

Tombstone: First Descent

*by Dave Thorpe
photos by Rory Gibson
and Roger Becksted*



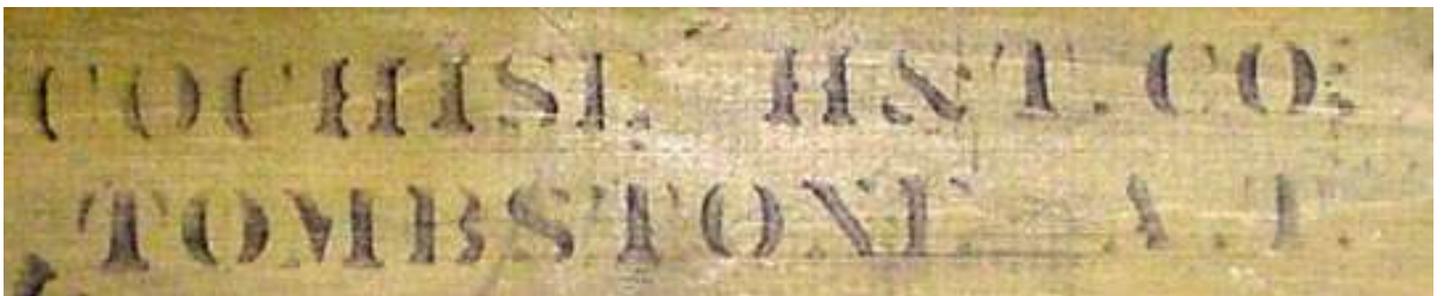
You are very much alone. You are living in a part of your psyche that believes it is a nine year old walking through the woods after dark. Decades of experience cannot subdue the apprehension of descent into a new shaft. Six thousand pound test rope seems like clothesline, your bombproof rigging looks to unravel, and the clean rock wall now threatens to crumble in on top of you. That is how it feels in an unknown mine shaft, and anyone who tells you different is a liar or a fool.

Roger Becksted had been exploring the mines around Tombstone, Arizona over the past year. Some real interest was aroused when he began to discover some early artifacts. The first Copper Queen fuse wrapper was found as well as a dynamite box with Tombstone stamping.

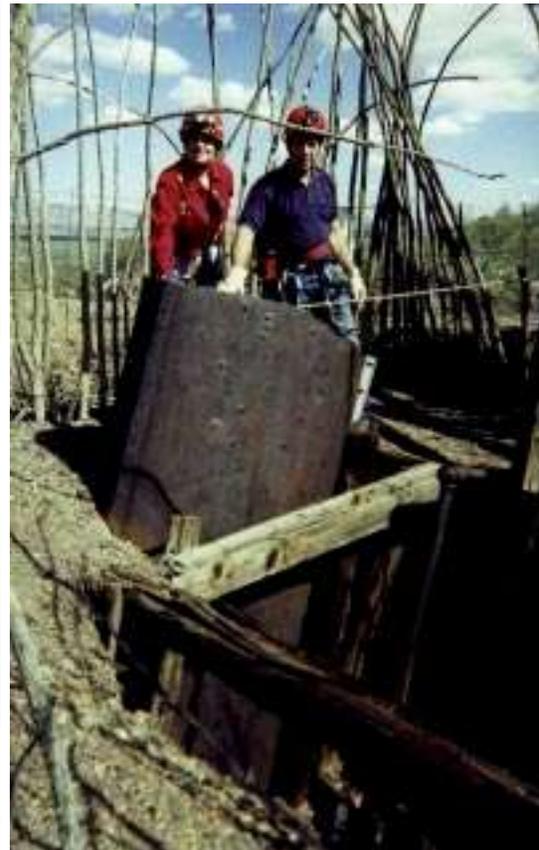
Roger is a very private gentleman, a self-made engineer from Tucson. He had no prior rope training and realized that further finds would require shaft work. I suggested that we put a team together for just such an expedition. Roger outfitted himself with a brake bar rack and rope-walker ascending system, and we enlisted the help of Dave and Linda Derrick (vet-

eran shaft droppers from Wisconsin), as well as Rory Gibson and Larry Kuester of southern California for top work. A date was made for October 19th, and we set out for two large workings: The Emerald Mine and The Prompter Mine.

We had scoped these out from the surface a month beforehand. Both had headframes still standing, as well as deep haulage shafts.



Above: A portion of a dynamite box is photographed in a Tombstone area mine. The abbreviations stand for Cochise Hardware & Trading Co., Tombstone Arizona Territory.

