

Lure of gold leads prospectors to Texas Canyon

By Jim Eckles

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It looks like a jagged scar that angles up the mountain from the golf course and then disappears as it jogs south toward Texas Canyon. The trail is visible from most places on the main post, but few people know it once was a road to the mines hidden deep in Texas Canyon.

In many places the trail is little more than a deep rut rapidly developing into a ravine. But, through the middle of the 20th century, it was a nasty little road that resolute miners used for hauling heavy equipment and ore. Part of one truck is still on site along with several rock crushing devices and a diesel engine to power them.

According to a New Mexico School of Mines bulletin published in 1935, two gold deposits were discovered in Texas Canyon between 1890 and 1900. John Dodd and his brother were the first to work the canyon's mines.

To crush the ore the brothers used an arrastre until 1898. Used for centuries all over the world, an arrastre is a crude but effective way of crushing ore to free the gold or silver. It consists of a large rock or slab being pulled over another rock with the ore in between. The weight and motion effectively smash the ore to bits and can reduce it to flour if done correctly.

In 1898, the Dodds reportedly erected a two-stamp mill to crush ore.

In 1910, a company known as the Texas Canyon Mining and Milling Company was organized and acquired the property. They brought in an aerial tramway that had previously been used at the Modoc mine in Fillmore Canyon on the west side of the Organ Mountains.

The mining bulletin states that the tram was never used. However, it may have been used after 1935. As of January 10, 2005, one of the tramway towers was still standing between two of the mine adits (tunnels). It could be that the tram was used to move ore from the upper adits to the road in order to haul it to the crushers.



The diesel engine used to drive the crushing equipment rests in Texas Canyon. (Photo by Jim Eckles)

The road into the canyon was constructed in 1917 and, according to the School of Mines bulletin, the last full-scale mining was done in 1927. It also states that the road, in 1935, was impassable but could be made adequate for small trucks without great expense.

Enter Fred Schneider. Schneider came from Germany and kept a family, a wife and seven children in El Paso while he and partner George Hohenberger prospected throughout the Organ and southern San Andres Mountains. Separately and together they filed and worked many claims around what is now White Sands Missile Range and Fort Bliss.

Before WWII, Schneider settled in Texas Canyon to work the vein at the end of the canyon. He was assisted by family members and Hohenberger.

Son George is quoted remembering how hard the work was – drilling holes by hand in solid rock to tamp explosives in and then mucking (shoveling) out the broken rock to haul it to the crushers. Moving the rock down a steep slope to the crusher was no picnic either. The days were described as physically exhausting.

One history describes the reward as “meager.”

Some say Schneider made enough to keep on going but not enough to leave.

It was White Sands Proving Ground that forced him to leave after 1948. Before he left, however, Schneider befriended a young soldier named Tom Grosch who was stationed at White Sands in the machine shop.

In 1979, I met Grosch and his wife Polly when they showed up at Public Affairs asking if they could visit Texas Canyon. When I heard he knew Schneider and used to spend his weekends in 1948 helping to work the mine, I agreed to take them up to the operation.

According to Grosch he didn't fit in very well at White Sands so he started hiking up into Texas Canyon during his free time. At first Schneider wasn't very friendly because GIs often vandalized his cabin and equipment. But after a few trips, Schneider warmed up to young Grosch and became a second father to him.

Grosch said that some of the German V-2 scientists also visited Schneider. Apparently it was a way for them to get away from their military overseers and relax. He said they would speak in German and drink schnapps provided by Schneider. Von Braun supposedly made at least one visit.

Eventually Grosch spent whole weekends at the mine. They found him a place to sleep in the cabin, although in the summer it was more comfortable out under the stars.

The cabin had two rooms (some of the walls are still standing) with the walls covered with shelving. The shelves held ore samples, notebooks and chemicals. Every morning Hohenberger sprinkled the dirt floor with water and tamped it down. It was meticulous.

Grosch related that one summer night they were sleeping inside with the door open for ventilation. In the middle of the night, a skunk sauntered in. Grosch said he was awakened by the roar of gunfire and the overpowering stench of a skunk spraying the room. Schneider was shooting at the skunk as it jumped from shelf to shelf but only managed to make it mad.

