STORY NUMBER 14 - **MY VENTURE IN GOLD MINING**
- MOJAVE DESERT, CALIFORNIA
As told by William J. (Bill) Kuhrt, 1990

This is not in the nature of a story. It is simply a statement of my venture in gold mining. In 1934, when things were kind of quiet in the Los Angeles Milk Industry, I had completed examinations for two federal positions and two for the state. And our milk law was awaiting action in the Legislature. So there was very little that I could do at that particular time.

Well, our attorney, Jack Whitcomb came to me one day and said, "How would you like to get in on a gold mining deal?" I said, "Well, I don't know anything about gold mining." He said, "Well, there's four of us that have put in $2,000 apiece and we'd like another $2,000. We have a ten-year lease from Jess Knight on a piece of property up at Mojave. It's a mine that has been worked before but has just been lying there. Nobody was doing anything about it."

I went up and took a look at it and saw that there were pretty good prospects there. So I inquired as to what their plans were. Well, the plan was to build a small gold extraction mill and tie it in with the ore that was in the vein. There was a tunnel into the mountain, Soledad Mountain, about 450 feet. Very little work had been done below the track in the tunnel, but there had been a considerable amount of what they called stoping, which is above the tunnel. After some checking I found out that there were areas where the gold was as rich as perhaps $40-$50 a ton. And then it dwindled off on both sides to as little as a dollar or two per ton.

But the idea was to build a ball mill and recover as much of that gold (and there was some silver in it) as we could with that size of an operation. So I put in the money and went up with two of the men. One of them was a mining engineer and another was a woman who was a furrier in Beverly Hills, believe it or not, and her friend, his name was Clark (I can't remember what he did).

Anyway, I went up and we made plans to build a mill. The whole scheme was to have the ore broken loose above the tunnel, carted out to the entrance in a car on track, and dumped into a chute which is on a very steep slant down into a crusher box that was for the big crusher. From that it went into the roller mill that got the ore into a finer condition. Then it went from there into the ball mill, and from the ball mill it was spread out with water across what they called the plate, which was about a six-by-eight or nine feet steel plate that was "dressed" as they called it or covered with quicksilver. That was to catch all of the free gold as it went down over this plate which was on a slight slant. And then it went across into what they called a corduroy catchall to pick any pieces of gold that might come over the plate.

From there the sulfides and the oxides which wouldn't be picked up on the plate would go into what they called flotation cells. The first cell was filled with water and a paddle that was moving all the time, and there was a drip of what we called pine oil that went into that. The pine oil and the water created a very large number of bubbles, very strong, tough bubbles.

From that one "tub" (I called it), into the second one, and into the third where the pine oil bubbles would bring the sulfides and oxides to the surface. And there was sort of a reel, something like a binder reel, that would keep moving and would just take off these bubbles, put them into a trough, and they ran down into a box where they had a chance to dry. What was left over just went down into what we call a slush pit.

Well, that's the general layout. We got the materials, we bought the ball mill and the two crushers, and the mining engineer made the three flotation cells and built up the structure to carry out the plan as I have explained it. They got it all going in fine shape and we operated I guess maybe three or four weeks. Each weekend I took little cones (I called them) of gold mixed with a little silver down to Los Angeles, put them into a stout sack, and shipped them to the mint in San Francisco.

I didn't mention the fact in trying to recover the gold and the silver from the quicksilver, we had a little retort set up. You mix that amalgam with the gold and silver in it with what they called the flux, which was sand, and you put it into a clay retort, heat the whole thing to melting, and then pour it into forms that made little conical batches of gold. The flux, which was sand, would rise to the surface, was then knocked off, and then you recover the little cones. The quicksilver condensed into a bucket of water.

So we had it all working in pretty fair shape. And we had I think three miners who were working in the mine. Their operation was to drill with these stopers, which are simply like a jack hammer with a long shaft. They had to push them up instead of pushing down, and this was above the tunnel. They'd drill a certain number of holes every day. And then before they quit on the twelve hour shift they would load each hole with dynamite and a wire fastened to a central area where just before they left they would push this button and all of the dynamite would explode and break the ore loose above the tunnel. Then in the next shift they would bring the ore out of the area above the tunnel, load it into the car, and as I said, dump it into the long shaft that brought it down to the crushing area. So we had it working in pretty fair shape.

