

STRANDED ON WEAVER'S NEEDLE

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 1998

The quest for gold has attracted men and women to the Superstition Wilderness for more than a hundred years. These quests have been tragic for some and an adventure for others.

In March of 1963, two prospectors in the area of Weaver's Needle heard cries for help. Ray Gatewood was trapped on top of Weaver's Needle and was screaming that his friend, Vance Bacon, had fallen.

Bacon, a registered geologist, had been hired by Mrs. Celeste Marie Jones of Phoenix for a special job on the "needle". He was to formulate a plan of procedure for mining a claim owned by Mrs. Celeste Marie Jones of Phoenix who believed the "needle" contained a rich vein of gold. Jones was the infamous feuding partner of Edgar Piper who camped near the base of Weaver's Needle.

Gatewood, a 20 year-old, had recently moved to the valley from Oregon and had been doing odd jobs to get by. He answered a classified ad to do some work on copper claims in the Superstition Mountains. Bacon picked Gatewood up in Tempe and they drove out to Peralta Canyon.

They hiked to the base of Weaver's Needle, and at about 10 a.m. on March 25, 1963, they began their ascent of the "needle." They climbed to a ledge above the mine's entrance that lay about ten feet below them. Bacon threw a coiled rope over the ledge and started to climb down to the mine. Gatewood said at this point he heard some rocks falling and then saw Bacon's body plunge downward. The geologist fell some 500 feet to his death. Gatewood looked down from the perilous ledge he was standing on and saw Bacon's body sprawled on some rocks far below.

Two men, Joseph Roider 55, of Chicago, and Ted Herrick, 51, of Apache Junction, were working a mining claim near Bluff Springs Mountain almost a half a mile away. They could hear Gatewood's cry for help but couldn't see him. They hiked around the "Needle" finding Gatewood on a narrow ledge high up on the side of Weaver's Needle. They told Gatewood they would go for help.

Roider and Herrick hiked out to Apache Junction and reported the incident to the Pinal County Sheriff's Office. Roider reported the man on the "Needle" as being shook up and that his friend had died in a fall. Roider spent the night in Apache Junction and returned with Range Deputy Amos Hawkins and a posse the next morning.

In March of 1963, a geologist named Vance Bacon was climbing on Weaver's Needle, attempting to formulate a plan of procedure for mining a claim owned by Mrs. Celeste Marie Jones of Phoenix who believed the "needle" contained a rich vein of gold.

Bacon was accompanied by Ray Gatewood, a 20 year-old who had recently moved to the valley from Oregon and had been doing odd jobs to get by.

Bacon fell to his death during the climb and two prospectors in the area heard Gatewood's cries for help.

Joseph Roider 55, of Chicago, and Ted Herrick, 51, of Apache Junction, were working a mining claim near Bluff Springs Mountain almost a half a mile away. They hiked around the "Needle" finding Gatewood on a narrow ledge high up on the side of Weaver's Needle. They told Gatewood they would go for help.

Two other men were also involved in the recovery of Vance Bacon's body. They were Nyle Leatham, of Mesa, and Clay Worst, of Fairview, Montana. Leatham was a reporter for the Arizona Republic. Both men had just hiked out of the mountain when they heard about a man falling off the "Needle". They returned to Linesbra Ranch before light on March 26, 1963, and hiked back into the area of Weaver's Needle. Leatham remained near the base of the "needle" while Worst climbed the "needle" to the point where the stranded man was located. Leatham and Worst had two-way radios. As Worst arrived on top, the rescue helicopter also arrived. Both Worst and Gatewood were hauled aboard and Worst radioed the information to Leatham. Louie Cordova, one of Jones' men, hiked over to the base of the "needle" with Leatham and located the remains of Vance Bacon. They then returned to Jones' Camp and reported the information to the deputies.

Vance Bacon was born in Caldwell, Idaho in 1933 and attended the University of Idaho at Moscow. He was a registered and experienced geologist. Looking for work in Arizona he answered Celeste Marie Jones' classified ad seeking a geologist to prepare a plan of procedure to operate a mine in the Superstition Mountains. Jones said she paid Bacon two hundred dollars for his service. He left behind a wife and four children.

Ray Gatewood met with tragedy that day and survived. But, the memories of that fateful day will remain with him for the rest of his life.

Source of information: Nyle Leatham, Arizona



Ted Herrick (l) and Joe Roider (r) heard Gatewood's plea for help from the top of the Needle. Photo courtesy of the Arizona Republic.