



# Wrightwood Roots

by george



Friday, November 5, 2004 A.D.

## The Padres' Gold

by

William Bristol

from

*"The House That B---- Built"*

William Marion Bristol was a man who loved nature, which he perceived in a light few of us will ever see. William Marion Bristol was a man of many interests and talents, yet very little has been written about him and his work.

In the book, *"The House That B—— Built,"* by William B., William Bristol insisted that his name not be used, insisting that "modesty always charms" and "distance lends enchantment." William Bristol built Wrightwood's Acorn Lodge (see *"Wrightwood Roots,"* December 1999) and was the designer of Camp Cajon, which enhanced the area just below today's intersection of I-15 and State Route 138 before its destruction by the 1938 flood (see *"Wrightwood Roots,"* April & May 2002).



G F Tillitson collection      foto7781.tif  
William Marion Bristol

This selection from his book, "The House That B Built" illustrates still another side of the builder.

I have never been greatly impressed by tales of hidden treasure. Everyone knows that old Mother Earth has concealed in her crust countless tons of gold. It is also known that, on the average, it costs more to find and extract it than it is worth. And, whatever the fascination of the quest, the same is true of that which has been buried by man to hide it from his fellows.

A good news reporter tells in his first paragraph the outstanding features of his narrative and then follows with the details. I will reverse that order in my story of my experience of yesterday, except to say that, in the first year of national prohibition. I stumbled

upon a stronghold of Bacchus in our own San Bernardino county mountains.

Thirty years ago, with two companions and half a dozen burros, I left Los Angeles on a hunting trip to the upper San Gabriel Canyon. Six weeks later, our appetites for venison having been satisfied, our party disbanded. With my personal belongings packed on my own burros, Moses and Samson, I scaled the high ridge at the head of Prairie Fork of the San Gabriel and descended into the north fork of Lytle Creek. And thus it befell that I saw the fertile valley of San Bernardino and became enamored of the picturesque Highland foothills

where I have since made my home

My Highland neighbors have often wondered at my interest in Lytle Creek and Cajon Pass. The charm of what I beheld when I stood on that lofty divide and looked down across the serrated eastern ramparts of Mt. San Antonio -- Old Baldy-- has never been dispelled. When the speeding automobile supplanted the burro as a means of transportation in the mountains, I turned still more frequently to the heights of that picturesque region. I have there communed with Nature in many of her shaded and charming nooks and bowers. The mountain folk, too, I have known and visited in their hospitable and unconventional habitations. Their tales of mountain happenings, of big game slaughter, of horse thieves and cattle rustlers, of gold rushes and divers mineral excitements, have beguiled many a leisure hour. Only a year ago, however, I heard for the first time the story of hidden treasure in Lytle Creek, buried and left by the Spanish padres many decades ago.

And this is the story:

With the aid of the Indians the Padres were working a profitable gold mine when, in 1833, the secularization of the missions was ordered by the Mexican government. Hearing that the soldiers were coming to drive them from the canyon and knowing that they would be robbed of the yellow metal they had accumulated, they buried the treasure and pronounced a curse upon any of the Indians who should disclose its hiding place.

For various reasons the Padres did not return. The Indian, knowing little of the power of the white man's gold, and fearing also the Padres' curse, filled themselves with the husks that fell from the ranches of the white invaders of their forefathers' realm, and went not again to Lytle Creek.

I say they went not again. That is nearly, but not quite true.

Pablo Montesano and his wife, Juanita, took up their abode at the ranch of John Blanque, near the present site of Highgrove. For many years they

dwelt there and Blanque was kind to the simple and faithful couple. But he came to know the story of their flight from Lytle Creek and as the years rolled by he became more insistent that they should break their vow and conduct him to the enchanted spot. Finally, when the shadows of age were creeping upon the primitive pair, they consented and the trio set out to find the place which the white man pictured to himself as Paradise, but which the red man doubted not would prove to be Purgatory

In spite of my intimate, acquaintance with Lytle Creek, I was unable to recognize the points described in my informant's narrative. I judge, however, that it was in the neighborhood of the Glenn Ranch that Pablo fell desperately ill and was unable and unwilling to proceed farther. Briefly, the party returned to the Highgrove ranch. It was not known that Blanque made any further effort to find the gold. A few years later he disappeared and was never after seen in the community.

