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Looking for Tom Mix Along a Road Paved With Promises of Gold

by Lee Gutkind

When I asked the man at the gas station to direct me to the Paradise Gulch Saloon, he slid out from under the car he was working on, glanced at my motorcycle resting beside the old-fashioned glass-domed American Oil pump, and got to his feet.

"When?" he said.

I hesitated, looked the man up and down. He was in his mid-fifties, short, with an overstuffed basket for a stomach and gray bib overalls stained with grease. I didn't know whether he was being serious or trying to give me trouble. Sometimes, when you ride a motorcycle, people get the wrong idea about you.

"Now," I finally said.

"Well, it isn't there now," he said.

"It isn't *where* now?" I persisted.

"It isn't where it was when it was last here," he said.

I sighed, turned away and looked down the hill into the tired old town of Dubois, Pennsylvania, in the northwest corner of Clearfield County. Across the street and up the block from where we stood was the Flaming Earth Cafe, and although a beer would have tasted good right about then, I was holding out for the Paradise Gulch.

It had been a difficult day, the morning rainy and cold, and now the afternoon was thick with heat. Earlier, the truck winding down the narrow mountain road from Boot Jack had roared past, splattering me with mud. It had slowed down to go up the next hill, but when it came down the hill after that, I was splattered again.

I explained that I had heard about a Tom Mix festival taking place in Dubois each year to celebrate the cowboy's birthday. "I thought that the Paradise Gulch was where Tom Mix fans hang out."

Mix, incidentally, was one of the first white-hatted heroes of movie westerns, having moonlighted his first of nearly four hundred films in 1910 while working as a deputy

marshal in Dewey, Oklahoma. He distinguished himself from his cowboy competitors by refusing to ever kiss a girl on film. "Rather kiss a horse," he always said.

Supposedly, the festival featured showings of Mix films, displays of Mix memorabilia, panel discussions about Tom Mix, and Mix souvenirs. The year before nearly seven thousand people attended the Tom Mix festival in Dubois, including a couple from West Germany.

"That's right," the man in the gasoline station said, "but the festival ain't until September."

"I know, but I just want to see the place."

"But it ain't real," he said. "It only exists during festival time." He chuckled and shook his head. "If we had a place like the Paradise Gulch year round, there would be nothin' left of Dubois."

The man explained that each autumn the town fathers erected the Paradise Gulch in a different spot, but that the patrons got so drunk paying homage to Mix that they'd tear the place apart long before the festival was over. The Paradise Gulch was so authentic and true to the image of the Old West, of which Mix was an integral albeit symbolic part, that some of the patrons even wore guns.

"The Paradise Gulch is a good place to go," he continued, patting his side where his six-shooter might have been and wiping his greasy hands on his knees, "if you got a grudge against somebody who's going to be there at the same time."

I thanked the man, washed up a bit, squeezed on my helmet, and headed north through Tyler, Weedville, and Caledonia toward Mix Run in Cameron County, about an hour's drive away, where Tom's grandfather had settled one hundred fifty years ago, and where the King of the Celluloid Cowboys was subsequently born. He moved to Dubois as a teenager, where he worked with his brother and sister as a stablehand.

Along the way, I would pass the ghost towns of Coalville, Glen Fisher, and Wilmer, as well as the site on which Bill Smith's Rattlesnake Zoo once stood, before old Bill caught a wet bite from a member of his friendly family of serpents and died on the spot.

This is a lovely, soothing stretch of country, with rolling meadows, fresh white church steeples, log cabins low to the ground, hills cushioned with trees, houses of natural stone. I wound my motorcycle out through all five gears. It whispered in the wind as I soared up the blacktop.

Actually, Mix never really needed to go to Hollywood to strike paydirt. According to stories and legends there is a motherlode of treasure buried near Mix Run, beginning with \$1.5 million in silver, stashed a century and a half ago by a salvage expert named Captain Blackbeard, who had raised a Spanish galleon near the port of Baltimore. While attempting to sneak the silver overland through Pennsylvania and into Canada, Blackbeard panicked, buried his treasure near the village of Gardeau in McKean County, about a day's ride from Mix Run, and fled. He was killed on a boat to England soon afterward, and the location of his treasure died with him.

