

By William Ascarza Special to the Arizona Daily Star
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While prospecting along the Hassayampa River in October 1863, Henry Wickenburg and several associates discovered a gold-bearing quartz outcrop 500 feet long, 400 feet wide and 100 feet tall. Wickenburg named the future mine the Vulture after he saw turkey buzzards hovering over a nearby peak. Not long after that, one of the original claimants threatened Wickenburg with an injunction against further working the mine. Although dismissed in district court at Prescott, it was the first mining litigation brought to civil authorities in the Arizona Territory.

Wickenburg lacked the money to develop the mine, a lode-bearing mine that required the knowledge and prowess of a hard-rock miner to extract the gold deposits. He allowed other miners to work his claim, charging them \$15 a ton. The ore was transported by mule or burro to a series of 40 arrastras located along the Hassayampa River, where it was crushed and the gold extracted. Wickenburg, not satisfied with the profit, sold four-fifths of the Vulture claim for \$50,000 to the Vulture Mining Co., which mined it between 1867 and 1873. Even though its principal ore body had been worked out by 1872, the Vulture's reputation for additional ore deposits kept hopes alive, with productive activity continuing there until prior to World War I.

Vulture City, built as a mill site around the mine in the 1870s, drew water from the shallow wells along the Hassayampa River. The town, which grew to a population of 300, was known for its numerous hangings of unscrupulous miners. The mine drew the interest of Horace A.W. Tabor, the Leadville, Colorado, silver-mining magnate who acquired the property as a speculative venture in 1887. The mine failed to produce, and Tabor was at the mercy of creditors who accused him of fraudulent actions. He was forced to sell his holdings a decade later.

The Vulture Mines Co. acquired the property, and after finding a faulted segment of the ore body, built a 20-stamp mill in 1910. The company operated the mine until 1917, extracting \$1.84 million worth of ore. It was later worked by multiple lessees, with little profit, and since 1970 has operated as a tourist attraction.

The mine was credited in the 1860s by Arizona Territorial Governor Richard C. McCormick as being "the Comstock of Arizona," in reference to the huge Nevada gold and silver mine. According to the Arizona Geological Survey, the mine yielded 340,000 ounces of gold and 260,000 ounces of silver from 1863 through 1942. One million tons of ore were mined, with an average grade of 0.35 ounces per ton of gold, and 0.25 ounces per ton of silver. The figures may have actually been greater except for highgrading (theft), fraud and embezzlement.

Most production occurred before 1900, with an estimated value of \$6 million. During that time, the Vulture mine helped settle Central Arizona with the allure of great riches during Arizona's early territorial years. As for Wickenburg — a prospector, farmer, businessman and pioneer — he retained a fifth of the Vulture claim and lived a long life — 85 years — before despondency overtook him and he shot himself with a Colt revolver in 1905.

Although he came to a sad end, the bucolic town of Wickenburg 12 miles northeast of the Vulture mine was named after him. The Vulture mine may yet reopen as a profitable open-pit mine as a result of exploration drilling in the area by Vulture Peak Gold LP in 2011.

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Sources: Gene Botts, with John and Marge Osborne (1995), "The Vulture: Gold Mine of the Century"; W. Spencer Hutchinson; "The Vulture Mine," Engineering and Mining Journal, Feb. 12, 1921; Duane A. Smith, "The Vulture Mine: Arizona's Golden Mirage," Arizona and the West, Autumn, 1972; Jon E. Spencer, Stephen J. Reynolds, Michael J. Grubensky, John T. Duncan and Don C. White, "Geology of the Vulture Gold Mine," Arizona Geological Survey "Arizona Geology" Winter 1989; Eldred D. Wilson, J.B. Cunningham and G.M. Butler, "Arizona Lode Gold Mines and Gold Mining," Arizona Bureau of Mines Bulletin 137 (revised 1967).



Courtesy of Mining & Engineering World

The arrastra was a pit lined with hard, flat rocks with a post and swinging arm in the center. A burro, mule or ox walked around the post, dragging a heavy boulder over the added pieces of ore, grinding them to gravel.