JULIA THOMAS SCHAFFER

By Tom Kollenborn © 1989

At age 29, Julia Thomas was one of the first searchers for the Lost Dutchman Mine, beginning her quest shortly before the turn of the Twentieth Century. She organized, financed and led the first expedition in search of a legendary lost gold mine in the Superstition Mountains.

Thomas, from New Orleans, was the soul proprietor of a small bakery located on West Jackson Street in the early settlement of Phoenix in 1892. An old prospector named Jacob Waltz spent his last days living on her property. He had been rescued from his farm, along the north bank of the Salt River, during the flood of February of 1891. After the flood, old Waltz never regained his health and eventually succumbed to lumbar pneumonia a few months later on October 25, 1891.

While living on Julia's property, the old man supposedly passed on many clues to his rich gold mine somewhere in the Superstition Mountains. Soon after his demise, Julia sold her business to finance her search for Waltz's gold. She asked Rhinehart Petrasch to accompany her on this venture into the mountains. He agreed to go only if his brother was also asked. Julia had no problem with Rhinehart's brother, Hermann, going with them. At the time, Julia was 29 years old and very capable of taking care of herself, according to some Phoenix pioneers.

This unlikely group of prospectors, Julia Thomas, Hermann and Rhinehart Petrasch, traveled toward the precipitous west face of Superstition Mountain on August 11, 1892. The weather was hot and humid and took its toll on the three young prospectors. Gold fever had replaced common sense in these people's minds, and the fate of this expedition did not become known around Phoenix until several weeks later.

An early newspaper article reported the group returned to Phoenix in early September. They had spent three weeks searching the canyons and ravines near Weaver's Needle and Bluff Springs Mountain to the east of Superstition Mountain for the Dutchman gold mine. The lack of potable water and the hot sun ended their search.

Several decades later Hermann Petrasch told William Cage the following story.

"We traveled eastward across the desert from Phoenix, it was extremely hot and hard on the team. The wagon was constantly giving us problems when we crossed arroyos. The wagon was soon abandoned some three miles from the face of Superstition Mountain. From this point on we walked and used the team to carry our gear. Our plans had included driving the team and wagon as close as possible to Weaver's Needle. We walked around the northwest end of Superstition Mountain and packed all of our supplies to the area of Weaver's Needle. This was a very difficult job. Our search was centered in the area of Weaver's Needle and Bluff Springs Mountains. The weather was so hot we spent most of the time in the shade and only searched in the early morning and late evening. After three or four weeks of extremely hot weather and the lack of water for the animals and ourselves we abandoned the search and returned to Phoenix. "

Julia Thomas had failed in her attempt to locate the Dutchman's gold mine and was frustrated upon her return to Phoenix. She had sacrificed everything for this search. The irony of her search was the fact she walked over the now famous Black Queen and Mammoth Mine locations while making an attempt to find Waltz's gold. These two mines later produced thousands of ounces of gold for Colorado promoters between 1893-1897. The Mammoth Mine at Goldfield produced more than three million dollars in gold.

Where Julia Thomas was not successful, four other men succeeded. Morse Hakes and the Merrill brothers staked out and filed on the Black Queen claim in November of 1892. Time and again the question has arisen... Did Morse Hakes and the Merrill brothers discover the source of Waltz's gold?

Who was Julia Thomas? Julia Thomas was born Julia Kahn, Korn or Corn on December 17, 1862, in the State of Louisiana. Both her father and mother were born in Germany. Her parents had immigrated to America through the Port of New Orleans around 1840.

There was considerable controversy among Dutch hunters and historian as to the ethnic background of Julia. Most documents indicate she was not negro or mulatto as described by most contemporary writers. Julia was married to Emil W. Thomas on December 28, 1883, in Colorado City, Texas. Historians doubt a mixed race marriage would have occurred in Texas during this period in American history. Emil and Julia Thomas arrived in Phoenix around 1885. The Thomas' operated a confectionery and bakery shop in Phoenix until their separation on March 23, 1890. Julia filed the divorce suit on August 8, 1891, and Emil traveled to Centralia, Washington, then on to California after their divorce. Julia continued to operate the business after Emil left. Two years later she sold out to finance the expedition into the Superstition Mountains.

Julia married Albert Schaffer on July 26, 1893. After her marriage to Schaffer she produced several maps showing the approximate location of the Lost Dutchman Mine. Some say she charged for these maps. It is also interesting Julia sold a city lot to Albert for $80 the day after they were married. Albert and Julia's relationship appeared to be on and off for several years.

Some historians believe much of the information for the article about the Lost Dutchman Mine, written by Pierpont C. Bicknell for the San Francisco Chronicle on January 13, 1895, was provided by Julia Thomas Schaffer. Bicknell probably paid Julia for her information after seeing the article about her trip into the Superstition Mountains to search for the Lost Dutchman Mine.

She and Albert became involved in a mystic type religion around 1900. Julia Thomas Schaffer also became involved with a problem on the Indian reservation near Tucson in the early weeks of December 1900. Jim Blaine, a Papago Medicine man, made a complaint against her. Blaine encouraged the authorities to rescue the Papago nation from the religious fanaticism of the strange woman filled with the devil. It wasn't to long after this incident Julia returned to Phoenix. She and Albert held their religious gatherings at their home at Jackson and Second Avenue during the first decade of 1900.

In 1911 an insane man attacked Albert Schaffer and pulled out much of his red beard, screaming he had his wife buried on their property. Indeed, the Schaffer's place was a strange setting with it fire pits burning all the time and a strange religion being practiced on the property. Albert and Julia continued with their place until her death from Bright disease on December 17, 1917. She was only fifty-five years old. She left no relatives at the time of her death. She was buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Phoenix.

Julia Thomas' was the first of a long line of Dutch hunters that searched for the Dutchman's gold mine in the Superstition Mountains.