

# Tall Tales

By Walter Chalfant



According to a persistent legend of the desert country there is somewhere among the dunes of southeastern California the decayed hulk of a ship, reputedly laden with treasure.

It is said that there are records to prove that in the year 1610 the King of Spain authorized a Captain Cordone to engage in a naval expedition and a pearl hunt for the crown. Three ships were built at Acapulco and sailed up the western coast of Mexico. In a battle with the Indians one of the ship captains was wounded, and turned back to Acapulco with his vessel.

The other captains Juan de Iturbe and Pedro de Rosales kept on with their pearl hunting. Their Negro divers were successful in securing quite a stock of the gems. The voyagers also made shrewd trades with the Indians, often exchanging old clothes and wormy ship's biscuits for pearls. At this point De Rosales drops out of the story.

Iturbe kept on a course up the Gulf of California, which narrowed as he progressed until it again opened out into a large inland sea. He believed he had found the long-sought connection between the two oceans, but when he was in 34° latitude he was forced to abandon that idea. When he turned south he was distressed to find that communication between the inland sea and the Gulf had been cut off. He sailed around until his vessel grounded. The water continued to recede, leaving his vessel high and dry; and there, the story goes, it was abandoned. All this was in latitude 34°, which is about the south line of San Bernardino County. To make this tale right, we must assume that the Colorado River was at a high stage and that the inland water he found was the predecessor of the Salton Sea, which was cut off at a time most inopportune for Senor Iturbe.

It is claimed that prospectors have seen the bones of the old ship, rotted in the sands. Such stories have been laid to the imaginative- visions of the desert-crazed. A writer asserts that an Indian woman told him that under a certain hill a ship was buried. She told him that many years ago there were some great floods on the desert. Then the Indians would climb to high lands and live there until the water went away. Her grandfather – “him grandfather, him grandfather” probably - saw a great bird with white wings come floating from “down Mexico way.” It came to the hill she pointed out, and stopped. The water went away and the bird was in the sand. Its white wings fell down, leaving tall bare trees sticking up. After a while the sand blew and blew, and the bird was all covered up.

A contemporary writer investigated the rumors as far as he could. A San Bernardino paper reported that a party headed by one Charley Clusker made a search of many days, during which Clusker nearly lost his life. One of the party was a man named Talbot, who showed the same reluctance as others to talking about the trip. After some persuasion he said:

“In the year 1862 some of us had mining interests in La Paz, Arizona. We had a skiff built in Los Angeles. She was 21 feet long, rigged with a single mast for sailing, and mounted on wheels for the overland haul to the Colorado River. All went well until we had crossed the San Gorgonia pass and came to the lowest point in the desert. There the teams gave out and we were forced to abandon her. Mark my words: that was the origin of

the ship of the desert. She had two wagon loads of provisions and groceries on board, and those who find her are welcome to all my treasures on that desert ship that sailed with neither sea nor breeze.”

The writer continued: “Here, one might think, the story ends, but such is by no means the case. It was less than a year ago, while on a periodic tour of the Colorado desert, that I had the good fortune to make camp with an old habitue' of the wasteland. Inevitably the conversation turned to the subject of lost mines, of buried treasure, and finally to the desert ship.

“‘I think I know where the old hulk lies,’ he said, in a confidential tone.

‘Would you betray a vital secret if you told me?’ I asked.

‘W-e-e-1-1, maybe not. You know the southeast corner of this county is covered with sandhills. Every time a big wind hits them they move - sometimes a foot or two, sometimes a rod or more. I got it figured out that those dunes have covered up the old ship. They’ll keep on moving, of course, and some day the old packet’ll be uncovered. The man who finds it will make the biggest strike in all history, and don't you forget it.’”

Old newspaper files contribute enough to prove that the ship was considerably discussed but without giving any more definite information on.

The *Sacramento Union* of August 31, 1870, said: “The wreck of the vessel found in the upper end of the Colorado desert, south of the road from San Bernardino to Topaz, fully a hundred miles from the sea, as stated by telegraph from San Diego, was seen by Albert S. Evans in 1863, and described in an article published in the *New York Galaxy* last January.”

