

# Lost Hardin Silver

## *Mystery or Hoax?*



*It rose from the desert floor like a broken fang — the ruins of a 90-year-old silver ore mill at Hardin City ghost town, Nevada.*

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Photos by the author

Map by Norton Allen

**W**HEN LONG shadows creep through the canyons, and the night grows dim and large, desert men press closer to dying campfires and talk seems drawn to lost mines and buried treasure. Up in northwestern Nevada, the tale men tell is that of the Lost Hardin Silver.

Three generations of men have pondered that story, but the mystery of the Hardin Silver is still unsolved!

In the first place, there would seem ample reason to doubt that any silver ever occurred in the locale ascribed to the Hardin deposit; yet, 90-odd years ago, men were so confident of that treasure's abundance, they founded a frontier town, built homes and erected three ore mills.

Groundwork for the Hardin story was laid in 1849 when a California-bound emigrant train—comprising 14 wagons and 200-odd members—one night made camp at Double Hot Springs, a few miles north of Black

**Had Charles Isenbeck, German scientist, really found the lost silver lode that J. A. Hardin and his companions once stumbled into? Or was he the greatest fraud ever to live in Hardin City? The silver had been there; many people saw it. Then—it suddenly disappeared.**

Rock Point, in Nevada's Black Rock Desert.

Upon breaking camp, on the morning following, the wagon captain delegated three men to go in search of wild game for food—one of that trio being J. A. Hardin, a wheelwright. The huntsmen, according to the plan, were to swing through a low range of hills paralleling the trail on the east, and later cut back to overtake the slow-moving wagons.

After several hours of unrewarded tramping through the hills, the men started down the west slope of the mountain to rejoin their party.

During their descent they came upon a deposit of soft material, similar to

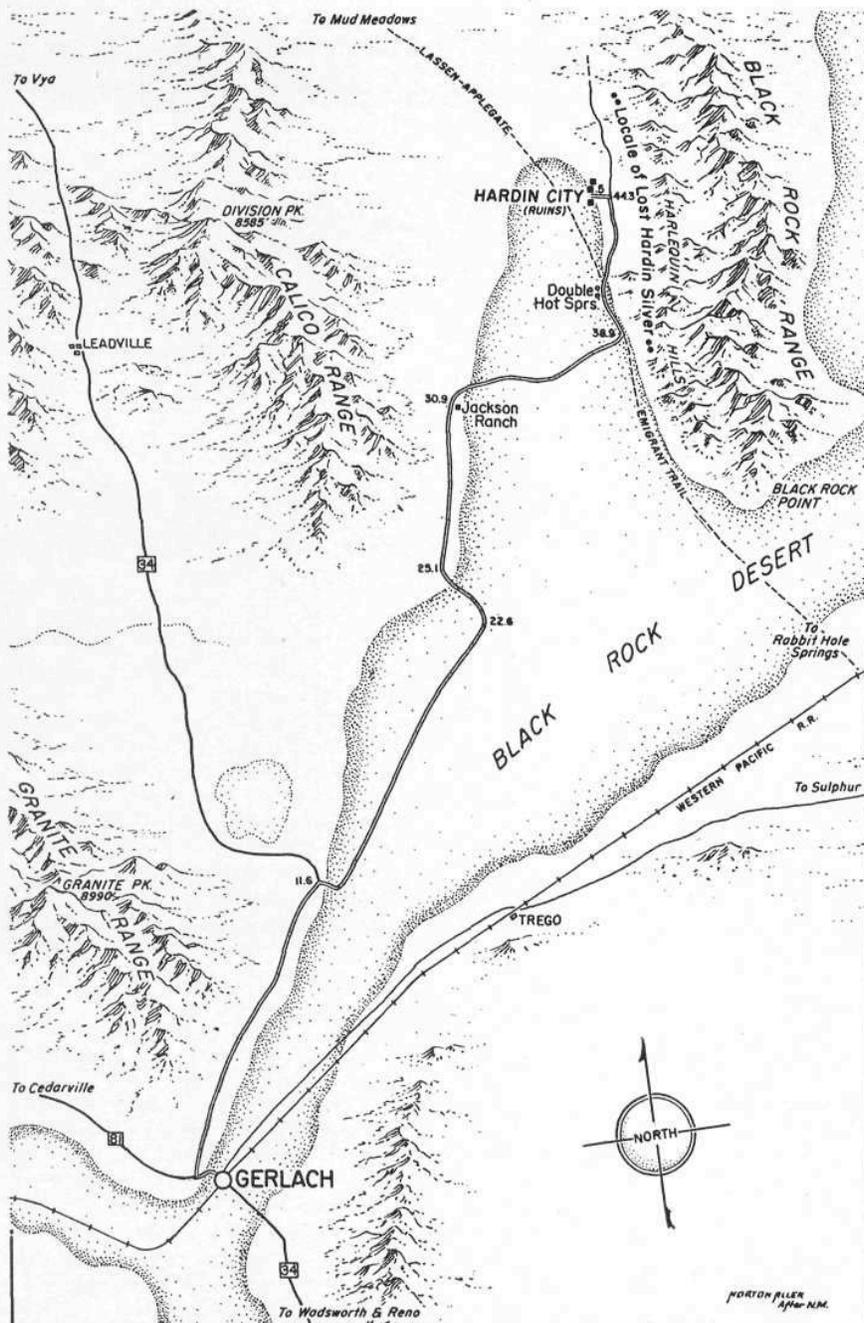
volcanic ash. Floundering across it they were attracted by glittering bits of stone scattered on the surface. One of the trio suggested it might be native silver, and the men filled their hunting bags with as much as they could carry.

