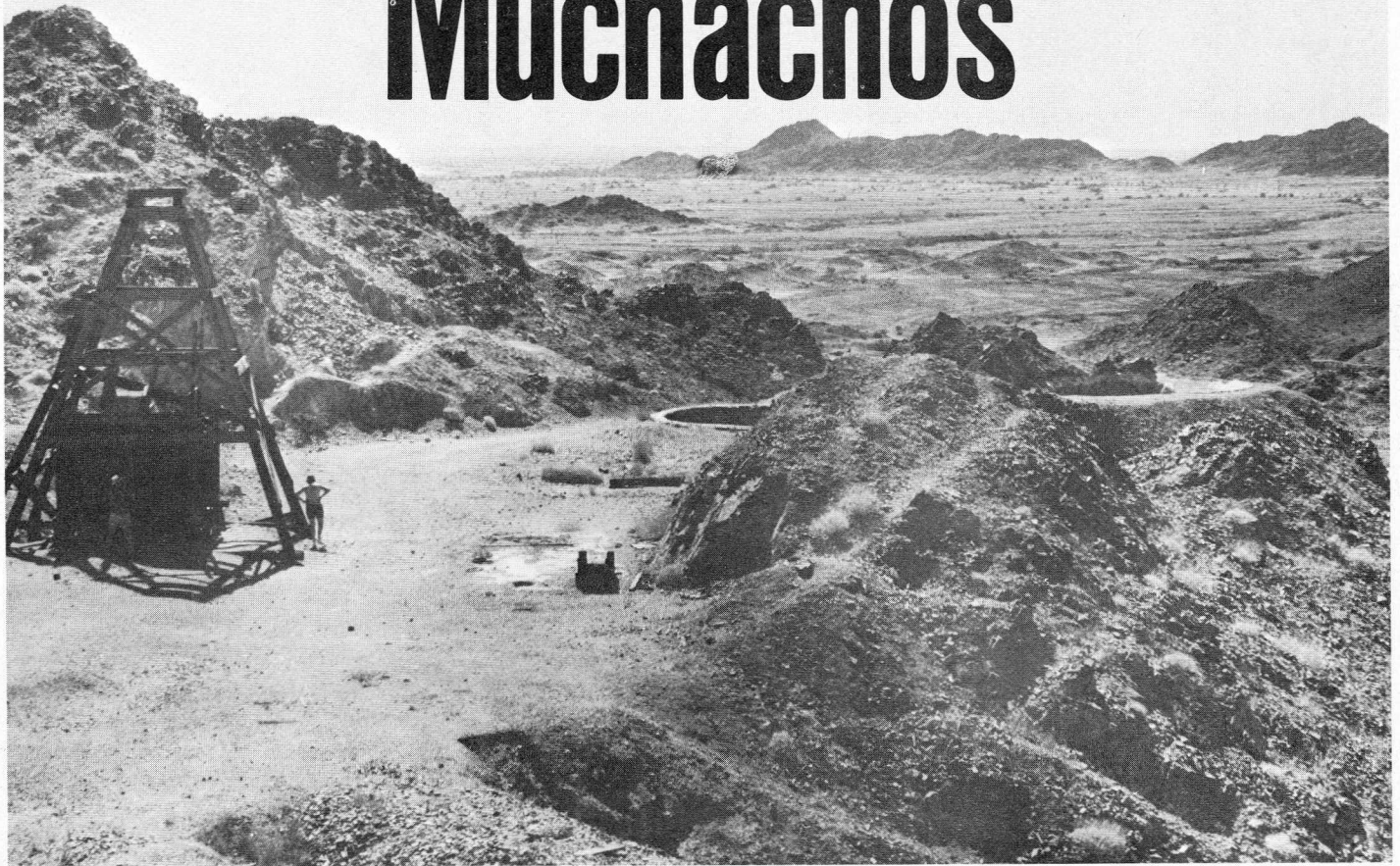


# Mysterious Cargo Muchachos



by Jack Pepper

SWEATING AND cursing the 120-degree heat the miners hacked at the iron ore deposits under the blistering sun which turned the rock formations into an inferno. Beside them worked captive Indians—slaves to the white man and his insatiable quest for gold. Indians who would soon revolt, kill their masters and dump the gold into the Colorado River.

