

DR. RALPH FLEETWOOD PALMER

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 1978 2002

High on the western slope of Superstition Mountain, just above the Mining Camp Restaurant, is located the eroding waste dump of the old Palmer Mine. This silent dump denotes a bygone era of copper and gold mining history in this area and the site is still quite conspicuous from many points around Apache Junction. Several questions have emerged about this old waste dump.

The history of this old mine involves the lives of two noted Arizona pioneers. The first man was William A. Kimball and the other was Dr. Ralph F. Palmer. Both men were well-known pioneers during territorial days and Kimball located the Boulder-Buckhorn Mine first in 1886. He sank a shaft some 75-feet deep and eventually shipped a couple carloads of ore to a smelter.

Kimball was also involved in many businesses during the Goldfield gold rush 1892-1897. He operated a hotel in Mesa, stage lines in the area and the boarding house at Goldfield during the peak period of the Mammoth Mine and Mill production. By the time Ralph F. Palmer came on the scene in 1903 the famous Goldfield mines had ebbed. Kimball passed away in Mesa on January 20, 1906 from pneumonia.

Palmer was the second man who became interested in the old Boulder-Buckhorn Mine high on the slopes of Superstition Mountain. Palmer's interest stemmed from a story told to him by an old Pima chief while he was in the employ of the United States Reclamation Service at Roosevelt.

You might say the Palmer story began on November 4, 1875, when he was born in Marquette, Michigan. Palmer attended the University of Michigan from 1894-1898, and then attended the College of Physicians and Surgeons at the University of Illinois in 1900. On December 1, 1900 he was made a member of the house staff at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. On June 1, 1902 he received his diploma, and immediately moved to Arizona Territory because another doctor recommended the dry climate would be good for his health.

Upon his arrival in Arizona Territory he stayed at the Halfway House located between Morristown and Castle Hot Springs, just west of Phoenix.

He then moved to Prescott in September of 1902, and from there he moved to Camp Verde in December of 1902. He spent a year in Camp Verde, then applied for a position with the Bureau of Reclamation at Roosevelt.

Palmer moved to Roosevelt in 1903 and served as post physician and surgeon for the United States Reclamation Service at Roosevelt from 1903-1907 when he moved to Mesa. Almost immediately after arriving at Roosevelt he became involved in his first encounter with the Superstition Mountains. A group of Pima Indians refused to work on the road gang because an old chief was afraid one of his wives was going to die. The two wives had been in a vicious fight and one had a severe hatchet wound in her skull. Palmer was sent to Government Well, some thirty-seven miles from Roosevelt, to see what he could do. None of the road gang would return to work until the wives were better or died. Palmer was able to save the lives of the two women and in doing so, he became a friend of the old Pima chief.

Chief Ash Nash Ni told Palmer he was guarding the secrets of Ain-We-Gophon (Superstition Mountain) and further explained that his wives would soon give birth to a son for him to pass the secrets of the mountain on to. The chief also told Palmer that his sons would guard the secrets of Ain-We-Gophon and would forever make peace with the Pima Earth Gods. This was Dr. Palmer's first contact with the mysterious Superstition Mountain. He wasn't sure there was any truth in what he heard, but he became intrigued with the mountain for the rest of his life. He enjoyed mining, the West, and the many stories about Superstition Mountain.

Dr. Palmer had read a lot about the Goldfield area and he knew it had produced a lot of gold just a few years prior to his arrival. He dreamed of opening his own gold mine in the Superstition Mountain area.

Next Week, Part II

Palmer's first mining property in the Goldfield area was the old Boulder-Buckhorn originally located by William A. Kimball. The Buckhorn-Boulder Claims were the oldest mining claims in the immediate area excluding the Lucky Boy. Kimball staked his claims in 1886. An Arizona newspaper reported on February 28, 1900, the following, "W. A. Kimball of Mesa is shipping some high producing ore from the Buckhorn Mine, two carloads being loaded yesterday."

