

MURDER CONSPIRACY AT THE U RANCH

By Tom Kollenborn (c) 2002

Recently I read on the Internet about a local cattle family's ranch being used to hatch a murder conspiracy. The conspiracy supposedly included Abe Reid, George "Brownie" Holmes, Milton Rose, Jack Keenan and Leroy Purnell. The ranch was the Quarter Circle U in Pinal County and the man to be murdered was Adolph Ruth, a Washington, D.C., gold hunter.

The year was 1931 and the story goes something like this.

Adolph Ruth arrived in Arizona in mid May of 1931. He was searching for a pointed peak in the Superstition Mountains. Ruth had a map his son acquired in Mexico in 1914, which he believed would lead him to buried gold in the Superstitions.

Using another map acquired from his son, the old man had limited success in his quest for gold in the Anza-Borrego Desert of California in December of 1919, but he was convinced he would be successful in these mountains.

On June 11, 1931, Ruth tried to persuade William A. Barkley to take him into the region around Weaver's Needle, but Barkley refused because of Ruth's physical condition and the summer heat. Barkley made every effort to point out the hazards of going into the mountains this time of the year. Ruth was a man who could not be discouraged easily. Finally Barkley agreed to pack Ruth into the mountains after his return in three days from Phoenix.

Barkley left the ranch for Phoenix on June 12, 1931, and returned three days later to find Ruth had already departed for the mountains. Ruth became impatient during Barkley's absence and asked two local cowboy-prospectors to pack him into the mountains. These two men were Jack Keenan and Leroy Purnell. Ruth was packed into the mountains through First Water to a site near Willow Springs in West Boulder Canyon. His campsite was just west of Weaver's Needle. Ruth's camp was comfortable and the temperatures were only up around 94 degrees at midday.

Early in the morning on June 18, 1931, Ruth met a man near the old brush corral south of West Boulder Canyon. This man claimed Ruth was in good shape but walked with a limp and appeared a little exhausted. They talked about the weather and the black gnats. Ruth asked the man for directions to Needle Canyon. The man told him how to find the trail over Black Top Mesa Pass and into Needle Canyon. He also noted Ruth was carrying a small side pack, like a military gas bag, and a thermos jug. The man also noted Ruth was carrying a side arm of some kind. This individual never stepped forward during the investigation because by the time he heard about Ruth missing, the search had turned into a murder investigation. This fateful meeting was recorded in the man's prospecting journal.

It is my contention this was the last human to ever see Adolph Ruth alive. He reported Ruth in good condition, although he thought he was unprepared for this rugged country at this time of the year. When Ruth told him he had a base camp the man wasn't as concerned.

Barkley rode into Ruth's camp at Willow Springs in West Boulder Canyon on June 20, 1931. After examining the camp he determined Ruth had not used the site for at least twenty-four hours. When Barkley realized the old man was missing he immediately notified the authorities. A search was mounted and it continued for forty-five days without a trace of Adolph Ruth being found. The search conditions for Ruth were terrible with temperatures reaching the 115-degree mark and were finally abandoned around the first of August 1931.

Ruth's skull was discovered on December 10, 1931 by the Phoenix Archaeological Commission's expedition.

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Ruth's skull was discovered on December 10, 1931 by the Phoenix Archaeological Commission's expedition. This expedition was lead by Richie Lewis and "Brownie" Holmes. William A. Barkley and Jeff Adams found the skeletal remains of Ruth on the eastern slope of Black Top Mesa on January 8, 1932, about a quarter of a mile from the location of the skull.

There was no final agreement just exactly how Ruth died, but there was a consensus that he died of natural causes and did not die from some foul deed perpetrated by some evil contriving individual. The periodicals of the period conjured up all kinds of murder and conspiracy theories. These stories were the source of the many tales that survive today.

It is pure fantasy to believe a person or parties known or unknown conspired at the Quarter Circle U Ranch in 1931 to murder Adolph Ruth for a treasure map he carried. If Ruth was not murdered then there could never have been a conspiracy at the U Ranch. Again, all evidence suggests Ruth died of natural causes. Doubt was only raised when Ruth's son, Erwin, made claims his father was murdered for a map he carried. The Arizona Republic later printed this map in their newspaper. This conspiracy story was dreamed up to malign a lot of honest Arizona pioneers because of conflicting beliefs and interest involving lost gold and treasure in the Superstition Wilderness. One of these individuals was Quentin T. Cox. He had a very fiery pen and often attacked people and their ideas in writing. Hundreds of his letters exist today and these letters continue to keep this murder conspiracy going. Milton Rose, according to Cox, was one of the conspirators in the Ruth case. Rose also had a fiery pen and countered any story that implied Ruth was murdered.

I met Quentin Cox on several occasions while employed on the Quarter Circle U Ranch in the 1950's. He often came up to the old U Ranch and visited. His tongue was as fiery as his pen when it came to talking about certain people. I would listen to his rhetoric then go about my chores. I will admit Quentin Cox had some interesting stories and he adjusted them according to his theories. It is people like Quentin Cox and Milton Rose who keep the tales of the Superstition Wilderness going.

Old Bill Barkley, William Augustus Barkley's son, was a clever and capable person until his health failed in 1965. His family placed him in a rest home in Mesa in 1966. Bill wanted to be close to the Superstition Mountains in twilight days of his life I was told. A noted con artist and treasure hunter named Robert Simpson Jacob removed Bill Barkley, against the families wishes, from a rest home in Mesa and moved him to Apache Junction to a small trailer behind George's Steak House on the southeast corner of Vineyard Road and the Apache Trail two weeks prior to his death on May 7, 1967 (The site is now occupied by a Texaco Star Mart).

My wife and I stopped by and talked to Bill after Toby Drummond told us he was living there. He was having difficulty breathing and we couldn't believe he was living in such conditions. Bill passed on before his family could get him moved back to the rest home in Mesa. Jacob certainly shortened Bill's chances to live a few more months or maybe even a few more years.

The Barkley's were true Arizona pioneers who worked hard to eke out a living in this desert and the Superstition Mountains. Old Gus had made every effort to find Ruth and the Barkley's never felt guilty or haunted about the Ruth incident or anything to do with it.



photo E. D. Newcomer, Az Rep.



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