The time was the 1770s and the place the Cargo Muchacho Mountains in California's Imperial County. Today the Cargos and the nearby Chocolate mountains are pocketed with more recent mining operations and there are a few—but not many—more people in the area. There still remain hundreds of forbidding canyons and washes which probably never have been transgressed by white man.

Although there is no documentary evidence, it is believed that the Cargos were

the site of the first discovery of gold in California, three quarters of a century before Marshall found nuggets in the Mother Lode country and started the stampede of the '49ers.

J. Ross Browne and William Blake, both early explorers and historians, said gold was known along the Colorado River in the 1770s, and Paul Henshaw, writing in the *California Journal of Mines and Geology* in 1942 stated mining was first carried on in the Cargo Muchachos in 1780 with the founding of the Spanish settlements on the Colorado River.

Although what Spanish records might have existed were lost when the Indians revolted and destroyed the mission pueblos, present day members of the Yuma (or Quechan) Indians still talk of their ancestors who were forced to dig gold for the Spaniards. As Fray Salmeron

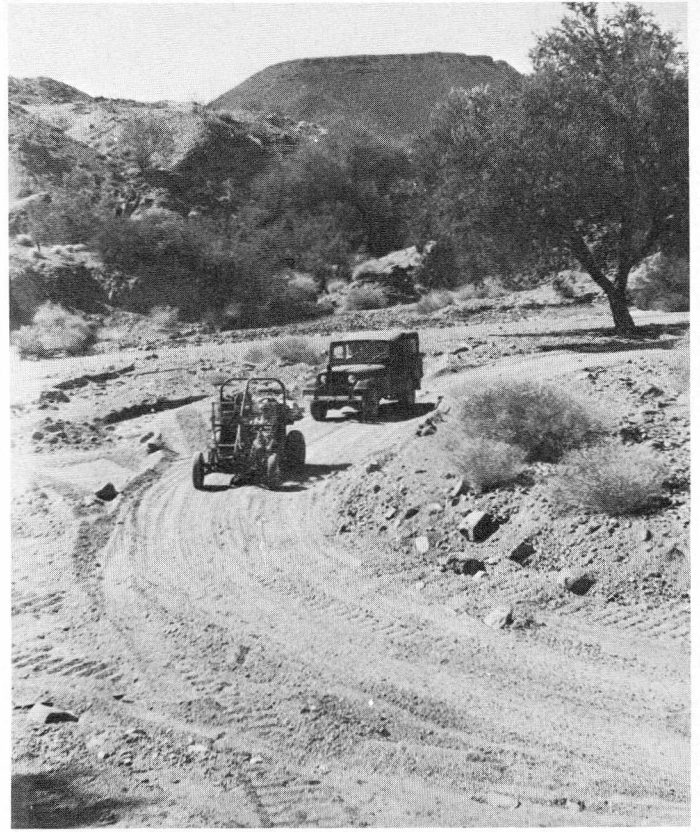
reported in 1629, the Spanish soldiers "out of greed for silver and gold would enter hell to get them." This particular hell was in the form of *tepushete de color*, found in the region. *Tepustete* is gold-bearing iron ore found in Sonora and in which the early Spaniards thought would be found gold in the Colorado River area.

In 1775 Father Francisco Garces, the dedicated Jesuit missionary who spent his life exploring and documenting the Southwest, commented on the *tepushete* and said his Indian interpreter indicated there was much gold in the area. At the time they were camped near the present town of Yuma.

Five years later Father Garces, three other missionaries and some settlers, allegedly "protected" by Spanish soldiers, established two mission-pueblos on the Colorado River. This was in 1780. Father



*Vandals have dug up and desecrated the graves at Tumco Mine and shot holes into a sign warning it is a criminal offense to commit such acts. If further acts of destruction continue the mine may be closed to the public.*



*The road from Indian Pass through Gavilan Wash to the Colorado River is spectacular and colorful. It should not be attempted except in back country vehicles due to several steep hills and soft sand.*

Garces was not interested in gold, but evidence indicates the Spaniards had been mining gold for 10 years in the area with Indian slave labor. One year after the mission-pueblos were founded, on July 17, 1781, the Indians revolted, killed Father Garces and the other missionaries, and captured those soldiers and settlers who were not slain. The Indians made no distinction between the white men who sought their salvation and those who sought gold.

Today the evidence of these Indians can be found in the distinct rock trails across the mountains and desert, petroglyphs and broken pieces of pottery (potsherds), a few arrowheads and the mysterious scratches on the hundreds of rocks at Indian Pass.

