

## Hope is a Cave of Gold

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

Marble Mountain is but a dwarf compared to her sisters, rising a mere 13,200 feet in the shadow of Crestone Peak at the northernmost tip of the Great Sand Dunes National Park along the Sangre de Cristo Range in South-Central Colorado. If it's a marble tombstone you're going for, or just a sack of marbles, don't bother. Despite its name, Marble Mountain is but limestone.

But the mountain is home to another lure, a treasure-rich cavern. Indians centuries before the arrival of the white man believed it to be filled with gold but put their hopes aside because it was guarded by demons. But in the fifteenth century Spanish explorers arrived, translated the legend, kindled their own hope, and it became La Caverna del Oro.

In 1541 three hopeful Spanish monks from the Coronado expedition enslaved Indians to extract the gold. The Indians, fearing the demons rebelled, killing two of their masters. However, the third monk, De la Cruz, convinced them he had subdued the demons, and so they brought out vast amounts of gold and loaded it for him on pack mules. Then the Spaniard killed his slaves and led the mules and treasure back to Mexico, leaving only the demons behind.

That is the legend of La Caverna del Oro. It was thought to have been unexplored again for centuries until about 1900 when Elisha Horn discovered what was likely another entrance to the cave not far above the town of Westcliff. There she found a skeleton clad in Spanish armor with an arrow in his back. Painted on the hillside above was a faded old red cross. It remains faintly visible even today.

In the 1920's, a club led by a hopeful forest ranger explored the cave again. He had been told by an old Mexican woman of gold buried deep in the cavern. She could remember as a child being at the cave watching miners come out bearing loads of gold and claimed that some 500 to 700 feet beyond the entrance was an oaken door leading into the gold-rich Three Steps Mine.

The ranger's expedition explored deep into chambers and passages of the cave but found neither oaken doors nor gold. But they came out with other interesting items, including a two-hundred-year-old ladder and a hammer dating to the sixteen-hundreds. Lower on the mountain they found the ruins of an old fort and arrowheads scattered on the hillside.

In the century since, more hopeful attempts have been made, but no gold has ever been found in La Caverna del Oro, only old ropes, buckets, clay jugs and shovels, once even a human skeleton chained by the neck to a cavern wall.

The caves of Marble Mountain require a lot of crawling and only the first thirty feet are safe for amateurs. And that's if you ever find an entrance. So, go for the scenery, or go for the gold. But don't get your hopes up.