

The BUGLE

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The Legend of Sierra Azul

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Legends are just that -- stories from the past that tell of remarkable people and extraordinary places.

Their lifeblood is exaggeration, overstatement and the belief at one time that they were fact.

Most die a slow death. Some gain immortality.

And a rare few emerge from behind the shroud of myth, when it is discovered that they were, in fact, at least based in truth.

Such is the case with the Legend of Sierra Azul -- the Blue Mountain -- a mountain so fabulously rich in precious metals it played a role in the history of the Verde Valley, if not that of the entire Southwest.

A myth emerges

Sierra Azul is first mentioned in a memorial of Diego de Penalosa, governor general of New Mexico from 1661 to 1664, as written by his aide de camp, Dominguez de Mendoza.

Little is known of the author. Penalosa was a notorious liar.

Mendoza's account tells of Penalosa's well-planned expedition to "Sierra del Azul, the ores of which have been assayed and are known to be rich in gold and silver."

However, according to Mendoza, Penalosa never made the trip, due to Apache wars and other obstacles. Mendoza mentions neither his source of the information on Sierra Azul or its location.

The account also tells of a trip Penalosa made in 1662 to the country of the Coninas and Cruzados Indians who lived west of Oraibe, the western



Painting by Frederic Remington

The list of fabled treasures to be found in el Norte began with Francisco Vasquez Coronado's journey through Arizona and New Mexico in 1540, in search of the Seven Cities of gold, said to include the towns of Cibola and Quivira. It was a legend the Spaniards brought with them from Spain.



Like virtually every Spanish conquistador, explorer and Governor of Mexico, Don Juan Bautista de Anza spent at least part of his time in

most of the Moqui (Hopi) pueblos.

It is uncertain whether the trip to Sierra Azul was to have been part of the trip to the Hopi mesas.

New Mexico and Arizona searching for the fabled Sierra Azul. However, he was one of the only ones who following his search proclaimed the mountain a myth.

Later tales of Sierra Azul would indicate the mountain was in the neighborhood of the Cruzados, believed to have been the Yavapai Indians, who lived south and west of the Hopis.

Penalosa was eventually discharged from his service to the Spanish crown and later sought French support for his treasure-hunting expeditions.

In 1680, the Pueblos of New Mexico revolted and successfully routed the Spanish from what is now New Mexico.

But the legend of Sierra Azul remained.

Perpetuators of a myth

The Spanish historic record next mentions the mountain in a report to King Charles II from Father Alonso de Posadas, former custodian for the New Mexico missions.

In his report, Posadas tells the king of "Sierra Azul...so famed for its wealth, because its ores have been assayed many times, but never possessed because of our negligence and timidity." Posadas said the mountain lay 100 leagues (Spanish league=2.6 miles) southwest of Santa Fe and 50 leagues north of Sonora.

In 1689 a Spanish adventurer by the name of Toribio de Huerta petitioned Charles II for the opportunity to reclaim New Mexico for the crown, at his personal expense.

The altruistic de Huerta stated his intention was to return the backsliding Pueblos to the church but, while he was in the neighborhood, he also offered to check out "a place called Sierra Azul, more than two hundred leagues long and full of silver."

De Huerta upped the ante to the king noting he would also be passing by a reported quicksilver (mercury) mine, "the Cerro Colorado, by which the entire realm and the rest of the provinces and kingdoms discovered might be supplied."

He said the quicksilver mine lay between the New Mexico Pueblo of Zuni and the Hopi pueblos in Arizona.

His offer to locate quicksilver hit a cord with the king, who granted his request. Quicksilver was used in the processing of gold and in great demand. The king realized a local (cheaper) source would be a windfall for Spain.

However, like Penalosa's side trip, de Huerta's expedition to recover New Mexico never materialized. When it got down to funding the operation, it seems de Huerta was "short of funds."

In the name of God and gold

With de Huerta stuck in Spain and short of money, the reconquest of New Mexico and the search for the fabled mountain fell to the newly appointed governor at El Paso, Diego de Vargas.

But before he could move, Vargas was instructed to investigate Sierra Azul and Cerro Colorado to determine if they were based in fact or fiction.

He interviewed three missionary fathers and nine Spanish settlers familiar with the New Mexico

lands once occupied by the Spanish Crown.

Some recounted stories of the gold and silver to be unearthed at Sierra Azul. Some recounted seeing loads of almagre a reddish rock believed to be cinnabar (the rock from which mercury is extracted), arriving at the Moqui pueblo of Oraibe.

In 1692 Vargas led a group of Spanish soldiers to Santa Fe and retook the city in what was called the "bloodless reconquest."

He immediately turned his sights and his men to Moqui. When he arrived he heard the mines were 10 days travel away, in a high mountain.

The ores, he was told, were in a deep pit that took a day or two to descend and other day to ascend. The Hopi also told him the road was bad, water was scarce and that a river lay in the path, with sides too steep to take a horse down.

His men and horses exhausted, Vargas gave up the idea, but not before he obtained samples of the almagre to be sent to Mexico City for assay. The red earth, it was discovered, contained no quicksilver.

Vargas' disappointment at the Hopi pueblos, however, had little if any effect on the search for Sierra Azul.

A slow death

In 1699, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino found a piece of red metal on the banks of the Gila River, which he was told had washed down from the [Verde River](#).

When Kino arrived at the confluence of the Salt and Verde River he was told by his guides that the Verde got its name because it passed though a mountain that contained stones laced with green, blue and other colors.

Capt. Juan Mateo Mange, Kino's companion, stated he believed Sierra Azul, "rich in ores of silver and gold," was to be found somewhere up the Verde, then the very heart of Apacheria.

By the mid 1700s several rich silver mines had been discovered in southern Arizona and the Sierra Azul turned to the unexplored region lying between the Gila River, the Moqui villages and the Colorado River. It was a land controlled by the Apaches, a wild and dangerous place for anyone.

When a group of Frenchmen arrived in Santa Fe in 1744 the first thing they asked was for the location of Sierra Azul. The local priest Father Juan Miguel Menchero told them it was in a rough and dry land, four days journey from Moqui in the land of the Coninas Apaches.

The story of Sierra Azul was told and retold over the next century. It was passed on to the Mexicans after the Spanish were gone. But no one dared enter the wild, rugged and dangerous land of the Apache.

Facts emerge

In 1858, a ragtag band of renegade Mexicans, once held captive by the Apache, stumbled into the southern Arizona town of Tubac, telling tales of a mountain near the headwaters of the Verde River rich in gold and silver.

It would be another 15 years before the Apache threat was neutralized and men began nosing around the promising mountain on the southwest side of the Verde River, just downstream from its headwaters.

Years later, scholars studying the fabled Sierra Azul would declare the mines of Jerome were in fact the fabled wealth sought by fortune hunters for almost three centuries.

The story, they say, was based in fact. The location of the mines had been discovered as early as 1583 when the first of two Spanish gold-seeking parties visited the Verde Valley.

For reasons unknown, the pathway followed by Antonio Espejo and Juan de Onate to the blue mountain of copper southwest of Moqui was lost.

But the truth behind their story survived 300 years of exaggeration and overstatement to emerge from beneath Cleopatra Hill.

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