

Terrell County Memorial

March, 2016
Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

The Lost N_____ Gold Mine

The Reagan Brothers' Biggest Mistake



Illustration: Coronado's Children: Tales of Lost Mines and Buried Treasures of the Southwest, J. Frank Dobie, University of Texas Press, Jun 28, 2010

Many stories have been told about the Lost N_____ Gold Mine. In this day of heightened "political correctness" I am leery of using the "N" word, even though all the stories I read used it in full, and if you listen to newscasts you hear black Americans using it freely. But, as to this story, there are so many variations it is hard to know which is correct. In my research I came across a 1913 *El Paso Morning Times* news article that is based, purportedly,

on interviews with the Reagan Brothers, themselves.

According to the story, the Reagan Brothers had a ranch in the great canyon that bears their name, just over in Brewster County. The Reagans had business dealings in Terrell County, and at one time owned the Cottage Bar Saloon when Charlie Wilson sold out his holdings in Terrell County. They had other business prospects in Terrell County and we count them as our own.

The four brothers - John, Jim, Frank and Lee - ranched in Reagan Canyon around 1884-1900, near the mouth of Maravillas Creek, the great watershed that begins just west of Marathon, Texas, and drains a huge area of the Big Bend. John and Jim Reagan had a camp at the mouth of the canyon, where they employed a Seminole Negro named Bill Kelley. Kelley was part Negro and part Seminole Indian, whose tribe had escaped to Mexico, integrated into the Mexican culture and spoke Spanish. On this particular day Kelley was sent out to look for stray horses. He did not return so Jim rode downriver to find him. Some distance from the camp, he met Kelley returning to camp, but with no horses.

"Have you been out all day looking for those horses?" Jim asked, sternly, for he was a little put out with his employee.

"Yes," Kelley replied, "I didn't find the horses, but I found a gold mine. Do you want to see the ore?"

But, Jim was having none of that. "We hired you to work stock, not hunt for gold mines! I do not want to see the ore!" Somewhat deflated, Kelley and Reagan returned to camp in silence.

The next morning Kelley handed John Reagan a large chunk of ore and said, "This is gold from my mine."

Figuring that the man was just "goldbricking," John cursed and threw the sample into the river, then proceeded to reprimand Kelley for shirking his duty. This angered Kelley and he quit immediately and went to Sanderson.

At Sanderson Kelley made the acquaintance of a Mr. Lock Campbell. He gave some of his ore samples to Campbell, who had it assayed. The poorest of the samples assayed at \$63,000 to the ton. But, before he could give Kelley the good news, he

had disappeared completely.

Locals theorized that Kelley, obsessed with the idea that his life was in danger, stole a horse from the Reagans and went back to Mexico. At any rate, he was never heard from again.

John Chambers, an old prospector, stated that he had found gold on both sides of the river, but not enough quantity to make it pay, unless transportation facilities were closer at hand. Ruggedness of the terrain made that not likely to happen.

John Reagan, realizing his mistake, teamed with Lock Campbell and others and hired an old prospector named Finckey to search for the mine. After some time, Finckey returned with rich ore samples. He said he found the mine on the opposite side of the river from Reagan Canyon. He started back with a large sack of samples, but became exhausted and hid most of it behind a boulder on the Texas side.

Finckey kept promising to take the men to the mine, but found many excuses putting off the trip. Finally, he was seriously injured when a horse threw him at Sanderson and Reagan and Campbell sent him to a hospital in El Paso. When Finckey recovered from his injuries he checked himself out of the hospital and he, too, disappeared, forever.

In the time that Finckey had been searching for the mine across the river from Reagan Canyon, the Sierra Ladrones, there was a gang of horse thieves operating in the area. They ranged from Sierra Ladrones up into Texas, as far as Indian Territory.

One day a mysterious stranger showed up in Alpine, Texas and made so many inquiries that he aroused the interest of local citizens and prospectors. Finally, he took one into his confidence and told him a story. The man said that he had been in jail in the In-

dian Territory and one of the prisoners he met said that he was going to be in jail for the rest of his life and that he knew where the richest gold mine in the world was located. It was in Mexico across the river from the creek known as the Maravillas. He said he had run with a gang of horse thieves who worked the Ladrones, but all his old cronies were dead. The Mexican Rurales killed them one-by-one, and he was the last survivor.

Once when the gang was fleeing the Rurales and headed to the river, they came across an old man who they thought was Mexican, but turned out to be an American. He was half-crazed by the sun and terribly afraid that he was going to be killed.