When they rejoined their companions that evening at Mud Meadows, the ore samples caused a stir of excitement among the emigrants in the train. But provisions were low and the Black Rock country was swarming with hostile Indians and it was agreed that the caravan should not delay for further prospecting.

Eventually the wagon train reached California, and Hardin settled in Petaluma, established a wagon shop, and soon was doing a flourishing business. His companions found profitable employment, and since the Indians in Nevada were reported to have become increasingly hostile, a return trip was deferred from month to month.

As years passed, prominent and wealthy Californians urged Hardin to lead an exploration party to the scene of discovery; and after months of delay, Hardin, in 1858, agreed to do so.

Using Double Hot Springs as his



initial landmark, the leader retraced as best he was able the route taken by his hunting party nine years before. All went well until he reached the exact point on the mountain where he believed the silver should be; and there Hardin halted and stared about him in bewilderment!

On all that slope, there was not one landmark he could recognize! The only explanation seemed to be that devastating landslides had smothered the area. Either that, or the Petaluma man had misjudged his distances or directions, or had confused his landmarks.

Although he hunted it all the rest of his life, he never found the Lost Hardin Silver.

Others sought it, too.

L. D. Vary, O'Donnell and Jennison, and Judge Harvey and Steve Bass, Johnny Thacker, and Jo Voshay—all of them left campsites on the Black Rock. But the deepest mark of all was left by Charles Isenbeck.

Isenbeck was a humbug or he was the most astute scientist and shrewdest operator who ever worked on the Hardin silver! It's all a point of opinion.

Up in Idaho, at that time, the Poor-man mine was disgorging riches from a black, waxy-looking ore. When a prospector who had seen that ore, now discovered in the Black Rock country a vast deposit of a faintly similar material, word spread that the source of

Hardin's silver had been found, and the rush was on!

But Black Rock ore failed to return anything but goose eggs. Samples were sent to assayers all over the country; and every assay certificate brought back the same disheartening tale—not even a trace of silver!

When someone recalled the occurrence of a "similar ore" in the vicinity of Freiberg, Germany, a sample of the black, waxy stuff was forwarded to Charles Isenbeck, eminent Freiberg chemist.

