


Pinal **NUGGET**

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FREE



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the Copper
Corridor,
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OF A
CONQUISTADOR**
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Photo by Jose Lira Jr.

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The Ghost of Melchior Diaz

The Sierra Pinacate volcanic range is quickly gaining a reputation as one of the most exotic landscapes on the planet. Located only a short distance from the ocean shores of Puerto Penasco (Rocky Point), this ancient volcanic field holds one of the earth’s driest deserts. The area averages only two to four inches of rain a year and one giant crater went seven years without recorded rain.

NUGGET

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As one might expect the plants of the Pinacates reflect the tough conditions. One of the most southern reaches of the Sonoran Desert, the landscape is still dotted with saguaros; but much

more common are the thick fields of teddy bear cholla which populate the cinder cone slopes like an army of tiny thorny soldiers. There are only a few scattered organ pipe cactus but there are many of the fuzzy



DIAZ'S DOWNFALL

It was a wolf much like this one that was the downfall of Conquistador Melchior Diaz. This photo was shot at the Minnesota Zoo. A critically endangered Mexican Gray Wolf is kept captive for breeding purposes. Less than 15 Mexican Wolves are currently estimated to survive in the wild.

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Gary Every Pinal Nugget

crested senita. Particularly exotic are the multi-headed barrel cactus, interlocking thorns protecting the plants from grazing herbivores.

The geology itself looks fire blasted; the rocks appear to be just out of the furnace as lava flows sprawl in twisted shapes, the contorted sculptures of rapidly cooling molten stone. Cinder cones holding gigantic craters erupt all across the landscape. The largest of these is Crater Elegante, over 800 feet deep and 4,800 feet in diameter. Some of the lava flows are colored a rust red but most of them are jet black. All of them are striking when the glistening white sand dunes spill across them. Early Spanish pioneers named this path the “Camino Diablo” or Devil’s Road.

The first Old World explorer to travel the Camino Diablo was Melchior Diaz in 1540. Diaz was a part of the Coronado expedition as it tried to find lost cities of gold. Coronado had thought it was possible that his colony in New Mexico could be supplied by sea. Hernando Alarcon was given a ship and the best approximate directions possible to try and locate Coronado. California turned out not to be an island, and Alarcon was

forced to try and navigate the Colorado River upstream. Men walked along both sides of the shore, connected to the sailing vessel by ropes as they towed the heavy vessel northward. Alarcon gave up near the junction of the Gila and Colorado River without ever reaching Coronado and without ever imagining the Grand Canyon which still lay as an obstacle up ahead. Coronado sent Melchior Diaz along the Camino Diablo to try and locate Alarcon.

The irony that Diaz became the first explorer to cross this dry and brutal desert in an attempt to reach the ocean has never ceased to amaze me. Melchior Diaz traveled this region of cactus thorns, cinder cones, and sand dunes accompanied by a half dozen conquistadors and a flock of 40 sheep. You can imagine how delighted the wolves were by this banquet of mutton on the hoof. The gray wolves must have practically drooled as they watched the plump domesticated sheep march through this inhospitable desert. The wolves howled all night while the lost conquistadors huddled by the fire and the sheep circled around, bleating nervously.

In the morning Melchior Diaz prepared for battle. The proud

conquistador donned his armor, mounted his stallion and with lance in hand, charged into the fray, jousting the feral canine carnivores. Atop his galloping steed, Diaz eyed the kill and lunged...

The wolf dodged and the blade of the lance struck nothing but stone. The butt of the spear bounced back and fatally wounded the exploring conquistador. Melchior Diaz lay in the shade, slowly dying from a self inflicted groin wound,

painfully aware that he was suffering perhaps the most inglorious death in all of history.

No one has ever found the lost grave of Melchior Diaz. It is one of the great mysteries of the region. The grave is so lost that no one can even say for certain whether Melchior Diaz’s remains are in the Sierra Pinacate, Gran Desierto, Cabeza Prieta Wilderness, or Organ Pipe National Monument. What is worth noting, is that

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Melchior Diaz

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when combined, these four bioreserves, (two on the American side and two on the Mexican) make up the second largest wilderness preserve on the planet - perhaps soon to be the largest depending on the extent of drilling in the Arctic Wilderness Refuge.

Sad to say, the last Mexican gray wolf disappeared from the Pinacates in the 1970s but according to unconfirmed reports a funny thing has happened since the wolves went extinct from the region. On full moon nights sometimes you can still hear the ghosts of the wolves howl. Sometimes you can even see their shadows, just their shadows, racing across the landscape, feral ghost dogs running wild.

Suddenly the sand will shift, the earth will open, and the grave of Melchior Diaz opens wide. The ghost of Melchior Diaz rises up from the earth still riding atop his magnificent stallion, lance in his hand, preparing to battle wolves once more. The horse gallops into the darkness as the ghost wolves flee before

it and Melchior Diaz aims his lance, shouting out the conquistador battle cry of "Santiago! Santiago!"

