PERALTA STONES: Maps to Lost Dutchman's Gold—or Hoax?

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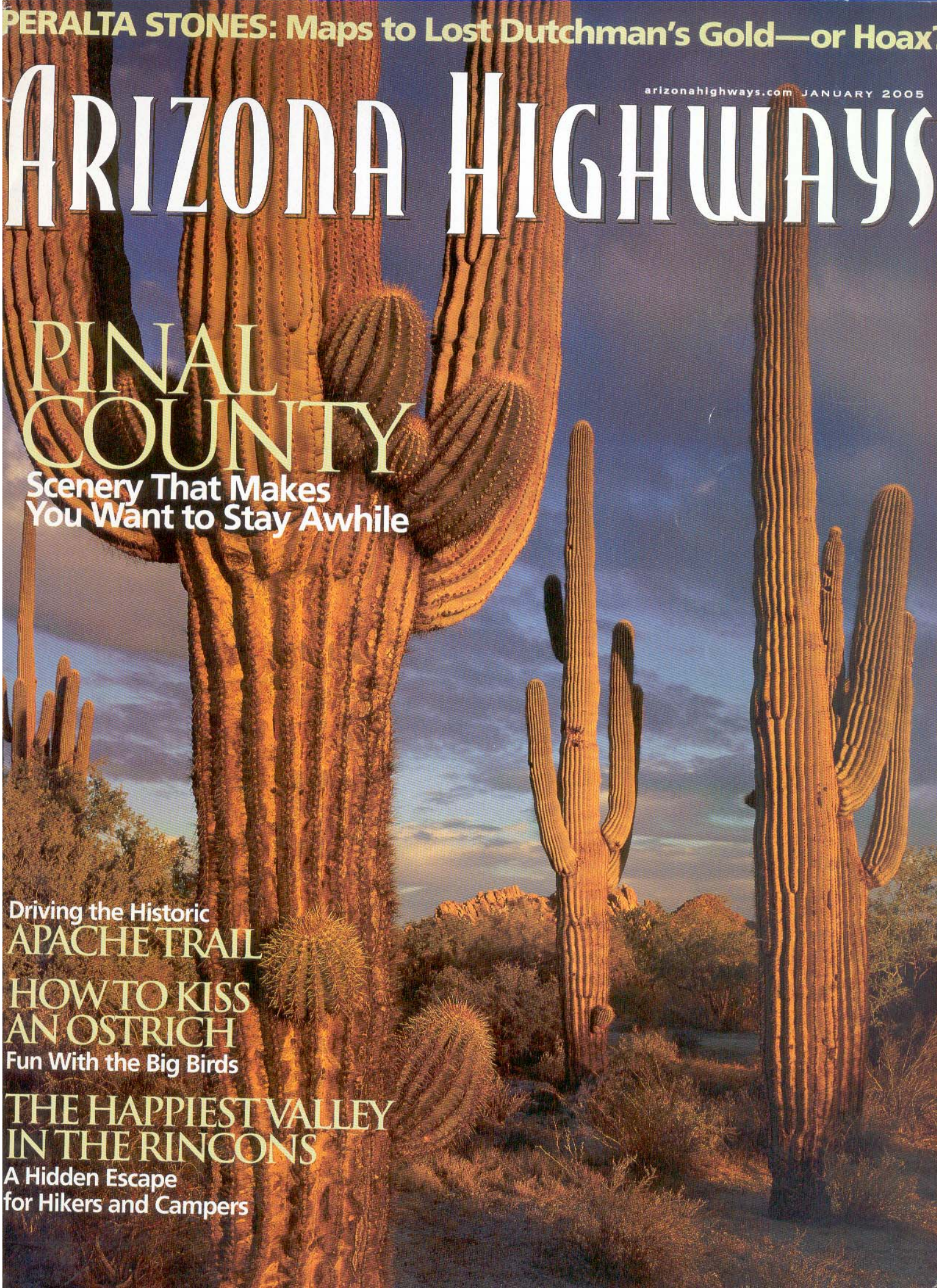

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THE PERALTA STONES

MAPS TO THE LOST DUTCHMAN GOLD MINE

or

Hoax?

Text by ANNE MONTGOMERY Photographs by PETER NOEBELS

ARE THE CONTROVERSIAL PERALTA STONES actually "stone maps" that lead to the Lost Dutchman Gold Mine? Did they lie buried in the desert for almost 100 years before being discovered at the foot of the Superstition Mountains? Are they clues to the Holy Grail for treasure hunters worldwide?

Until recently, hard evidence on the incised sandstone slabs has been scarce. But thanks to some scientific sleuthing, we may finally have answers to the Peralta Stones' puzzle.

The story behind the stones goes something like this: Sometime in the early 1860s, German-born miner Jacob Waltz—whom most people called the "Dutchman"—and his lifelong friend, Jacob Weiser, met Don Miguel Peralta, member of a powerful family from Sonora, Mexico. Peralta, whose fortunes were sagging, convinced Waltz and Weiser to accompany him for security on an expedition he was leading to the Superstitions, where he hoped to locate rich gold veins discovered by his family 20 years earlier.

They found the place and after mining gold from an open pit, Waltz and Weiser

offered to give up their shares of the gold for the rights to the property. Peralta, who needed cash, agreed. The two friends are said to have extracted great quantities of high-grade ore from the mine, which they buried in numerous pits in the area for safekeeping.

Then disaster followed. After a trip to a nearby town for supplies, Waltz returned to find their camp destroyed and Weiser gone. Devastated by the disappearance of his friend, the Dutchman grabbed what gold he could carry and left.

