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THE MINT AT  
THE MESCAL MINE

(CONTRIBUTED TO THE TIMES)

The Mescal mine lay on the east slope of one of the largest mountains of the Mescal range, which trends across the northern part of San Bernardino County, Cal. A tunnel opened in the side of the mountain about half way between its base and summit, ran in three hundred feet and crosscut an almost perpendicular vein of silver ore of about eight feet in thickness. The ore had been stoped down from the top for some distance and a wide chamber had thus been made about the interior locality of the "pay. "

This was the condition in which the mine was left in 1889 when the price of silver dropped from 95 to 65 cents an ounce, and Bill Williams, the owner, shut down the property with a suddenness which fell like a heavy blow upon every human heart in camp.

At this time there were about sixty people there whose livings depended on the product of this mine. The houses were well built, of adobe brick with good shingle roofs, and this notwithstanding that all lumber had to be hauled fifty miles from the railroad over a dry desert trail. There was a store there and a postoffice. The small smelter employed about ten hands, and the balance ground work in or about the mine; a number of men lived with their families there, wages were good, work steady and everybody was happy; but through politics, or finance, or commerce, or whatever else, the price of silver tumbled, and a forty-ounce silver ore mine situated as was this could no longer be mined at a profit: so that with this decline in the market value of the commodity, operations at the Mescal ceased.

Activities there remained suspended until the early part of 1892, when, silver lying at the bottom notch on the market, the inhabitants of one or, two little copper camps near

by and the agent and a few others at the railroad station, forty miles distant, who comprised all the population for fifty miles around were astonished one day to learn that the Mescal was going to start up again.

“What was the reason?” this was the inquiry on every one’s lips. The mine, it was rumored, had been sold; bought by a man named Davis, of Denver. He had examined the property carefully and had great confidence in it; believed the grade of ore would run higher as it got deeper, and he was going to sink on the vein at the end of the tunnel.

Strangely enough, rumor proved true. Williams, who had long realized he had an elephant on his hands, sold, almost for a song, a property which had cost him \$30,000 and from which he had only received about \$10,000 in return. The mine had never been patented, and after it had been shut down, Williams, who was a wealthy man, never troubled himself about doing the annual representation work upon it as required by the statute, and the property had been jumped by two men who had thereby a more or less valid claim to it. The relocations were made, however as a sort of “hold up” scheme on Williams, so that if he should ever want to start up the mine again, he would have to either compromise with these to have a lawsuit before he could peaceably resume.

This man Davis had, however, taken advantage of both horns of the dilemma. He had been able to buy out Williams for a trifling sum, partly because of the relocation by Brooks and Boswell, and he was able to buy out the latter two for another trifle because they held only a cloud upon the title to the property was really in Williams.

Having completed his purchase, Mr. Davis proceeded at once to revive the camp. His first move was to bring in a lot of new and part of it singular machinery, which had been made at a foundry and machine shop which he conducted in Denver. There was a small refining plant added to the smelter, and a considerable portion of the machinery was, oddly enough taken into the tunnel; after the shaft had been sunk some distance it was put down the shaft.

While this latter machinery was being put in, several miners applied at the mine for work; they were told that no one was needed; that the price of silver was so low that it was necessary for the mine to employ just as few men as it was barely possible to operate with, and that those who were then employed had been brought from Colorado from one of Mr. Davis’s mines there, and were tried men. The applicants were advised

to acquaint other miners who wanted work not to come to the camp as they would certainly be refused employment; and as the distance from the railroad or adjacent camps was great, they would have a long and fatiguing journey for nothing.

The miners asked concerning the machinery, which was, in its carefully boxed condition, then being put into the tunnel. Mr. Spencer, the superintendent, replied that it was hoisting machinery; that it was to be set up at the end of the tunnel, and above the shaft. When asked if this was not a rather unusual way in which to work a mine, Mr. Davis replied that it might be but, the necessity for keeping down expenses compelled them to operate in the most economical manner possible.

All of the above facts I learned from my guide and driver of the team which conveyed me to this camp early in July, 1893.