Female adventurers are safe from this ghost when they travel the Camino Diablo but male travelers must be especially wary, because like Ichabod Crane's headless horseman, the ghost of Melchior Diaz seeks to replace that which he has lost and we all know just which particular body part the ghost of Melchior Diaz no longer carries.



CONQUISTADOR

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American Legion Heroes of the Copper Corridor

With Memorial Day and Flag Day past and the Fourth of July right around the corner, veterans' organizations like the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars are becoming more active in the Copper Corridor. Just last month the Superior VFW and American Legion hosted Memorial Day services at the war memorial at Fairview Cemetery.



PARADE

Members of the American Legion often serve as Color Guard for parades.

The American Legion is a wartime veterans' organization which supports service to veterans, service members and community. They have been influential in securing many benefits for veterans, influenced social change and provided many programs for children and youth. The American Legion was formed in 1919 by members of the American Expeditionary Forces who had

fought in World War I. Membership quickly grew as many veterans in communities across the nation joined.

In Arizona, American Legion posts were established including a number along the area we know as the Copper Corridor. In its early years, it was customary to name a post after a local service member who had been killed in action. In 1919 the communities in the Copper Corridor that established

John Hernandez
Pinal Nugget

posts were: Ray, Hayden, Superior, Globe and Miami.

The town of Ray established the John H. Pruitt Unit #18. United States Marine Corporal, John H. Pruitt, died in France at Blanc Mont Ridge, Oct. 4, 1918. In 1919 he was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. The *Tucson Daily Star* reported: "According to the official citation, Pruitt attacked single handed two German machine guns which were spraying the American troops with a hail of lead. He silenced both, killing their operators. Continuing, he raided a German dugout, capturing forty of the enemy." The following day, Pruitt was killed in action.

Pruitt's mother, Belle Pruitt, accepted the medal. In 1920, a Navy cruiser ship was named for John H. Pruitt. His parents attended the christening in Maine.

There was some controversy about the Ray post taking the name of John Pruitt as it was known that the Pruitt family lived in Alhambra and Phoenix where John grew up and the newspapers had been calling Pruitt a Maricopa County resident. The Ray post Adjutant, Orion M. Zink, wrote a letter to the *Arizona Republic* which said that John Pruitt had enlisted in Ray and was considered a Pinal boy. It was also known that Pruitt had been living in Kelvin in 1916. There were other local men who had lost their lives in World War I.

The first group of officers for the John H. Pruitt, Ray American Legion Post #18 were: A.P. Maygar, Post Commander; S.E. Stretton, Vice-Commander; Miss Josephine Cunningham, Treasurer; and Orion M. Zink, Adjutant.

Following World War II, the town of Sonora, what started out as the Mexican section of Ray (Ray-Sonora) established a post which was known as a Spanish-American chapter of the Legion. The Sonora American Legion Post #69 received its charter in May 1947. It then became known as the Amador – Larini post. It was named for two men from Sonora who were killed in World War II, Louis L. Amador and Manuel H. Larini.

Louis Amador lost his life while



SALUTE

Memorial Day 2018 the Superior American Legion and VFW hosted services to honor the fallen.

Photo by Jose Lira Jr.

serving as a B-24 aerial gunner during a bombing mission. Staff Sergeant Amador posthumously received the Air Medal with two oak clusters "for exceptionally meritorious achievement while participating in ten separate bomber missions and for meritorious achievement in the destruction of one enemy airplane while serving as crewman in a bombardment mission over enemy-occupied Continental Europe." His father, Auralio Amador of Sonora accepted the medal from Colonel M.M. Munn, Commander of Davis-Monthan Field. Louis' mother and two younger brothers were present during the ceremony.

Staff Sergeant Manuel H. Larini was killed in action in France June 6, 1944

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American Legion

Continued from page 7

during the landing operations of D-Day. He was 19 years old. He left Ray High School to enlist in the Air Corps in 1943. He was stationed in England and had completed many bombing missions and had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He was survived by his mother Lupe H. Gomez, his step-father Salvador Gomez and three sisters, Esther, Eva and Emma Larini.

The first group of officers for the Amador-Larini post were: Lawrence Cittadini, Commander; Fred Flores, Adjutant; Joe Duarte, Finance Officer; Luis Mesques, Sergeant at Arms; and Eulalio Acevez, Chaplain. In 1965 the town of Ray Sonora was destroyed by the Kennecott Copper Corporation to expand its open pit mine. The Legion posts were temporarily on hold. The John H. Pruitt post would

be re-established in the new town of Kearny. In 1968 the Sonora American Legion would merge with the Kearny post and become known as the John H. Pruitt & Amador-Larini Post (P.A.L. Post #18).

In October 1919, the Hayden American Legion Post #22 was established. It would be named for Norman E. Griffin, who was killed in France while operating a tank machine gun advancing towards some German machine gun nests. A German shell blew off the top of the tank as well as Norman's head as reported by newspapers. The tank driver survived.

