

Short Story 1

Three Washtubs of Ore

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Whenever the old timers gather in mining camps throughout the West, whether their purpose is to soak up warmth on the sunny side of the street or wet their whistles in some Whiskey Row saloon, the subjects of their tales are likely to be women, miners and high grade ores—in that order.

Gleeson in Arizona's Cochise County doesn't boast a saloon today and is home for only a handful of denizens, none of whom can be considered old timers. However, were a bunch of the ghosts of the miners who labored in the rich pits of the Turquoise District to return for a reunion, yarns would be spun about the diggings of the Spaniards who grubbed "plata" from narrow trenches in the red mountain way back in the days of Coronado and Cortez; of the Tiffany Mine that supplied turquoise for jewelry to the great Eastern firm; of Yee Wee, the friendly Chinaman who lived so long in the all-but-deserted camp and of Jim Giacoma and his washtubs of fabulously rich silver ore.

There's nothing of factual nature known of the silver production that resulted from the efforts of the Spanish explorers in the Turquoise District back in the 1500's. Tiffany and Company—like so many mining firms—disclosed little or nothing about the results of their mining activities. Yee Wee, colorful character that he was, was a gardener, not a miner and as such he is mainly remembered for his acts of generosity and the excellence of the vegetables he supplied to the kitchens of Gleeson Camp. But Jim Giacoma is a horse of a different color—mine owner-operator, leaser, all around miner, trucker and prominent Tombstoner. He is also remembered for the fabulous three washtubs of ore he dug from the Defiance Mine at Gleeson and sold for a small fortune.

Jim's career in mining had its beginnings in Mexico when as a lad of 19 he emigrated from his native Italy. Arriving in Cananea, Sonora, Mexico in 1907 under sponsorship of an older brother John, who was employed in that copper camp as a mine foreman, the young man finished his formal schooling in Cananea and received his initiation into the mining trade there. Before long Jim and his older brothers, John and Tony, forsook Mexico for Arizona, settling in Tombstone where Jim found work in a mine as a timberman at \$3.00 per day.

As the years passed the Giacoma brothers found their

niches in their adopted home. All of them were engaged in various business enterprises, married, had started families and were accepted as community leaders. They also remained miners—usually leasing some portions of the great old silver-gold mines in the Tombstone District and recovering pockets of high grade ores that the early-day operators had passed up in their rush to gain big production from the virgin veins and rolls.

Jim married into the pioneer Cochise County Costello family who owned most of the patented mines in the Turquoise District at Gleeson, some 15 miles east of Tombstone. The summer of 1940 found him mining zinc at one of the Costello properties, the Defiance Mine, which is high up on the hog back that overlooks Gleeson. The Defiance ores were complex, usually containing a little gold, some copper, quite a bit of silver and often considerable lead and zinc. Giacoma had a small but stable crew of miners—men with whom he had worked for years and who functioned together like a well-oiled machine. Tom Molina, Martin Troglia and Manuel Ballesterero were the regulars. Others were hired or laid off as the need arose.

Things were going smoothly at the Defiance and one morning in the Spring of 1940 Jim stayed in Tombstone to take care of a business matter. Arriving at the mine just after lunch he found Martin handling the hoist and tramping ore to the bin and waste to the dump, while the rest of the little crew were busy underground. Martin took his boss to the dump and showed him some waste material he had piled aside preparatory to pushing it over the dump.

The two miners pondered a bit as to what the stuff was, then went underground to the face. The ore was very soft, had a greasy appearance and could be cut and scraped from the vein with a pocket knife. Giacoma turned to his fellow miner and said, "Something smells. Have you been eating garlic with your lunch?" His companion replied in the negative and Jim exclaimed, "Hell, Martin, it must be silver!"