About a year after this mine recommenced operations, the Treasury Department at Washington became aware that a new and wholly unprecedented counterfeit one dollar silver coin was in large circulation, apparently all over the United States. It was not made of spurious metal, to the contrary, it was of pure silver, containing only the proportions of alloy used in like coins turned out by the mints. The coins were not molded, as all the counterfeit coins I have ever known have been made, but it was punched pressed and milled, in other words, it was minted just as are the pieces coined at the mints.

The fact that this new counterfeit was silver, that it had, consequently, the proper weight and the proper "ring," made it an imitation exceedingly difficult to detect: only by the closest inspection, and the most accurate analysis and comparisons were the experts of the Treasury Department finally able, positively to declare that these pieces had not been made at any of the government mints, and were, therefore, illegal and counterfeit.

The points of difference between the genuine and the imitation coins having been once noted, it was possible to detect all of these fraudulent issues, since they were all lacking in the same particulars. These particulars consisted of certain shades of inferiority in the execution of the whole of the obverse and of the eagle of the reverse, a difference which, however, was not apparent upon casual observation, and could only be originally perceived by the aid of lenses in a studied comparison between the

genuine and the counterfeit.

It was clear therefore, to the Secret Service Bureau of the government that all of these illegal coins were made with the same (sic.) die. Where that die was located and at work, whether in the United States or without, and who was operating it, these were the great questions which concerned, not alone the Treasury Department, but the entire administration, and was committed to the Secret Service Bureau for its best work.

It was clear to us that the manufacturers had been incited to their enterprise by the wide margin that then existed between the commodity (sic.) price of the silver contained in the coined dollar and the value of that dollar as a legal tender. This margin was something over 60 cents, and if any large number of coins were being turned daily those engaged in the unlawful enterprise were doubtless accumulating immense fortunes.

It was a hard case to handle. Not alone was it difficult by reason of the fact that the operators were evidently men of means and of intelligence far above that of persons who usually engage in debasing the currency, but also from the fact that certain existing popular and political conditions seemed likely to hedge about the culprits a kind of indefinite sympathy and support might intensify and increase the intricacies surrounding their detection.

Of course the way in which the government was being damaged was by having its silver circulation indefinitely inflated. But in the minds of many at that time the circulation was not possible of inflation. Thousands of persons wanted free coinage of silver. They earnestly believed there was not enough money of all kinds in circulation, and whoever these illegal coin manufacturers were, the money they were making was being turned directly into circulation, while unfortunately much of the coinage of the government never left the mints where it was made.

It seemed, therefore, that a certain kind of public sentiment supported the acts of these counterfeiters so long as they continued to coin money equal in metallic worth to the government dollar, and this sentiment, we thought, would assist in preventing the detection of the malefactors.

All of the numerous circulars distributed broadcast by the department, offering enormous rewards for the apprehension of the makers of this coin, were without avail. Few persons were willing to give information concerning the person from whom they received one of the coins, when that coin would have been seized as a consequence, and who, without giving such information, was almost certain to pass it on somewhere else. A coin which required such careful scrutiny to determine whether or not it was a creature of the government was likely to pass almost anywhere, and many of the banks took it, relying on the usual tests of weight and "ring".

After scouring the country for months for a clue, we stumbled upon one by accident. The Treasury Department was at that time, under the Sherman law purchasing about 4,400,000 ounces of silver monthly, and this was delivered at the mints in the usual form of bars. In a consignment which reached the mint in Philadelphia there was a bar which, when subjected to the ordinary probing which is undertaken to ascertain that the government purchases no "gold bricks", appeared so singularly cast that the director ordered the end of it sawed off. Imagine the surprise of everyone present when it was seen that the exterior of the bar was really a heavy box or shell, and that within there was a large number of these spurious silver dollars. They were packed in rows so closely as to make the entire practically a solid mass. There were one thousand of these dollars and it became clear that it was in this manner that the counterfeit coins which had been flooding the country for months, was transported from its place of manufacture to co-conspirators, doubtless in the centers of trade, by whom it was distributed.