These interesting Indian artifacts and landmarks, coupled with old mines which produced millions of dollars in gold during their operation in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, and the availability of semi-precious stones make the Cargo Muchacho Mountains an area rich in adventure.

And you can see and visit the majority of the interesting places in a passenger car. The once rutted roads have now been graded and are kept up by the county. Al Pearce, whose article on the vanishing Bighorn Sheep appeared in last month's *Desert*, and his wife and I explored the area for three days recently. We could have spent a week and still only covered a small section.

We made our headquarters at the Gold Rock Trading Post. To reach Gold Rock, turn left off Highway 80 from El Centro to Yuma, just before Winterhaven and just after 80 ceases to be a freeway. A good gravel road takes you to the former railroad town of Ogilby and the railroad tracks. Once a flourishing community, Ogilby today consists of cement slabs and three lonely graves.

Cross the railroad tracks at Ogilby and watch for the sign to Gold Rock. Keep left and five miles down the graded road you will reach the trading post. An asphalt road is being built parallel to the graded road to Gold Rock and goes between the trading post and Tumco Mine.

If you take this road turn left at the entrance to the Tumco Mine—seen on the right—and two miles down the road you'll arrive at the post.

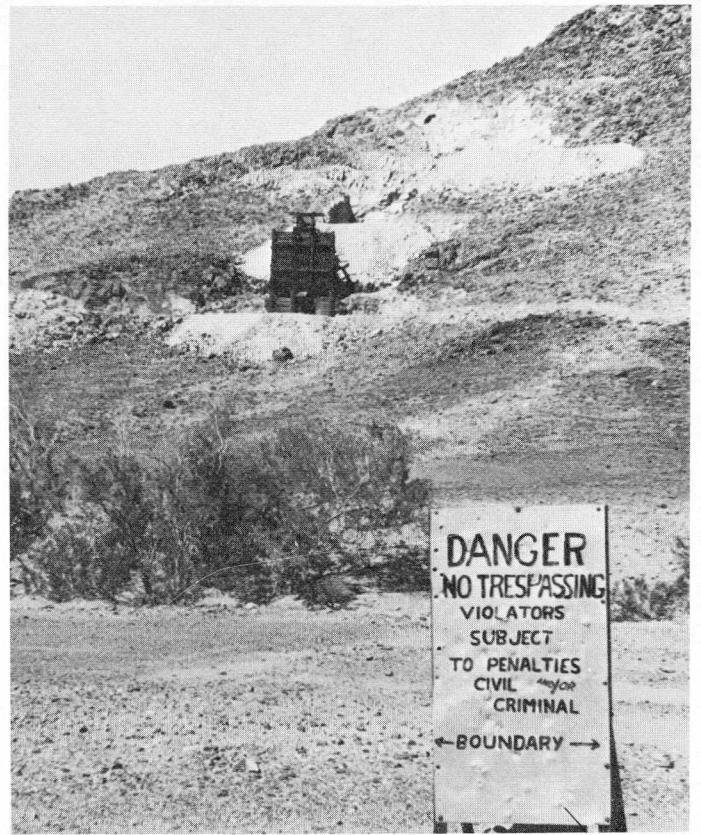
Hosts at Gold Rock are Bob and his wife, Margrete, better known as "Scotty," who have an interesting and vast collection of rocks and mining equipment, plus Indian artifacts which they have collected during their years of exploring. They are a wealth of information and will direct you to places of interest and rock hunting areas.

They also have soft drinks and sandwiches and a wide area where you can pitch your tent or park your camper. Bob Walker is the son of Carl and Margaret Walker who established the trading post and were the last owners of the Tumco Mine.

Tumco Mine was more than a mining operation; it was a gold camp and company town. Named from the initials of the corporation, The United Mines Company, it had a peak population of 2500 during its heyday. Started in 1892, it



*Al Pearce, explorer and writer, uses a metal detector to look for old coins near one of the many adobe ruins found in the Cargos. The area is also a favorite hunting ground for rockhounds.*



*Although there are many old mines in the Cargo Muchachos which are abandoned and may be explored, some have recently been reactivated and are posted. Even if there are no signs of life at the posted mines, do not trespass.*

flourished until 1909 when it was shut down for one year. New owners operated it on a more limited scale from 1910 until its demise in 1916. It is located only two miles from the Walkers.

