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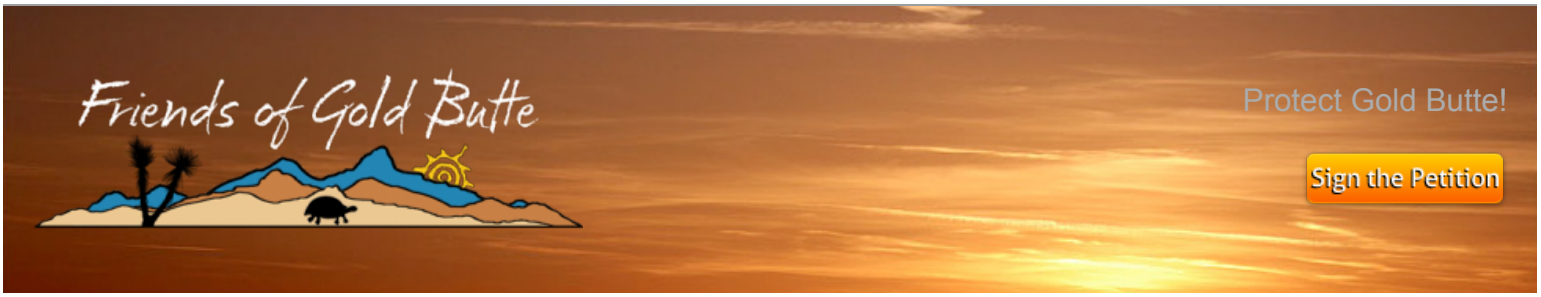

Gold Butte country still holds plenty of treasure

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Desert Valley Times
David Bly
Friday, January 18, 2008
No mines operate in the Gold Butte country these days, but there's still plenty of treasure to be discovered if you're interested in history.

John Lear, who has mined and explored the area for years, outlined the history of mining in the region south of the Virgin Mountains at the Friends of Gold Butte meeting Tuesday.

The Gold Butte Byway now transects the area, but in earlier times, before Lake Mead was created, the main access was through St. Thomas, near present-day Overton, east to the mining areas. Wagon tracks from that road can still be seen in some areas.

Lear said the region had 45 mines over the years, and he has been to all but two of them.

Mining in the region appears to have begun with the Spanish in 1730, Lear said. Evidence of their efforts can be seen near the ghost town of Gold Butte in the form of an arrastra.

An arrastra is a large flat rock hollowed out, over which which donkeys or bullocks would drag another rock to crush ore.

"In the Gold Butte area, we figure there are at least four arrastras," said Lear.

The first recorded instance of mining was by Daniel Bonelli, who discovered mica in 1873, and shipped mica from the region in the early 1890s.

Gold was discovered after the turn of the 20th century, and by 1906, the Las Vegas Age newspaper was stirring the excitement about the prospects at Gold Butte. In 1907, the newspaper reported the mining was going well and the new town was well on its way to becoming a permanent settlement. It had a post office and a saloon, but few permanent buildings.

"They all had tents in those days because it was too tough to bring in wood to build houses," Lear said.

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Gold Butte, which at one time had a population approaching 2,000, had only a brief period of glory. In 1909, the post office was taken out because so few people lived in the region.

It wasn't exactly a Klondike.

"The problem with the ores in the Gold Butte area is that there was gold, silver, mica, lead . . . but not enough to ship," said Lear. A few miners made a little money, but the ore concentrations weren't enough to support larger enterprises.

The story of nearby Copper City was a little better. The copper ore there was rich, and from 1910 to 1919, wagons hauled the ore from Grand Gulch Mine to the northwest, at first to Moapa, then later to St. Thomas when a railroad spur was put in. The mining was spurred on by the need for copper generated by World War I, and that town, too, grew to nearly 2,000 inhabitants.

During the region's copper mining heyday, said Lear, at least 100 ore wagons would be on the Grand Gulch trail at any one time.

"It's fantastic to ride up one of these canyons and realize there was a road so smooth, they ran ore wagons on it," he said.

After the war, the decline in copper prices made mining in the region unprofitable, and activity declined.

Efforts continued through the years, but never on a large scale.

Lear knew many of the people who worked in the region, including "Crazy Eddie" Bounsall, an eccentric mining and aircraft enthusiast who has become somewhat of a legend in the Virgin Valley.

Lear acquired the Treasure Hawk mine, "the only certified and operating mine in Clark County," and set about improving it. BLM regulations prohibit mining in the region, but Lear's project was grandfathered — in place before the regulations came in.

From 1996 to 2006, he spent about $600,000 on permits, licences and the cost of developing the mine and the infrastructure. But one year, he forgot to file a $30 annual permit, and "the ACEC (Area of Critical Environmental Concern) slammed shut."

He's no longer able to operate the mine, but he's still responsible to reclaim the mine — "which means I have to restore it to what it was 10,000 years ago."

He's philosophical about losing his mining privileges.

"Life is full of challenges," he said. "This is one of them."

He knows the country intimately, and has done years of research on the people and places in Gold Butte country. The names of the mines roll off his tongue: Grand Gulch, Windmill Susan, Jumbo, Lakeshore, Lakeview, Eureka, Key West . . .

Equally interesting were the people who lived in Gold Butte country, including "Crazy Eddie" Bounsall, and two men known as "The Odd Pair."

Bill Garrett, he said, was a tall Texan cowboy and an expert gunman, and the nephew of Pat Garrett, the lawman who shot Billy the Kid. His sidekick was Art Coleman, short and slight, intellectual, and of frail health.

The two men arrived in the Gold Butte area about 1916, and for years, their humble shack was a stopping place for travelers. They were known for their hospitality and for keeping their word.

Coleman died in 1958 and Garrett died a few years later. They were both buried at Gold Butte, although Lear said ground radar shows their grave markers were interchanged.

"The ground scan showed a five-foot guy in Bill's grave," Lear said.

The work in Gold Butte country was hard, the rewards were few, as people struggled against the elements to retrieve the elements from the unforgiving rock. Traces of their work can still be found in the form of shafts, foundations and pieces of

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machinery stranded halfway up steep mountainsides.

“I don’t know how the hell they did it,” said Lear.

Gold Butte country still holds riches for him as he continues to seek out and document the old trails and mines in the region. For him, the treasure now is the history.

“I love it,” he said. “Every scrap of it.”

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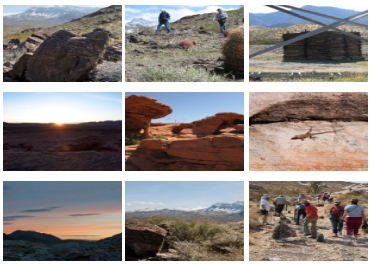

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