

THE STORY OF JOE DEERING

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 1998

Lost mine stories continue to attract the attention of adventurers and tourist in the Superstition Mountain area. Treasure hunters and gold prospectors come from around the United States in search of high adventure and dreams of riches. One of the truly unusual stories about lost gold in the rugged Superstitions is the story of Joe Deering.

A prospector showed up at the Bark Ranch in late December of 1891 with a burro and a young puppy. He informed the occupants of the ranch that the Silver King Mine had shut down again, and the man was inquiring about a job.

Owner James Bark just happen to be there at time, and asked the man if he was interested in repairing and maintaining water holes for the cattle on the ranch. The man agreed... if he could prospect in his spare time when not actually working on the water holes. Bark, being interesting in mining, told the man he could prospect as long as he was his partner.

The man told Jim Bark and John Chuning about a rich gold mine he knew of in the Superstition Mountains on Jim Bark's cattle range. Bark and Chuning listened attentively as he talked. Finally, Chuning spoke up and said it wouldn't be difficult to find a mine if someone else had already found it. The man told Bark and Chuning there was no danger of anyone discovering the mine because it was in the roughest rock strewn country anyone had ever seen and nobody would climb up there to look for it. He further explained he had built small rock monuments marking the trail to a site near the mine. The only purpose of the rock cairns was to help him find the area again, not the mine.

The man told how he had worked with Joe Deering at the Silver King Mine, then finally how he found out about Deering's secret gold cache in the Superstition range. Deering had told him how he had tracked two soldiers from Fort McDowell and then, by using pure logic, he figured out where the mine was located.

The man continued to explain how Deering said he found the mine. "I headed for the Silver King Mine to get a job. I had camped in a big canyon at a spring, near some willow and sycamore trees. I had breakfast, took my canteen of water and went looking for my burro. I finally spotted the beast halfway up the side of a mountain, and about a mile and a half up the canyon and above my camp. As I started after the burro I came across a deeply worn trail. The trail was so much larger and worn so much deeper in the rock than any other trail I had ever seen in those mountains. It excited my curiosity. I left the burro to follow the trail. I must have walked four or five miles and came to the worst place I had ever seen in these mountains. There was a tunnel and it had been walled up. The walled portion had settled about eight inches and had partly fallen down. I don't know how deep the tunnel was. Above the tunnel it appeared there had been two shafts, but they were pretty well filled in."

Deering returned to his camp over the same trail. He noticed a large willow tree growing just at the lower edge of the trail on his return trip. He rested under the willow tree and took his little hand axe he carried, and cut a cross in the tree.

It might be interesting to note here that a prospector named Wright found a battered hatchet on this same trail almost fifty years later. The head of the axe had been pounded out of shape, as though it had been used to crush or pound rock. This same trail was monumented by small piles of rock until it left Javelina Canyon, where it dropped over into "horse country." Deering said, "The country was kind of ghostly looking and there were many queer-shaped rocks in the region. Some of them looked like stone statues. I didn't spend the night there because of all the unusual appearing stones."

Deering further said, "I did go back the next morning. After walking around the mine for awhile, I went back to camp. At this time, I came down off a big mountain and through a canyon and there I built four monuments of long slender stones with four or five smaller stones laid around to support them. I paid a little attention to directions or distances in the area to take interest away from the monument near the mine, and therefore confuse anyone who might happen along and find the stone monument which marked the mine area."

According to the man, Deering had gone on to the Silver King Mine the next day to secure the job he was looking for, but changed his plans. His new plan was to secure a grubstake and work the rich gold mine. Deering soon found out it wasn't that easy to secure a grubstake at the Silver King Mine, so he decided to take a job and save enough money for a grubstake and work the mine alone.

John Chuning met Joe Deering at the Silver King Mine a few weeks before he died on September 29, 1884. Deering was injured a couple days prior to his death when a huge boulder crushed his leg in an underground mining accident. Deering had told Chuning he found the mine within two to three miles of the Salt River. He also told Chuning there was a trick in the trail. Actually, he said it was a tunnel or a hole. "The trick is high up," Deering would say, "but still you must go down to get to the trick in the trail."

Deering said he had only worked the mine twice, but always went out through the desert and not the mountains for fear of running into the old Jacob Waltz.

Deering showed Chuning about four pounds of gold from the mine while they were in Jesse Brown's Saloon in Pinal. Chuning later told Jim Bark the gold was quite rich. When the ore was broken up the particles of gold would have been as large as peas or kernels of corn. Some years later, Jesse Brown verified Chuning's story to Jim Bark in Nogales, Arizona.

Chuning hunted for Deering's lost mine off and on for the rest of his life. He always believed Deering's and the Dutchman's mine were all one in the same.

John Chuning prospected out of Tortilla Flat until his death in 1912. Most of his prospecting was done on Tortilla Mountain and Peter's Mesa. The so-called Monumented Trail still existed clearly in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Chuning was probably one of the greatest users and developers of this trail. However, after each decade of prospectors came through the country, more and more of the monuments were destroyed with hopes of protecting the location of the mine from others. The question remains, did the modern prospectors destroy Deering's or Chuning's monuments?

In the early Spring of 1910 Chuning fell ill. His prospecting days were over. He died at the age of 65 on November 13, 1910, at Tortilla Flat. Dr. Ralph F. Palmer, the post physician at Roosevelt Dam attended him in his final hours. John Chuning was laid to rest in the Mesa Cemetery.

Chuning spent the final years of his life searching the region south of Tortilla Flat between Peter's and Boulder Canyons. His search proved futile, but his name was inscribed forever in the history of the Superstition Mountains. A cave in La Barge Canyon bears his name. Also a faint trail that leads up the east side of Geronimo Head was named after John Chuning. Even the name of these modest memorials to an old prospector have been lost in the pages of Arizona history. Maps of today no longer carry the name of Chuning Trail or Cave.

I helped Bud Lane remove the pieces of an old helicopter crash from near the top of Tortilla Mountain in 1974. After about twenty trips Bud was able to pack most of the old helicopter off Tortilla Mountain. Occasionally, as Bud searched for better way off the mountain, we came across an occasional monument that had survived the wrath of the prospectors who were protecting their secrets. These monumented monuments were unique. A lot of effort had been put in their construction. I am sure there are still photographs of these markers in existence.

Did Deering construct the monumented trail that led directly to the area where the Lost Dutchman Mine was located? Or was Chuning just telling a great story to focus attention on him in his twilight years. I suppose we will never know for sure. We are all victims of myths, stories and dreams associated with lost gold.



Caption: One of the old water tanks used by cattle on Peter's Mesa. (PetersMesaTank.1a)

