

Short Story 4

The Mystery of the Missing Bags of Ore

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Early in the 1920s “Judge” John Ross had a good thing going at his Side Wheel Mine high on Military Hill, a couple of miles south of Tombstone. No one was getting rich off the little operation but it was supporting several families and a bit was left over after the expenses were paid. This was considered a successful small mine.

Credit for the economical operation belonged to the crew of experienced miners who were extracting the manganiferous argentite from a shoot that outcropped high on the mountainside. Regulars among the miners included Manuel Ballesterro, Sharkey Harsha, Hondo Walker and one of the Trapmans. Others were hired as the need arose.

The Side Wheel ore body was mined by sinking an incline right on the shoot which averaged about seven feet in width and 15 feet high. So well defined were the sidewalls and top and bottom of the shoot, that the miners cleaned out the ore in much the same manner as a cantaloupe is relieved of its meat. The manganese content made this ore particularly desirable because of its fluxing quality.

Ore was dropped down the mountainside in three stages via sheet iron chutes. At each station an ore sorter hand picked the waste rock, discarding worthless material on its way to the ore bin. There was no dilution of ore from Ross’ mine and the smelter loved it!

Then came the day that a small but particularly high grade nodule of horn silver was encountered. Fifty-two sacks, each weighing 50 pounds, were bagged in the mine. Ends were sewed tight and the high grade (which turned out to average over 200 ounces of silver to the

ton) was toted down the trail on the backs of the miners.

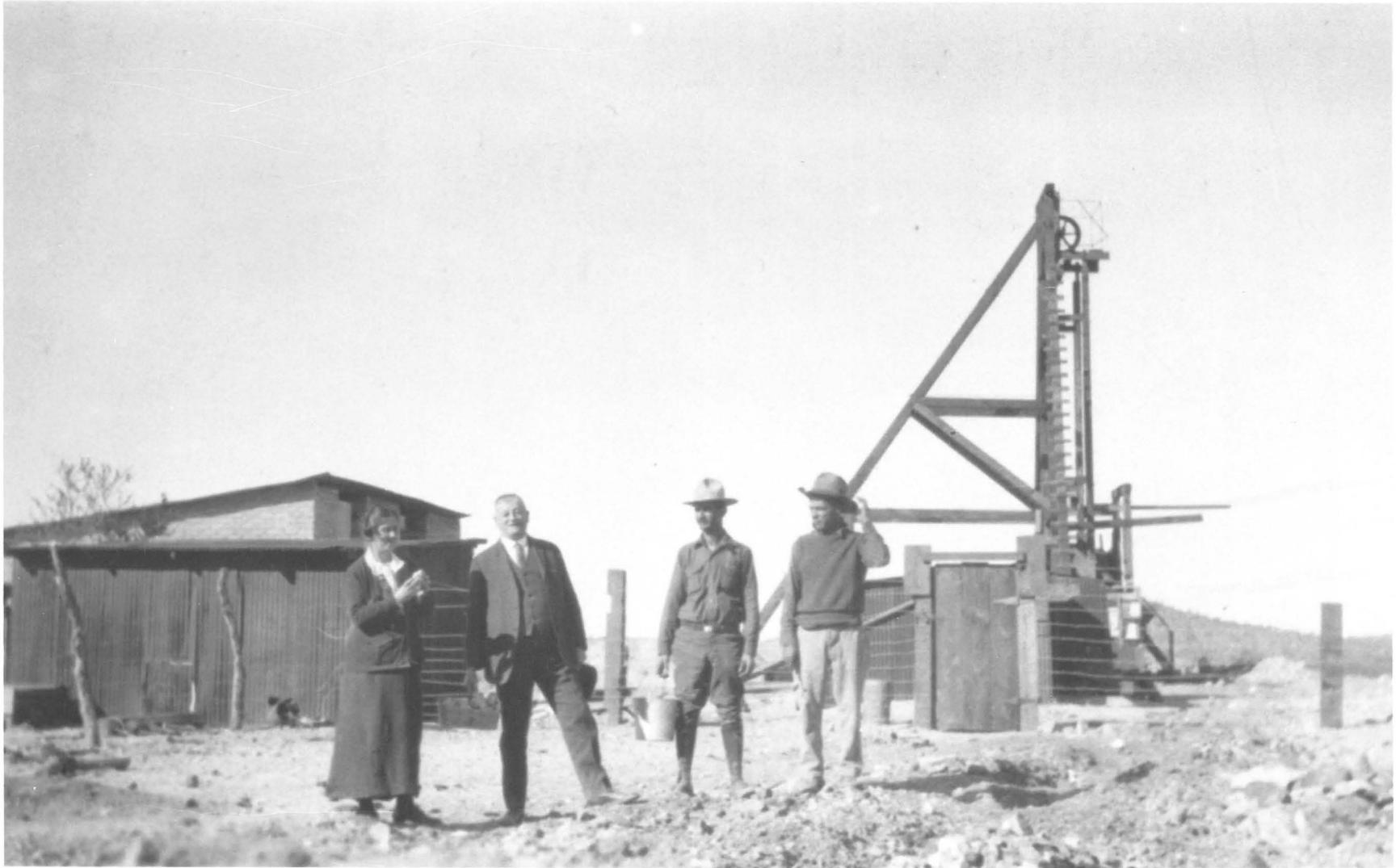
A couple of strapping young Tombstoners, both just returned from service for Uncle Sam in World War I, watched as the 52 bags of ore were loaded onto their war surplus Liberty truck, after which they headed for the ore buyer in Douglas, half-a-hundred miles away. Upon reaching their destination their load was lighter by two bags—only 50 were received at the buyer’s dock.

When the settlement check arrived from the ore buyer, Judge Ross was beside himself. The loss of a hundred pounds of ore that was worth at least \$200 a ton wasn’t really all that much money—maybe \$10—but the fact that he couldn’t pin down what became of the two bags upset the lawyer-miner no little bit. Try as he might, the stories of the three parties involved were unshakable: The crew at the mine insisted that they loaded 52 bags; the driver and his helper admitted to only having stopped in Bisbee long enough to refuel the truck and their bellies, and the ore buyer said flat out that he received but 50 bags. Ross died many years later, still fuming about being cheated by the ore buyer.

Forty years later the two truckers were still laughing about the incident. Whenever their paths crossed Jim would point at Ernie and say “He got both bags”. His compadre retorted, “You know, Jim didn’t even share with me”. Those who knew them best opined that they’d swapped the ore for a jug of “shine” at a roadhouse along the way.

The mystery of the missing bags of high grade remains. Who did what? Quien sabe?





Mining family in southern Arizona. Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society/Tucson.

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