The Evans’ article in the *Galaxy*, in January 1870, read in part: “By two o’clock I had reached the summit of the divide between Dos Palmas and the Palma Seca and looked in the plain . . . . Southward to the very horizon stretched a great plain of snowy salt, the white ghost of a dead sea which once covered all this accursed land but has passed away forever. Across this white plain, as across the waters of a placid lake, the moon threw a track of shimmering light, so bright as almost to dazzle the eye of the beholder. Right in this burning pathway of light, far out in the center of the ghostly sea, where foot of man hath never trod, lay what appeared in the distance the wreck of a gallant ship, which might have gone down there centuries ago, when the bold Spanish adventurers, bearing the cross and sword in either hand, were pushing their way to the northwest in search of the fountain of youth, the famed Kingdom of Cibola.”

And the *Sacramento Union* of October 6, 1870, had this: “A dispatch dated at Los Angeles October 4th says: An advance party of four, from San Bernardino, have left to visit the famous wrecked ship in the Colorado desert near Dos Palmas station. The ship, which must have lain a wreck for over two hundred and fifty years, is built of teak wood, and is perfectly sound. The bow and stern are plainly visible, and she is 240 miles from the Gulf of California.”

This account was continued on October 13, 1870, under the date line of Los Angeles, October 12: “The ship hunting party in Colorado desert returned to San Bernardino.”

Again, on November 16, 1870: “Another search is to be made for the fossil ship in the Colorado desert by the men who went for it before but did not find the prize.”

And as late as September 30, 1872: “The ship on the Arizona desert proves to be a ferryboat mired there while the owner was endeavoring to transport it to the Colorado.”

Similarly the *Inyo Independent*, September 27, 1873, said: “The ship in the desert story, which has heretofore been attributed to a writer’s lively imagination, is verified by the James expedition explorers. In the Colorado desert, fully twenty miles from the Gulf of California, they found the mast of a vessel, doubtless cast there by some terrible storm.”

Other “tall” tales are concerned with the West’s visiting humorists. Artemus Ward, one such famous figure, visited Nevada on a lecture tour. One of his dates was in the then lively city of Austin. A newly built granite store building appeared to be the only place available for his appearance. At the appointed hour he led the way to the building, carrying a borrowed lamp. Most of the audience followed, to hear what the local paper said was “the first lecture in the Shoshonean nation.”

The event was so successful that a delegation came from a place called Big Creek, a dozen miles away, and requested that the lecture be repeated there. The invitation was accepted. Before starting from Austin, Ward was warned of Indian dangers on the road. Said he to Dr. Hingston, his manager: “We’ll go, Warrior, only take care to have put at the bottom of the handbills, ‘Admittance one scalp; front seats two scalps.’” Ward and Hingston each bought a large revolver. Ward put his in the bottom of his trunk; Hingston belted his on in approved style.

The Young America Saloon was the lecture hall. A hundred miners, each of whom paid two dollars at the door, formed the audience. They sat on kegs and on the floor while the bar kept up business, and barkeep and miners joined in whoops of laughter over *Babes in the Woods*.

After the lecture Ward and Hingston started back to Austin in the buggy in which they had come. Suddenly out of the night appeared a band of redskins. They captured the lecturer before Hingston could draw his revolver. Forcing the captives to get out of the buggy, they kept them on their knees under guard for half an hour. Then the leader of the gang demanded, in bad English, the captive’s name.

“Artemus Ward,” said the lecturer, with teeth that chattered more from the cold weather than from **fear**. “Ugh! ugh! Melican talkee man!” the Shoshone leader yelled. He made a lunge for Artemus’ scalp while some of the band shouted “Talkee! Talkee!”

Artemus did his best to oblige. He began one of his lectures; but the Indians wouldn’t listen. Still he kept on until one of the band yelled “Bosh!”

That ended the captivity right there. Artemus realized that he was being made the victim of a practical joke. When they had finished laughing, the leader gave the shivering lecturer and manager something to warm them, and escorted them into Austin, with a warning not to be careless again in a wild country.

Artemus met Mark Twain in Virginia City. After they had liberally sampled the vintages of the city, Artemus observed that he wished he knew more about mining and its facts and theories.

“It’s perfectly simple,” said Mark. “Of course you know that gold and silver are obtained from rock taken from under ground. In the beginning, someone finds a ledge of mineral and by having assays made of samples from it ascertains what it contains.”

“Yes, I know that much about it.”

