose Peak. On our way, we spotted so many trails that branch out into the Blue Range Primitive Area that offer spectacular views and rugged terrain. We, however, needed to reach Rose Peak and test Reynolds' theory, that this was the mountain they climbed to spot the twin peaks. It wasn't easy to find but we managed to catch a glimpse of a small campground on the left, drove past at first, then turned around and saw a much clearer sign as we drove north, back toward Hannagan. Once you get to the campground, there are signs pointing you in the direction of Rose Peak. There is a trail but we took the road (most traveled) before realizing that the trail was on the other side. Either way gets you to the top of the mountain which was our intent.

I'm thinking it must have been a clear day when Adams and Gotch-Ear were standing on the top of Rose Peak taking in a full northeast view of the twin peaks — but which peaks are twins? There are so many.

We thought maybe we spotted them but then other peaks looked like they could be those peaks as well. I decided I would just take pictures and then study the photos when I got home. Driving back up Hwy.191, we pulled off the road at another lookout area and took some more pictures but, for the most part, we weren't sure if we saw them or not. The trip was not a total failure, however. We spotted a herd of deer and met Keith Palmer. We kept passing Palmer on the Trail as he biked his way to the Blue Vista Lookout where we talked to him. He had ridden his bike from Seal Beach, California and was trying to make it to Alpine. His adventure started out with others who were making a cross-country trip. Palmer had to be back at work by the upcoming Saturday so he left them and decided to climb the Coronado Trail. By the time we talked to him, he was exhausted and had pretty much decided to just ride to Hannagan Meadow Lodge and then head back to his home in Mesa. Many kudos to him for peddling over 900 miles.

Our next trip took us all the way down to Silver City and then up Route 15 to the Gila River. State Route 180 is full of trails that lead to gems, minerals, fossils and even hot springs. Many of the stories about Adams' Diggings talk about this area, including the ghost town of Mogollon that, during its mining years, pulled out more than a hundred million dollars (in today's dollars) of "disseminated gold." It lies in an area called the "Mogollon Breaks," wedged between the eastern end of Arizona's Mogollon Rim and the summit of the Mogollon Mountains of New Mexico. The 8.5-mile climb up NM Route 159 to the top of the mountain where Mogollon lies is more treacherous than the Coronado Trail. But there are a couple dozen buildings still standing and a painted clock on a rock commemorating the last shift in the mine when it closed in 1942 because of WWI. It is a historical showcase of the area.

We left Mogollon and continued on to Silver City. A town that was created because brothers John and James Bullard, hearing stories of lost miners and gold, set out to explore the San Francisco River area. They ended up on the Chloride Flats and discovered silver ore worth millions — and the town of Silver City was born. John Bullard became the richest and most respected man in Silver City and their main street and Bullard's Peak, located to the west of the town, still bear his name.

We hit Silver City on one of its busiest weekends. It was hosting the annual "Tour of the Gila," a five-day bike race that encompasses up to 103 miles of the surrounding area. We got there on day four of the race and ate lunch in their historic downtown square (Bullard St.) on an outside patio and watched as thousands of bikes circled past us. The sound they made was like a super quiet whoosh, whoosh, whoosh — but more like a whisper. It was incredibly colorful and all-in-all, pretty amazing.

The next day, we drove up NM Route 15 toward the Cliff Dwellings, a national park located at the end of the highway. The scenery is great but we only traveled as fast as a bike peddler because we ended up behind the race. At one point, we had to pull over and wait for the bikers to come back down from the dead-end where the visitor center and park were located. We eventually made it to our destination but had to turn around and head for home shortly after our arrival. We did manage a short hike to the Gila River and found that its shores still sparkle with some sort of shiny mineral.

On our way home, we pulled over at many overlooks and searched for the twin peaks from our western view. Still, hundreds of peaks covered the landscape and it was impossible to tell which of them might be what we were looking for. But as I finished reading Reynolds book, I discovered that the treasure is located at the north end of NM Route 180, not south. In fact, if I followed our route back to the Arizona border, turned around and headed back into New Mexico, and drove about one mile, Reynolds says I would see the twin peaks. It's at the point where the road travels north. You can't stop your car but they are in plain view. So, my search is getting narrower. I got out my map and marked my trail. I know where they are now.

Is there gold out there? I'm not sure. But if you want to find out, I suggest you get a map and start your own adventure but be careful...you could be the topic of a future story about those who go looking for the Lost Adams' Diggings Gold.

SIDEBAR

The story by Ammon Tenney, Jr., as related to him by John Brewer, about what happened during the first discovery of the gold in Sno-Tah-Hay Canyon is different from the tale told by Adams. Brewer says that they “rounded Baldy Peak on the north side and crossed the North Fork of the White River to the Continental Divide (which wasn’t named at that time). They crossed open country with high lava hills and canyons and timber-covered hills. And, unlike Adams’ story, they looked “Far north and a little to the west and could just make out through the blue haze, three lofty peaks.” Then, as they neared their destination, the guide pointed out what he called “two sugarloaf cones.” Brewer mentions that they had traveled about 24 hours after leaving the White Mountains. Once they reach the canyon with the gold, they started panning the stream immediately, then set up camp and ate. They estimated that they had panned about one and a half pounds of gold the first day and another pound the next. Unlike Adams’ story, Brewer states that Adams and one other person (probably Davidson) went to look for lost horses. The other members of the party went back to panning gold but Brewer hung back and did the dishes and cleaned up the camp. He also states that there were only three other guys and their guide who went back to the stream. His story depicts a battle with a band of Apaches and the other men were all killed but he managed to hide out and escape. In Adams’ story, he didn’t see who killed the men (and states that there were up to nineteen of them) but just heard their screams. Both Brewer’s and Adams’ stories include that they were both in the area but their details of that last day are completely different. What exactly happened certainly is questionable, especially since, a few years later, Brewer suddenly became wealthy and owned one of the largest ranches in Arizona...Many believe that he took the gold.