All three men were sprayed and spent the rest of the night sleeping outside trying not to smell themselves, if that is possible.

Sleeping outdoors wasn't like sleeping in your backyard because rattlesnakes were common. Grosch said Schneider didn't like snakes and always walked with a stick, tapping the ground ahead like a blind man.

Grosch had one encounter with a rattlesnake that almost forced him to jump off a cliff. He said he took a break one day on the edge of a rock looking down on the canyon bottom. After a while he noticed a rattlesnake had crawled up behind him. He said he was tempted to jump off the rock, but it looked like a 40-foot drop and that was as scary as the snake. Instead, he stayed very still and the snake eventually slithered away.

As a young man, Grosch said he was a bit of a romantic and Schneider was good at telling a story. When Grosch was bored, Schneider told him tales from books. When not telling stories, Schneider would read Voltaire.

To feed Grosch's dreams, Schneider pointed out the old cross vein that is on the north wall of Texas Canyon. The opening was covered over, as it is now, but Schneider told Grosch it was his to work and anything he found he could keep. He added that he



One of the tram towers still stands above the dump area leading up to the upper adits. (Photo by Jim Eckles)

didn't know who originally made the tunnel.

Grosch attacked the entrance with enthusiasm and once he gained entrance to the adit, he cautiously entered. He said his head was full of stories of Spanish conquistadors and lost treasure as he explored the tunnel. Of course, the vein was played out long before, but Grosch got to work his own "claim."

On our hike into Texas Canyon, Grosch explained in some detail how the mining operation worked when he was there. From the cabin there was a road to the northwest that climbs to the base of the saddle at the end of Texas Canyon. From the mine dump, another road loops back south and back to the cabin and milling equipment. Evidence of the roads is still there in many neat lines of rocks that were pushed aside for the roadway.

Schneider had an old truck he called Hitler. It had very large wheels and tires on the rear with regular wheels on the front. When going up steep slopes the truck was almost level.

Grosch said Schneider had to drive the truck



A rock drill. One person would hold the drill while another hit it repeatedly with a sledge hammer. Very slowly the team would drill holes into solid rock. Once deep enough the holes would be filled with dynamite and exploded to make a larger hole in the rock. (Photo by Jim Eckles)

wearing a gas mask. There was no exhaust system on the vehicle and no cab or firewall. The exhaust blew right into the driver's face. At one steep spot on the ascent, both Hohenberger and the dog Mica would get out and walk because it was just too scary.

They would load the back of the truck with pieces of ore from a day's dynamite blasting and haul it down the other road. The brakes on the truck were not up to this task so they hooked chains and logs to the back end to provide drag and help brake the truck.

They would then mill the ore once a week. The crushers were run by the diesel engine that still sits in the canyon.

Grosch said getting the diesel going was a real trick. One of his jobs was to preheat the single, horizontal cylinder using a blowtorch. Then he would crank the flywheels while Schneider primed the thing with gasoline.

Once the engine was chugging along, they didn't run it with diesel fuel. Instead there was a hopper mounted on top of the cylinder that fed the engine either sawdust or coal dust. It was cheaper than diesel.

Once the engine was running, a belt was engaged that mounted on a pulley on one side of the engine and connected to a long axle with a variety of pulleys on it. Other belts from these pulleys would be moved to drive the various crushing devices to smash the ore into smaller and smaller bits.

The first device opened and closed to crush rock between two plates like a set of jaws. Then the small pieces were run between two metal wheels that broke it down further. Finally, the small pieces were placed under two stamps that rose and fell like big hammers to pulverize the rock into powder.

From the crushing equipment, the flour was flushed over a shaker table at the bottom of the canyon. The shaker table was lined with copper plates coated with mercury. The gold specks would stick to the mercury and the rest was flushed into the canyon bottom.

It was then a matter of cooking off the mercury to leave a small blob of gold behind.

This last part of the process would work only for the ore extracted from the Cross vein. The gold there was "free-milling" which meant it could be

mechanically freed from the rock and would stick in the mercury.