As you enter Tumco Mine keep to the right on the gravel road. Although there are several washes by driving slowly a passenger car can easily maneuver. The main road will take you up to the main glory hole where you can turn around. Don't let children wander by themselves as there are unfenced holes in the area.

In the middle of Tumco and across the tailings to the left you will see the main building shown in our color photograph with this article. Just below this building and across the old mining road is the graveyard. To get there walk across the tailings and keep to your left.

Vandals have dug up several of the graves and shot bullets into a sign which states it is a criminal offense to desecrate graves. Vandals have also torn down the parts of the houses of Tumco and dumped trash into the mine shafts. For this reason the Walkers finally gave up

their claim to the mine and any liability. If further vandalism continues, however, it may be closed to the public by Imperial County and the Bureau of Land Management.

Tumco was one of several mines which operated at the same time. Others included the American Girl Mine, Cargo Muchacho, Piacho, Micatalc Mill, Vitrifax Hill (which produced the vital kyanite during World War II) and the Padre y Madre Mine. Only the Tumco can be reached by passenger car, however, and many of the other mines in the area once again have been claimed and are off-limits to visitors. If you have 4-wheel drive vehicles or dune buggies and are exploring the other mining areas, respect the "Keep Out" signs; there are many places to explore where you will not trespass on private property.

Another interesting side trip is to the area of the mysterious scratched rocks in Indian Pass, easily accessible in a passenger car. From Gold Rock go north 9.3 miles and turn right on a good gravel road which takes you across the flatlands.

Ahead on the right you will see Picacho Peak—a landmark for prospectors. If you stop to explore the washes along the way you will discover what look like graves. Actually they are small gun emplacements used by soldiers during maneuvers in World War II.

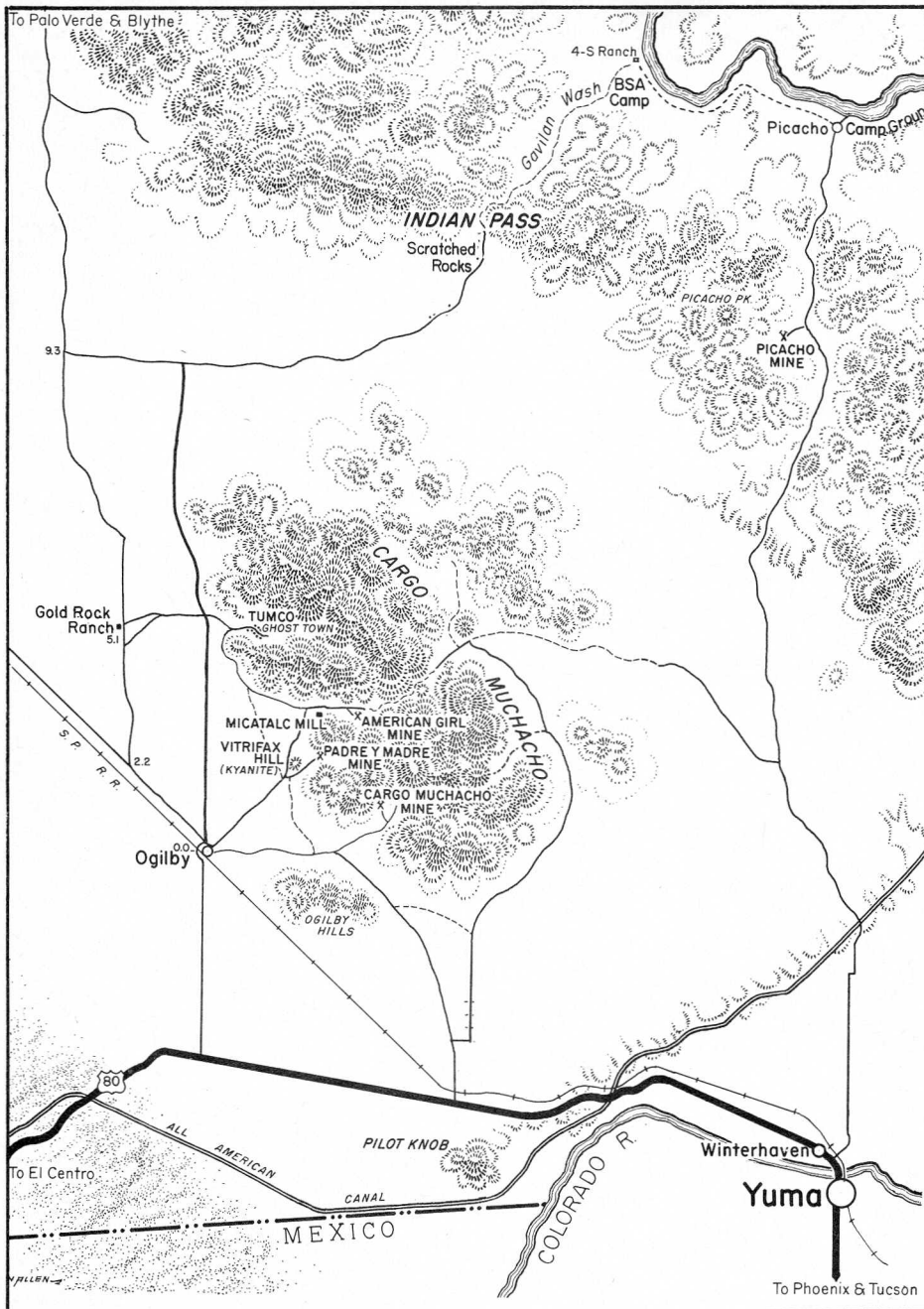
Approximately 11 miles from the turn-off you start into Indian Pass, reaching the mysterious rocks at about 19 miles from the turnoff. They are at the top of a hill and from here the road descends sharply downward to Gavilan Wash. Unless you have a 4-wheel drive vehicle or a dune buggy DO NOT go down the hill.

