

THE LOST ADAMS DIGGINGS

PART 1



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For El Defensor Chieftain

Without a doubt, the three most credible legends of lost gold in the Southwest are that of the Lost Dutchman Mine, the Lost Adams Diggings and Victorio Peak. Hundreds of people have searched for Adam's gold since 1864. This two-part series presents the story of the Lost Adams Diggings and the close involvement with Socorro and Catron Counties.

THE LEGEND

The Lost Adams Diggings are one of those stories of gold found and gold lost. It is not a fictional story. The known survivors touted pretty much the same account. They also had gold in their pockets to prove at least some of their claims. They tried for years to find the hidden canyon full of placer gold to no avail.

Many of the searches began in Reserve, Quemado, Magdalena or Socorro. Their stories were recorded at the time in old Socorro Chieftain newspapers, McKenna's "Black Range Tales" and Langford Johnston's "Old Magdalena Cow Town," to name a few. J. Frank Dobie's historical novel "Apache Gold and Yaqui Silver," first published in 1930, became the definitive exposé on the story.

Forty years after Dobie's death, his book is still in print, still selling about 2,000 copies every year to new enthusiasts. In preparing for this article, I have run into no less than five people actively searching for Adam's Diggings. Adam's hidden canyon is out there somewhere, most likely in Catron or western Socorro counties. It is clearly one of New Mexico's perpetual

legends, whether Adams canyon still has gold or not - or ever had it.

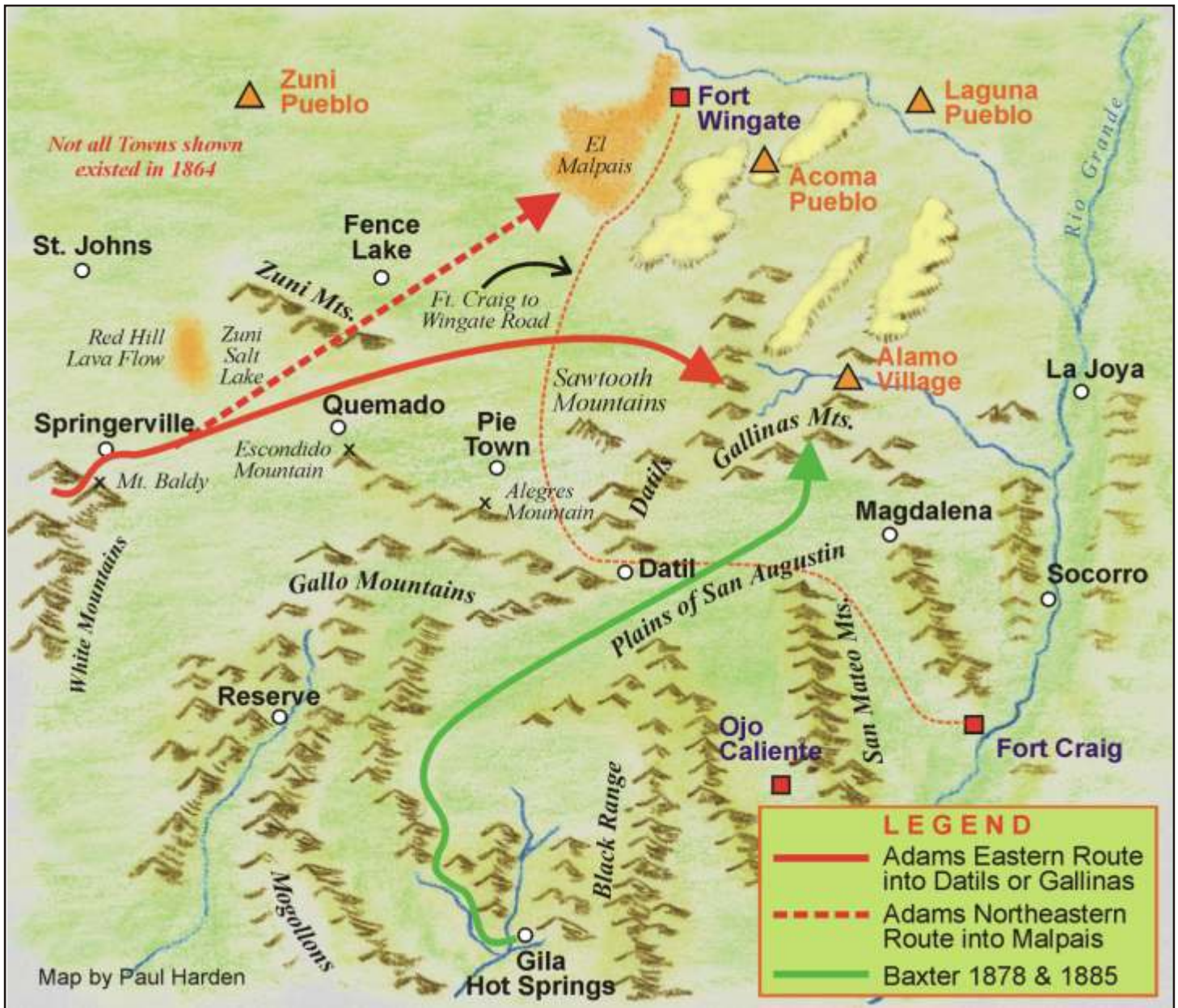
The main clues to the story are given below. Grab your map of New Mexico, or the one accompanying this article (see next page), and follow along. Where do you end up for the Lost Adams Diggings?

