

MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF THE UINTA'S

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A story is told of a group of five desperados who were trying to elude their pursuers. In their haste, they bury their loot, containing many gold bars taken from an Old Spanish mine. Because there was a curse associated with the access to the mine, all five suffered ghastly deaths at the hands of their captors. The gold is never recovered, and a map detailing the precise location of the gold is still buried inside a rusty tin can under a giant rock at the bottom of a canyon.

So goes one of the numerous Spanish gold stories from the Uintas. Numerous volumes have been written about Uinta Mountain gold. Regardless of their veracity or of any lack of real evidence, the stories of Old Spanish gold mines in the Uinta Mountains have attracted many optimistic prospectors since the 1800's. Undoubtedly inspired by tales of immense riches just waiting to be discovered. Prospectors never seem discouraged by the stories of people allegedly killed while searching for these legendary treasures. It seems to give authenticity to the story if someone mysteriously dies or vanishes. The lack of tangible proof of the existence of gold will not discourage diligent searchers either. There must always be a challenge, and it cannot be too obvious to find the treasure or else someone already would have. It is like trying to solve a puzzle or a mystery. If the whispered stories fail to entice your curiosity, numerous newspaper articles and books, very popular among local residents and prospectors, probably will.

The following summary might help illustrate what readers will find in terms of semi-historical accounts, sprinkled with healthy doses of folklore on the subject of several lost treasures still awaiting discovery.

One of the more noted locations is Dry Fork and the story of the "*The Mine Of Lost Souls*." The earliest version of this account we have found was an article published, by The Vernal Express, Dec. 19, 1946. William Schaefermeyer, Sr. relates the story as told by Fred Reynolds about a cave in Dry Fork, which seemed to fit the description of an abandoned gold mine. Schaefermeyer became very interested in the story and following a lead from Reynolds went to talk to a Mr. "H" in Roosevelt. Mr. H

referred him to Mr. Mitchell, who seemed to have acquired a map showing the exact location of the mine. According to Mitchell, an old Mexican woman who made frequent visits to the mine with her family and some of her people drew the map. They would mine the gold and take it back to Spanish Fork, where they could sell it. On one occasion, as she and her husband returned to camp they found all of their people dead. As the story goes, Indians had killed them. Hurriedly they placed the bodies inside the cave and built a masonry wall, sealing the mine opening. They loaded as much gold as they could carry and fled to Mexico, never to return. Unfortunately, Mitchell had given the map away. Schaefermeyer scouted the area following all the clues provided by the story, but never found the mine.¹

This of course is not the only lost Spanish mine in the Uintas. Another early account comes from a Salt Lake City paper. In the 1950's, James P. Sharp wrote a series of three articles for the Salt Lake Tribune about the famous but elusive Uintah gold mines. Sharp suggested that Spanish explorers had reached the Uintas in the 1540's and learned about the location of an Indian gold mine, which they proceeded to mine. Later, when they were carrying the gold out of the mountains the Indians confronted them and took the gold back to the sacred location. Mormon Selman, missionary author of an English-Ute dictionary, who worked among the Indians for over forty years, allegedly told this account to Mr. Sharp in 1922. Since Sharp published the stories, many have attempted to find the gold mine, all without success.² Recent published works on Spanish gold embellish and build upon these initial accounts.

To sort out the origin of the gold mines can be a little confusing. In some accounts the Ute are responsible for starting the mines, in others the Ute just know the location of gold deposits, and in still others the Spanish who create the mines enslaves the Ute. The most prominent historical figure in the Spanish gold lore is Caleb Rhodes. Rhodes was a local prospector who worked many claims throughout the Uintas and nearby areas. According to some accounts he was allowed access by Ute Chief Walker (Wakara) to a secret Ute mine. Much of the gold was taken to Mormon church leader Brigham Young in Salt Lake. The gold on the angel Moroni on the Salt Lake temple

¹ William Schaefermeyer, Sr. "The Mine of Lost Souls," The Vernal Express, December 19, 1946.

² James P. Sharp, "Gold Mine in the Sky," and "Madre de Oro del Uintah", Salt Lake Tribune, 1950

supposedly came from one of these shipments. These stories are interesting because they combine local figures with important regional characters. They also weave religious icons into the tale.

Spanish Remains

Kilns and the Spanish

Several gold prospectors have indicated that a number of kilns found in the area were used by the Spanish to process the gold ore. This process would have produced great mounds of tailings, which at present nobody has located near these kiln sites. These kilns represent a case of cultural amnesia.

