

EXCERPTED FROM:
IMPERIAL VALLEY'S LOST GOLD
Published By Southwest Printers
Yuma Arizona, 1974



Mount Signal which straddles the international boundary. Could the gold bars be hidden nearby?

THE GOLD BARS OF MOUNT SIGNAL

by Paul Gillett and Frank Odens

We were back in our camp in Nine-Mile Wash, and once more sat around the camp fire sipping our cup of coffee, talking of the days before the land rush brought innumerable settlers to Imperial Valley.

When the winter was rough on man and beast in the Laguna Mountains, cattlemen brought their animals into the Valley, and some of them built huts for themselves which can still be found. If only a few stories dealing with the second half of the 19th century have been preserved, it may be because the Valley, to most travelers, was a most inhospitable place which should be crossed quickly and then forgotten. Yet, many a fascinating tale could be spun if we but knew the facts. Such is the story of the gold bars hidden close to the base of Mount Signal. "From time to time, I heard rumors about these gold bars," Paul said. "I felt it best to keep my mouth shut, hoping I'd find the cache for myself, but I have been searching for 45 years now, and I'm beginning to feel that it's a hopeless case. What I'll tell you now is true, and if the events sound somewhat fairy-landish, well, they're just the way I'm telling them to you, but they have been verified by people who were in one way or another connected with them."

Paul's father, Charlie, and his wife, Nellie, had come to Imperial Valley to settle permanently about 1900, Paul said, but he had been in the Valley before, when he was working with the Arizona Cattle Company. He married Nellie Milner in 1902. In 1907, the Gilletts had returned to Arizona where they met a man named Rudd who had at one time been a hired gunman involved in the famous Tewkesbury-Graham war of Pleasant Valley, which pitted the cattlemen against the shearers. The war lasted several decades and more than 20 were killed. Rudd had retired and lived peacefully in Glendale.

"When the sheep war had stopped," Paul said, "Rudd and others who had been involved in it turned robbers, operating on both sides of the Mexican border with their headquarters across the line. President Teddy Roosevelt pardoned these men who had been hiding in Mexico. Now, Rudd came to see my father because he had come through Imperial Valley before and knew his reputation, and told him of a tunnel on the north side of Mount Signal which had been full of blowsand and near which valuable gold bars were hidden."

Charlie Gillett did not pay too much attention to the story, because he had never come across such a tunnel although he had spent considerable time in the vicinity.

Rudd told him that he, together with another American and a Chinese, had robbed the Wells Fargo stage a day or two after it had left the La Fortuna gold mine in Arizona near the border. This had been in the late 1890's, Rudd said.

The stage had been carrying a gold shipment from the mine to the coast. The holdup happened about 22 miles east of Yuma. The robbers took all the jewelry and cash of the passengers, mostly minted gold coins, and left them in the desert with barely enough water to survive. Then, they mounted the stage which was loaded with the gold bars from La Fortuna and drove on, crossing into Mexico somewhere south of Yuma.

Some 20 or 25 miles southeast of Mexicali lies Cerro Prieto, the Black Butte, today the site of a tremendous geothermal development where more than 15 wells produce geothermal power for much of the huge city of Mexicali.

But in those days, it was a stark naked, fearful, lonely spot. Near the base of the butte, the robbers buried part of their loot, then they continued on, turning back toward the north, and re-entering the United States near Mount Signal.

In a dry wash at the foot of the north wall of the mountain, on a sand bar which was higher than the water level would be during the rains, they dug a hole into which they placed most of the jewelry and the personal effects of the passengers of the stage which they had robbed. They realized that they might be questioned on their way north and did not want to have any items on them that could be traced back to the stage robbery.

"Then Rudd and his white friend killed the Chinese," Paul said, "and buried him on top of the jewelry and the other loot. They marked his grave with cactus plants which were clearly visible and recognizable to the initiated."

A huge rock was a short distance above the wash on its north bank. There, the two conspirators dug a hole in which they hid about \$250,000 dollars worth of gold bars. This was less than 100 feet from the grave of the Chinese.

“As I said before, my father did not take too much stock in the story of the man’s adventures,” Paul said. “He just didn’t believe there were any tunnels. And why would Rudd tell him the story? Why wouldn’t he go and get the gold himself?”

Years passed. Charlie Gillett became sheriff of Imperial County, and one day in 1927, he heard of several Americans who had been jailed in Mexicali for working in Mexico illegally.

“My father was working for their release,” Paul said, “and when he talked to them, he discovered that they had come from the coast and had hired some young men from Calexico to dig blowsand out of an old tunnel in a wash at the base of Mount Signal. Their camp had been in the United States, but the tunnel was a short distance away, inside Mexico.”

The Americans told him they had received information from an inmate in San Quentin that a large amount of gold was hidden in the tunnel.

Sheriff Gillett told his son about this, and Paul did, indeed, visit the camp from which the men were going out to work at the tunnel. Charlie Gillett and Paul later went to Arizona where they met Rudd, the man who had originally told the story.

“He Was confined to bed,” Paul continued, “and could not walk because of old age and too much whiskey. But he related the events quite clearly.”

A short time later, the late Harry Horton, a well-known El Centro attorney, found documents which showed that a gold shipment from the La Fortuna Mine, consigned to the San Francisco Mint, had disappeared en route. It must have been the one Rudd and his buddies had robbed. “In 1931, on the banks of the wash that I believe to be the one that should have the grave in it, about a quarter of a mile south of the border, I found an old 1852 \$20 gold piece,” Paul said. “Of course, it’s only fair to mention that most gambling in Mexicali in those days was played and paid in gold, and still is. So, this coin could have been lost by just about anyone who had been in the wash.”

“I’ve been in that area,” I said, “and I never lost a twenty-dollar gold coin there.”

“Perhaps that was because we never went to Mexicali to gamble,” my wife said.

“And also because we never had such a gold coin to our name,” I said.

“Time to turn in,” Juanita said. “Tomorrow is another day.”