APACHE GOLD

A wagonmaster named Adams, whose exact name is not known with certainty, ran freight between Tucson and California. After some bad luck on the trail, losing his pack train to Apaches, he arrived with twelve horses at the Pima Indian village of Sacaton. There he told his story to a cantina filled with desperados and prospectors.

One, a man named Brewer, paid for a round of drinks with a gold piece. A Mexican-Apache half breed, named Gotch Ear, noticed the shiny gold piece and told the men "I know a canyon in which you might load a horse with this stuff in one day's gathering." The prospectors listened to the story carefully. By the end of the evening, gold fever grabbed them all. Adams agreed to furnish his horses for the expedition and the young Indian agreed to lead them.

The expedition set out from Sacaton, near present day Casa Grande, on August 20, 1864. Of the 22 men, only five are known with some certainty: Gotch Ear, Edward (or John) Adams, John Brewer, Jack Davidson, and a German named John Snively. These men were drifters into the area, unfamiliar with the common landmarks, depending entirely on Gotch Ear to lead the way. This proved to be a grave mistake, as their inattention to the country prevented them from finding their destination again in later years.



Gotch Ear led them down the Gila River in a general northeast direction for several days. On August 25, they camped in a saddle between two lofty peaks, believed to be Mt. Ord and Mt. Baldy, near present day Springerville, Arizona. This, and the following dates, are those estimated by the author based on the various accounts.

The next morning, Gotch Ear pointed out two mountain peaks over 100 miles away to the northeast, telling them the canyon with the gold is near those peaks, about six days away. Retracing Adam's route, historians Richard and Lois French identified these two distant peaks as Veteado Peak - an 8,525 foot mountain about 20 miles north northeast of Quemado. This has not been missed by others, as the Veteado Peak, Zuni Mountains and the Malpais have been a popular search locations for years.

On this author's visit, the twin peaks of 9,869 foot Escondido Mountain and the Gallo Mountains, south of Quemado, are more prominent. They are visible from ground level, Veteado is not. Are these the peaks they followed? Proper identification of the two peaks they headed for is a crucial clue to the story.

The party descended the White Mountains, camping on the east side of Round Valley with Escudilla Mountain to their south. From there, the next four days were over high open country with rolling hills, mesas and draws.

On August 30, Adams believed they had crossed the Continental Divide. They came to the only wagon road they had seen thus far. Gotch Ear told them, "Mark this road well. It leads to the fort in the malpais rocks." At sundown, they camped near some pumpkin vines Adams called the "pumpkin patch."



Photo by Paul Harden

The Adams party set off for western New Mexico from the saddle between Mt. Ord and Mt. Baldy, shown here near present day Springerville, Arizona. From here, the party could see numerous mountains in Socorro and Catron Counties, and north to the Zuni Mountains.



Photo by Paul Harden

The Adams party supposedly followed the two-peaked summit of Veteado Peak into western New Mexico. Escondido Peak, south of Quemado, is easily seen from U.S. 60 near Springerville, AZ.; Veteado Peak is not. Are these the mountains they followed?