“Then they sink a shaft in the graniferous limestone. If they happen to miss the pay streak, they take that shaft out and move it to the right or the left or the north or south, as circumstances may suggest.”

“I don't just see how that can be done,” said Artemus; “but maybe I don't understand very well.”

“It must be that you are not up to your standard. It’s perfectly simple. You see, don’t you, that the ledge may not go down in just the same direction the shaft is run, and that to get out the ore the shaft must cut into it?”

“That certainly looks reasonable.”

“Well, there you are. If the shaft isn't in ore. it is necessary to contact the ore deposit. There’s no use to waste the work already done. Many mines contain porphyry horses. You’ve heard of them haven’t you?”

Artemus said he had heard them mentioned that day.

“The power available through the presence of the porphyry horses,” Mark went on, “makes it comparatively easy to shift the shaft a short distance one way or the other. Does that seem reasonable?”

The puzzled Artemus thought maybe it did.

“You understand that when a winzet (A winze is a passageway connecting one part of a mine with another at a lower level.) is built they make the walls of varying thickness to allow for contraction and expansion?”

Not knowing what to say, Artemus nodded.

“Of course if the moving has to be done for any distance, it is more economical to hitch the mine hoist to the collar of the shaft - you heard the super talking about the collar of the shaft?”

Artemus had.

“When the hoist is hitched to the collar (The mouth of the shaft), the shaft is taken out in short sections which can be easily moved. Sometimes of course it is necessary to chop or saw away the connecting tunnels so the shaft can be more easily taken out.” Seeing that Artemus, though alcoholically affected, looked somewhat dubious, Mark took up a more probable line.

“The ore that is taken out has to be crushed very fine, so the metal in it can be more easily recovered. That's clear enough.”

Artemus said it was perfectly plain.

“In some kinds of ore the quicksilver does not act right unless there is some other material with it. Sometimes salt is used. You saw a lot of salt at the mill today.”

“I remember seeing the salt but didn't know what it was for.”

“That was the purpose. Sometimes they make a strong infusion of sagebrush leaves, boiled down until it is thick, and put that in too.”

“What's it for?”

“It makes the ore stick and any material foreign to the country rock is promptly shed and the quicksilver takes up what is cast off.”

“Your explanations are of course perfectly clear to anybody who is less muddled than I seem to have become; but I don't seem to understand it very well, and I think you had better tell me more about it in the morning when I can grasp the subject better.”

More thrilling - and dangerous - were some of the adventures experienced by the real citizens of early California. Different from any other in these pages was the story of John Searles and the grizzly. It was told by Searles himself to P. A. Chalfant and published in the *Inyo Independent* about 1874.

Searles and his brother Dennis were among the first arrivals in Inyo County during the 'sixties. They were afterward the discoverers and locators of the great mineral area named for them, and now a large industrial center. The *Independent* said of John: “John Searles is one of the remarkable men of the coast. For daring and courage he is the equal of the famous Kit Carson or any other pioneer and Indian fighter. At one time, armed with a Henry rifle and accompanied by but one man, he followed a band of Indians who had driven away his stock, out east of the Panamint range, and not only recovered his stock but single-handed cleaned out the entire gang, killing four outright and wounding and driving off several others.”

In 1870 the Sierra Nevada had an abundance of wild life, including bears of the different California species. In March of that year Searles and others went out from Visalia to hunt deer. Searles shot a buck, which fell over a precipice. Going to see what had become of his game, he saw below two full-grown grizzlies and a cub, and got close enough to kill all three. That gave him a taste for grizzlies. His guide told of a region where the bears were plentiful and where two ferocious specimens had killed many cattle. Thither they went.

Stormy weather kept them in camp for a day or two. Searles found that he had shot away all his cartridges but four, and sent for more by hanging the cartridge box beside the trail for the first passerby to take to town and bring out a fresh supply. The order was filled, but as the messenger had thrown away the cartridge box he brought back misfit ammunition. It could be used only by trimming the bullet, which allowed the cartridge to be forced into the gun - a Spencer rifle-though it took two blows of the hammer to fire it.