The gold from the vein that Schneider was working in 1948 is not free-milling. That means it is chemically bound with other elements and cannot be separated mechanically. It needs to be separated through a more complex chemical process. Grosch said they used to save the slurry of ore and water in barrels and then haul it to El Paso for final processing.

The shaker table was driven by a belt from the diesel engine as well. Also, water for the process came from a deep pool upstream. The diesel turned a generator that powered an electric pump to suck the water out of the “well,” as Grosch called it, down to the table.

The pool had a cover over it and also supplied their drinking water. He said they once noticed a bad smell coming from the canyon bottom. They followed their noses to the pool to find one of Jim Cox’s cows dead in the water. Grosch said Schneider, after removing the cow, pumped the pool dry and went to town for a few days.

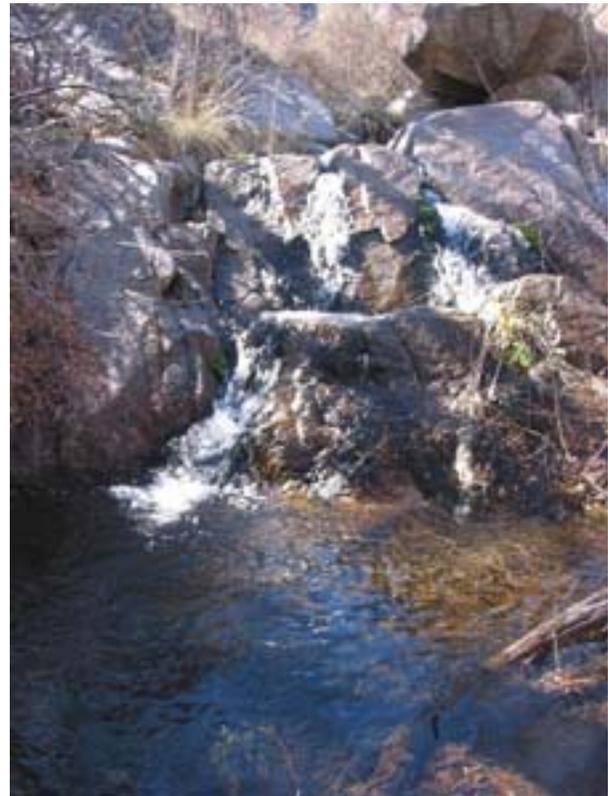
As we toured the canyon, Grosch still was dreaming of Spanish explorers and the possibility they had visited the canyon centuries ago. He said Schneider showed him a dagger that had Moorish symbols on the handle.

Schneider supposedly found it in the sand down at the mouth of Texas Canyon. They used to imagine a Spanish prospector losing it and his life in the canyon.

There is no doubt that gold and silver exist in the vein in Texas Canyon. I once escorted Fred Potter, a geologist with the Bureau of Land Management, into the canyon and he told me the ore contains small amounts of gold, silver, copper and iron held in a matrix of quartz.

The iron appears as iron pyrite or “fool’s gold” while the copper is often seen as green copper oxide. I have been to the mines before and seen Boy Scouts breaking apart rocks for the copper oxide on the surface, thinking they had found turquoise.

According to Potter, the vein fills a vertical gap in the saddle at the end of the canyon. The fault that created the gap runs to the northwest and causes a similar saddle north of Sugarloaf Peak and between



A waterfall and pool in flourished in Texas Canyon on Jan. 10. Most of the time the canyon is dry except in a few spring areas. (Photo by Jim Eckles)

the Rabbit Ears and Needles in the Organs.

There are several tunnels that bore into the vein starting where the dump is at 5,670 feet. Some of the rail used for running ore cars in and out of the main tunnel is still on the dump. The top tunnel is at 5,925 feet.

Today the trail up into the canyon is rocky and rough. It is used frequently, at least to the remains of the old radar reflector. Only the supports are left as the billboard-like panel was removed several years ago.

From the reflector, the trail loops south to the stream draining the canyon.

Even if the trail into Texas Canyon was once a road, it must have taken a great deal of sweat and ingenuity to move the mining equipment to its present location. Dreams certainly push people to do the most astonishing things. ■