The task was then to trace down from whence this particular bar had come. In order to do this we had to "run down" each of the bars received, in that consignment. This was quite difficult, but after two weeks of labor we succeeded in tracing it to Kansas City, where we learned it had come from a pawn shop, a sort of a "fence," the keeper of which had bought it from a thief.

Operating through the local authorities the little Jew who kept this place was arrested and thrown into jail upon a charge of receiving stolen goods; we told him if he would divulge from whom he had received it we would let him go free. He very gladly did so, and this brought us in contact with the thief. Employing the same tactics we learned that he had stolen the bar from the room of a lodger in a lodging—house where

he was employed; that the fellow had one night while drunk, employed him to escort him to his lodgings, he did so and while the man was in a sodden sleep he ransacked the room and everything in it, and he found this silver bar at the bottom of a big trunk which he had broken into.

We secured a good description of this bacchanalian silver owner, and I started in search of him. I soon found he was no longer in the city, and as it was more important to continue to trace down where the bar had come from than to pursue this criminal, I turned this part of the investigation over to the bureau and myself continued on the main case.

To find out through what channel that bar had gotten into town was the important thing. It was most likely that it had come under some sort of a cover—enclosed in something intended to disarm suspicion of the fact that bar silver was being transported. It was almost a matter of course that I should first [call at the various railroad offices to inquire if any persons answering the description of the drunken lodger had at any time received any freight which might allow of the hypothesis of its being bullion. Imagine my surprise and delight when the division superintendent of the first road I called upon the Santa Fe Railroad, told me that large quantities of silver bar had been shipped over the line, billed to a man I described, who went by the Reynolds. He told me there was no secret about these shipments; that the bars were the fine silver and that they came from the Mescal mine in California. The Santa Fe hauled all of the silver from this mine and most of it was taken to Kansas City and delivered to Reynolds, who from there reshipped it to various points throughout the United States.

Possessed of this information, and feeling myself on a hot trail I communicated at once with the bureau at Washington, advising them of my intention of going to California, taking charge of the Mescal mine, and arresting every person having any relation to it. I advised the chief that in order to successfully carry out this programme it might be necessary to make a show of force, and I wanted a detail of some sort to be placed under my command. Accordingly I received instructions through the War Department to call on Gen. McCook of the Department of Arizona to place at my disposal whatever force I should feel myself in need of.

This being arranged, I started for California. Arriving at the station of Bitter Creek,

which was the point on the road nearest the Mescal mine, I sought out a teamster known as Dolph Kevane, who had been an old prospector who was well acquainted with the country, and especially with the locality of the Mescal mine.

At that time Licut. Ferguson, with a detachment of twenty men of the cavalry, had arrived from Fort Wingate and were camped at Burton's Bridge across Dry River. The lieutenant reported to me and I ordered him to proceed with his troop to the Mescal mine, and to arrive there under the cover of the night, at daybreak on the morning of the 5th of August. Kevane and myself, equipped with a sparse camping outfit, and driving a good team of mules in a light covered wagon, started for the mine on the 1st day of August. It was a long and weary drive across a broad desert into a country of rugged and bare mountains, the most desolate region the mind can imagine. We traversed the dry bed of an ancient lake where the ground was blistering hot and our animals nearly strangled to death with the dust of alkali far down the valley hovered a water—like mirage, as though in mockery of a cooling sea. The ground was partially covered with a stubby sage brush which made travel difficult, and occasionally we were forced to cross a deep dry rut which had been plowed in the surface by the running waters of a winter's cloud burst.

Ultimately we entered the mouth of a wide pass which Kevane said was five miles from the mine. The great mountain on either hand were bare in their dry desolation; only little dots of color here and there against the bare reddish earth told that some famished shrub continued to cling to a weak existence in desperate defiance of the furious sun. Occasionally in some gulches, or depressions, orchards of yucca grew like stunted trees, the little tufts of green palm—like leaves sticking from their tops, while often almost all the balance of the plant was dead and rotted. Across the valley stood Park's Mountain, bold, gigantic, grand! A great dark mass, dark, for its limestone, while all the rest are granite.

