



Readers Write

The Magnet and the Burro

by Daniel J. Demers



A faithful and loyal donkey

Mike Lane was described as an “interesting old Irishman . . . [with an] Irish wit.” He was a miner by occupation and in 1902 was known “in every mining camp from Virginia City to the Mexican Line,” according to the *Arizona Republican*.¹ At first blush the story he related seems rather far-fetched but further research suggests there may be some truth to his unlikely tale.

Lane claimed that he was prospecting in Death Valley about five miles from Ballarat, California. Death Valley is the hottest place on earth having experienced the world’s highest temperature of 134° F.² Today Ballarat is a ghost town but during its heyday (1897-1905) it boasted a population of between 400 and 500 inhabitants. A typical Western mining boomtown, it included seven saloons, three hotels, a stagecoach station, post office, school, jail and a morgue—“but no churches.”³ The town developed around a natural waterhole and served as a supply point for the mines in the area as well as a place for local miners to relax.

According to Lane, while out prospecting he ran across a “dyke” of lodestone. A geological dyke is a formation of younger rock between layers of older rock. Lodestone is a rare variation of magnetite—a natural form of magnet.⁴ Lane was examining the geologic feature when he noticed that his burro stepped onto a “bare spot on the dyke, and as [the burro] had [horse] shoes on he stuck there.” He tried to pull the burro off, but “it was no use,” he related. As Lane struggled in the heat to pull the animal off the dyke, the nails in his own boots “were pulled out” as he tried to budge the burro.

He returned to his camp and collected some drills, a hammer and a little gunpowder with a fuse. He intended to drill a hole and “put a lifter under him” in order to break the bond [i.e. detonate an explosion] between the magnet and the burro’s hoofs. A frustrated and befuddled Lane said “both the hammer and drill [bits] stuck to the [magnetic] magnetite and I couldn’t get them off.”

Lane was forced to abandon the poor pack animal. When he

returned two years later he found his burro’s “skeleton still standing up, stuck to the dyke.”

The same day that Lane’s story appeared in the *Arizona Republican* another bizarre story was reported. The previous night in Tombstone, a lightning bolt struck a mine smokestack. The lightning “followed it down to the guidewires when it jumped off, one ball of fire going down the shaft. . . the lightning then followed the [ore cart] rails. . . several of the miners [inside the mine]. . . experienced sever shocks” with one “partially burned.”

Mother Nature has a strange sense of humor—
at least when reported by journalists.

Sources

Articles

A Miner’s Story, *Arizona Republican*, September 20, 1902, page 3
[http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020558/1902-09-20/ed-1/seq-](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020558/1902-09-20/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=1836&index=4&rows=20&words=desert+terrapi&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1922&proxtext=Desert+Terrapins&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1)

[3/#date1=1836&index=4&rows=20&words=desert+terrapi&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1922&proxtext=Desert+Terrapins&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020558/1902-09-20/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=1836&index=4&rows=20&words=desert+terrapi&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1922&proxtext=Desert+Terrapins&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1)

Underground Fireworks, *Arizona Republican*, September 20, 1902, page 3

[http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020558/1902-09-20/ed-1/seq-](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020558/1902-09-20/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=1836&index=4&rows=20&words=desert+terrapi&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1922&proxtext=Desert+Terrapins&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1)

[3/#date1=1836&index=4&rows=20&words=desert+terrapi&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1922&proxtext=Desert+Terrapins&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020558/1902-09-20/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=1836&index=4&rows=20&words=desert+terrapi&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1922&proxtext=Desert+Terrapins&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1)

Magnetite and Lodestone, *Geology.com*, undated,
<http://geology.com/minerals/magnetite.shtml>

Websites

Ballarat, California, Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballarat,_California

Death Valley, Wikipedia

<https://www.google.com/#q=What+county+is+Death+Valley+in>

Lodestone, Wikipedia

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lodestone>

¹ A Miner’s Story, *Arizona Republican*, September 20, 1902, page 3

² Death Valley, Wikipedia

³ Ballarat, California, Wikipedia

⁴ Magnetite and Lodestone, *Geology.com*, undated; Lodestone, Wikipedia

Copyright © 2016 by Daniel J. Demers All Rights Reserved

Dan Demers’ recent book *OLD WINE AND FOOD STORIES* is now available through Amazon.com. The book contains ninety historically accurate vignettes about interesting and humorous events and personalities printed in American newspapers between 1779 and 1922.