It has long been believed the "fort in the malpais" refers to the first Fort Wingate, located south of present day Grants. If this is true, Adams was likely on the Ft. Craig to Ft. Wingate road, somewhere between the malpais and Pie Town and east of the Continental Divide. The nagging question about Adam's story is whether they traveled east, or northeast, from Springerville to figure out where they crossed the Continental Divide and the elusive wagon road.

Early on August 31, the party rode through a narrow canyon for two hours, topping out on uneven ground



Photos by Paul Harden

Pelonas Peak (top) and Mangas Mountain, along the Continental Divide, have both been thought to be the mountain the Adam's party headed to from Arizona.

studded with lava rock. The guide pointed out *dos piloncillos* (two sugar coned) shaped mountains straight ahead. Adams said they looked like haystacks. Gotch Ear told them, "those piloncillos are beyond the canyon of gold. They mark it well."

The tired party knew they were getting close. About mid-day they came upon a solid rock escarpment that seemed impossible to scale. The guide led them to a secret door behind a huge boulder

leading into a narrow, twisting canyon through the rock barrier. Adams called this the "Zig Zag Canyon," which after some difficulty emptied into a park, or valle, with running water and a small water fall at the far end.

GOLD FOUND

As the men rode along the clear stream, several of the prospectors recognized color in the gravel. Dismounting with pans in hand, they immediately began to recover gold. This canyon, with substantial placer gold, is the famed Adams Diggings.

However, according to most accounts of this story, Gotch Ear told them this was not the canyon of gold he promised them. "The real gold pieces, the size of acorns, lay in the next canyon." But, the men didn't budge. They camped and were again panning out gold at the crack of dawn the next day. Gotch Ear was paid his gun, ammunition, two gold pieces, and the two horses promised. He bid farewell to the men, never to be heard from again.

The next day, Nana and 30 Apache warriors appeared in the canyon. He told the miners, in fluent Spanish, they could graze their horses and dig for gold, but must not go above the falls at the end of the canyon. The men agreed, no doubt relieved they still had their scalps!

Nana told Adams the canyon was called *Sno-Ta-Hay* by the Tchihene people. After Nana's warning, the men were convinced large deposits of gold were located in the next canyon, just as Gotch Ear had told them. However, Adams persuaded the miners to never venture above the falls as Nana decreed, knowing it would bring doom to them all.

Over the next week, most of the men mined out the seemingly endless supply of gold from the stream as others began building a cabin. It was decided to put all of the gold into a container, which was hidden under the fireplace hearth in the cabin. The gold would be distributed amongst the men evenly when they departed the canyon. This was agreed by all except Snively, the German. Due to his fear of the Indians, and perhaps distrust of the men, he insisted on his share at the end of each day and lived in a small cave away from the others.

Sno-Ta-Hay, the canyon of gold, has been sought for ever since. From the clues so far, where do you think it is? The Zuni's? The Malpais? Datils or Gallinas mountains?

GOLD FOUND - GOLD LOST

About September 10, Adams selected six men to take the wagon to the "fort in the malpais" for provisions, placing John Brewer in charge. Brewer felt the fort was about four days away and it would take eight days round trip to make the journey, possibly indicating his familiarity with the country. (This fact also became the title of one of the better books on the Adams Diggings, *Four Days From Fort Wingate*, by Richard French)

The six men left for the fort while those that remained behind continued to pan for gold – and await the return of the men with fresh provisions.

On September 19, the men were a day late. Adams and Davidson left to see if they could spot the men. At the entrance to the zig-zag canyon, they found five of them – dead – mutilated by Apaches. John Brewer's body could not be found. They hid the bodies in a crevice, covering them with pack saddles and rocks, then hurried to warn the others.

As they approached Sno-Ta-Hay, they saw attacking Apaches. Hiding in a safe place, they watched as they danced around the slaughtered miners and burning cabin, a festivity that lasted until the following morning. Adams and Davidson hid all the next day for fear of being spotted by the Apaches.