Isenbeck's report on that ore had the immediate effect of turning night into day, and bringing rejoicing out of despair! The ore was rich beyond man's wildest dreams—some of it running as much as one pound of silver to four pounds of rock!

Or, so said Isenbeck, and the German chemist thought he could work out a process of milling the ore.

Isenbeck was given all the time he wanted—more than two years of it—during all of which period he was carried on the payroll of Black Rock's most important mining company as a research chemist and was pulling down a fabulous salary. (Rumor said \$1000 per month!)

In his report for the fiscal year 1866-67, filed with the State Surveyor General, Humboldt county's assessor and surveyor gave extended praise to the Black Rock district and, in closing, planted this thought: "If Isenbeck succeeds as he expects, the people of Blackrock and the whole country should erect a statue to his memory built of solid silver . . ."

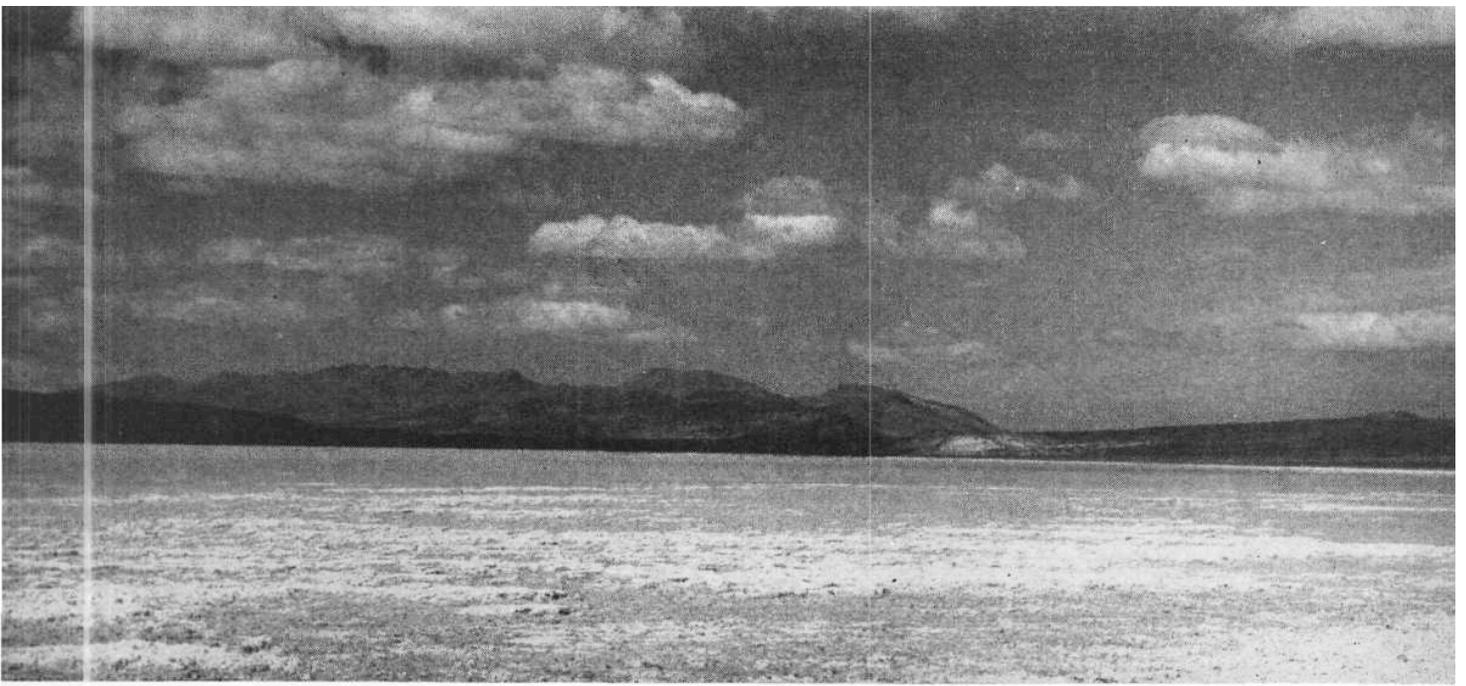
But the *Humboldt Register*, of Unionville, took a dim view of this report—or of any report favorable to the Black Rock. For several months past the *Register* had been characterizing Isenbeck as a "a prince of humbugs," his followers as "victims of insanity," and the Black Rock as a fraud and swindle. And now, muttered the *Register*, a "statue of solid silver" to Isenbeck alluded to by the Humboldt county assessor "was evidently intended to mean two uprights with a cross beam and a rope in the center . . ."