We turned around a small cone—like hill and there before us, close upon us, was the Mescal camp. It lay on a ridge which made out from the mountain into the valley. A scramble down a steep hillside brings you to a little stream trickling away from a pool of the most delicious water, fed from a pipe communication with a wet shaft in the mine. Above on the bold side of the high roaring mountain is the mine, its gray dump marking with a light splotch the dark slope. There is a bucket cable railway leading down over trestles from the mouth of the tunnel to the smelter several hundred yards below. To

which place the ore is carried for treatment.

In my long experience as a detective I have found out the best way to work up cases is to conceal your identity while you can, and never reveal your true case. Invent a set of circumstances to employ for the time which will prompt the one upon whom you are operating to do your will; the need of this will be but transitory and employed to overcome a present obstacle or carry a point at hand; when you have this and your true character has been discovered, the man whom you have thus deceived will think nothing of it so long as he himself is not injured, and this it should not be your purpose to do except he be the party against whom you are operating. Indeed it seems to me the ability of a detective is measured by the readiness with which he invents these circumstantial subterfuges and the depth and strength of them.

If I had told Kevane that I was a government detective, and that I knew the operators of the Mescal mine were a lot of counterfeiters and that I had come there to arrest them, his tongue would have burned at the roots, and he could never have cooled it until he had told the men at the camp all I had told him. I did not commit this error; besides, had I done so, he would have realized that the camp was about to be broken up, and as it was a source of great revenue to him, and of nearly all the prosperity of the little town about the station, where the spurious dollars circulated like air he would naturally have sided with the camp against me. I therefore told him I was an agent of Williams; that Williams had sold the mine upon the condition that if the ore developed over 40 ounces he was to get a certain royalty on the difference that we had reliable information that the ore was averaging 70 ounces, and yet Davis had never told us anything about this increased yield. The purpose of my visit to the mine was to secretly ascertain how the ore was running.

Knowing it was the strict rule of the operators to allow no stranger in the camp or on any of the claims, and wishing to remain here as long as possible, I went disguised as a laborer seeking employment. I arranged with Kevane to have a mock quarrel with me after our arrival, the upshot of which would be that he would refuse to take me away on the team. Having no food nor water, I would then be an object of pity and sympathy to those at the mine, and being very harmless and inconsequential in appearance, I relied on my chances of being tolerated in camp and given a little food while without making any inquires I would keep my eyes open to all that went on about me.

This programme came to be carried out exactly as it was laid down. The quarrel with Kevane passed off successfully, and I was left alone. I was ordered out of camp by Superintendent Spencer, but I told him I would not go; that I had neither food nor water, and that I could not walk over the desert, as my feet were sore. I told him that the only thing I could do was to remain at the camp until a team went down to the station and go on that. My excuse did not please Mr. Spencer but he did not drive me off.

So far as the mining of the ore, and the smelting and refining was concerned I observed nothing unusual or extraordinary, except that they should have a refinery in connection with their plant, then they could have shipped the bullion and have had it refined much cheaper in the East, and this is the usual method at all mines where any smelting is done; but I asked no questions. I observed also, that after the silver was cast into bars it was taken up into the mine, and subsequently the bars were brought back to the refinery again and piled up there in an iron vault.

After witnessing this I felt sure that coining was going on in the mine, doubtless in the bottom of one of the shafts, and that the coins were packed in these silver boxes which were then sealed up and made to look like solid bars. I felt sure that the eight bars of silver which I saw stacked up at the refinery were so many boxes of counterfeit silver dollars, and this theory was confirmed by the story that Kevane had told me about the machinery which went into the mine, and by the fact of their keeping such a close guard over the mouth of the tunnel.

Mr. Davis, the proprietor worked in the mine, and, to my idea, he operated the minting and rolling machines. Mr. Spencer appeared to keep a general lookout on the surface, a part of his practice being to carry a pair of glasses in a case hung around him, and with these to occasionally sweep the valley.

From what I saw of the operation of the mine, they must have been taking out about twenty tons of ore daily; this, reduced and refined, would have yielded an average of eight hundred ounces of silver, this quantity of metal coined into silver dollars would produce about one thousand coins, so that it might be said that the gross output of this enterprise in false money \$1,000 per day.

