

# OATMAN ESCAPADES

Hunting for gold in a zany town populated by burros and other characters

I must've said something that got under Uncle Charlie Hicks' saddle blanket. He looked me up and down, snapped his suspenders and said, "Is there still gold around here? Pardner, it's *everywhere*. I can take you out in the street right now and pan some."

I wasn't trying to be ornery, but how could I let that pass? The street was old Route 66, which also serves as the main thoroughfare through tiny Oatman, 28 miles southwest of Kingman.

"It's paved, Charlie," I pointed out. "How're you gonna pan for gold on pavement?"

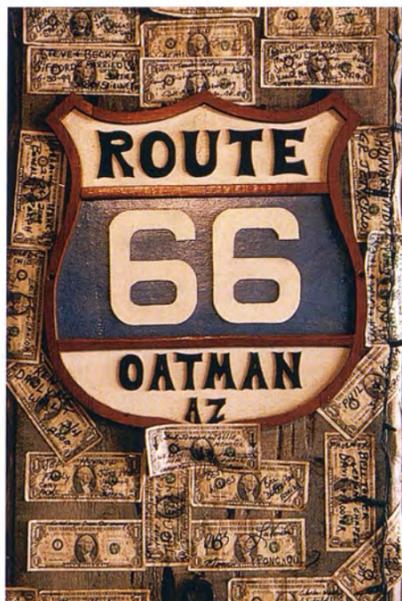
He gave his suspenders another good thwacking. "Are you comin' or ain't ya?"

Next thing I knew, I was standing by the side of 66 with a crowd of winter visitors and three burros watching Charlie dig into a hole in the pavement the size of a coffee cup. He was using a dinner fork.

Before I report on the results of this miniature gold rush, I should say that none of the locals found our activities unusual. Oatman makes its reputation by being, shall we say, a little off-center, a witness-protection kind of town.

"It's trippy here," said bartender Melanie Jones. "We've got a lot of characters. But not many last names."

Mostly, it's nicknames — Long Tom, Stitches, Chipmunk, Squirrel and One-Legged Dave. Do you think a fellow who answers to Toothless Smokey is going to



[ABOVE] Continuing a tradition of more than 70 years, visitors' dollars are added daily to the collection at the Oatman Hotel.

[OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE] Parallel parking can still be accomplished without holding up traffic. [OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW] Completely acclimated to their surroundings, the burros eliminate the middleman by helping themselves to carrots sold to tourists to hand-feed the furry natives.

pay attention to two alleged grownups hunting for color outside a gift shop called Fast Fanny's Place?

Nah, it hardly boosted an eyebrow. The

fact that a settlement exists here at all was pure accident.

It happened in May of 1900 when Jose Jerez camped for the night in a gulch 2 and a-half miles east. He was prospecting on a \$16 grubstake from Henry Lovin of Kingman.

In the morning, as he sipped coffee, Jerez saw that his burros had wandered onto a high ridge, and he set out after them on foot, cussing the entire breed as he hiked.

A little way up the slope, he stumbled and fell belly-down onto one of the richest gold veins in Arizona. Jerez chipped out his hotspots and hauled them back to Kingman, where an assayer told him he'd never have to work again.

Four towns totaling 20,000 people eventually grew from the bonanza, which lasted from 1906 to 1931 and produced 1.8 million ounces of gold. Oatman, the biggest of the four, had three banks, four hotels and two theaters.

The boom, as always, went bust, and by 1942 the last mine had closed.

But Oatman hung on, today a hiccup of a settlement clinging to a gulch in the heart of the forbidding Black Mountains. It has no particular reason to exist, except that tourists love to walk its plank sidewalks, watch daily gunfight re-enactments, eat buffalo burgers at the Oatman Hotel Restaurant and explore the gift and curio shops.

I'd been in town a few days when I figured out another reason Oatman is still



Text by LEO W. BANKS Photographs by EDWARD MCCAIN

kicking. The folks who live there—all 100 of them, and that might be a stretch—speak of it in heartfelt terms, as if the old way of life had leached into its very soil.