So time marched on, with half the newspapers within 200 miles of Hardin City battling for the glory and honor of the district, and the other half whetting their knives for the kill.

They had not long to wait.

The axe fell early in 1869 in the form of Uncle Sam's yearbook, *Mineral Resources of the States and Territories West of the Rocky Mountains*, compiled and edited by Rossiter W. Raymond, special commissioner of mining statistics.

After stating that the Black Rock district had been the scene "of hopes



*Somewhere along the edge of the great Black Rock Desert playa millions of dollars worth of silver ore may be hidden forever.*

as wild and disappointments as overwhelming as any recorded in the history of American mines," Raymond carried through with a lengthy resume of the Black Rock story.

"It was not long before the story found credence that a new ore of silver had been discovered in the black wax of Humboldt County," stated the Raymond report. "Respectable assayers in the Pacific states, and in New York, flatly contradicted the popular delusion. But the Black Rock people had an assayer of their own—a man by the name of Isenbeck—who claimed that no one but himself could extract the silver from these peculiar ores. He worked by what he called the Freiberg process, and made use of a peculiar flux . . . Of course, Mr. Isenbeck's secret flux contained a compound of silver.

"Six or seven years passed away in experiments and explorations . . . At last, in 1867, Mr. Isenbeck announced that he was ready to work the rock on a large scale and 13 tons were hauled . . . from different ledges . . . The result announced was \$70 to \$400 per ton! A renewed excitement was the consequence . . . A mill was built in the Black Rock country to be managed by Isenbeck. Two others were put in active preparation. But Mr. Isenbeck could not afford to use his flux on a large scale; and before operations commenced, he disappeared from the public eye.

"The Black Rock miners, who had shown for six years a grim determination and perseverance worthy of respect . . . abandoned their mines in despair. Houses, mills, everything was left as it stood, and in the summer of 1868 there was not a human being left in the district. Even thieves would not go there to steal the abandoned

property. An expedition sent to the region by Mr. Clarence King confirmed the opinion of all scientific men from the beginning, that Black Rock was a swindle . . ."

The mystery surrounding Hardin City had grown ever deeper with the passing of time.

Partly for this reason and partly due to a general interest in the Black Rock Desert, I had begun reading every word I could find on the Hardin silver—old history books, old mining reports, old emigrant diaries, and almost endless columns of blurred six-point type in 90-year-old newspaper files. The more I read of those conflicting reports, the more confused I became; and, finally, I knew I would have to go to Hardin and see for myself

During my five years of Hardin City research it had been my good fortune to meet Nellie Basso, of Lovelock, Nevada. An advanced mineral collector, amateur assayer, and devotee of Black Rock history, Nellie, too, was eager to go to Hardin. But one important obstacle stood in our way: For all our combined researching, we still didn't know how to find the place!

Even Humboldt County officials were unable to offer any help in pinpointing the old town's location.

It was Ed Green, of Lovelock—our guide and companion on many other desert jaunts—who came to our rescue.

"Okay!" he said, at last. "I'll string along with you! If we can find Hardin City, we'll find it! Otherwise, we'll at least see a lot of country."

As it isn't considered advisable to enter the more remote sections of the Black Rock with only one vehicle, our departure from Lovelock on a morning in July found us driving both Ed's pick-up and my old desert-toughened

sedan. Our immediate destination was Gerlach, in central Washoe County.