Weiser, who was severely injured in the raid and would eventually succumb to his wounds, escaped and was rescued by peaceful Pima Indians. He, too, believed his partner was dead. Neither man would ever learn the truth.

Though there were rumors that Weiser had created a rawhide map and Waltz had tried to explain the location of the mine to a family who had befriended him as he lay dying in 1891, the buried caches of gold were never found. It has been theorized that Apache Indians, who considered the Superstition Mountains sacred, filled in the open pit, disguising the mine's location. An earthquake in 1887 further muddled the landscape, changing the area so extensively that the gold—if there is any—remains hidden to this day.

The Peralta Stones—three approximately 10 by 17-inch 25-pound slabs—were supposedly discovered buried in the desert between Florence and Apache Junction by an Oregon couple in 1954. Currently under lock and key at the Arizona Mining and Mineral Museum in Phoenix, the rocks had never been examined by a professional archaeologist, geologist or historian. At least, not any who allowed his or her name to be used. (In 1965, Travis Marlowe, whose real name is Clarence O. Mitchell, published a book titled *Superstition Treasures*. In the foreword, he explained that the stones were "examined by a professor of geology at one of the state universities who declared them to be genuine and carved approximately 100 years ago." The author never gave the geologist's name.)

The people who supposedly discovered the stones and the early "promoters" are all dead. Others who claimed to believe in their authenticity, and some who may have used them for get-rich-quick schemes, are nowhere to be found.

A drawing of a standing horse dominates one of the Peralta stones. On its reverse side, a witch or priest figure carries a cross. Squiggly lines, circles with dots in the middle and unidentified markings resembling a map abound on the front side of a second stone, while the word "DON" is etched on its back. The back side of the third stone bears a large Christian cross, and its front displays a cutout heart shape.

Research archaeologist Dr. Jenny Adams of Desert Archaeology Inc., a Tucson-based consulting service, finds the discovery part of the story hard to believe. "There is no evidence these stones were ever buried. The stone material is very soft, and there would be a lot of random abrasions. If they sat out in the open, there would be lichen, weathering of the symbols and discoloration of the stone material. Just look at old headstones in any cemetery."

The question of how the Peralta Stones were made also debunks the idea that the rocks were carved before the 20th century.

"The pair of dark stones were mechanically sanded and then drilled," Adams says. "In many places, there is a 'start dimple' where the drill first touched the stone."

The use of an electric drill to create the drawings and symbols, as well as the shape of the stones, most likely dates their carving to sometime after 1940. Hauling around 75 pounds of "map" could not have been very practical. So one might expect that rock maps leading to treasure in the Superstitions might be made from sandstone common to the mountains. However, Dr. Elizabeth Miksa, also a research geologist with Desert Archaeology, explains that the Peralta Stones originated far from where they were supposedly found.

"The big stone with the horse on it appears to be Coconino Sandstone," she explains. "The other two sandstones are very soft, very fine, iron-rich . . . sandstones. [These] are most likely found on the Mogollon Rim or in northern Arizona."

[OPPOSITE PAGE] The mysterious Peralta Stones depict (clockwise from far left): a horse, various squiggles suggesting a map, and a heart cutout. [RIGHT] Lesley Presmyk, vice chairman of the Arizona Mineral and Mining Museum Foundation, uses a magnifier to examine the Peralta Stones for clues regarding their origins.

And what about the words? Poorly spelled Spanish phrases have been translated to mean the following: "This trail is dangerous. I go 18 places." And, "Search the map. Search the heart." The heart, about the size of a 6-inch salad plate, is a removable, engraved stone that fits snuggly into a recessed carving in one of the rocks. Two other phrases translated as "The horse of Santa Fe" and "I graze to the north of the river" are similarly baffling.

Some say the blocky, poor writing is another clue that the Peralta Stones are probably phony. Words are written in all capital letters, and even common words like *caballo* (horse) are misspelled as *cobollo*.

Historical archaeologist Homer Thiel of Desert Archaeology finds this diagnosis easy. "The lettering is completely wrong for the Spanish language documents of the [supposed] time period."

Although the evidence seems to suggest that the Peralta Stones are elaborate forgeries, many treasure hunters show great interest.

"People . . . come, they pay money to photograph them," says Ray Grant, chairman of the Arizona Mineral and Mining Museum Foundation. "I think people just like lost treasure stories."

Anne Montgomery of Phoenix, an avid mineral collector, got to spend some private time with the Peralta Stones. Now, she's off to find the gold.

Peter Noebels of Tucson says he would not bet a nickel on finding any treasures using the cryptic information on the Peralta Stones.

ON EXHIBIT

It has been 35 years since the Peralta Stones were first displayed at the inaugural Flagg Foundation Tailgate Mineral Show at the Don's Club Grounds in the Superstition Mountains. Since that time, the stones—or the molded facsimiles that were on exhibit at the Mesa Southwest Museum—were viewable only with certain "secret" portions intriguingly taped over. But on January 7, 8 and 9, the Peralta Stones will be on display in all their quirky weirdness at the 23rd Flagg Gem and Mineral Show in Mesa.

The event, sponsored by the Arizona Mineral and Mining Museum Foundation and the Mesa Community College Geology Club, runs from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. daily. It will be held at the Mesa Community College west parking lot on Dobson Road, between Southern Avenue and the Superstition Freeway. Admission and parking are free.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: (480) 814-9086 or (602) 255-3795, extension 10.