He set out with his four good shots and a supply of the misfits. Plodding along on foot he saw the nose of a big grizzly which was lying down. He killed the bear with two shots. He heard another grizzly in a thicket, and went after it. While he was working around for a sight of the animal, it suddenly rose in front of him, its nose not eighteen inches from his own. Brush prevented his backing off, and he pointed his gun at the base of the bear's jaw, hoping to reach its brain, and fired. At the gun's discharge the bear pitched over, gasping and

pawing at its eyes, which had been burned by flame from the shot. Searles threw in another cartridge, expecting to shoot at the base of the bear's brain. The shell was one of the doctored kind, and had not been dented enough to explode, though he tried it twice more. The bear rose and turned on him; Searles thrust the rifle barrel into its mouth, but the weapon was brushed aside and he was knocked to the ground. The bear bit the lower part of his face, then with another bite injured his windpipe and laid the jugular vein bare. The animal next grabbed its victim's shoulder, causing blood to spurt in a curve above him. As this mouthful of flesh was pulled clear Searles rolled over; his coat was now bunched on his back and the bear bit into it, then went away.

“What does a man think when a bear is tearing him to pieces?” asked Searles in telling the story. “I thought: ‘Twenty years in California-to be killed at last by a grizzly!’ I was disgusted.”

Though he was as much dead as alive, his discomfort saved him. His wet clothing began to freeze, and cold sealed up the torn blood vessels. In spite of his shocking condition, his jaw broken and dangling, his throat torn, his left arm useless, he managed to get to his horse, mount it, and reach camp. He traveled three days to a Los Angeles hospital. There he heard the surgeons consulting as how best to make him comfortable during the short time he had to live. While they talked of boring through sound teeth to wire the broken lower jaw, he managed to kick one of them from the bedside. Then came one who patched and pieced and plastered, and in a few weeks Searles was up and around.

Later, in his office at the borax plant, he displayed a bottle in which were twenty-one fragments of bone taken from his jaw. His rifle showed the bites of the bear. His jawbone showed depressions where bony material had been removed, and his neck was stiffened from effects of the bite. Nevertheless, he lived to a ripe old age, as venturesome and daring as in his youth.

Another tale of the region also involves a grizzly. Mexican residents of the young town of Bakersfield had as one of the features of their September 16, 1874, celebration, a fight between a bull and a bear. They lassoed a 600-pound grizzly, brought him in, and chained him to an anchorage in the center of an arena they had built. Before the fight began, announcement was made that fifty dollars would be paid to anyone who would ride the bull during the fight. A young man named Hall said that fifty looked good to him and, despite arguments, arranged for his perilous ride.

While the band played lively Spanish music, the door to the corral was opened, and through it charged a large black bull. The tips of its horns had been sawed off, and dripped blood. As it passed under a platform, Hall jumped astride and seized the surcingle, which bore double handholds. The bull made several jumps and plunges without dislodging Hall before it spied the bear. It charged the bear and knocked it over. The bear, on its back, used its long claws with fearful effect disembowling its antagonist. Hall was thrown high in the air, and landed unhurt. While the two vicious animals fought he scrambled from the ring.

The preceding story, which was published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of that month, was given directly to its writer by an eyewitness.

In the herd of a pioneer cattleman of northern Owens Valley was a bull that was in truth the monarch of all he surveyed, so far as he saw fit to enforce the claim. Owner Givens had no objection to the bull's vanquishing all bovine interference within his domain but was less favorable able to its defiance of all human control. Herders mounted or on foot, were chased until they wanted “nuthin’ to do with that critter.” When roundup time came, the presence of the unconquered warrior meant trouble for everybody.

One day Givens and a friend undertook to herd the animal and soon decided that they had had enough. Their horses, if not themselves, were too valuable to risk, and they withdrew from the neighborhood. A vaquero named Russell Briggs arrived on the scene, and scoffed at the idea of their being driven off by the bull.

Dismounting he drew a bowie knife and walked out toward the bull, which was bellowing defiance to all comers. The bull promptly charged. Briggs jumped aside at the right instant, and as the animal passed he slashed it across the face. The bull wheeled and again came at him, receiving another slash. This was repeated several times, the bull showing no loss of courage. Within twenty minutes the bull was cut and slashed so much that from loss of blood it dropped in its tracks. Briggs fell once as he dodged aside, but escaped uninjured. He offered to bet a thousand dollars that with no weapon but a knife he could whip any bull in California. The amount of the bet would not have been important to him if he had lost.

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