I have said that it was a year ago that I heard the story of the hidden treasures. More accurately it was in June, when we were building the first concrete tables at Camp Cajon. Ever since, until yesterday, I have been too busy to journey again to Lytle Creek to inspect a curious geological formation which taught my eye as I followed my burros down that enchanted canyon three decades ago.

Everyone who has been in Lytle Creek knows of the old placer diggings in the lower reaches of the canyon. Only old timers, however, know of Banks Gulch and other sources of gold in the upper portion of the north fork. As for myself, I have never sought the yellow metal in its native matrix. My knowledge of geology is superficial only and I have simply sought to read Nature's record of formations and transformations as written in the earth's topography. As I was berating Moses and Samson for their plodding pace on that October day, thirty years ago, my eye caught a glimpse of a white ledge set almost in the north wall of the canyon. "Lime," I said to myself and passed on. I did not then know that lime, in its purer forms, is marble.

I cannot tell what mental process sent me yesterday to Lytle Creek – but I went. I did not find the Padres' gold, but I did learn what became of it. Those who go up today to see what I saw yesterday, will get the same thrills that I did and will understand why a strange and creepy feeling comes over me as I write. Briefly, I went to Lytle Creek yesterday to examine that marble ledge and found, all at once, the solution of two distinct mysteries.

Reaching the foot of the ledge, which was half a hundred feet wide, I determined to climb to the summit of the ridge and look down into Lone Pine Canyon on the other side. On reaching the summit I paused to gaze upon the landscape before me. As I did so, I caught sight of a bit of sawed board in the marble fragments at my feet. Those who have come upon the obvious work of man in the mountain wilds will testify that it always attracts instant attention. Pushing aside the broken marble with my foot, I soon found that my board was more than a bit. In fact, I quickly uncovered some trap-door, whose hinges were little more than patches of rust. The wood itself was in a fair state of preservation, for it was California redwood, noted for its resistance to decay.

I did not succeed in raising the door until I had broken a hole in it and inserted a broken limb of a tree as a lever. When I finally swung it over, I saw to my surprise that it had been hooked on the inside. Did this mean that the key to the mystery was to be found in the pit at my feet?

I did not linger long in my inspection of the door. Leading down into the shaft which I had uncovered was a winding stair, carved from the marble itself. As I looked down it, I noticed that it was not dark at the bottom; in fact there was a diffused white light by which I could discern an expansion – evidently a room or cell which had been excavated for a purpose. Instantly I knew that I had found the Padres' cache. The discriminating reader will notice that I do not spell that work c-a-s-h. I have already said that I did not find their treasure – but at the instant of gazing down the marble stairway I did not know that.

Obviously there was no one to dispute my entrance, yet I stood for some moments wondering why the door had been fastened on the inside. Was there a subterranean outlet from the chamber below, or had one of the Padres remained to guard the treasure and, miser-like, perished beside it? I will frankly confess that strange thrills coursed up and down my spine, while conflicting emotions battled within me, and I stood as one entranced.

But the soft white light below seemed to beckon me – and I descended. Reaching the last step I found myself in a chamber perhaps 20 feet square and I discovered a row of small wooden casks ranged around its sides on the floor. I had never dreamed that there was gold enough in all the gulches of Lytle Creek to fill that battery of kegs. More than a score of them I counted as my eyes became accustomed to the soft white light and then I saw that on receding shelves cut into the marble sides of the room were countless bottles of suspicious shape and appearance. I had read tales of the retreats of old-world monk strongholds where they stored both their gold and their liquor, but I had not dreamed of their existence in our California mountains.