The rich ore referred to as copper and was taken from a shaft some seventy-five feet deep.

William A. Kimball died in 1906, and the mine remained inactive until 1917. A group of Mesa entrepreneurs acquired the mine and after extensive investigation they decided to extend the old shaft to 120 feet in depth. The Buckhorn and Boulder Mining Company decided to initiate this work. Palmer was one of these original investors, but not active in the mine at the time. The shaft was further sunk to the depth of 215 feet between 1917-1918. During the summer of 1918, a drift was extended 35 feet to the south of the shaft and there in an isolated pocket a single specimen of ore assayed 882 ounces of gold per ton. Many other assays ran more than 400 ounces to the ton in free gold.

World War I virtually shut down operations at the mine in August of 1918.

The property then remained closed until the duration of the war except for the annual assessment work done in the name of the corporation. The mine had a \$5,000 note against it. The property was eventually sold at auction to pay for the outstanding indebtedness in 1926, at which time Dr. Palmer bought the property.

Palmer made several attempts to finance the property and reach the pot of gold he believed lay just beyond the 215-foot level. It would require another ten years before Palmer was able to raise sufficient capital to sink the shaft.

Dr. Palmer was not to be discouraged he organized a company to open the mine in 1937 and put it on a paying basis. Palmer and nineteen others investors, in need of financial backing, formed the Ain-We-Goph-On Tribe. The name was based on an old Indian legend about the origin and destiny of Superstition Mountain. The company was eventually known as the Superstition Sage Mining Company.

Continued efforts by the company failed to uncover Palmer's pot of gold. Palmer was a dedicated and sincere man who believed there was a rich deposit of gold just beyond the 215-foot level. Dr. Ralph Palmer and his associates invested several thousand dollars in a vain attempt to extract the gold they believed existed here. The mining operation came to an abrupt end in December of 1947 when Enestro Jacoeo was killed in a premature explosion at the bottom of the 225-foot shaft at the Palmer Mine. Frank Hedworth, the hoist operator at the time, later reported he heard the blast before the signal was given to raise the men in the shaft below. This indicated to him a premature blast.

The mine was abandoned in 1949, but Palmer continued to do the assessment work on the mine for a short time. The old shaft was used as a well to supply water for the Barkley Cattle Company from 1950-1962. On many occasions during the summer of 1959 I started the pump at the old Palmer to water cattle. Recently on a ride to the old Palmer Mine I found most of the old dump obliterated and planted over. Often when I look up at that spot on the side of Superstition Mountain I reminisce the history of one great Arizona Pioneer.

Dr. Ralph Fleetwood Palmer was a true Arizona pioneer and in his book Doctor on Horseback he tells how it was in those early days before statehood. The book tells of his travels from Chicago, to Camp Verde, Roosevelt, Mesa and Superstition Mountain. He tells the story of a doctor on horseback serving the medical needs of early Arizona pioneers before the arrival of the automobile.