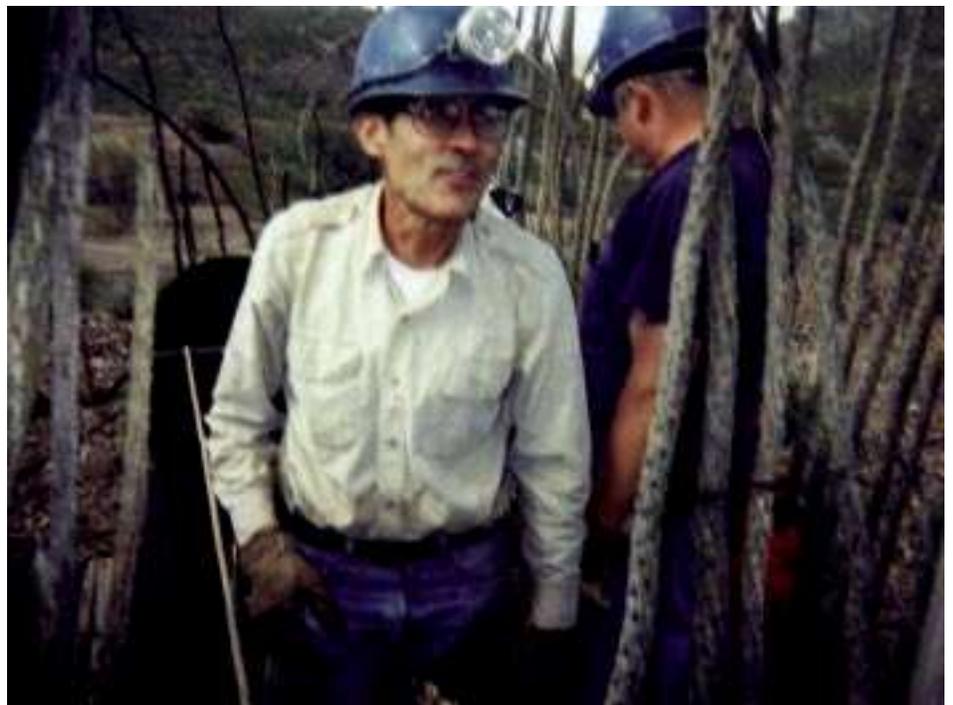


The Emerald Mine, with Dave and Linda Derrick beside the steel tube manway.

The Emerald was our first mine, and also marked our campsite. The simple metal headframe sits over a very steep incline haulage shaft. Old maps show the mine reaching a 500 foot depth. Immediately next to the shaft was a vertical manway. This was an large riveted steel tube that dropped 20

feet to a flat station. There was no ladder in the tube, so we brought down an extension ladder to span this first distance.

Once off our ladder the manway continued as a rickety wooden ladder that went another 200 feet through a rock shaft. It ended on a large landing where it now joined back with the inclined haulage shaft. Using our more powerful lights we lit the depths of this pit. It continued for another sickening 300 feet! Although clear of obstruction, many timbers and debris clung precariously to its sloped surface. Not one of us volunteered to drop it. At our landing point there was a large stoped area with another horizontal tunnel that collapsed after a few hundred feet. Everything was devoid of artifacts. Another day may send us down the remaining haulage incline, but we were anxious to see what was in store on the next ridge.





Here was the Prompter whose headframe (left) sat over a semi-clogged shaft. Through the debris, one could see the beginning of a ladder some 50 feet down. A nearby adit let us walk directly into the mountainside. This area had been recently remined and was open in various places to the sky.