Cutting a sample of the material, Giacoma accompanied by his daughter Madelina (Mrs. Gene Lewis of Tucson) carried the ore next day to Hawley & Hawley at Douglas for assaying. The report arrived shortly thereafter with the information that it was cerargyite (horn silver) and

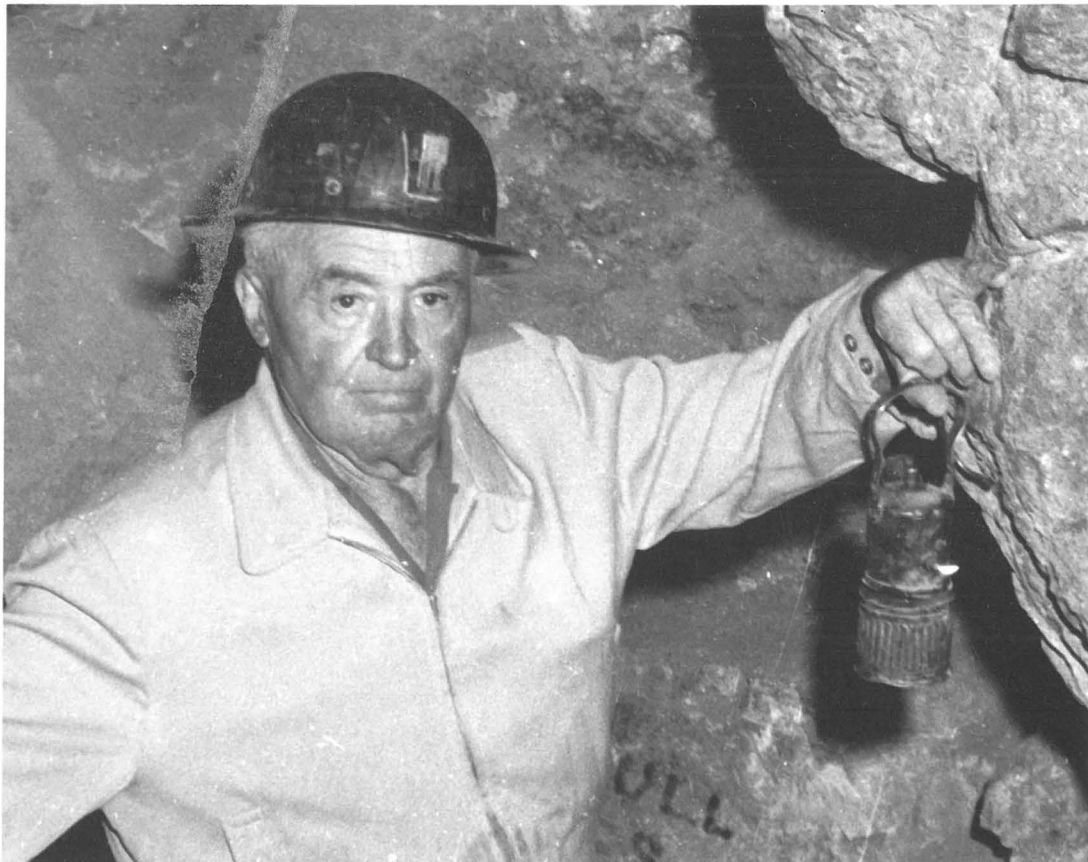
the sample contained 6,080 ounces of the silver chloride to the ton. A notation with the assay certificate read, "Best of luck, Jim. Hope you find a mountain of it!"

Jim and his crew became chloriders muy pronto. First they gleaned every particle of the "horn" that had been put on the dump. Then they went to work at the face, following the vein until it petered out. All in all the Defiance gave up three heaping wash tubs of cerargyite for which the ore buyer paid about \$28,000.

Giacoma's wife, Ruth, was away in California at the time of the bonanza find and Jim, thinking to give her

a pleasant surprise, said nothing of the sale of the rich ore. A few days after her return Ruth got around to looking after the family bookkeeping and was astonished by the entry in the checkbook for the settlement. Turning to her spouse, she exclaimed, "My God, Jim, what have you done? Robbed a bank?"

Jim mined the Defiance for 14 or 15 years after his high grade find, but never again did he ship as much as a pound of horn silver. He did, however, find a place in Arizona mining history with his three washtubs of ore!



Jim Giacoma, miner, in Toughnut incline—Tombstone mining district, Cochise County. 1965. Photo by author.

HISTORY OF MINING IN ARIZONA
VOLUME II

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MICHAEL N. GREELEY

PUBLISHED BY



MINING CLUB OF THE SOUTHWEST FOUNDATION
TUCSON, ARIZONA