It was here we filled our gasoline and water tanks and gave our tires and cooling systems a final check. Then we dropped in for a brief visit with Sheriff "Cisco" Ashenbrenner. Whenever we're heading into isolated territory, we like to have some responsible person in the vicinity know where we're going and when we expect to be back.

The sheriff advised us to go "to the old Jackson place," 30 miles north of Gerlach, and there cut east across the playa toward the Black Rock range. In that way, he said, we would hit the old emigrant trail just south of Double Hot Springs.

"You'll be traveling across the old lake bed," he explained, "and if you're a praying person, pray you won't hit a soft spot! You can see 'em if you keep your eyes open," he went on. "They're generally a little whiter than the surrounding flat; and if you think grease is slippery, that's because you've never been trapped in one of these Black Rock sinks!"

With our business at Gerlach thus completed, we headed north on the trail of a lost city, and the hoped fulfillment of a long dream.

After following the old Leadville road for about a dozen miles, we turned sharply into the desert, and five minutes later found us rolling soundlessly across the bland face of that great sink where thousands of years ago had lain the deep blue water of Lake Lahontan.

We were entering, now, a wide world—wide, and wild, and terribly big and empty! All around us stretched the pale magnificence of the Black Rock playa—a devil's dancefloor, 60 miles in length; a cream-colored void in which was visible not one sign of life,

neither plant nor animal, nor bird, nor insect; not even one greasewood, or a lone blade of salt grass! Whenever I cross this Black Rock sink, it is with the strange feeling of having been re-born into another era of geologic time.

The entire lake bed was our highway. Wheel tracks led off crazily, circled and reconverged. There were no road signs, or bridges, no guard rails, no gutter. There was no speed limit, no traffic officers, no traffic. As the sheriff had said, you paid your money and took your choice . . . and all the while, you sat a little tensely in your seat, and the cords in your neck grew a little tight as you watched for those treacherous soft areas of which you had been warned.

We bored into the northeast for a dozen miles, then bent to the northwest and the west; and, gradually, the slatelike surface of the dry lake bed was replaced by drift sand and scattered greasewood. Having bounced over the last rough hummock of the old beachline, we again turned north—now on a dirt road that paralleled the east base of the Nevada Calicos.

Thirty-one miles north of Gerlach we passed the old Jackson place; and here, as the sheriff had directed, we swung due east toward the Black Rock range. Seven miles across the unwrinkled face of the playa, another mile of bouncing over the rough hummocks of the easterly shoreline; and, again, we were heading into the north.

Torrents of water, pouring from tinder-dry canyons during this area's infrequent but violent storms, had cut the trail in a series of sharp, deep gashes. Some of these gullies required shovel work; most could be crossed with care, and low gear. There were stretches of knife-like rock, and gravel-filled washes, and pockets where powdery blow sand had drifted deeply over the trail. If it had been difficult to travel this road a century before, it was no less difficult today—it was still the same road—but we eased the cars through, at five miles an hour, and the miles wore away.

A smear of green tules and salt grass, vapory white steam rising from twin cauldrons of near-boiling water, a white-encrusted flat, and a long-deserted cabin built of old railroad ties, announced our arrival at Double Hot Springs. Here the wagon train had made camp on the night prior to the discovery.

Soon after leaving the hot springs, we began paralleling the Harlequin Hills—a gaudily-colored range that stretches along the horizon a few miles east of the trail.

My eyes were still searching those lonely canyons and bare ridges when Ed halted the pick-up; and when I had

coasted to a dusty stop behind him, I saw he was grinning.

"Over there—" he said, jerking a thumb toward the west. "What's that?"

Narrowing my eyes against the wind, I could make out a white stone up-thrust, like a broken fang; and all in a quick, incredulous flash, I knew it was an old mill chimney!

