

TRAILS ACROSS PETER'S MESA

By Tom Kollenborn © 2003

Peter's Mesa is a very interesting piece of landmark east of Apache Junction that lies in the heart of the Superstition Wilderness Area. The wilderness is a part of the Tonto National Forest. The origin of the name appears to be the namesake of an early cattle drover in the area.

The first cattle drovers arrived in this area about 1877 and they ran wild herds of cattle in the region to feed the hungry miners at the Silver King Mine. The cows ate the grass and the Mexican woodcutters harvested the mesquite, and anything else from the area that would burn in a wood stove or a boiler.

The woodcutters used large strings of burros to pack their wood to the towns of Silver King, Pinal and Hastings. These pack strings sometimes had between thirty and fifty animals. The woodcutters harvested anything that would burn within a twenty to twenty-five mile radius of the Silver King Mine. Even before the cattlemen and Mexican woodcutters arrived in the area Apaches and Yavapais harvested the Agave. They baked the Agave hearts in several large fire pits that can still be found Peter's Mesa and other locations in the Superstition Wilderness.

No, these fire pits were not silver smelters used by the Spaniards or Mexicans as believed by many old Superstition Mountain prospectors. The Agave heart was an important staple food of the Apaches and other Native Americans. It was a staple food only certain seasons of the year for the ancient inhabitants of the area.

Prospectors wandered into the area about 1875 looking for gold and other mineral wealth. Knowledgeable prospectors and miners soon abandoned the region and moved on. A few misguided and inexperienced prospectors remained and continued searching Peter's Mesa and the region east of La Barge Canyon for gold or hidden treasure. One of the most notables of these individuals was a man named George Miller. He owned and operated the Lost Dutchman Mine Inc., in the 1920's near the Tortilla Ranch east of Peter's Mesa and Tortilla Mountain. Miller started prospecting in the area around 1905. He was buried on a small hill near his mine on April 7, 1936.

Roy Bradford, another prospector, hunted around Peter's Mesa for almost a decade. He then moved down toward the headwaters of La Barge Canyon, just above the Upper Box. Prior to camping in La Barge, Roy had a camp up in Cottonwood Canyon on the western side of Tortilla Mountain.

Hermann Petrasch spent a considerable amount of time in the area also. Hermann maintained a camp on Tortilla Mountain in a small cave for several years. His brother Rhinehart was with Jacob Waltz just prior to his death on October 25, 1891.

Bud Lane pointed out the general area of Hermann's camp to me when he was packing a downed helicopter, in pieces, out of the mountains. Another man who spent a lot of time in the Peter's Mesa area was Abe Reid, an old friend of Bill Cage and of my father. Reid occasionally made a trip up through Red Tank Canyon then over into Horse Camp and on over to Peter's Mesa with his burro string trying to following some clues he believed was valid about the Dutchman's Lost Mine. Reid claimed he worked a small hole near the southern end of Peter's Mesa that produced quite a bit of pay dirt in the 1930's, but eventually played out.

Walter Gassler started working Peter's Mesa in 1932. He sincerely believed there was a rich outcropping on the mountain. His tenacity came to the attention of William A. Barkley, who was in awe by Gassler's effort and determination to prospect this rugged country.

Prospectors have left many footprints behind as they searched for gold on Peter's Mesa. Men such as Sinclair, Phillips, Butler, Cherry, Braum, and others worked Peter's Mesa searching for gold that probably didn't exist. The notes, journals and maps these men left behind make interesting reading, but do not allude to anything significant on Peter's Mesa other than a handful of relics left behind, later discovered by our contemporaries.

The cattle history of Peter's Mesa dates back to 1877. Jack Miner, an early drover from Texas or New Mexico, ran some of the first herds in the mountains. Marlar, Marlowe, Criswell, Bark, and Barkley followed in the cattle business on the western end of the wilderness. William Barkley purchased the Quarter Circle U (Bark Ranch) in 1907 from James E. Bark. Peter's Mesa was part of the Barkley cattle range.

When I worked for the Barkley Cattle Company, it was in its twilight years. William A. Barkley had just passed away, October 1955, and his wife Gertrude and son William T. Barkley were running the ranch.

Soon after I began my employment I was packing salt to distant locations on the Barkley range. One of these locations was Peter's Mesa. My father and I had hiked up on Peter's Mesa several times in the late 1940's. When Barkley gave me directions to his salt grounds on Peter's Mesa I knew the approximate location.

It is quite a hike out of La Barge Canyon to the top of Peter's Mesa. However, riding a strong horse and leading two pack mules loaded with salt blocks made the job a lot easier compared to hiking and carrying a forty pound pack on my back.

The trail up Peter's Mesa from La Barge Canyon is filled with jagged sharp rocks. The climb is quite steep and very loose in some areas. The panoramic vistas from the rim of Peter's Mesa are spectacular when looking across at Bluff Springs Mountain and up or down La Barge Canyon. It was along this trail that part of an episode of "Unsolved Mysteries" was filmed in 1988 about Walt Gassler.

Cottonwood trees and other deciduous trees dot the course of La Barge Canyon flowing northward. As you near the top of the mesa you are looking into Charlebois Canyon on your left. You eventually come to a fork in the trail and turn left to ride on to Barkley's salt grounds. This trail eventually will lead you over to Squaw Box Canyon, and that is another story.

There are several interesting things on Peter's Mesa. Many contemporary Dutch Hunters have roamed over this mesa on foot. I have spent lots of time rounding up and working cattle on the "Mesa" and hiking across it on foot. One interesting landmark is a natural arch formed from an ancient volcanic blister cone. There is a large adit in the area of the arch that once had a wooden table in it. Over the years I have found three or four vertical shafts and at least five adits or tunnels. None of the adits or shafts are deep.

There is a stone wall in the canyon as you climb up on Peter's Mesa from La Barge Canyon. Barkley told me this wall was built by Mexicans for Jim Bark when he had the Quarter Circle U Ranch. The purpose of the stone wall was to separate cattle from one pasture area to another.

The cattlemen also constructed a dam on Peter's Canyon hoping to form a reservoir to water their cattle. I don't recall seeing this dam in place. As I recall, the dam has always been washed out. The dam and tank that was most successful was the one located in a small tributary that flowed into Peter's Canyon. This stone dam had a gate in the bottom to flush the sand out of it every once in a while.

Along the trail in Peter's Canyon there is a large underground beehive. This beehive was enormous the last time I visited the area. I don't think it would be wise to disturb these bees, they could be Africanized.

Several years ago while riding on Peter's Mesa with a friend I found a couple of large eyebolts. They were so imbedded in the rock I couldn't even move them. Their use could have a variety of possibilities. Peter's Mesa has some unexplained mysteries, but like all mysteries the puzzle may be solved one of these days. Peter's Mesa is a place where prospectors, miners, cowboys, treasure hunters, adventurers and dreamers have all roamed searching for a little piece of reality, a part of the Old West they believed still existed.



Cattle and fire wood came from the Superstitions to keep the boom town of Silver King alive in late 1870's. Above, the Superintendent's office at Silver King.



Early vertical shaft on Peter's Mesa. This shaft supposedly produce a quantity of gold during the 1930's.



The western escarpment of Peter's Mesa.



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



Resting on the Peter's Mesa Trail with pack horse.