

Chapter Seven

Life in a Boom Town—Oatman, Arizona

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Located on the western slope of the Black Mountains at the foot of the towering landmark called Elephant's Tooth, Oatman, Arizona was much like other mining boom towns in the west, but it did have one unique feature. The area was home to three of the greatest gold mines in Arizona history. In a period of about forty years these three mines, the Gold Road, the Tom Reed and the United Eastern, with a little help from some of the smaller mines, produced 2,225,000 ounces of gold which today would be worth over one billion dollars.

There had been a mini-boom in the area from 1901-1905 which started with the discovery of high grade ore at the Snowball claim and resulted in the building of the "town" of Vivian. In 1909, Vivian was renamed Oatman. The name probably came from Olive Oatman, a girl who had been captured by Apaches in 1851 and sold to the Mohave Indians, although some say the town of Oatman was named for John Oatman, a local mining man, who claimed to be the son of Olive Oatman and a Mohave Indian.

The big boom started with the Gold Road Mine, two miles north of Oatman. This mine was discovered by Jose Jeneres who had been grubstaked by Henry Lovin, a Kingman merchant. The Tom Reed Mine was probably located about the same time as the Gold Road, but not much was done with the property until it was taken over by the Blue Ridge Gold Mines Company of Pasadena in 1906. After a large amount of underground work was done, the Tom Reed went into production. It was operated continuously from 1908 until 1932. Total production is not known, but one report gives the value of ore extracted between 1908 and 1932 at over \$13 million.

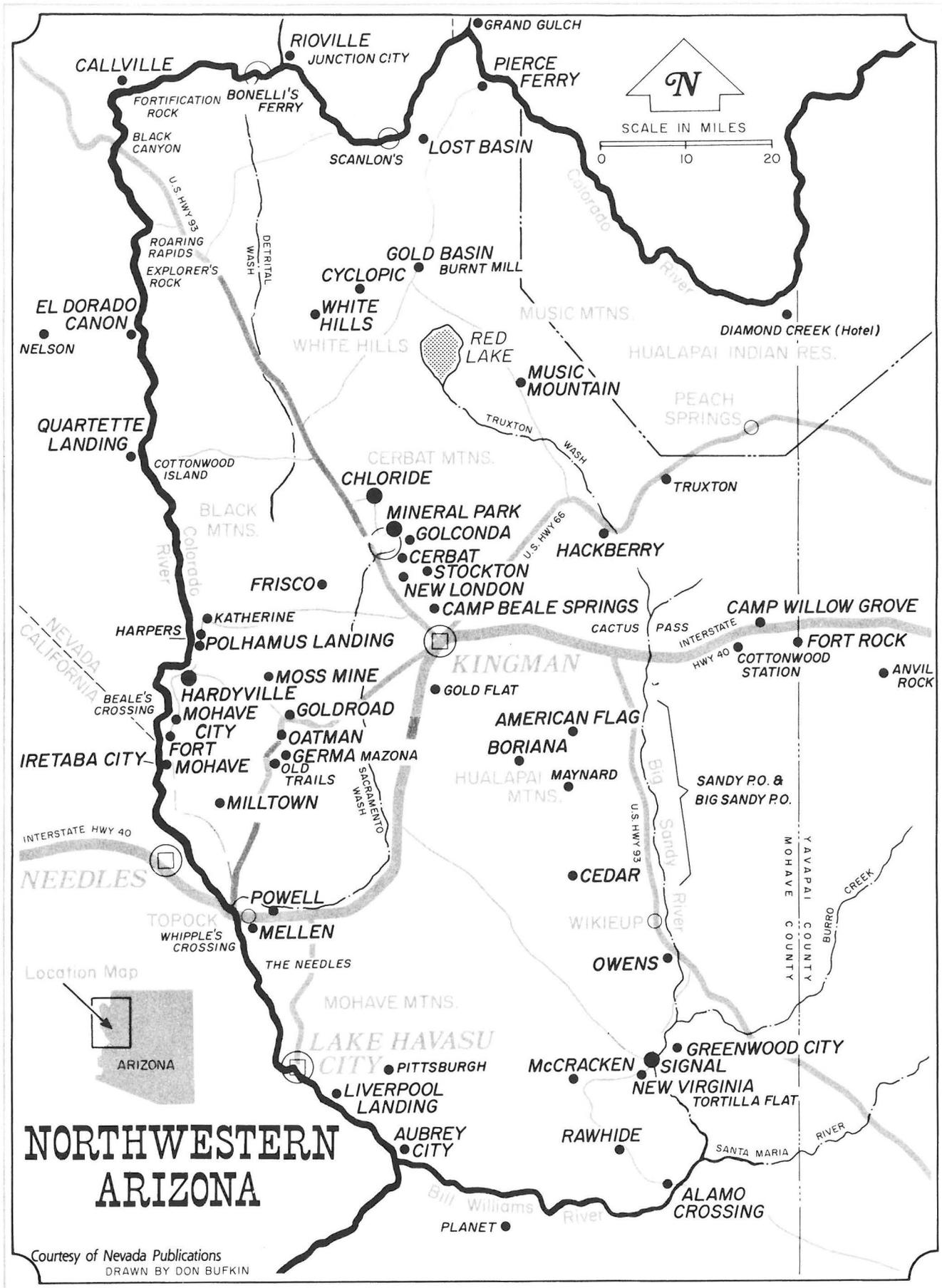
While Oatman had grown quite a bit with the Tom Reed, it was the big strike of two miners, McIver and Long, and the development of the United Eastern that brought miners, prospectors and business people into the area in droves. On February 27, 1916, Oatman filed a township application stating that there were about 300 people within the limits of the proposed township. Within a year it was estimated that there were 5,000 people, and the population by 1924 was said to be 10,000. Every inch of ground in the district was picked, poked, studied, assayed and claimed. In fact township applications were consistently denied because all of the area was claimed by the mines. Even today clear title to some of the land