If you do have a back-country vehicle, the road through Gavilan Wash takes you to the Colorado River and the now abandoned 4-S Ranch. A Boy Scout camp is located at the end of the road. North along the Colorado are several interesting washes. The road south follows along the banks of the Colorado and through the hills from which you get a panoramic view of the river. Unfortunately there is

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## CARGO MUCHACHOS

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heavy brush to the river's edge so there are few camping areas.

Approximately 10 miles south from the Boy Scout camp is a small campground and launching ramp. At one time it was a private enterprise, but today is operated by the state. There are no services available here. The campgrounds can also be reached over a passenger car road from Winterhaven (see map). Along the passenger car road from Winterhaven are several old mines, including the Picacho Mine. The section is a favorite hunting ground for rockhounds.

The area approaching Indian Pass and the Pass itself is also rock hunting territory. I am told you can find petrified palm root and fiber, blue dumortierite, silicified fossils, jaspers, agates and chalcodony.

At the top of Indian Pass park your car on a level spot above Gavilan Wash. The scratched rocks are only a few yards off the road to your left. They cover a large area and can easily be found. Also through the area you will find Indian rock rings and Indian trails.

The scratches on the rocks are not very deep but they must be quite old as they are covered with patina (desert varnish). When Malcolm Rogers, an archeologist, visited the area many years ago and dug into the rock circles it is reported he found conventional petroglyphs along with the marked stones. However, as far as I can determine, there are no petroglyphs in the area today.

Who scratched the rocks and when? There are numerous theories. One is that Indians gathered at the pass for religious ceremonies and kept time to their chants by striking the boulders with sharp rocks. Another is they were scores for some kind of game or contest of physical skill. Historians say Apaches once hunted mountain sheep in the area.

The most logical theory, in my opinion, was advanced by Harold Weight in an article on the rocks in *Desert Magazine* in February, 1949. The author points out the pass lies close to the western boundary of land once claimed by the Yuma Indians. It also marks the natural division point between the valleys and river bottoms of the Colorado and the desert.



*A scratched rock from Indian Pass. There are many theories as to why and when the rocks were marked. Indian trails and rock rings are found in the same area.*



Part of an old Indian trail winds through the rocks covered with patina or "desert varnish." The trails wind for miles and can be seen from the Colorado River to the Chocolate Mountains.

It is then possible the camp on the pass was sort of a border station and trading area for various Indian tribes and the marks on the rocks would be a tally of the persons traveling through the pass or a tally of traded goods. After all, the white man has toll roads, so why not the Indians?

The scratched rocks of Indian Pass are just one of the mysteries of the Cargo Muchacho Mountains and the nearby Colorado River. Who knows what other unsolved riddles are hidden within the rocks and washes of the area? Maybe someday you too will find another page out of the past in this country of fascinating history. □




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