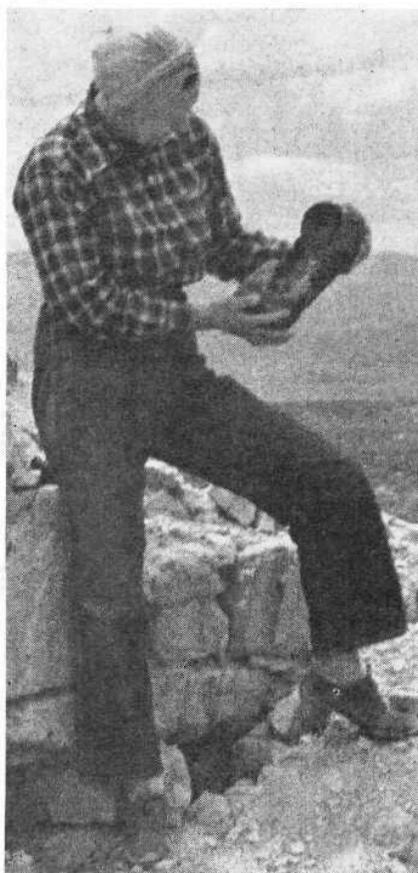
It was Hardin City!

Closer inspection revealed the ruins of two mills—neither one large or tall, but strangely imposing in that wide, empty land where no other man-made structure was visible. Situated about 100 yards apart, each of the ruins was perched on the lip of a low bank that dropped away to a clump of tules, a seeping spring, and a pond of chocolate-colored water huddled in the dead white somnolence of the flat.

Before we had time to examine the mills, we had made another discovery—a 90-year-old quicksilver flask! Half-buried in the white salt crust, the iron container was eaten deeply by corrosion and so fragile it crumbled at our touch.

And while we were still exulting over this find, Ed stumbled upon an old arrastra! In a copy of the *Humboldt Register* for 1865, I had read that Steve Bass was installing at Har-

*Author examines quicksilver flask found in mill ruins.*



din City one of these Mexican type ore grinders; but after all these years, I had never dared hope that we might find it!

The pit—about six feet in diameter, and lined by wooden planking—was refilled to the brim with blown sand; the rotted stump of the pivot post was still visible; the old grinding stones were still lying beside the pit; and, nearby, lay the flat paving stones with which that pit had been floored. Concentric lines, etched into their top plane by the circling boulders, left no question in our minds concerning the original use of those stones.

We established camp at the east edge of "town"—our campsite, an almost-limitless flatness encrusted with white mineral salts and sparingly dotted with small saltbrush.

In our prowlings of the following day, we found the ruins of the third mill. Largest of the trio, it was a vivid sort of structure built of black and red volcanic boulders, combined in some semblance of a color pattern. Sections of these walls were still standing to a height of ten feet.

Numerous low mounds, roughly squared, marked the sites where adobe or sod buildings had formerly stood, and melted away; and around these mounds we found old square nails and sun-purpled glass, a few bone buttons, and necks of green bottles—older and cruder in form than any we had seen before! We also found several graves, outlined with volcanic boulders, and with black basalt for markers. Time, and the sand-blasting wind, had erased whatever identification those markers once may have carried.

All the while, naturally, we were keeping sharp watch for the black "waxy material" that had inspired that long-ago excitement; but except for some black stratification in the Harlequin Hills to the east, we had seen nothing that remotely resembled the ore described.

"Candidly," said Ed, who has spent a good share of his lifetime prospecting the Nevada hills, "I don't think there was ever a pound of ore here! Non-metallies, maybe; not silver or gold . . ."

Nellie's faith in the Hardin treasure was still unshaken, but I sided with Ed. After all, there was plenty of evidence to uphold his theory, and not very much to support the rumor of silver's presence. We continued, however, to prospect the washes and flats; and by the time we left the Black Rock, I felt we had given the place a fair examination, and that Rossiter W. Raymond, Uncle Sam's mining statistician, had been right: There had never been any ore here, and Hardin City had been nothing but a swindle!