is almost impossible to obtain. By 1917, the boom was definitely on. Tent cities grew like mushrooms in a forest and little towns like Mazona, Old Trails, Times and "49" Camp blossomed.

In the Model T Ford days, when that twisting, rocky stretch of Highway 66 was one of the most feared grades on the entire route, many people traveling east took advantage of Oatman to spend the night and travel over the miserable road in the cool of the early morning. One such visitor in 1928 described the town as one that was not designed by a city planning board. In her book *Ghosts of the Adobe Walls*, Nell Murbarger said, "(Oatman's) main business street . . . followed the bottom of the twisting canyon. Bordering the unpaved street, on both sides, were wooden stores and shops and cafes, built cheek-to-cheek, rarely with a firewall between. In front of these buildings ran a wide wooden sidewalk, its outer edges supported by stilts, and its surface reached by splintered wooden steps. Many of the business houses had false fronts . . . and wooden awnings . . . Branching away from the main street of the town, dusty side streets, some of them little more than footpaths, struggled up the canyon sides to the homes of miners and millmen . . ."

People who grew up during those years in Oatman have nothing but fond memories of their childhood. According to them, it was a wonderful place for a child to live. Everyone had a job, wages were good and the town was safe. There was little crime, other than some drunkenness. Many of the people lived in tent houses. These houses usually had walls of all or part canvas. Some had tin roofs, while others had canvas roofs stretched over beams. Many of the canvas roofs were striped and children liked the "circus" look of their homes. Some of these tent houses were quite nice. The Douglas family had linoleum floors, green burlap covered walls, bookcases full of books, a victrola and a piano. Their house had a grape arbor across the front for shade to help cool the olla water and the inhabitants.

There always seemed to be something under construction and soon the town sported a 60-room hotel, the St. Francis, which was built at a cost of \$40,000, two or three other roomy hotels, and a Lovin and Withers branch store providing groceries, mining supplies and heavy equipment. There was *The Oatman News*, a school house,



churches, and an abundance of saloons, of which at least one, The Health Bar, encouraged the use of liquor as a restorative. The Health Bar was also the town's leading drugstore, library and general meeting place, which meant it had more information than the newspaper or the telegraph. The only better source of local news was the town's telephone operator.

Like people in most isolated communities, Oatmanites made their own fun. The 4th of July celebrations lasted two or three days and there was something for everyone. The big draw was a rock drilling contest and teams from all over the territory would compete for the prize money. In 1916, Oatman also scheduled an auto race from Oatman to Kingman and return. The usual foot races, ball games, fireworks, speeches and dances were held. In addition Oatman had a burro slow race and a mucking contest which consisted of shoveling 3 tons of muck from one bin to another. There were also dances at the Desert Inn Theatre, picnics at the foot of Elephant's Tooth, band concerts and minstrel shows throughout the year, and the movies. Oatmanites were addicted to the movies. The one reelers, the silents and the talkies were all popular fare in their time. The day Jackie Coogan made a personal appearance to promote "The Kid" was a red letter day in Oatman.