How long I stood in contemplation of my strange discovery I do not know. My native instincts for investigation at last overcome my awe, however, and I sought the source of the soft white light and also the possible lateral outlet. I was soon satisfied that the light came through the rather thin arched roof of the chamber, the white marble permitting a certain amount of diffusion. My quest of a side outlet, however, was not successful. But in searching for it I encountered my most thrilling experience. Bones! And human bones, at that, rattled hoarsely together as, on hands and knees. I felt my way into a corner of the room.

It is not strange that I drew back from the ghastly find. In doing so, however, my hand came in contact with a tin box – one of the old-fashioned kind used for valuables before the days of safe-deposit vaults. Instinctively I grasped it and carried it out to the daylight at the foot of the marble stair.

It was not locked, but its rusted hinges protested dumbly as I swung back its cover. But I found no gold. The box contained nothing but a paper, somewhat yellowed by age, but perfectly preserved. I hastily opened it and scanned its headline. It ran, "Confession of John Blanque."

I have read no stranger story than that which followed. In fairly good English, with an occasional foreign termination, he told of coming alone to find the Padres' gold of his successful quest in the marble chamber and of his subsequent doings. On finding wealth and wine in an isolated stronghold, he decided to take up his abode there and to return no more to his former home. The treasure he found being in the form of nuggets, he was unable to state its exact amount, but said that, disguising himself, he had carried it in instalments to the winery at Cucamonga and exchanged it for wine and brandy so swell the store left by the Padres, and for provisions upon which to subsist in his mountain retreat.

The closing paragraph of his "confession" is pathetic in the extreme. It reads:

*"After twelf years alone come now to the enda. I read one time ov rip von Winkle. After twenty years he come back and be sorry he do. I no more go back. My golda all gone my jerka (jerky -- dried meat) all gone. I gotta one bottle wine one bottla branda. I lay down now and drink myself to sleepa.*

**John Blanque."**

The reading finished, I turned to inspect the kegs and bottles. Their emptiness confirmed Blanque's closing paragraph. I made no search for nuggets. The statement of a man who knows his end is near, being usually true. Unlike many another buried treasure, the Padres' gold will no longer lure adventurers. I said that I found, in our own San Bernardino county mountains, a stronghold of Bacchus -- but Bacchus had abdicated. A good news reporter does not cumber his narrative with unnecessary details. I cannot refrain from alluding to phase of my startling discovery which I have not

obviously mentioned and which, at the time, arrested my attention, I refer to the fact that the trapdoor to the hidden chamber was almost completely concealed by fragments of the marble. How could the occupant of the chamber have thus covered it after entering and closing it behind him?

This query did not come to me until I had abandoned my quest of a lateral entrance and had come upon the bones.

But when the excitement followed my underground discoveries had abated and I had climbed the marble stairs to the broad and welcome daylight above, I paused to examine the door more closely. I assume that the Padres, rather than Blanque, had brought thither sufficient brea (the asphaltic residue left where crude petroleum oozes from the ground and loses its volatile parts by evaporation) to coat the upper surface of the door. And in this asphaltic coat they had imbedded thin slabs of the marble; in other words, they had shingled the trapdoor with stone shingles and thus hidden it from casual observation.

Just how Blanque discovered it, I cannot guess; but this is my analysis of this uncovered patch that caught my eye yesterday:

After Blanque's death some roving wild animal was attracted by the odor from the cracks and tore away some of the stone shingles in the effort to gain access. In the excitement at the moment of my discovery of the door, I had failed to notice that one side of the marble fragments I had kicked aside was black with brea.

It has been decided by the authorities that the bones of Blanque shall repose where they lie. The officers who go up today will carry with them a box of dynamite and will explode it within the cavern in order that it may not become a resort for the blind-piggers of the future; for the San Bernardino mountains must be celebrated for their sunshine rather than for their moonshine.

**April 1, 1920**