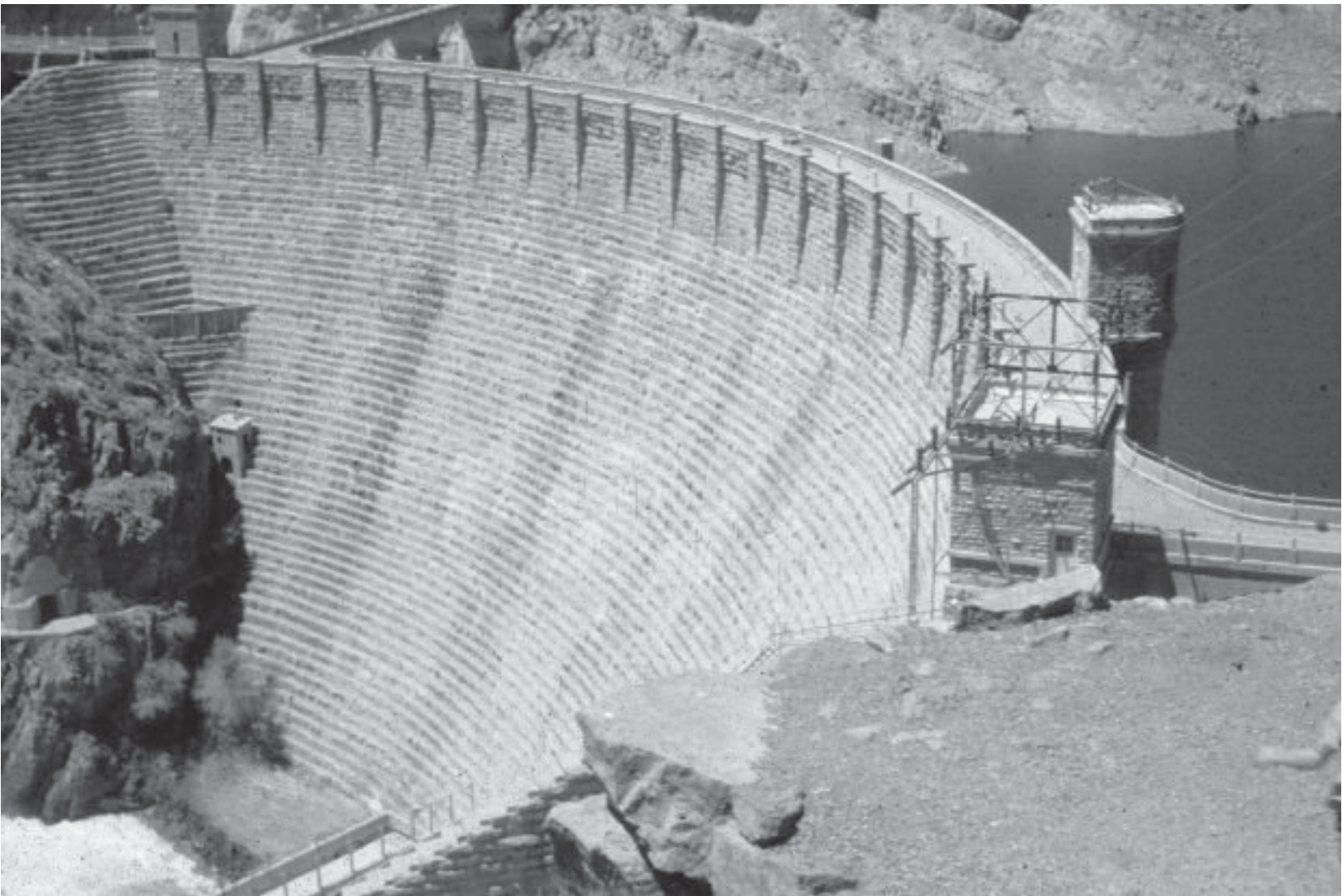
He was truly an amazing man, having once stood at the side of President Theodore Roosevelt, he was the first mayor of Mesa after statehood in 1912. He was instrumental in the organization of the Mesa Rotary Club and was the club's first chartered president. Palmer conceived the idea of the first real hospital in Mesa, raising some \$10,000 to finance the construction of the South Side Hospital. Some claim he brought modern medicine to the pioneer community of Mesa in 1907.

His memoirs reflect his love, determination and efforts to help settle a primitive frontier and help others cope with medical problems. Throughout his long life in Arizona his love for mining and the Superstition Mountains intrigued him until the time of his death on December 17, 1954.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Palmer's daughter, Harriet McCarter, now deceased, and Nancy McCollugh, his grand daughter, for their kind assistance in making this story possible.



Dr. Ralph F. Palmer
1875? - 1954?



Roosevelt Dam, prior to 1995 facelift. Photo by Tom Killenborn



Roosevelt, Arizona Territory, circa 1906. Photo by SRP