One of the most unconventional and unique stories in the Uintah Basin is the construction of the Bank of Vernal. In 1916 when the bank decided to move to the northeast corner of South Vernal Avenue and Main, they came up with a very creative way to ship the 80,000 bricks needed for the front of the building. Since the cost of freight was four times the cost of each brick, they decided to send them by parcel post at a cost of fifty-two cents for every fifty-pound parcel. The building became known as the “Parcel Post Bank”. The post office had to change its regulations in view of the incredible amount of work involved in the delivery of bricks and its low margin of profitability.

The brick for the bank could not be made locally. The bricks used on the frontispiece of the bank were textured, not like the regular bricks used to build homes. The need for regular bricks to build schools, commercial buildings and homes rapidly increased as Vernal kept growing. Kilns were necessary to manufacture bricks, process limestone for mortar, and plasters. Many brick making enterprises emerged in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s to provide the materials needed for construction.³

Robyn Watkins wrote an article about the limekilns in the Uintah Basin, documenting what remains of the old kilns in the region. Karl and Brig Swain were interviewed regarding their early 1900’s brick making operation. They described the construction and use of kilns in detail. After an extensive research, Watkins concluded:

³ Doris K. Burton, page 171.

Due to the evidence from local and historical descriptions of liming, slaking, and brick making, kiln locations on the Ashley such as Lime Kiln Springs and Dodd's Hollow were limekilns and not Spanish gold smelters.

Tree Carvings

One popular belief in the Uintas suggests that tree carvings were made by early Spanish miners to indicate the presence of a nearby mine.

Two carved trees, considered by prospectors to be "Spanish mine markers" were cored in July 2002 to establish the date when the carvings were done. The core test indicated that the trees were carved less than fifty years ago, establishing the date of carving in the 1940's.⁴

In 1982, a local resident reported the location of "Spanish carved trees" in the Ice Cave Peak area to the forest archeologist. Core testing determined that the carvings had been made in the 1930's.⁵ Tree ring dating is a relatively unobtrusive and very accurate way to measure the age of trees. It can also provide the date when a tree was carved with a very high margin of accuracy. Some of these trees have appeared in books dealing with Spanish gold mines and have been suggested to be signs left behind by Spanish miners long ago.

Unfortunately, the date when the carving was done does not corroborate the Old Spanish Trail theory. In reality, shearherders on the forest during the 1930's and 1940's are responsibly for the vast majority of these carvings. Sheep herding is a boring occupation and usually relegated to the younger generation. Out of sheer boredom, many would take up the art of tree carving, for fun and as a means of marking locations that they had been to.⁶ Our scientific approach to determining the age of these trees and carvings has not persuaded any of the Spanish gold buffs. We have been told that we are wrong, "those carvings have been there as long as anyone can remember." Another individual told us that our methods are provided incorrect results. "Those trees grow an inch every 100 years. So that means a 15 inch lodgepole is at least 1500 years old?!"

⁴ Bailey, Cristina "Core Samples from Two Spanish Mine Trees in the Ashley National Forest." Paper on file at the Ashley National Forest Archeology library, Vernal, UT.

⁵ Ashley National Forest Service Site report, (Mlazovsky 1982).

⁶ Tami Merkle personal communication with Mervin Slaugh.

Outlaw Gold

But not all Uinta gold is Spanish. Vernal prides itself on its outlaw history. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid are local heros. A summer theater, numerous books, an annual Outlaw Trail ride, and the biannual Outlaw Trail Journal all capitalize on this history. On January 25, 1970, The Salt Lake Tribune published an article by George E. Stewart titled “*Mystery of the Outlaw Gold.*” According to Stewart, a grave marks the hiding place, of a treasure in gold bullion, near an outlaw hideout. As the story is told, five desperados robbed a large shipment of gold from a mine in the east. One of the outlaws was shot in the shoulder but they kept going, followed by the sheriff and his men. One outlaw from Utah supposedly survived the ordeal because he left the group early on, and there is no further mention of his whereabouts. They mysteriously loose the sheriff and his posse somewhere along the way to the hideout location. They built a shelter in Nine Mile Canyon. After they arrive two were killed by Indians, who also stole all their horses. The one with the shoulder injury soon died, and was buried next to the shelter. The last survivor buried the gold next to the grave of his friend and eventually made it back to St. Louis, taking whatever gold he could carry. Before dying, he told his nephews about the gold still buried in Nine Mile Canyon and gave them a map. The nephews had a prosperous business and did not need the gold, so they gave the map to someone they trusted to retrieve it. This person never returned.⁷