With silver at 63 cents per ounce, which was then the ruling market price, the silver

contained in each coin was worth as I have said about 40 cents; this left a profit of about sixty cents on each coin dollar, or \$600 on the \$1000 as profits obtained through this illegal business. So that barring the cost of getting the money in circulation, these miners were making \$600 per day over and above their profits upon the production of the silver.

I managed to ascertain that no shipment of bars would be made for two weeks, and, as there were quite a pile of them in the refinery, (I) chuckled over the thought that I should capture all these silver bars or boxes, each one of which contained a thousand of their silver dollars. It was the 4th of August. On the following morning Lieut. Fitzgerald and his troop would be on the ground. I knew the direction they would come so that night I stole away from camp and went to meet them.

The troop was within four miles of the camp at 3 o'clock in the morning, and, acting upon my suggestion, they dismounted, left their horses with a guard and traveled the balance of the day on foot. I went ahead and returned to the camp alone directing that they should advance as closely as possible without exposing themselves and to remain concealed until I should give them a signal to appear.

The morning shift was just about to go into the mine when I approached Mr. Spencer, a low-browed, moon-faced man, with taffy-colored hair, who, seeing me said:

“The team will be here this morning, and if you ever come here again I shall send you to San Bernardino to jail.”

“Is that so?” I replied; “Then I will have you to know that you yourself, sir, are under arrest. I am an officer of the United States and I arrest “

I threw back my coat and displayed my star, which I had lately pinned on my vest. The man looked upon it almost paralyzed with astonishment.

“On what charge do you pretend to arrest me?” he said, without questioning my authority.

“Upon a charge of counterfeiting the coin of the United States.” I replied.

“Pooh.” he said, affecting a coolness he did not feel. “You talk like a fool.” He pulled a cord which rang a bell in the mine, giving the signal for the men below to appear on top. “I’ll have you know, sir,” he said, “that it will take a better man than you to arrest a whole camp and shut down a mine on such a fool charge as that; how d’ye suppose you’re goin’ to take us the railroad? D’ye think we will furnish our own transportation and haul you besides? Ha, ha!”

At this juncture the men who working below began to come out of the tunnel, and, Spencer started to explain to them that they had been spied upon by a detective who wanted to arrest all hands upon the nonsensical charge of counterfeiting. A short, thick-set man with black hair, a black moustache and light eyes, whom I supposed was Davis, wanted to argue with me what an absurd thing it was to talk about any counterfeiting going on at that place.

I was not disposed, however, to play on words.

“I command you to call every man here,” said I: “they must deliver to me whatever arms they have, and prepare themselves to go to the railroad with me.”

They laughed, “I will see,” said I. I blew a shrill blast on my whistle and instantly there tumbled over the top of the mountain the blue forms of twenty soldiers, their legs in brown leggings, and their rifles in their hands. They scrambled rapidly down toward us, while Davis and Spencer turned white and looked appalled. Instantly Spencer blew a lone whistle with a particular sound, and then I heard a great commotion in the refinery below us; then he beckoned to his men, and they ran as rapidly as possible together down the side.

Almost immediately after this, and while the soldiers were still about half way between the summit and the tunnel, there came at first a dull roar, accompanied by a slight shock, apparently from the center of the mountain; then in an instance followed an enormous and most terrific explosion; an explosion of volcanic violence which seem to roll from below us and through the tunnel and to convulse the entire mountain. The earth on which I stood heaved and threw me from it. I was hurled forward, forcibly striking the ground head first, and rolled down the slope. I looked above me; the

concussion had loosened a quantity of overhanging rock, and an avalanche of debris was sliding down among the panic—stricken soldiers. A great rock bounced past me and shocked me with its wind as it went rumbling onto the gulch below. Men came sprawling headlong down; some rolled down, while others remained lying flat on the side of the mountain.

When the affects of the explosion had passed I found, happily enough, that I was uninjured and that Lieut. Fitzgerald had the good fortune to escape. He joined me and we began to get together the members of the troop. We found that one man had been so crushed between rocks that he was in a dying condition; another had a leg broken and another had sprained an ankle.