Although Oatman was a good distance from either the railroad or the river, the freight teams that hauled between Kingman and Oatman managed to supply the town with all of the necessities and many luxuries. The major scarcity, however, was water. Water cost a penny and a half a gallon and was supplied by water wagons. One water "wagon" was a Model T Ford with a big tank hooked onto the back. The water wagons got their water from the Tom Reed Mine wells. Some lucky residents of Oatman were hooked up directly to the lines from the Tom Reed. Since the Tom Reed management was selective about who could have direct hook-up there was a lot of hard feelings in the town and some violence.

In 1916, Mrs. Walter Taylor got water out of the tap of W. H. Fowler to do her washing. Even though both were on the hook-up and both paid water rent, he took exception to her using his tap and told her not to do it again. This infuriated Mr. Walter Taylor who then attacked Mr. Fowler and beat him in the head with a hammer. Taylor was hauled into court and was fined \$25.00 plus costs.

When the Tom Reed expanded and put in a 20-stamp mill operation it needed all the water it could get out of the wells and refused to sell water to some homes and businesses. This caused several Oatmanites (those without water) to approach the Arizona Corporation Commission. The Tom Reed was ordered to supply water to the inhabitants of the town, with the result that a week or so later, nobody had any water. The well was dry. Water was again forthcoming when the Tom Reed made arrangements with the Times Mine to tap their water supply.

The town had a seamy side as well, one rarely seen and never discussed by the wives and children of the town. "49" Camp was the red light district. It was a self-contained community, one that was off limits to the children, and whose members did not venture very often into the main business area. The residents of "49" camp

tried to keep a low profile, but in 1917 the camp made headlines when Charles Bennet, owner of the camp, was convicted in a federal court of violating the Mann Act. It seems that he had transported, from California, two women who thought they were to take part in a dancing and theatrical enterprise. When they discovered they were also expected "to receive the advances of any and all", they rebelled and called in the law.

Although violent crime was at a minimum in Oatman, there were murders in the area. The last man executed in Mohave County murdered his mistress, Jennie Bauters (Bautery) by shooting her repeatedly, reloading his gun and shooting her once again through the head. Clement C. Lee (Leigh) was, after several appeals, hanged in Kingman on January 18, 1907.

But it was not the prostitutes, or even a murder or two, that set the town on edge. It was fear of fire. There were several major fires in the area which, at different times, destroyed large portions of Oatman, Mazona and Gold Road. 1918 was a particularly difficult year. There were several small fires during the year, and one large fire. Gasoline was ignited when it was poured into an automobile gas tank and burned up the entire business district of Mazona, a suburb of Oatman.

In June of 1921 a very destructive fire was started from unknown causes. Rumor had it that it was started by a woman in the St. Francis Hotel cleaning some clothing with gasoline. Another source said it was started by boys playing with firecrackers. It burned over half of the business district and about forty homes. Property loss was over \$300,000 but, amazingly, there was no report of loss of life.

Many businessmen whose buildings butted up against rock drilled a hillside vault complete with a stout plank door that was fitted with strap-iron hinges and hasp. They used these holes in the cliffs as safes. Money, jewelry and other small valuable items were locked up in these safes at night, not because of fear of theft, but for fire protection.

The good times lasted, with some minor ups and downs into the mid 1920's. Then the United Eastern closed down in 1926 when production costs exceeded the value of the ore. The Tom Reed which opened up a large gold vein about 1930 was worked intermittently until 1942, but the town of Oatman had begun to take on a slightly seedy appearance by the thirties when the depression came into full swing. It still had its moments of glory. Supposedly Clark Gable and Carol Lombard spent the night of March 29, 1939 at the Ox Yoke Hotel, and several movie films made in Oatman boosted the economy over the years. But the end of mining, the reason for Oatman's existence, was in sight. The death blow was issued on October 8, 1942 when the United States Government Order No. L208 closed the gold mines. Most of the people left Oatman. Some simply boarded or closed up their homes and moved to where the jobs were, expecting to return and hoping an end to the war would bring a return to normalcy. Oatman lingered on for a while as a stopping place on old Highway 66, but in the early 1950's when Highway 66 was relocated even that small source of income was gone.

The boom was over and had left little but a ghost town behind. Oatman never returned to the prosperity that the

gold had brought. Today it is a colorful mining ghost town, with art galleries, antique shops, and reenactments of gunfights, none of which were part of life in Oatman during the boom days. Only the burros roaming in the streets are reminiscent of the glory days.

