



Wickenburg

The Vulture and Its Legacy



This fabled Arizona lode is just a day trip out of Phoenix — but 143 years back in time

■ GERALD C. HAMMON



Now 143 years old, the wooden head frame at Vulture Mine is starting to show its age (top). The mine has twin shafts angled at 35 degrees into the earth (inset). At the Desert Caballeros Western Museum, a display portrays a super-market from the 1800s (above). A bust of the town's founder, Henry Wickenburg, sits in front of City Hall.

It's an odd name, particularly for a mine. And, as is usually the case, there are at least a couple of stories on how the Vulture Mine came by its unusual monicker.

According to one story, a prospector by the name of Henry Wickenburg — who had joined a hardy group of miners who were marching up dry washes and down rugged slopes looking for tell-tale quartz outcroppings that might be hiding gold — threw a

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the Glory Hole and, in fact, seven men and 12 burros went to “glory” when the collapse occurred.

Sadly, it was their own greed that did them in.

When the Vulture was actively mined, the ore was so extensive that the miners were forced to leave pillars of ore in place to keep the ceilings of the shafts from caving in. As you might expect, those pillars contained a lot of rich ore. The miners who were killed were illegally in the mine, digging out those pillars when the inevitable happened: the roof fell in and the tons of overlay dropped on them.

The assay building still holds much of the equipment used to analyze the ore, including the retorts and the furnaces. It almost looks as if the last assayer simply walked out, leaving everything in place. According to the manager of the property, the rocks from which the assay building was built actually contain a considerable amount of gold ore, approximately \$600,000 worth, he claimed — more



rock at a vulture that was either near, or perched on, a promising outcropping of quartz. A more prosaic version is that Wickenburg said the ore was an unlikely dark color, much like the dark feathers of the vulture. Either way, the outcrop was rich in gold, and Henry Wickenburg had his mine.

And, over time, the Vulture became one of Arizona’s most fabled mines.

The Vulture hasn’t been worked in years, but makes a worthy destination when combined with the town of Wickenburg, a true

Western community where the real West still lives. You can tour the mine’s surface remains for a small fee. It’s worth it. The wooden head frame is slowly breaking down, but still stands starkly against the blue sky, perched as it is close to the site where Wickenburg made his discovery. Metal tracks still lead down the 35-percent slope, deep into the earth. Next to the shaft is an area that has obviously caved in. You can even see old horizontal mine shafts along the walls of the cave-in. It has the dubious name of



Palm Lake at the Nature Conservancy’s Hassayampa River Preserve is a magnet for wildlife and birds (top). Many exquisite bronzes are on exhibit at the Desert Caballeros Western Museum (middle). The Vulture Mine’s diesel engine and generator date back to 1904 (above). Only freight trains roll by the once busy passenger station in Wickenburg (left).

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than the value of the ore that was removed from the mine during its final years.

Although it is claimed that some \$200 million dollars' worth of gold was taken out of the Vulture, no one really got rich from it. In fact, Henry Wickenburg sold his interest in the mine in 1865 for just \$25,000 (and later took up farming to pay the bills). It was, in retrospect, a smart move. Though rich in ore, the Vulture was 12 miles from the nearest water. In order to process the ore, it had to be hauled to the banks of the Hassayampa River, where it was first processed in Spanish-style arrastras, rock-lined basins in which the ore was dumped. A horse, mule or even burro would be used to pull rocks attached to a pivot so that the rocks would be pulled over the ore and, in time, crush the ore to the point the gold could be recovered. Still, the process was not nearly as damaging to the owner's profits as the "high grading."

High grading is a term that means, bluntly, stealing rich ore. Miners pocketed chunks of gold rich ore, and teamsters hauling the ore to the Hassayampa substituted barren rock for chunks of ore to keep the weight of the load roughly equal to what they had picked up at the mine.

The owners did try to fight back. A knurled old Ironwood tree beside the ruins of Wickenburg's house is called the hanging tree, because 18 men reputedly swung to eternity there for high grading.

Subsequent owners tried to make improvements. A pipeline was built to bring water to the mine site, but in 1890 a dam broke on the Hassayampa River and the resulting flood tore up the pipeline. Later, the mine was converted from steam power to electricity with an enormous 1904 diesel engine imported from Europe. It still stands, now silent, in one of the buildings on the tour. As you look at it, just remember it dates from the dawn of the Automobile Age.

The Vulture's legacy can still be found, however — not in the gold

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that was mined and sometimes misappropriated, but in the delightful community that grew up along the Hassayampa River where the ore was processed.

Named for the discoverer of the Vulture, Wickenburg has maintained the ambiance of the Old West in a unique way. While dude ranching didn't originate in Wickenburg, it was one of the earliest towns in the country to establish dude ranches where city folk could experience the mystique of the Wild West. In fact, five dude ranches still operate in Wickenburg, including the Kay El Bar Ranch, which is celebrating its 80th anniversary this year.

Lean, weather-beaten men and women in well-worn Levis and battered Stetsons still drive mud-splashed pickups into the parking lots at Safeway and Bashas. You can buy horse tack and working clothing next door to the place that offers upscale jewelry. The pace is laid back, just as it was when the dudes stepped off the Santa Fe and climbed into ranch vehicles for the ride out to the Remuda or the Kay El Bar. You'll still find horses tied up along Tegner Street today, and they do have the right-of-way in town.

Along with the Western ambiance, the Hassayampa River is its own attraction in Wickenburg. It's called the upside-down river, for good reason: The water travels far below the surface, except in rare areas where bedrock close to the surface forces the water into view. If you travel a few miles toward Phoenix on U.S. Highway 60, a highway rest area on the west side of the roadway provides a good view of the water flowing on the surface.

About a mile before you reach the rest area from Wickenburg, the Nature Conservancy Hassayampa River Preserve, also on the west side of the highway, is another place where the water comes to the surface and creates an all-too-rare riparian wonderland that is home to a stunning variety of plants, animals and birds.

Wickenburg is also home to the excellent Desert Caballeros Western Museum, known as the

"West Most Western Museum," where interesting permanent exhibits bring the past to life. Several of Remington's paintings and sculptures are there, along with a different sort of Remington; an extensive firearms collection that attracts people specifically to the museum.

Henry Wickenburg never got all that was owed him from the Vulture, and when he turned to farming things didn't get much better for him. The Walnut Grove Flood of 1890 washed away the rich river-bottom soil Wickenburg and others depended on, and Henry's farm was ruined. He struggled on for another 15 years, but in 1905 ended his life with a pistol shot. The town he created also struggled but then thrived. The phrase "Out Wickenburg Way" has symbolized a laid-back, comfortable Western way of life for decades. It's a place where the air isn't polluted, the traffic isn't daunting, and the stores aren't crowded. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION

ARIZONA OFFICE OF TOURISM
(866) 275-5816, ARIZONAGUIDE.COM.
CIRCLE 211 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

DESERT CABALLEROS WESTERN MUSEUM
(928) 684-2272,
WESTERNMUSEUM.ORG.

THE VULTURE MINE
(602) 859-2743.

WICKENBURG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
(928) 684-5479,
WICKENBURGCHAMBER.COM.

COACH CAMPING

DESERT CYPRESS RV PARK
(928) 684-2153.

HORSPIALITY RV PARK
(928) 684-2519.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS

WICKENBURG IS LOCATED AT THE JUNCTION OF U.S. HIGHWAYS 60 AND 93, ABOUT 50 MILES NORTHWEST OF PHOENIX. THE VULTURE MINE IS 12 MILES SOUTHWEST OF TOWN.