After about 30 days I discovered we were not getting all of the gold out. The main problem was the flotation cells which had

been constructed by this mining engineer. To prove it we had to take samples, probe samples of the dry material that had gone through, and we found that we were losing about 25 percent of our gold because the flotation cells weren't working. So I confronted the mining engineer with that, and he just threw up his hands and Said, "Well, I want to get out of this. I'll sell my shares to you for $200." I saw prospects pretty good so I paid him the $200. So I then had 400 shares, and as a result of that they elected me president of what they called the Desert Gold Mining Company.

We did some more checking, ran the mill a little more, and did what we could to try to straighten things out. Then we discovered the ball mill didn't have a liner and with those balls going around, and round, and round, and crushing up the ore that was in the ball mill, it just gradually was wearing out the outside hull of the ball mill, and it wasn't going to last very long. Which simply meant the mining engineer didn't buy a ball mill with a liner, which would have saved it quite a little bit and probably would have done pretty well all the way around. So we couldn't use the ball mill any more. And of course with the flotation cells not working properly we weren't able to continue the operation there. So it was a matter of getting enough money together to build a new mill, and one that would really work.

At that time, to take the place of this mining engineer, I knew a lady I had met some time before. She was a spinster by the name of Annie L. Alexander and was connected with the Alexander Steam Ship Line. She collected samples of flowers and animals for the University of California at Berkeley, and she and a companion would go out and sometimes be gone two or three weeks. But anyway, I had occasion to talk with her and she said, "Oh, sure, I'll put in $2,000." So we had that money. But then what to do about the whole thing.

At that time, you know, there was the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which was set up for just that sort of thing. So we invited them to give us consideration. And they said, "Well, first we have to have an engineer's report as to how much ore you have, how high a grade it is, and what is really needed." So we got an engineering report, which was quite favorable. We brought that to the attention of Reconstruction Finance and after just a few days they called and said, "Well, that looks like a pretty good deal. We're prepared to lend you $50,000 for a new mill and somewhere between $75-$100,000 to block out some of your best ore so that you have something to work with. We'll have the papers ready for you in just a very few days." So they brought the papers over and we were ready to sign.

But I noticed there was one place where it said the owner of the land on which the mine claim was situated also had to sign these papers. So we went over to Jess Knight who was the owner of

the land, told him the story, and we thought it would be more or less routine. But Jess reared up and said, "Oh, I wouldn't sign anything with the federal government. They're a bunch of crooks. I've had all I can stand with the federal government so don't expect me to sign." Well, we did everything we could to get him top sign. He had a son who later on became the governor of the state of California. We went to him and he said, "Well, I can't influence my father. He has his head set against the federal government."

So, by golly, the whole thing had to be thrown into the ash can and we had no other area or place where we could raise that much money to get ourselves started. We just went ahead and sold everything we had, the ball mill and the motors and all of the equipment, and cleaned it all up. But we left the chute and the track and so forth.

I found a miner by the name of Olson who said he would go in with a couple of other miners. They would mine the ore, bring it down to the bottom, load it into trucks, and take it over to a cyanide mill at Rosemond, which is about 25 miles from there. And he said, "I'll keep records and see that you get your proper proportion of the income." Well, that looked like something of a way to recover some of our funds, and we went ahead with that.

Very shortly afterward I was called from Los Angeles to Sacramento as you know from other stories. But Olson kept sending me the money every month and in the end we got back about 68 percent of the money we put in plus what we got from the sale of our equipment on the lot.

It was unfortunate we couldn't get the old man to sign because it was really pretty rich over below the tunnel, below the track. And we could have stoped out a good deal of that and probably made some pretty good money.

Just shortly thereafter, a couple of young fellows from I believe it was from Princeton, on just the other side of the mountain discovered a vein with ore that ran $40-$45 a ton, and they sold it to a South African mining operation for I think it was two million dollars.

So you see how these things can happen and sometimes you win and sometimes you don't win. Anyway, that was my gold mining adventure. I thank you very much.