The Norman E. Griffin post boasted that 100% of veterans in the Hayden area had joined. The Ray Consolidated Copper company had donated \$100 to the support of the

post. Dues were \$5 per year. The first group of officers for the post were: H.R. Christie, Commander; L.J. Reinhardt, Secretary; and George H. Parsons, Treasurer.

In the summer of 1919, the Kern American Legion Post #17 was formed in Superior. It was named for William P. Kern. Private William Kern, while serving with the 109th Infantry, was fatally wounded in June 1918 during action in the Aisne offensive in France. He had been reported missing in action until July 1919, when his parents received the news.

On Nov. 11, 1919, the Kern Post sponsored an Armistice Day (now known as Veteran's Day) ball at the Magma Club. All Superior's veterans were there, as Magma Copper had given the evening shift veterans the

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The American Legion Post in Globe was organized in July 1919. It was named the Henry Berry Globe Post #4. According to the *Bisbee Daily Review*, "Henry Berry was one of the first Globe boys killed in action on the battlefields of France and the World War veterans of this city felt that his name should be honored in those who returned. Henry Berry was the son of J.H. Berry a well-known resident of this city."

The officers of the new post were Post Commander, M.F. Murphy; Vice-Commander, Ed Chilson; Executive Committee: C.C. Faires, Jack Low and Dr. Wales.

In Miami, the Harrington-Gray Miami Post #5 was also established in July 1919. It was named for Parmer Harrington and Bertram Gray. Harrington was killed in action in December 1918. Gray had enlisted in July 1917 and was reported to have died in December 1918.

American Legion membership peaked following World War II. In the 1990s it began to dwindle. Legion halls have closed around the country. In small town Arizona, some posts have closed down while others that once had their own American Legion halls, now meet in public facilities. Two American Legion posts that are no longer shown as being active are the Miami and Hayden posts. A post in San Manuel which was established in the 1950s is no longer active. The Kearny and Superior posts now meet in public venues. The Globe Henry Berry Post #4 is still active and has its own clubhouse on Broad Street. These active posts will be 100 years old next year. They continue to work for veterans and give to their communities as well as keep the memory alive of some of the brave soldiers who have given their lives for their country.


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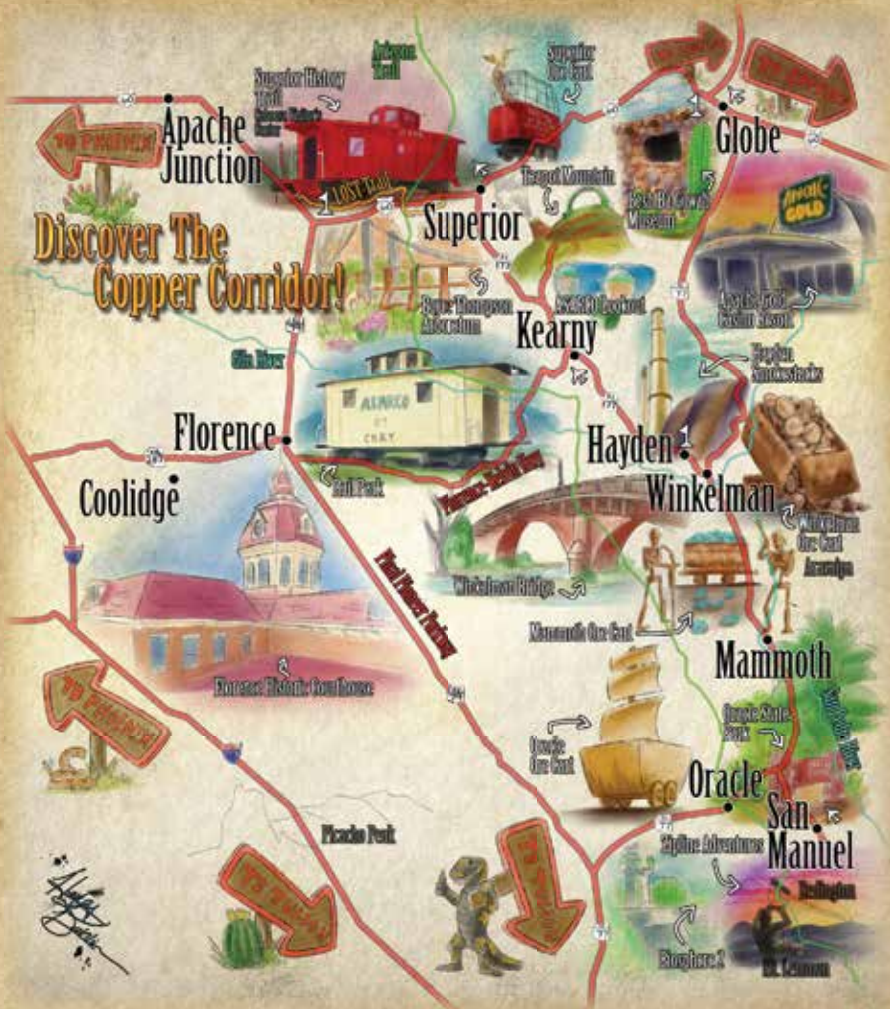
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