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Oatman street scene. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Highway 66 through Oatman, c. 1933. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Mazona, a suburb of Oatman. The Tom Reed Mine in the background. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



"The Oatman News," newspaper office, 1916. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Elephant's Tooth looking over Oatman, c. 1915. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Tent City—springing up like mushrooms in a forest. *Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.*



Celebrating the Fourth—a rock drilling contest. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Jackie Coogan in Oatman for showing of "The Kid." Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Hotel going up. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Street scene in Oatman, c. 1917. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Freight team delivering to Arizona Stores Co. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



The notorious "49 Camp." Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



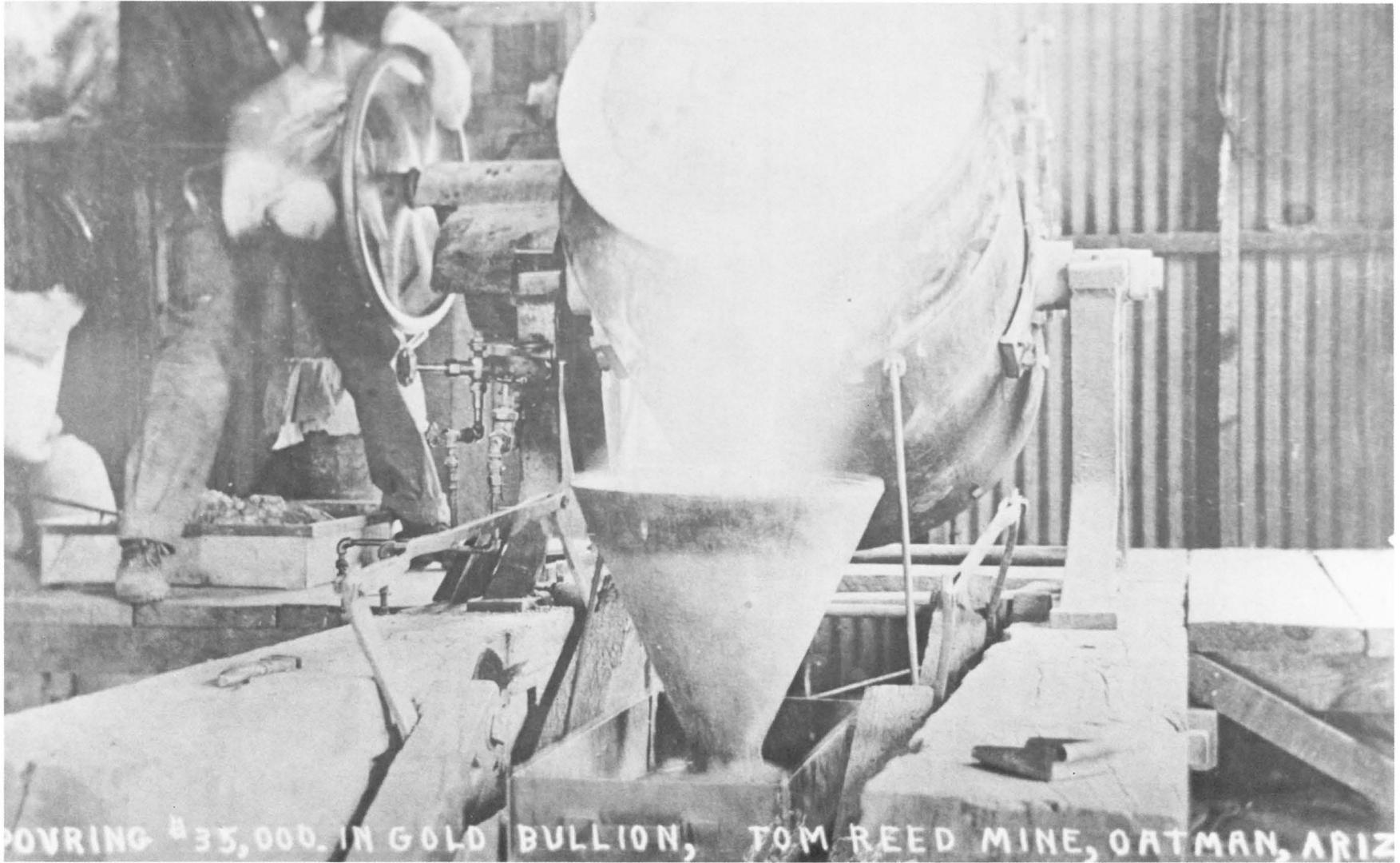
Birdseye view of Oatman, Arizona in its heyday. *Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.*