After sunset, they finally ventured into the canyon, checking the mutilated bodies, finding no survivors. The collapsed, smouldering logs and scalding stones of the cabin prevented them from retrieving the gold hidden under the hearth. Adams estimated the stash at \$100,000 based on \$20 per ounce. They would have to be content with the small amount of dust and a few nuggets each in their pockets until they could return at a



Photo by Paul Harden

The Lost Adams Diggings are about a day's travel east of the Continental Divide. U.S. 60 crosses the divide near the Sawtooth Mountains, east of Pie Town, NM.

later, and safer, date.

Adams and Davidson left the canyon, deciding to travel only at night. While this kept them safe from the Apaches, it also got them totally lost and disoriented. About September 27, they were spotted by U.S. soldiers and taken to Fort Apache, according to the story. However, Fort Apache, near the San Carlos Reservation, was not established until 1872, adding another ambiguous clue to the story.

One would think if Adams had been rescued by the Army, he would have recalled the name of the fort in later years. Jack Davidson, on the other hand, claims they were taken to Fort Whipple, east of Prescott, without mentioning Adams again. He never offers Fort Wingate as a possibility. Another one of the mysteries trying to follow this story.

THE SURVIVORS

Adams returned to his family in California, where he remained for 10 years. In 1874, he returned to New Mexico, searching for his lost gold until his death in 1886. He searched areas in Arizona from Springerville to St. Johns, into the Zuni Mountains, the malpais, the southern mountains along the Plains of San Augustin, and the Gila. This huge chunk of country clearly shows Adams didn't have a clue where his "hidden canyon" was located. He claimed only the country around Reserve and the Plains of San Augustin appeared familiar, causing many treasure hunters over the years to search in the Gila and Pelona Peak areas.

The elderly Jack Davidson returned to his family in Ohio and died shortly thereafter. He played no further

role in the legend. However, in 1929, his daughter came forward with his journal, and a map, showing the canyon in the Zuni Mountains. This fueled hundreds of searches to that area, including the first known aerial search in 1930, keeping the Zuni Mountains a favorite search area to this day.

Adams and Davidson assumed they were the only survivors. However, over the following years, it became obvious there were likely two other survivors: John Snively and John Brewer.

JOHN SNIVELY

John Snively, the German, apparently survived as well. Perhaps due to his extreme mistrust of the Indians and living separately from the other men. He arrived at Pinos Altos with "gold nuggets he had found about 125 miles due north after narrowly escaping the Apaches." (Clue: 125 miles north of Pinos Altos would be near Pie Town). Cashing in his nuggets for \$13,000, he returned to Arizona, swearing never to return to the wild Indian country of New Mexico. Unfortunately, Snively was killed in 1871 on his ranch near Prescott – by Apaches.

Before leaving New Mexico, he told several soldiers where to find the hidden canyon, recorded in McKenna's "Black Range Tales." This account has led many treasure hunters into the Plains of San Augustin and the Gallinas Mountains.

JOHN BREWER

The leader of the supply wagons, John Brewer, turned out to be the most surprising survivor, writing a detailed account of the expedition and his escape in the El Paso Herald in 1928. His account closely collaborated Adams, even though neither knew the other had survived.

New Mexico historian Jack Purcell, author of the book "The Lost Adams Diggings," documents Brewer's arrival on the Tenney Ranch, north of Springerville, with his wife and children in 1886. Shortly thereafter, Brewer was a wealthy rancher and landowner in Mexico. Unlike Adams, Brewer spent very little time searching for the gold – perhaps because he had found it! Brewer's account has led many searches around St. Johns to Fence Lake.

I find the Brewer account to be the most interesting.

In short, Brewer states after the Apache attack, he too traveled only at night, following the moon eastward. This is in the opposite westward or southwestward direction taken by Adams and Davidson.



Photo by Paul Harden

The Gallinas Mountains define the northern edge of the Plains of San Augustin. Tres Montosas is on the right. These were favorite hunting grounds for Nana and the Warm Springs Apache. Is it also home to Sno-Ta-Hay?

After several days, exhausted, starving and sick, he was found by a friendly Indian village and tendered back to good health. He did not know what type of Indians they were. He suspected Pueblo Indians. Regaining his health, the Indians showed him the trail to the Rio Grande. Reaching the river a day later, he walked seven miles north, crossing to the east side, entering an unnamed village, where eventually he caught a wagon train to Santa Fe. He was not heard from again until his brief return in 1886.