At about the same time Blackbeard was hiding his silver, a man, sick and delirious, wandered into the tiny town of Hazel Hurst in McKean County and confessed to robbing a bank in nearby Emporium, making off with \$60,000.

He claimed to have stuffed the money in glass jars and buried them under a large flat rock within sight of Kinsua Bridge. To this day, the rock under which the money was allegedly concealed has not been found.

But the biggest all-time payload, today worth more than \$7 million, was brought into Penn's Woods West by Lieutenant Castleton of the Union Army, assigned to transport twenty-six fifty-pound bars of gold, concealed with black paint, from Wheeling, West Virginia, to Philadelphia, and to avoid detection by the Confederate Cavalry.

Castleton took the extra precaution of hiding the gold under a specially designed false bottom in his wagon, and selecting a roundabout northern route from Pittsburgh through Clarion and Ridgeway. He arrived in St. Mary's,

Elk County, in June 1863, the last time in which he and his men (with one exception) were ever seen alive.

Two months later, Sergeant John Conners wandered into Lock Haven, Pennsylvania and told a fantastic story of how the entire caravan was ambushed by highwaymen who stole the wagons. Without food or ammunition, Conners had managed to save himself only by drinking swamp water and crawling night and day through the snake-infested wilderness.

Since then, the army has conducted dozens of fruitless searches and investigations, most recently in 1941 when the Pinkerton detective agency uncovered one-half of a black-painted gold bar between Driftwood and Dent's Run. This is not much of a payload, considering all the trouble the army has gone through over the years, but it is more of a reward than I received when I rounded the last bend a few miles past Driftwood and chugged up the long hill to the site on which the town of Mix Run once stood.

All that is remaining of Tom Mix's ancestral home and the community surrounding it is a plaque, standing silent and erect like a wooden soldier on the shoulder of the lonely road:

Tom Mix cowboy star of silent motion pictures was born a short distance from here. He served as a soldier in the Spanish American War, later becoming renowned for his wild west roles in cinema and circus. Mix died in an auto accident in Arizona on October 12, 1940.

The terrain flattens somewhat as you travel northeast into the heartland of Pennsylvania, hooking up with Route 120, the Bucktail Highway, a winding rope of new asphalt, tall trees, crystal blue skies, edged with jagged mountain ridges.

I stopped for a drink at Whitcomb's Country Store, a red and white shingled structure with log facing and rows of elk antlers in the windows. Inside, along with the packaged goods, homemade sausage and pickles, the fishing tackle and postcards, a life-sized wooden Indian lounges in a swivel

chair. On the wall, there's a photo of a deer under a quilt in a four-poster bed and another photo of an old man French-kissing a buck elk.

As I continued northeast, there were freshly painted houses, many of them red, valleys scooped out of burly hills, silver silos gleaming like rockets, coal tipples, raw wood barns hunching in fields of grain, glazed golden with sun. There were ferns wafting up over the shoulder of the road, huckleberry bushes, blankets of ivy. The pungent aroma of pine filtered through the heat.

Every time I ride through this part of the country, I am simultaneously invigorated and enchanted. The sights I see and the solace I experience remain with me long after I return home. This isn't gold or silver or the glory of Tom Mix, but it's treasure enough.

“Back road journeys do not end any more than a book ends because it has been read or a symphony because it has been heard or a painting because it has been seen,” writes Ed Peterson. “In highway driving the trip is ended when

the destination has been reached, but in backroad driving the trip lives on for many years, growing both in pleasure and in significance, for backroad driving is a belief in the abiding pleasure of blue sky and clouds, of a sparrow's song at night, of a stone house with a story to tell, of an old woman in a country store, a little girl who talked to a turtle, trillium in the spring and sumac in the fall, the taste of huckleberries, the smell of autumn apples, and the exhilaration of being lost and found again on an earth that, to those who live in it, is always familiar.”

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

The Tom Mix Museum in Dewey, Oklahoma is five miles north of Bartlesville on U.S. 75. Located on 721 North Delaware Street, it is a one room museum depicting the life of the silent screen cowboy who in real life was once town marshal. For more information call (918) 534-1555. Another Tom Mix point of interest is the Blue Belle Saloon and Restaurant in historic Guthrie, where he worked for a time as a bartender.



ILLUSTRATION BY BRENT JOHNSON