

1840 – Smith Strikes Gold while Searching for the Lost Pearl Boat of the Mojave

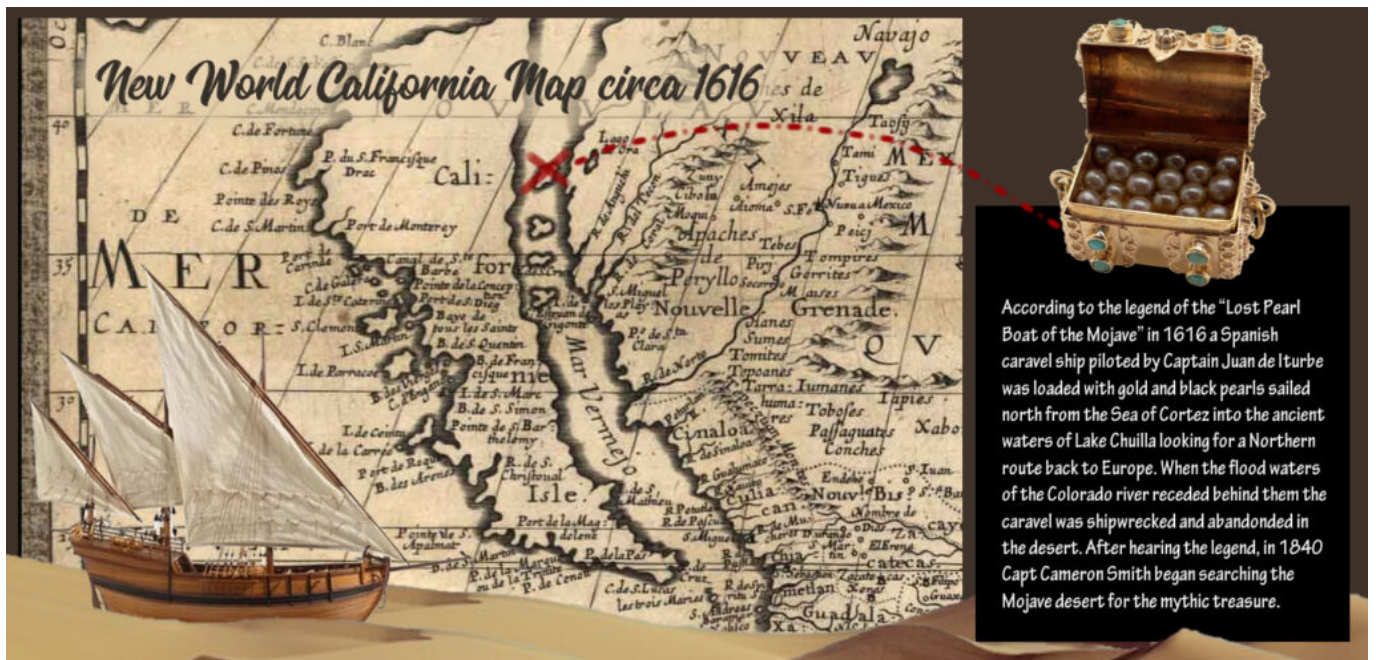
During his westward journey, Cameron Smith encountered tales of the “[Lost Pearl Boat of the Mojave](#).” According to this legend, in the 1600s, a Spanish caravel ship, captained by [Juan de Iturbe](#), was laden with gold and black pearls and was shipwrecked in what would eventually become the California desert. This improbable event occurred when Iturbe navigated north from the Sea of Cortez in Baja California, venturing into the ancient waters of [Lake Chuilla](#), while seeking a northern route to Europe. During the 1600s, California was believed to be an island, and Lake Cahuilla encompassed present-day Imperial and Coachella Valleys, reaching as far north as Indio, California, on the edge of the Coachella Valley near Palm Springs.

When the ship ran aground, the crew, along with most of its cargo, were abandoned, scattering into the unforgiving desert. Iturbe led his crew on a treacherous journey north across the desert and mountains, spanning some 350 miles until they reached the Spanish Mission in San Luis Obispo. Centuries later, as the floodwaters of the Colorado River receded and Lake Chuilla shrank to become the present-day Salton Sea, Iturbe’s ocean-going ship presumably lay buried in the sand, hundreds of miles from the nearest water source, deep within the Mojave Desert.

The legend of the lost ship was bolstered by [ancient petroglyphs in the Mojave](#) depicting a masted ship and indigenous stories of the *Great Bird of the Mojave*. For generations, these tales had been passed down among the native inhabitants of the desert, igniting speculation about the presence of ancient Spanish treasure hidden in the Mojave

Desert.

Upon hearing these intriguing stories, Smith decided to embark on a quest to discover the Lost Pearl Boat. With the guidance of local experts, he crisscrossed the low desert, particularly in the lower Colorado desert region of the Sonoran Desert now known as the Coachella Valley due to its proximity to the Salton Sea. However, after months of fruitless searching, Smith's enthusiasm waned.



Aware that Iturbe had journeyed northward after the shipwreck, to expand his search Smith ventured north traversing the Dos Palmas mountains into the true Mojave desert through [Chiraco Summit](#). Smith reasoned it was possible that Iturbe sailed further up the Colorado River delta that would have extended much further north in ancient times. It was there that he enlisted the assistance of an extraordinary guide who would forever change the course of his life.

The guide's name was Malika, a strikingly beautiful California Native American from the [Hutto-pah Mojave tribe](#). Malika became enamored with the handsome young Smith, and together they spent countless days and nights exploring the Mojave. Despite their relentless efforts, the elusive ship and its buried

treasure remained beyond their reach. One by one, members of Smith's expedition withdrew, leaving only Smith and Malika to continue their solitary desert exploration.

In an unexpected twist of fate, while searching for water to replenish their supplies, Malika led Smith to a concealed oasis nestled within a remote mountain range. Here, Smith did not uncover the buried treasure he sought; instead, he discovered a mountain oasis blessed with flowing water, enveloped by palm trees and lush desert vegetation, a true sanctuary amidst the Mojave Desert's harsh terrain. Smith and Malika decided to establish a camp within the oasis, where they could rest and prepare to continue their search.

Then, in a remarkable turn of events, while exploring the caves on the northern end of the plateau, Smith made an astonishing discovery—a vein of pure gold. Smith knew he had struck it rich both in life and in love. Guarding their secret closely, Smith and Malika chose to return to the oasis and establish a settlement on the plateau, which would later become known as the town of Oasis Palms.