

Short Story 3

The Moonshiners' Mine

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By their very nature prospectors and small miners are a versatile breed. Blue Holt was no exception!

It was the mid-1920s. Metal prices were depressed and clouds of the market bust and the Great Depression that followed were just beyond the horizon. Tombstone, like most of its sister mining settlements in the Southwest, was suffering from hard times, the result of widespread unemployment in the "little" mines. The county courthouse was about to be lost to neighboring Bisbee. Most of the denizens of the once-great boom camp had moved on to cities that offered employment opportunities and a promise of "the better life". Those who stayed on were faced with tightening belts and scrounging for every penny.

Holt chose to "hang and rattle"!

Over the years Blue had been a single-jackass prospector, a miner employed by the giant companies as well as the smallest operations, and he'd successfully leased from owners of Tombstone mines. He was sharp, knowledgeable and long on ambition.

Finding himself out of work and with no other source of income, the hard-rocker decided to turn moonshiner. After all, in good times or bad there was always a market for white lightning and what's more, Blue was experienced in distilling the stuff.

With another Tombstoner, Jack Rider, Holt set out to locate a convenient, but safe, place to begin operations. They chose an old prospect pit a couple of miles southeast of town, just off the Bisbee road. With the still set up and in operation the miner-moonshiner and his partner soon became prosperous. Their product must have been good—at least acceptable—for the demand for their booze became so great that expansion of the facility was urgent.

In typical miner fashion, Blue decided to enlarge the prospect and went to work drilling a round. The holes were loaded and blasted. After the dust and powder fumes had cleared the partners set out to muck and hoist the waste. The first bucket of rock that reached the shaft collar put them out of the moonshine business for it was found that they had blasted into an unusually high grade lead ore body.

This was the beginning of the Tombstone Extension Mine, a property that went into production in 1930 and

was the largest producer of lead ore in Arizona during 1932-33 and second in 1934.

What Holt and Rider realized from their discovery is not known. Production records from the Tombstone Mining Company, owner of the property, show that between January of 1930 and December of 1937 eight leasers and the owners worked the Tombstone Extension Mine. Payment was received for gold, silver, lead, iron and lime.

An interesting sidelight is the comparatively small amount of money that the owners and lessees received for their production in the seven-year period for which figures are available. The total gross value of metals mined was \$408,941.08. Smelter charges amounted to \$200,994.80, while freight and other charges against the total gross were over \$30,000. The net to the shippers was only \$177,470.99, or approximately \$11 per ton for the 16,000 tons of ore mined, hoisted and shipped.

Partners Holt and Rider have long since disappeared from the Tombstone scene. Whether or not their discovery of the Tombstone Extension Mine paid off for them in coin of the realm depends upon to whom you listen, but one thing is certain, they made history when they discovered their "Moonshine Mine"!



Cast iron condenser coil used in Holt and Rider's distilling business. Photo by author, 1968.



Adit of Gunsight Mine in the Santa Rita Mountains. Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson, Henry and Albert Buehman Memorial Collection #B91740a.

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