Historians struggle with Brewer's account, not knowing where he started, what Indian Pueblo he stumbled across, what dry river he walked down, where he ran into the Rio Grande, or what village he arrived to find a wagon train. They claim the Indian village must have been Laguna Pueblo, finding the Rio Grande somewhere around Los Lunas. This scenario does not well fit Brewer's description, however.

For those of us living in Socorro County, and familiar with the geography, Brewer's trek seems obvious and fits his account nearly perfectly. It's a wonder why it hasn't occurred to any of the researchers.

If the Lost Adams Diggings is in the general region of western New Mexico east of Springerville, an eastward route would lead one into the Alamocito and Rio Salado drainage basin, gouging its way through the maze of mesa's and mountains north of the Gallinas Mountains. This region is also south of old Fort Wingate.

Some distance down the Rio Salado, you'll come to the Alamo village. In 1864, this was an ancient pueblo on the Rio Salado inhabited by both the pueblo people and

a band of Navajos escaping Canyon de Chelly. It was years later, the census prior to the 1912 New Mexico statehood, that this "lost band of Navajos" was discovered and identified by the government. They were allowed to keep their land, today known as the Alamo Navajo Indian Reservation and Alamo community.

From the Alamo, down the Rio Salado to the east about 30 miles, is the Rio Grande. The confluence of the Rio Salado and the Rio Grande is north of the village of San Acacia. Seven miles north on the east side of the Rio Grande, exactly as Brewer described, is the town of La Joya.

From Mesilla to Belen, La Joya is one of the few towns on the east side of the river, even today. It was a popular stop and staging area for wagons traveling along El Camino Real. If you were going to hitch a ride to Santa Fe on a wagon, this famous Camino Real landmark would be the place, fitting Brewer's description.

If this scenario is correct, it again points to the western region of the Rio Salado as the location of the Lost Adams Diggings. This would place Sno-To-Hay and the zig-zag canyon near the Catron and Socorro County lines, north of the Plains of San Agustin, likely in or around the Gallinas Mountains.

BAXTER-McKENNAACCOUNT

Jason Baxter, a Gila rancher, was told how to find the canyon where a German named John Snively had brought out \$13,000 of gold in the 1860's. In 1877 or 1878, Baxter and John Adair set off from Gila Hot Springs and found the canyon with the burned cabin and panned some gold. A bad thunderstorm and injuries from an Indian attack forced them from staying any length of time.

Seven years later, Baxter again set off to find the hidden canyon, this time taking along friend James McKenna. Both expeditions are recorded in detail in McKenna's "Black Range Tales" and the foundation for the movie "McKenna's Gold." These two accounts contain important clues to the Lost Adams Diggings, though called the Snively Diggings in the account.

First, the 1877 and 1884 searches are among the earliest documented, before the story began to grow, exaggerate and get distorted. Secondly, it is based on Snively's escape and has nothing to do with Adams constantly changing versions of the story over the years. It is pristine, and again, points to the Datil or Gallinas Mountains quite precisely.

Both expeditions are virtually identical, leaving from Gila Hot Springs, along the west fork of the Gila River, turning north through Turkey Feather Pass into Iron Creek, then north into the Elk Mountains. Crossing over the divide near the head of Negryto (sic) Creek, they bore right, crossing foothills and came out onto the San Augustin Plains on the south end, making a dry camp for the night.

The second night they camped at a water hole on the plains. The third day, they entered the mountains through a copper stained canyon about 300 feet wide and 150 feet deep. This would have to be the Datil or Gallinas Mountains, north of present day U.S. 60. And those familiar with these mountains can come closer than that!

Baxter remarks how the canyon, now full of rocks, appears different from his first trip, as if disturbed by an earthquake. Coming out of the canyon, Baxter points to the next mountain to the northeast, calling it "Island Mountain." He tells McKenna, "Don't it look like pictures of the pyramids of Egypt? After we pass through the natural gateway, we'll soon be in the gulch of the diggings."



