

The Rock That Kills ...an Arizona legend Copyright 1997 by Sam Negri

Pursuing a legend can be hazardous to your health. In the spring of 1994 I went looking for the elusive Rock that Kills --sometimes called the Death Trap Mountain-- and it was only after I was high in Mohave County's Cerbat Mountains that it suddenly occurred to me that if I located this mysterious phenomenon and verified its power, I probably wouldn't be around to write about it: According to legend, anything that touches the rock dies --zap! As in instantly. But, the legend also says that even in the sunlight the rock gives off a pale blue light, and so I thought maybe I could detect the rock by its ice-blue glow and avoid any direct contact.

I first heard about the Death Trap from Don Gawthrop, of Tulsa, a man who enjoys reading about the history and legends of the West. Gawthrop said he was a child in Detroit when he first heard this story about a rock in Arizona that kills on contact. Many years later he found an expanded version of the legend in a book by Leland Lovelace called *Lost Mines and Hidden Treasure*, published in 1971. Lovelace's account of the fatal rock appears to be an expanded version of the same story written by one John S. Eross and published in 1966 in *True West Magazine*.

Both writers agreed, as Lovelace put it, that "The Death Trap is in a narrow gorge, a little pass in a rugged, almost inaccessible mountain, the Cerbat range. The locale is of great interest to hunters and prospectors, for this mountain is the hide-away of antelope and big horn sheep, and lies in the gold and silver country."

There's no question that the reference to the mining activity is accurate. Gold, silver and copper have been extracted from the Cerbats, located about 20 miles northwest of Kingman, for at least 100 years. The old silver mining camp of Chloride lies at the base of the range.

The Cerbat Mountains are very dry and covered with granite outcroppings and diminutive desert scrub. In addition to the big horn sheep, the steep hills and deep canyons of the range are home to a herd of about 100 wild horses. There are two Bureau of Land Management campgrounds in the twisted pinon pines and junipers at the top of the range, but few visitors see the place. Hunters and prospectors --people with a specific mission-- are most likely to be attracted to such a harsh terrain, and it was a group of hunters who were credited with the first non-Indian reports of the Death Trap.

Lovelace claimed that while white men had never heard of the Death Trap "it was known to the Hualapais [An Indian tribe in Mohave County] from prehistoric days." Anthropologist Robert Euler of Prescott, an expert on the Hualapais, called this rubbish.

"In all my years with the Hualapais I have never heard any such thing as that," Euler said. "I've been all through the Cerbats with Hualapai guides and never once heard a story like that."

But, let's hear the rest of what Lovelace and Eross have to say:

Around 1883, some of the men building the Santa Fe Railroad across northern Arizona took a weekend to go hunting in the Cerbats. From their camp, these hunters could see a bright, steady light on the mountainside. They were intrigued by the light but decided not to investigate it firsthand. Instead, they returned to work the next day and made some inquiries. Some Indians reportedly told them about "the power in the rock," Lovelace reported, but they refused to go into any detail.

The next mention of the Death Trap came in 1895. Lovelace says a group of hunters from Pennsylvania startled a big horn sheep in the Cerbats which "in its fright ran blindly into the narrow gorge beneath the overhanging ledge and, to the great surprise of the hunters, who had as yet not fired a shot, it fell dead upon the rock."

Eross, the earlier writer, told basically the same story but said the hunters were from Texas. Presumably he should know. He was one of them. He said he was 13-years-old at the time, which would have made him 84 when he finally decided to publish his account in True West in 1966.

Seeing the strange death of the big horn, Eross and the other hunters started walking toward the rock to investigate. Suddenly an old Hualapai Indian jumped out of the brush and, with hand signs and animated speech, warned them off.

"He said the sheep had stepped upon the Death Trap and if we followed after it, we would die even as the sheep. He pointed out the number of whitening bones that had fallen from the rock into the gorge," Eross wrote.

"While we stood gazing at the spectacle, a rattlesnake crawled out of a crevice and, mounting the edge of the blue rock, writhed, coiled, raised its head and fell lifeless. To us it was enough to verify the ancient tradition! We thanked the Indian for saving us from a dreadful fate."

