

“Gold Dust”



The classic view of Superstition Mountain, from the Lost Dutchman State Park, Arizona.

Let's talk about *gold*. Not just any gold, but *lost gold*. If there's one thing more appealing than *found gold*, it's *lost gold*. Because that means that the gold, maybe an unknown, vast quantity of it, is *still out there somewhere*, just waiting to be found. Like fairy-dust sprinkled from a magic wand to vitalize some situation, a dusting of the lure of gold can make a place attract people – those people looking to make it big. Sometimes they win; sometimes they lose. And sometimes they die.

We have our own place of temptation right here in our backyard: the *Superstition Mountains*. For the past century or more, this rugged range of desolate, inhospitable, and yet beautiful rock formations just to the east of Phoenix has drawn countless treasure seekers. The goal? A mysterious cache of gold, or gold ore, or maybe even a mine itself. Who knows which? That's part of the mystery, and the draw of the place.

In 1891, one Jacob Waltz, a German immigrant and prospector, known locally as the “Dutchman” (men from both the Netherlands and Germany were then frequently called that in America), died in the Phoenix home of a friend, Julia Thomas. On his deathbed, Waltz described to her the location of a gold deposit of which he knew, deep in the Superstition Mountains. But in his possession then were only a few gold nuggets, and he never had appeared to be a wealthy man.

Yet, Ms. Thomas and two of her friends, the Petrasch brothers, believed that there was something to his story, and they set out to find it. They spent weeks roaming the wilderness, searching for whatever they could find, which ended up being nothing. Julia Thomas did find a way to capitalize on the Dutchman's fate, however. She drew and sold some “treasure maps”, as well as told Waltz's story to at least one free-lance writer, who in turn embellished it even further.

Hence, the story grew, and multiplied. And so today, there are almost too many “Lost Dutchman” stories of which to keep track. (And remember, it is the gold that was lost, not the Dutchman.)

There are variations which include Mexican miners (who supposedly originally found the gold), Apache Indian raiders (who killed the Mexicans and maybe even Waltz's sometime mining partner, Jacob Wiser), high-graded gold ore stolen by Waltz himself from near Wickenburg and stashed in the Superstitions, and even Jacob Waltz having murdered his partner to hoard the gold for himself.

The wildness of the terrain, the relentless, blazing sun and lack of shade, the dearth of water in the remote desert canyons of the Superstitions, and a colorful cast of crazies, desperadoes, and dream-seekers who have over the years spent countless time seeking out the rumored riches have only added to the luster of the story.

The details of all these legends and maps do not matter so much as the fact that they exist, and that the story of the lost gold endures – the fascination goes on. Over the years more than two dozen adventurers have lost their lives, in one way or another, while exploring the range.



Looking deep into the heart of the Superstition Wilderness, near Phoenix, Arizona. Weaver's Needle is in the background.

The derivation of the name "Superstition" is not even certain. One version is that in the 1500's, the Spanish explorer *Francisco Vasquez de Coronado* apparently gave the mountains that name, based on the Apaches' claim that therein lay the abode of spirits, ones who did not look kindly upon intrusion, especially in the name of profit.

Only a few years after Jacob Waltz's passing, hard-rock gold was discovered not far from the north side of the range, near what is now the little mining town of Goldfield. Millions of dollars were taken from the ground during the heyday of mining operations there.



A maze of golden canyons makes travel through the Superstitions a true adventure. This view is from along the *Apache Trail*, aka State Route 88.

That a true *in-situ* gold deposit does exist in the Superstitions themselves is very unlikely. As I've mentioned in several other past GeoStories™ ("Tuff Times", and "One Piece at a Time"), the range (in this case, the western end, of which is to where the legends refer) is built-up of thousands of feet of ancient volcanic ash, fused into thick, resistant layers which today have eroded into a maze of pinnacles, ridges, and gorges.

Barren volcanic cinders – now rock – and that's all. Barren of precious gold, that is, but not of dreams.

Take a look at the Superstition Mountains from a distance, in the setting sun sometime. If you give pause for a moment, they look yellow, even golden. It's that coating of gold dust out there that you see. That and the glimmer in your eyes.

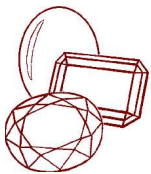
To learn more, visit www.gemland.com, go to the "Superstition Mountains" section, and click on whichever name on the map interests you. That will initiate a series of images, together with geologic explanations, and you can even send any picture you like to your friends as an E-postcard for FREE!

----- *Richard Allen*

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At right: natural Arizona Peridot and 22K Gold gent's ring by GemLand © 2006



by Richard Allen

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