Oatman is a friendly place where neighbors know each other and look after one another. If someone is having trouble finding a household item, such as a heater, one will be hunted up, often using the barter system. An open-invite town barbecue is held every spring and fall, and with no policeman within a half-hour's drive, residents tend to their own troubles, which aren't too many.

"We got a lot of good, common people here," said Glenn Rimmer, a retired Missouri cop. "And I love these rugged old mountains and these jackasses walking around."

Hold on, he's not talking about tourists. He means the burros.

Along with gold fever, they're part of what remains from Oatman's glory days. When the miners up and left, they turned their four-legged butlers loose, and the animals' descendants are still hoofing around.

Bossy, smelly, inquisitive, cute and hungry, the burros are Oatman's signature attraction—what Wyatt Earp is to Tombstone, only fuzzier.

Every morning they wait in the hills above town for the tourists to show up. At the first sign of a bald guy in Bermuda shorts and black socks, down they come, eight adults and six babies, clopping along.

Each has a distinct personality and habits the residents have come to know well.

Buck, the only male, waits for the females to come to town first, then stands at the bottom of the hill, throws up his head and brays like crazy.

Jackie Rowland, owner of Fast Fanny's Place and a member of the Goldiggers, women who dress in Western outfits to entertain tourists, said, "He wants the ladies to know he's here." Then she elbowed me and added, "You know how men are."

Sarabell shakes hands, and if you hold out a carrot, she'll tap on the ground with her hoof. Everybody agreed that Strawberry is a genuine sweetie-pie, but the same can't be said for Agua.

Robin Ledbetter, formerly a sales clerk at the White Buffalo Trading Post, said Agua's been known to stroll into stores and eat dolls. She's been trouble since birth. "When she was a baby, she fell into a mine shaft, and it took six hours and a backhoe to get her out," recalled Ledbetter.

Everyone in Oatman has a burro story, usually involving their ingenuity at working



[TOP] Actor Robert Casper personifies an old-time cowboy and miner.  
[ABOVE] Forever optimistic, Uncle Charlie Hicks pans for gold on Route 66, Main Street in Oatman.

tourists for food. It's not unusual to see one of them clomp onto the sidewalk, nose the lid off a barrel of alfalfa or carrots and commence to eat.

A burro named Snowball had a habit of sneaking up behind women tourists carrying sacks of food and sticking her head between their knees, eliciting screams and causing the food to go flying.

By the time it landed, the women were running away—feet don't fail me now—and Snowball was calmly eating lunch. But the Bureau of Land Management decided Snowball's hobby was a little too rambunctious and found her a new home.

Living in a town with wild animals rarely proves boring. Postmaster Ed Williams showed up for work one day and found that a mother burro had given birth in back of the post office. The animals often go behind buildings to escape the tourists.

Watching the newborn get its legs gave Williams something to look at out his window as he worked. "That kind of thing

makes rural Arizona worth living in," he said. History with a heartbeat. And a tail.

I took some time to look around and found other neat reminders of the past.

At the Oatman Hotel, one of the oldest two-story adobe buildings in Mohave County, dollar bills decorate the walls and ceilings of the restaurant and saloon. Proprietor Dennis Dusbabek said they total around \$7,500, and figures the tradition started sometime in the 1930s. When a miner came in, he tacked a dollar with his name written on it to the wall, and at five cents a drink that kept him in beer for the week.

Just down the street stands the Glory Hole, a combination museum and antique store. The 1915 two-story building housed the town drugstore and appears in the motion picture *How the West Was Won*, portions of which were filmed in Oatman during the early 1960s.

Proprietor Willa Lucas decorated the second floor like a miner's cabin, circa 1930, complete with a tin stove, hand-crank washing machine, buggy foot-warmer and a "thunder mug," which was kept under the bed to avoid midnight trips to the privy.

I also enjoyed visiting the Oatman Jail and Museum. Built in 1919, it consists of three tiny rooms—a sheriff's office in the center, holding pens on each side—and the original strap-steel door guarding the entrance.

The museum's artifacts include the cash register from the long-gone Arizona Hotel and a photograph of miners standing behind three-quarters of a million dollars in gold bricks ready for shipment.

For an authentic taste of mining life, I drove back toward Kingman 2.5 miles to the Gold Road Mine. With the price of gold sagging, the owners suspended operations in 1998 and authorized Larry Gier, the general manager, to give tours.

