

## SUPERSTITION MOUNTAIN

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 2001

Arizona's Superstition Mountain has long been the source of stories and tales about lost gold. Stories of mystery, greed and sometimes death. The Dutchman's Lost Mine, the Jesuit Treasure, Peralta Mines, and many other tales continue to attract men and women from far and near to this rugged mountain range east of Apache Junction. But, the real stories are not about gold, but about the people who search for the lost gold.

This giant monolith, Superstition Mountain, rises some 3,000 feet above the surrounding desert floor and dominates the eastern fringe of the Salt River Valley. The mountain is part of the Superstition Wilderness Area which contains some 159,780 acres or 242 sq. miles of the Tonto National Forest.

The region includes a wide-range of fauna and flora indigenous to the Sonoran Desert. Fauna range from the giant Saguaro cactus to the stately Ponderosa pine. Mule deer, javelinas, pumas, bobcats, coyotes, a variety of rodents, birds, reptiles and amphibians live in this fragile desert ecosystem. The diversity of living things in this region often astonishes the visitor.

Old-timers will tell you everything that survives in this hostile desert either sticks, stings, bites or eats meat. This is an age-old description of a land where life is totally dependent on the availability of water. Water is more precious than gold when temperatures exceed 119 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer months and can drop well below freezing during the winter months. Snow is not uncommon in the high desert-mountains during the winter.

This mountain of towering spires and deep canyons was formed by volcanic upheaval some 17-29 million years ago during the Tertiary Period of geologic time. Superstition Mountain formed during a tectonic maelstrom that resulted in a massive caldera almost seven miles in diameter.

After the lava cooled, magma pushed the center of the caldera upward forming a mass of igneous rock. This mass was slowly eroded for millions of years by running water and wind forming the mountain we see today. Superstition Mountain in the past was one thousand feet higher than it is today. Uplift, subsidence, resurgence and erosion have all played a role in shaping this mountain. Yes, Superstition Mountain was born of fire.

Many times I have been asked about the origin of the name of Superstition Mountain. The best answer centers on the early farmers of the Salt River Valley who grew and cut hay for the U.S. Army at Fort McDowell in the late 1860's. These farmers were constantly hearing stories from the Pimas about how they feared the mountain. The farmers translated the Pima's

fear to mean superstitious, hence the name Superstition Mountain. Superstition Mountain appeared on U.S. War Department maps for the first time in 1870, but was referred to as Sierra Supersticiones on military sketched field maps in the late 1860's.

Some authors and writers would lead you to believe the Spanish named Superstition Mountain. Sim Ely, author of *The Lost Dutchman Mine*, stated in the opening chapter of his classic book the Spanish named Superstition Mountain Sierra de Espuma, meaning the mountain of foam. The origin of this name appears to be a forest service map drawn by L.P. Landon in 1918. Landon named a small butte southwest of Superstition Mountain Monte de Espuma.

It is true that the first European visitors to this region were the Spanish arriving here almost five hundred years ago. Fray Marcos de Niza, in 1539, observed Superstition Mountain from the Gila River, but did not record it in his journal. Superstition Mountain would have no history if it were not for those men and women who came here as adventurers, cattlemen, cowboys, prospectors, and miners.

Some claim Superstition Mountain is Arizona's second most painted and photographed landmark, second only to the Grand Canyon. Artists from around the world have come to the desert floor beneath Superstition Mountain to paint its spectacular western facade since 1870. The mountain, with all its beauty, history, and mystic, continues to attract adventurers, tourists, dreamers and artists into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Superstition Mountain is truly a treasure for the community of Apache Junction.