Photo by Paul Harden

This pointed hill, high in the Gallinas Mountains, overlooks the Plains of San Augustin. Is this Baxter's "Island Mountain" looking like a pyramid? About a mile to the west is a very rock strewn canyon, fitting Baxter's description of a canyon "full of rocks ... as if disturbed by an earthquake."

Camping for the night, Baxter points out the Magdalena Mountain where the face of Mary Magdalene is on the east face. Another very strong clue they were not in the malpais as claimed by some!

From this description, it appears they are clearly in the canyons, mesas and mountains along the western portion of the Rio Salado and Alamocito Creeks.

Baxter and McKenna arrive at Island Mountain about 10 a.m., searching for the narrow opening leading into the park, Adam's zig-zag canyon. On Baxter's second trip, he was unable to recognize the exact location due to suspected earthquake damage. "The mountain looks like it was busted open by a large explosion" he told McKenna.

Unsuccessful at finding the canyon, they leave for Reserve, arriving several days later at the McKenzie Ranch on the west fork of the Gila. Here they were told Geronimo had escaped from San Carlos and had been seen in the area, and Grover Cleveland had just been elected president. This is important in dating the McKenna account, as he does not identify the date of this expedition other than "in March." Cleveland was elected president in November 1884. Geronimo escaped from San Carlos in 1881 and again in early 1885. Therefore, this second expedition must have occurred in March 1885. The first expedition, being 7 years before in August, would have been in 1878.

A few days after arriving at the McKenzie Ranch, Baxter was killed by Apaches.

ONE MORE CLUE

One of the interesting accounts is that by James Chase, a Socorro merchant. In 1878, he was the Indian Trader at the Ojo Caliente Army post, where he had befriended Nana.

One day, Nana told Chase he would take him to a canyon where he could load a mule with more gold than it could carry. When Chase asked where this canyon was, Nana pointed to the northwest and said, "Sno-Ta-Hay is two days for a white man, one day for an Indian." Chase wrote the strange name on the back of a ledger, which he kept for proof in later years while living in Socorro.

A modest pace on horseback is 30-35 miles a day, at least for a white man! A line 60-70 miles long drawn from Ojo Caliente to the northwest lands in the Gallinas Mountains.

There are many theories as to the direction of travel of the Adam's party and where the Lost Diggings are located. This is one. My interpretation of the accounts of Adams, Brewer, Baxter and Chase seem to point to the Datil or Gallinas Mountains. There are several contemporary historians trying to locate Sno-Ta-Hay from Reserve to the Zuni Mountains.. Only the book "Four Days from Fort Wingate" zeroes in on this area.



Photo Courtesy Socorro County Historical Society
Warm Springs Apache Chief Nana, taken in the studio of Socorro photographer Joseph Smith. According to family members, Nana showed up late one night and told Smith he wanted his photograph taken. Smith obliged, capturing one of the few known images of the famous Apache Chief.

Next month, the legend continues. Part 2 will present some of the expeditions from Socorro and Magdalena "in the old days" that were partly successful in finding the canyon, such as by Magdalena Sheriff Bob Lewis. What is the origin of the town called Adams Diggings? And, photos of two different canyons found over the years believed to be the actual site by some historians.

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REFERENCES

"Apache Gold and Yaqui Silver" by J. Frank Dobie, "Black Range Tales" by James McKenna, "The Lost Adams Diggings" by Jack Purcell, "Four Days from Fort Wingate" by Richard and Lois French, "Old Magdalena Cow Town" by Langford Johnston, "True Tales of the American Southwest" by Howard Bryan, The Patterson and Williams accounts, "Socorro Chieftain" 1897 and 1899 issues.

Other photographs by Paul Harden not published in the original article:



The Sawtooth Mountains viewed from the Continental Divide near Pie Town, NM.



The Sawtooth Mountains viewed from U.S. Highway 60 on the way towards Datil, NM.

The Sawtooth Mountains have always been popular hunting grounds for the Lost Adams Diggings. Indeed, they have a mysterious, ominous appearance with narrow canyons and “haystack” type mountains. However, it is a small mountain range, not fitting the distance descriptions, and nothing close to the zig-zag canyon or gold mineralization has ever been found. The Sawtooth mountains are photogenic and distinctive, and would certainly have been recognized by Adams on his return trips.