Stewart along with a friend discovered the place in 1967. Stewart and his wife Elva, and their friends, Jack and Nona Rasmussen, and John and Renee Chasel then revisited the Nine Mile Canyon area in 1969. They found a stone dugout and mysterious jigsaw puzzle-like pieces of stone with faint, but baffling engravings. The stones seemed to have been part of a larger rock and some pieces were missing. They failed in their efforts to put it back together in a way that could be logically deciphered. There is no evidence he ever found the treasure.⁸

⁷ George E. Stewart, “Mystery of the Outlaw Gold,” (Salt Lake Tribune, 01-25-1970).

⁸ George E. Stewart.

The Lure of Gold

The eastern Uintas only had a brief mining history. The most famous mine stories involve the swindles and hoaxes. Diamond Mountain is the most famous, but the Dyer Mine also started as fraud. Fifteen productive years as a copper mine dimmed the memories of the swindle. A less well-known story involves the area around the Forest Service guard station at Stockmore.

In 1905, a gold hoax created a new farmstead on Indian land before the reservation opened for white settlement. Mr. Stockman and Mr. Moore obviously had a deep understanding of the mechanics of greed. They advertised the presence of gold in the upper Duchesne River Valley in a low-key fashion. One of their accomplices showed up at various gambling establishments paying his debts with gold nuggets. This created a stir among the other patrons, and after a well rehearsed performance the stranger revealed where the gold came from. To further increase the number of land sales an article in the "Eastern Utah Advocate" of Oct. 12, 1905 advertised:

The mineral resources of the region are not yet determined, prospecting being in its infancy, but specimens of gold, silver, copper and coal are being brought in daily from the surrounding country.

Prospectors flocked to the region eager to buy property. Soon, a general store, three saloons, a hotel, several homes, and even an assay station were in operation. The hoax was finally revealed when the town decided to hold an election. When settlers sought advice from a neighboring community it was learned that their new town was not registered. This prompted the sheriff to come investigate the sale of Indian land. Stockman and Moore vanished, taking with them the proceeds from the illegal land sales. The area is named after the two, Stockmore.

THE VALUE OF FOLKLORE

Folklore not only is a reflection of the customs, views, and ideas of a culture, it also creates a common historical perspective very unique to each community. Historical accounts of an early diamond hoax, the sale of land under "gold" pretenses, cowboys and Indians involved on a "gold quest," several accidental deaths in the mountains attributed to ancient curses and other such accounts, have supplied good material for endless

campfire stories. They have also become quite lucrative for a couple of authors. These folktales give the quiet town of Vernal an aura of mystery that “non-natives” find very alluring. Tourists driving thru town almost expect to find the occasional outlaw, gold prospectors, or gunfighters around the next bend in the road. They are probably also hopeful to find their own souvenirs from the past as well, or at least a small gold nugget to prove the validity of these stories. One only needs to ask any old timer about the gold in the Uintas to receive a knowing smile. Then they’ll wait to find out which side of the issue you take before giving you the appropriate answer. After all, nobody wants to destroy other people’s dreams. If you believe you’ll find gold in the Uintas, you might be referred to someone who owns an ancient map. If you do not believe the stories, they’ll refer you to the local library or to the resident historian.

Folklore is, by no means, a negative or harmful cultural attribute. On the contrary, folklore can tell a great deal about the culture that originated the stories, the beliefs of the community, their attitudes regarding different traditions, and how they deal with everyday events.

Well, I’m off to find the hidden gold, which, a friend, of a friend, of my cat’s groomer, told me could be found on the bluff behind an old scarred tree, north of town. Good luck with your story, and your search!

MYTH: *A traditional story of unknown authorship, ostensibly with a historical basis, but serving usually to explain some phenomenon of nature, the origin of man, or the customs, institutions, religious rites, etc. of a people* 2. Any fictitious story, or unscientific account. 3. Any imaginary person or thing spoken of as though existing.

LEGEND: *A story handed down for generations among a people and popularly believed to have a historical basis, although not verifiable. B) All such stories belonging to a particular group of people. 2a). A notable person whose deeds or exploits are much talked about in his own time. B) The stories told about the exploits of such a person.*

FOLKLORE: *The traditional beliefs, legends, sayings, customs, etc. of a people.*

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