He leads visitors a quarter-mile into the darkness of the main drift, explaining mining techniques and pointing out the gold vein that Jose Jerez fell onto.

At an area known as "three shafts," Gier said, "When we get here, I tell tourists they're standing over a 1,400-foot shaft on 100-year-old timber. It gives them a warm and fuzzy feeling."

The mine has been the site of two weddings held in the same spot, 275 feet directly beneath Route 66. As Gier's wife, W.T., said, the marriages have nowhere to go but up.

The first Gold Road bride was Robin Ledbetter. "It was August 31, 1999," she



said in sweet remembrance of the event.

"Shaft number three," added her husband, Jerry, almost smiling.

From April through October, the Gold Road also offers rides in a four-horse stagecoach that rumbles down a rocky trail behind the mine, often with Gier riding shotgun and providing commentary.

Back in Oatman, I finally met Toothless Smokey, an actor with the Ghostriders, a local Wild West group.

I wanted to know how he got the nickname Smokey, and when I saw him puffing on a cigarette, I thought I knew.

"Oh, no," said 49-year-old Robert Casper. "It's on account of when I play in these here

gunfight shows, I keep getting set on fire and blown up."

I had to ask. It got worse when he showed me a wound on his chest. During a show in Laughlin, Nevada, another actor got too close while holding a shotgun filled with wadding and let poor old Smokey have it.

"My, gosh," I said, eyeing the terrible scar. "Did they take you to the hospital?"

"No," he deadpanned, "the bar."

But don't think gold is part of the make-believe of Oatman. It isn't. It's absolutely real. "Old-timers tell me they never even scratched the surface of the gold that's here," said Jim Ettinger, manager of the jail and museum.

Preacher, bartender and silversmith Uncle Charlie Hicks believes that absolutely. And at age 69, he still has enough air in his shocks to accept my tinhorn's challenge to prove it.

After scratching at the hole in Route 66, he dumped half a cup's worth of black soil into his gold pan. With a little water added, he shook out the heaviest pieces and eyeballed what remained. A hullabaloo grew as strangers peered over his shoulder, hoping to glimpse the metal that made Oatman.

But the pan was empty. Charlie grunted, then began the whole process again. Some of the kibitzers drifted away, shaking their

[ABOVE] At the Gold Road Mine, visitors can relish the past while touring the main passageway or plan for the future and pick out a wedding spot.

heads at the failure of his foolish errand.

Not so fast. A moment later, after shaking and kneading his mixture again, and angling his pan just so to catch the light, he shouted a word that has sent a thrill through these mountains for a century.

"Gold!"

The naysayers spun on their heels and hurried back. Believers now, the crowd hummed in contentment, and a few even patted Charlie on the back. "That sure does make me feel good," he said.

He was grinning so wide I was afraid his ears might work loose as we peered at the sliver of glorious yellow metal sparkling in the sunshine. But the magic of Oatman is not in finding gold in the streets. It's in finding the local characters who do. **AH**

*Tucson-based Leo W. Banks was so taken with Oatman that he didn't mind sharing the sidewalks with fat, stinky creatures who are always eating. He didn't mind the burros either. He also wrote the preceding story.*

*Edward McCain of Tucson got a "kick" out of this part of Route 66—in more ways than one. While photographing the burros along Main Street, he was kicked by one of his subjects, but escaped with only his pride having sustained injury.*



**LOCATION:** 210 miles northwest of Phoenix.

**GETTING THERE:** Drive northwest from Phoenix on U.S. Route 60, which becomes U.S. Route 93, to Interstate

40, then head west to Kingman, where you pick up Route 66 heading southwest.

**PHONE NUMBERS:** All are area code 928.

**ATTRACTIONS:** The Gold Road Mine, 768-1600; Fast Fanny's Place, 768-7400; Glory Hole, 768-5513; Oatman Jail and Museum, no phone.

**LODGING:** Oatman Hotel, 181 Main St., 768-4408.

**TRAVEL ADVISORY:** Paved, two-lane Route 66 winds through mountains from Kingman to Oatman, and hairpin turns require concentration.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** Oatman Chamber of Commerce, 768-6222.