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## Legendary gold stays shrouded in mystery

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Posted: Thursday, July 27, 2006 10:51 am

Art Martori

Mike Johnson slumped his big frame onto a rock formation in the foothills of the Superstition Mountains, pulled off his baseball cap and ran a hand through his long, sweaty hair.

"Wicked," he said in a thick New England accent.



Johnson and his companions took a breather Monday morning, exhausted from the 95-degree heat and the hike up the looming fortress of stone. After a few minutes, he dug a battered walking stick into the dirt and continued the ascent.

The hikers intended to press deep into the mountains in search of a fortune some say is only legend: The Lost Dutchman's gold.

The 45-year-old and his brother, Bill Johnson, 46, were lured to Apache Junction by the prospect of finding the hidden treasure of Lost Dutchman

Jacob Waltz.

They had visited the area several times when they lived in Gloucester, Mass., and in 2003 moved to Apache Junction, setting up a base of operations in a mobile home at the foot of the mountains.

Every year, countless treasure hunters make their way into the Superstition Mountains, often returning with tales of riches found — sometimes not returning at all. Despite these hopeful accounts, the treasure has never turned up. And some experts doubt it ever will.

According to Superstition Mountain Historical Society records, nearly 150 treasure hunters claimed to locate the Lost Dutchman's gold since his death in 1891. To date, no one has produced the gold.

George Johnston, president emeritus of the Superstition Mountain Historical Society, said he's seen the prospect of gold lure many a treasure hunter into the mountains. But, as far as he can tell, none of Waltz's gold has made it back down.

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"The problem is, when someone says they found it, we ask for the gold," the 86-year-old Gold Canyon resident said. "Then they say, 'I don't have any yet.'"

Johnston said he's lived in the shadow of the Superstition Mountains since 1950 and he's never known anybody to turn up with the gold. He hopes it will remain undiscovered.

"To me, I think the mystery is the story," he said. "I think if someone finds it or proves where it is, it will lose some of its interest."

Mike Johnson, who said his bad knees keep him out of work, hunts treasure full time. His brother, who works in the manufacturing industry, also is a treasure hunter.

The brothers have compiled an extensive archive of their findings that includes blurry photos and newspaper articles, saved on a computer Mike Johnson salvaged from a trash bin. They said they even found proof: A fragment of what they believe to be a human skull from some unlucky character in the Lost Dutchman saga.

They turned the fragment over to the Pinal County Sheriff's Office. An official in the department said the fragment has not been identified and the case is not being investigated.

Yet the Johnsons were undeterred.

"Nobody who found what we found has lived to tell about it," Bill Johnson said. He stood perched on a cliff about two miles into the mountains, scanning the area for landmarks and other clues showing the way to the treasure.

The temperature had surged to 105 degrees by the time the Johnson brothers

located a cave hidden by a paloverde tree. The ceiling of the cave was layered with soot from a campfire, and an old shovel leaned against the rock wall. But the Johnson brothers, now five hours into the trek, were subdued.

Most of the water was gone. And Mike Johnson, now pale and his breathing ragged, said he was lightheaded and worried about his heart condition.

"I take 19 pills a day," he said.

But he's not the only one who's had trouble in the mountains.

The Pinal County Sheriff's Office responds to about 120 rescue calls every year, most of them in and around the Superstition Mountains, officials said. In the past 21 days, the all-volunteer Superstition Search and Rescue has retrieved five people. Three of them were dead, and two were immobilized and near death.

Deputy Ben Cook, who coordinates efforts between the search and rescue team and the Pinal County Sheriff's Office, said it's too easy to overlook the danger of entering the Superstition Mountains. It's so strenuous that rescue volunteers first must demonstrate that they can hike three miles in one hour, while carrying a 35-pound backpack uphill.

"I think it's so close to civilization that people think it's safe out there," he said. "It's not. It's as remote and wilderness as you can get."

The Johnson brothers survived the excursion Monday, which included zigzagging across a two-mile route into the mountains and climbing nearly 2,000 feet in altitude. They made it back safely, but none the richer.

Clay Worst, a 78-year-old Apache Junction man who's sought the gold for the last 58 years, said treasure hunting takes a toll on a person. The longer the search, the harder it gets, he said.

"Sometimes, it gets to be 15 or 20 years before they realize it's not as easy as they thought," he said. "But they're having the time of their life."

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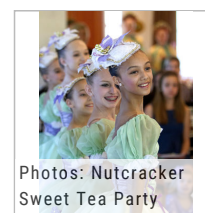
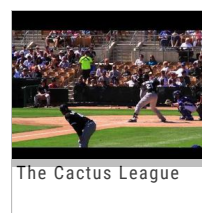
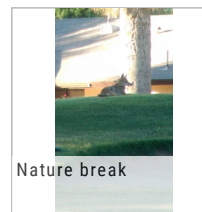
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Back in Mike Johnson's airconditioned mobile home, the brothers sipped ice tea and pored through files they said prove the location of the Lost Dutchman's gold. Mike Johnson had almost recovered and said he could never make the trip if he were weighted down with the fabled riches. They just want credit for the discovery, he said, and maybe a book deal.

"I can't picture myself hauling out a big bag of gold," he said. "I'd rather go for the other part - it pays the same."

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Posted in Mesa, Queen creek on Thursday, July 27, 2006 10:51 am.

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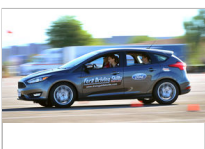

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