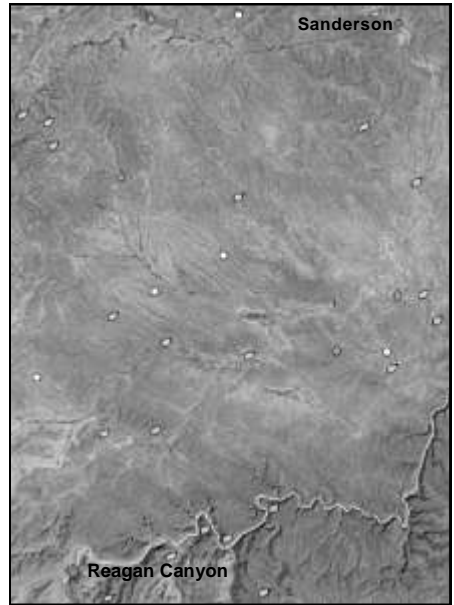
"If you'll only spare my life," he cried out, "I'll show you where to find the richest gold mine on earth."

The outlaw leader seized the opportunity. He robbed the man of his samples and forced him to take them to the mine site. Under threat of a severe death, he forced the old man to swear never to return to the Ladrones and never reveal to anyone else the location of the mine.

This, of course, would explain Finckey's mysterious behavior when he reached Sanderson. If he was under threat of death by outlaws, of course he would want to disappear.

But, the outlaws died, save one and that man ended up in prison in the Indian Territory. He met our mysterious stranger and drew a rough map of the location. This map eventually became the property of a John Young of Alpine.

Young went to Mexico City and got a concession from the Diaz government to operate mines in the Ladrones area, also known as the Zona Libre. He outfitted a party and proceeded to Reagan Canyon, but he found the Rio Grande at flood stage and he could not cross. Young's son, John, Jr., and another



young man tried to swim across, but in the process of swimming against the raging current, the map was lost. Young and Jones searched the area, trying to remember the map, but they were not successful. The elder Young was able to make a number of claims in the area under the Diaz government's liberal mining laws, but when the Diaz government was overthrown at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, the area became too dangerous to traverse, let alone set up mining operations.

In a *Sanderson Times* article for September 1, the editor remarked about the many lost mine legends. But he claimed that the Lost N_____ Gold Mine story was more believable. "At least two men were certified by reputable persons to have found it and one, Harry Turner, said if he told what sample ore assayed that he would be accused of 'having twenty dollar gold pieces assayed.'" But so much violent death was associated with the story that many believed the gold cursed.

John Young gave Mrs. Byrde Pearce Hamilton of Montell, Uvalde County, a

signed statement concerning the mine. "Mrs. Hamilton, who then resided in Alpine, says Young 'later brought me a story he said was signed by Lee Reagan, one of the Reagan brothers, principals in the story.' He related that he and two brothers, with Bill Kelley, the Seminole, drove a herd of cattle to Bullis Bend on the Rio Grande. "One night while sitting around the camp fire, Kelley remarked he had found a rich gold mine, which created a big laugh, but no interest. He said no more about it until one evening when he and I were out looking for some missing horses. Mr. Lee, come with me over younder (pointing) and I will show you that gold mine. It is just gold sticking out all around there." Reagan refused to go and Kelley disappeared. In 1892 the conductor on a train between Del Rio and San Antonio showed Lee and John, a piece of rich ore he got from a Negro which assayed at \$75,000 to the ton. Lee took John, Frank, and a fourth man to a ridge where Kelley pointed the direction of the gold mine, but after an unsuccessful search, they decided they needed to find the Negro before searching further. They made a trip to Mexico, but failed to find him. They made several trips back to the area but had to leave when food ran low. Their last trip was in 1916.

John Young entered the story about 1911 when he met two men recently come to Alpine and joined them "in a mining prospect in Mexico". They had a map received from a dead relative who got it from an old prospector in the Ladrone Mountains of Mexico. The prospector showed them a sack of rich ore and claimed to have found the mine. Another trip was mounted but the Rio Grande was in flood and the attempt was given up.

"The next angle was a letter from Jack Haggard of Musquiz, Mexico,

who later came to Alpine and begged my son to go with him to the mine," Young's purported.

Haggard had a Seminole Negro working for him at a mine near Los Espya, about 1901, who told of a wonderful gold mine he found in the Big Bend country. Haggard's foreman, Harvey Turner, identified the location by a sketch drawn from the Seminole's description. Turner went in search of the mine and on his return told Haggard he had found it

About a week before he completed his contract at the mine where he was employed, Turner was killed in an explosion along with several miners.

Among Turner's papers Haggard found what he believed was a description of the mine, but it was in an unknown code. "There is no doubt in my mind," Young's statement concluded, "but that the Seminole Negro found the mine and that the others who found it probably concealed it. All who searched for the gold, except for some of the Reagan boys now are dead. There is a superstition that all who locate the gold are under a spell -- are struck with tragedy or death before they can remove it." Young died about a year ago (1938.) All his papers and maps, except a tracing of the map he and Turner made were destroyed in a fire in his office.

And so, this part of the story ends. The Lost N_____ Goldmine has never been found. If you want to read about all the variations on the story, get Elton Miles' book, *Tales of the Big Bend*, Elton Miles, College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1976.

As for the Reagans, they filed claims in Arizona but never hit paydirt. They let the best prospect they ever had slip through their fingers. Isn't that the way most gold mine/get rich quick stories end?