Such was the list of our killed and wounded. We turned to look for those whom we had come to arrest, and we were in no pleasant frame of mind to undertake the business. They were all huddled together about twenty of them in a sheltered ravine. We engaged upon them. They did not resist. Davis told us there had been a blast in the mine. "A shot," he said, "had been set and the fuse lighted; we had come of the mine to take its effect without anyone."

"Are all your shots like that?" I asked.

He replied that that seemed to be an unusually heavy one, and it was. There must have been a ton .of giant powder burnt in that explosion. The tunnel had caved in and the debris from above the mountain had covered the place many feet in depth. It was perfectly apparent that both shafts within must have been torn to pieces and the whole mine was a wreck. Thousands of ton of rock doubtless filled the holes and to have reached the bottom of the shafts would have required as great an expenditure as the total amount that had been used in developing the mine.

It was clear to all of us that the explosion had been effected on purpose. These counterfeiters had taken into account the chances of the mine being someday raided by the officials who would trace to that place the counterfeit silver dollars. They had stored hundreds of pounds of dynamite where the concussion of its lanition would produce the severest of effects, and they had connected it with an electric wire leading to the refinery. Spencer had given the signal to discharge the blast, and the battery was turned

on: the result was the minting machine, dies, rollers and whatever else of evidence as to the crime of counterfeiting had instantly become buried beneath thousands of tons of debris.

We then proceeded to the refinery. Intending to seize the silver box bars which I had seen so numerous piled therein, but lo! every one had vanished. I asked where they were, but received no reply; to direct questions put to the foreman of the refinery I received the reply that he did not know. I looked into the melting kettle; it was full of silver metal. The box bars with their silver dollars had been thrown into the kettle, and had melted into bullion; but no trace of the form of a box or the shape of a dollar could be discerned in the molten mass of bright metal.

I chafed under the realization that withal I was to leave the mine without a particle of legal evidence that any counterfeiting had been in progress there, but such was the fact; I had no such evidence. We took with us all the men employed at the place, together with Davis and Spencer, but most of them were ignorant Italians who knew nothing beyond their immediate duties at the mines, and from these I learned nothing.

Davis, Spencer and Coughman, the smelter foreman, were put on trial, charged with counterfeiting, but not a word of damaging testimony could be elicited against them. The metal I took from the refining pot was assayed and found to contain just the proportions of pure silver and the identical kind of alloy contained in the silver dollars; but they produced in court samples of the ore of the mine which was shown to contain the same minerals, to-wit: silver and copper. A quantity of the spurious silver coins were found on their persons and we put our experts on the stand, who examined the coins and pronounced it counterfeit; but they produced a greater number of experts who declared it to be genuine. But what discomfited us most in the trial of the case was their tendering one of our experts on the stand a coin and ask him whether it was genuine or spurious. He examined it with great care and pronounced it to be the latter. They then put a number of witnesses on the stand each of whom testified that they had together on that very morning procured that identical coin where it had been issued to them as genuine.

We found it impossible to trace to this mine with the certainty of legal evidence the bar containing the silver dollars which we had cut open at the mint. There was no doubt that the only way we could get evidence against the accused proving they had been engaged in the manufacture of counterfeit coin was by penetrating those innumerable

tons of rock in that mountain and bringing to light that machinery which lay buried hundreds of feet below. There were no funds available to meet this expense and though Congress was called upon to make an appropriation to this end, yet the bill therefore, like many other good measures, died in committee and never reached passage.

The accused were acquitted and they went their way. That way, however, was not back to the Mescal mine; that enterprise abides silenced and the silver dollar counterfeit have about disappeared from circulation. I did not succeed in convicting the culprits, but I did succeed in squelching the industry. I afterward learned that Davis and Spencer were partners and while they had been conducting several important enterprises yet they had been pressed close to the wall of bankruptcy; unable otherwise to raise much—needed money, they took this means of veritably raising it out of the earth in defiance of United States laws. Whether they accumulated sufficient profits from their lawless venture to recoupe their fortunes or not I have never; but certainly so far as I have ever heard, their careers as counterfeiters closed with that terrible explosion at the Mescal mine.

JOHN E. BENNETT.