The old Indian then removed a horsehair lariat that he carried round his waist, raised it over his head and flung it toward the dead sheep, catching it round the head without touching the ground. He dragged the sheep off the rock and that night joined Eross and his companions for a mutton dinner. After supper, the old Indian told the hunters the legend of the Death Trap. Eross didn't relate that legend in 1966, but said only that it was a long story.

Lovelace doesn't say where or how he learned what the old Indian had said during his campfire monologue, but in his 1971 book he narrated a detailed yarn that could have originated with the Brothers Grimm, but which he said originated with the old Hualapai Indian.

The gist of the story is this: Long ago a stranger came to the Hualapais asking for food and shelter. The man had blonde hair and an attractive face, but he was hunchbacked and his body was described as small, shrunken and deformed. This gnome-like person also had brilliant blue eyes "and had strange powers of healing the sick and injured --

sometimes by merely fixing those large luminous eyes upon the patient," Lovelace wrote. Even the animals loved him, and followed him like the Pied Piper.

"The chief of the tribe held the stranger in such trust and affection he made him a tribal medicine man. During the many years he remained with them, time had no aging effect upon him. Others grew old and the children matured, but the blond, blue-eyed hunchback changed not," Lovelace related.

But the gnome's fortunes changed suddenly when he violated the chief's trust. As the story goes, the chief's son was about to be married to a beautiful young woman, but just before the ceremonies were to begin the bride disappeared. No one could figure out what happened until an old woman went to the chief and told him his blue-eyed medicine man had used his magic to take the bride away.

Lovelace says everyone loved the hunchback so much that, rather than kill him they decided to simply drive him off. After giving him a head start, a dozen Indians were sent to pursue him to be sure he kept going, but then a peculiar thing happened. In Lovelace's words:

"As time passed, they found themselves following, not chasing. He was leading them on, and as if drawn by some irresistible magnet, they could neither halt nor retrace their steps. When the chief sent runners to bid the braves return, they gave no ear to the commands. On and on, looking neither to the left nor to the right; seeing only the once-loved figure before them. The hour of sunset near, they still ran without pause."

Then an even stranger thing occurred: The runners chasing the first group of Indians were suddenly spellbound "seeing the dozen braves fall, one by one, dead in their tracks as they stepped upon the parted segments of a huge blue stone."

And so --according to Lovelace-- the Hualapais say the strange blond medicine man invoked into the stone forever the fateful power of the gods to frustrate pursuit of him and his stolen Hualapai bride.

When I gave the broad outline of this story to anthropologist Euler, he said he'd never heard anything like it among the Hualapais. Then I told him the operatic drama about the blue-eyed hunchback who uses magic to steal a bride, and he said there actually was a white man who lived with the Hualapais before the turn of the century.

"His name was Charlie Spencer and he lived with the Hualapais around 1880 or 1890," Euler noted. "He even learned to speak the Hualapai language, and he helped them with their farming, but one day an Indian got mad at him and killed him."

Then I reviewed the story again with Don Simonis, an archaeologist with the Bureau of Land Management's Kingman office, who accompanied me into the Cerbats.

"You know," Don said, "I first heard that story when I was a kid growing up in Prescott. It's a good story but nobody knows if there's anything to it. Every so often I'd mention it to a geologist and the only thing they come up with is that maybe this rock is a highly radioactive chunk of [uranium](#)."

Uranium and other rare minerals have been found in the mountains of Mohave County and in other parts of northern Arizona, but no one I talked to knew of a chunk of uranium so hot that it could kill an animal on contact.

Simonis said a few years ago he met a Hualapai Indian in Kingman named Grant Tapija. "I don't remember exactly what we were talking about, but he brought up the blue rock; as I recall he just said there was this old blue rock that kills. He believed it was a true story."

Dan Messersmith, an administrator at Mohave Community College and a local historian, had a theory about the origins of the Death Trap story. In his words:

"There is a grain of truth in the story in that there are a number of places in the mountains around here where animals have been killed en masse and their bones have piled up. My guess is that some story teller picked up on that and expanded it. When a Hualapai leader died, they would cremate that person and destroy their worldly goods. It's possible they considered the person's ponies part of his worldly goods and just took them out and killed them, and that may be why the bones are piled up here and there.

"But the business about the Death Trap, " Messersmith said, "may simply be adapted from a Hualapai legend to keep people away from their burial grounds."