Gold shipment. Ingots on right from the Tom Reed. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Tom Reed June Clean-up—\$110,000. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Pouring \$35,000 in gold bullion from the Tom Reed Mine. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



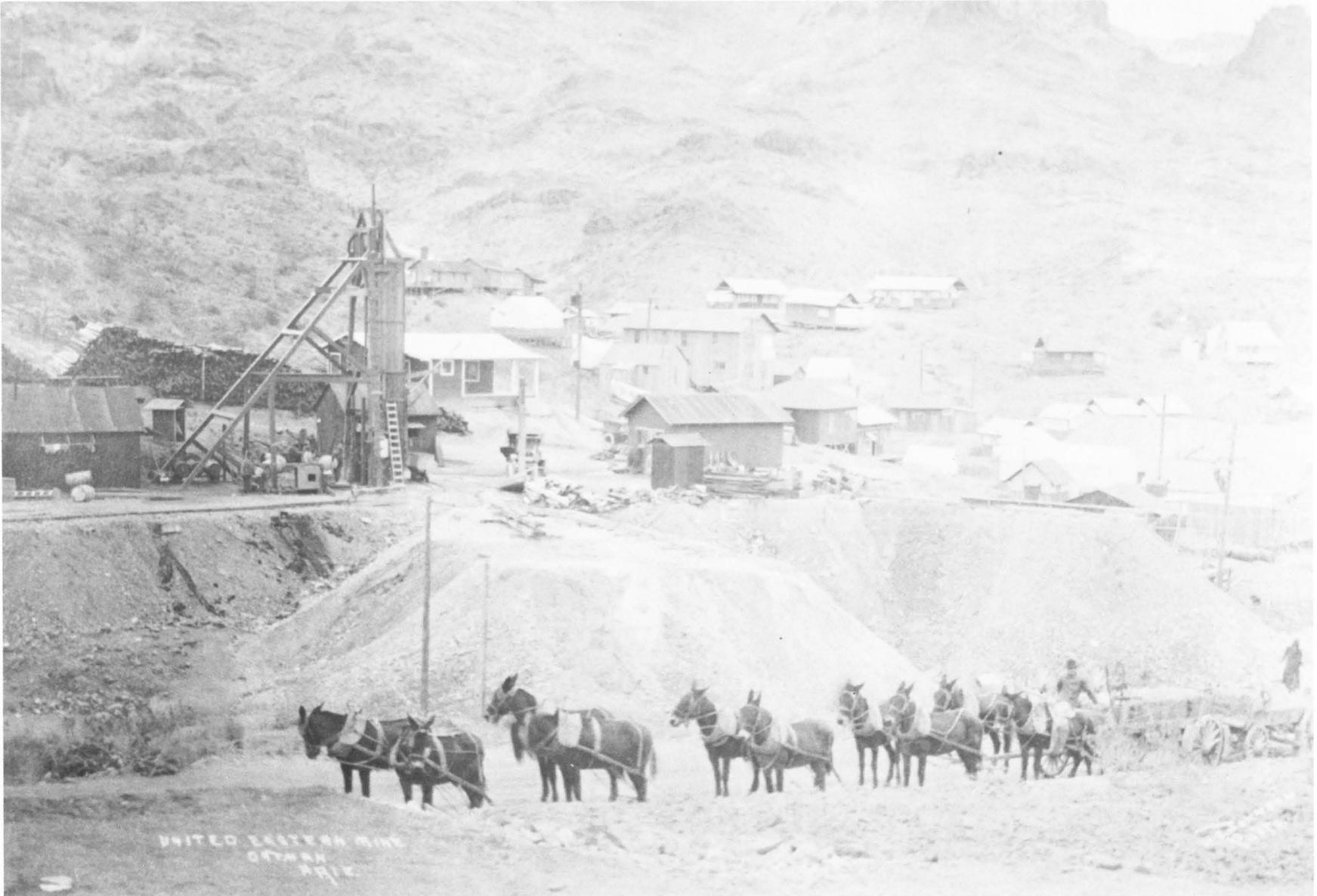
Tom Reed Mine and Mill. *Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.*



Tent City below Tom Reed Mine. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



Freight team hauling machinery into Oatman. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.



United Eastern Mine. Courtesy of Mohave County Historical Society.

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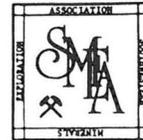


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