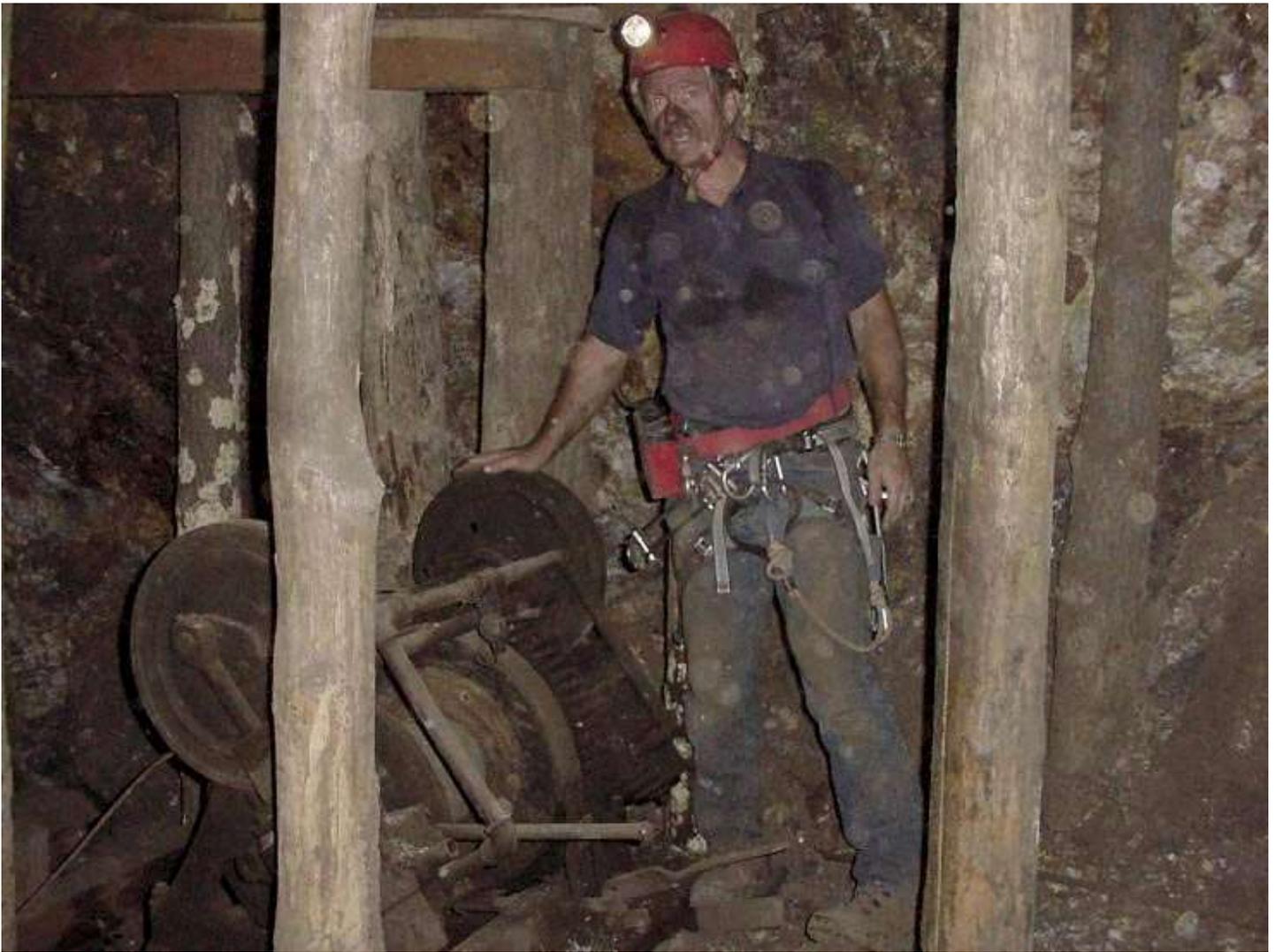
Not too far in we encountered a shaft. Several logs and flat boards lay across the top as a makeshift bridge. Beneath lay 70 feet of vertical shaft that appeared to transition into an incline at a further depth.

Below: Roger rigs into his rappel for the inside shaft of the Prompter Mine. The ladder only spanned the first six feet of the shaft.

This would be our rappel point, but the best rigging point required crossing the bridge. I did this with some trepidation on hands and knees, while Roger skipped right across with little concern. Dave Derrick stopped midway and did a short Irish jig on a round log as Linda scolded him.



Dave Thorpe gingerly crosses the wooden bridge in the Prompter Mine.



Dave Derrick examines a steam hoist at a junction room in the Prompter Mine.

After the first 70 feet of vertical rappel, there was another 50 feet of steep incline rappel, and then another 100 feet of downclimbing. We now entered a junction room where several tunnels met. There were two stories here with both round and square timbering. It was here that we encountered the first artifacts. A small steam hoist (above) still had steel cable on its drum. There were three partial ore cars, one with a very cool round bottomed box, all riveted construction. One ore truck as found with only two wheels, but both were spiral spoked. General litter was piled on the floor comprising tins, cans, and boxes. One tunnel led to the haulage shaft that we had looked into from above. It continued down to some sickly level, and above various short sections of wooden ladder clung loosely to the walls. Back in the junction room, all of the tunnels were caved after several yards. We spied a nice ladder though leading yet deeper. Dave and Roger traveled down this route, and by their account they scaled twelve separate ladders for a total of 170 feet! They then encountered massive horizontal passage with major air blowing. Each explorer took a separate arm for at least a thousand feet before they returned to meet each other. Neither had reached a dead end. It was getting late, and the top party was anxiously waiting, and so we decided to exit. This will of course be the beginning of our next trip, as Roger believes that this level is heading for a completely different mine system, and air was still blowing strong.



Our tired crew back at the Emerald base camp. Left to right: Dave Derrick, Linda Derrick, Dave Thorpe, Larry Kuester, and Rory Gibson.



Finally, an interesting artifact found in another Arizona mine. More on this one later!