

The tiny Peeples Valley schoolhouse quickly fills to capacity, even though a steady rain has turned the parking lot into mud. The unexpected size of the crowd has momentarily unnerved the historical society organizers of today's lecture. But the topic, nearby Rich Hill, proves as irresistible as the lure of the gold that made the mountain legendary.

Elly Loftin stands in the front of the classroom like a patient teacher waiting for her unruly charges to settle down. The dusty black cowboy hat that is her trademark corrals shoulder-length silver hair. The laugh lines around her eyes deepen as she smiles. The room grows quiet.

Loftin begins by apologizing that she is the one who will be delivering the lecture. After a mere 30-odd years on Rich Hill, she calls herself the new kid on the block. "I'm not the history of Rich Hill," she says. "I just try to keep track of it." For the next two hours, Elly entertains the group with photos of the mountain's rocky, desert landscape and stories about eccentric prospectors with names like Rattlesnake Bill and Crazy Willie who eked out a living on the gold they found there.

For more than 100 years, tales of Rich Hill, located in the Weaver Mountains about 13 miles north of Wickenburg, have assumed mythical proportions. In 1863, members of a scouting party sent to retrieve pack animals were said to have found gold nuggets the size of potatoes just lying exposed on the hilltop. Since then, the population and lawlessness of the area have risen and fallen with the price of gold.

These days, most of the prospectors on Rich Hill are recreational club members who camp in luxury RVs and wield metal detectors. The Lost Dutchman's Mining Association led the way when it bought the ghost town of Stanton, at the base of Rich Hill, in 1978. The LDMA restored the three historic buildings there — a hotel, an opera house and a store — and opened the town as a campground for members to use for recreational gold prospecting. It was a new idea.

In the mid-1980s, Elly Loftin started her own club, which became the 24 K Gold Hunters. Several other clubs followed. But Loftin owned claims on Rich Hill long enough to know the "old boys." She collected their stories and photos, and has become an unofficial keeper of the lore.

When Loftin arrived at Rich Hill in 1977, a surge in gold prices contributed to a general lawlessness, and rival factions were at war.

"I got down to what is now Decision Corner, and the open pit mine had guards on it," she remembers. "They looked like the Aqua Vella man, with black turtlenecks and black caps, and it was hot, but there they were. And *Uzis!* I went back and took a turn north, and I just got on that road when there was gunfire in front of me, *whiz, whiz, whiz.*"

"I slammed on my brakes and thought, *I'm going to get out of here.* Then someone rode over from this side with a horse and went [Elly gestures someone waving her on], and someone rode over from this side and went [she waves her hand again], and I thought, *well, I don't see white flags, but I guess it will be OK.* I drove through and the minute I got through, the gunfire resumed. That was my introduction to Rich Hill."

Elly thought once she got out, she'd never look back. But after a few days on the mountain she decided it was so beautiful she never wanted

to leave. She bought the historic Devil's Nest claims, located at the heart of Rich Hill, and lived on them for three years.

Being gregarious and curious, Elly got to know most of her neighbors. One of her favorites was a man the locals called Rattlesnake Bill, who lived in a stone powder house not much bigger than a walk-in closet. He claimed to share it with 14 rattlesnakes. Bill eventually moved to Wickenburg, where he died. Elly likes to say he was struck. And he was. By a car.

Then there was Crazy Willie. "When I first came out here, everybody told me to stay away from Crazy Willie 'cause he'll kill ya," Elly remembers. "So I went right over to meet him. It was toward evening and the sun was getting low. The screens in his house were dusty and I could see his face behind it and it looked cadaverous; he was very thin, and it looked like a *skull* was talking. He called me by name and said, 'Elly, are you going to just stand there or come in and have coffee?'"

Clyde Thomason is one of the "old boys." A small man with narrow eyes and a warm handshake, Clyde's parents were placer miners who lived on Rich Hill. Clyde is old enough to have known the Lucero brothers, who were celebrated for killing Charlie Stanton in 1886. Stanton was the unpopular storekeeper for whom the town was named. When he knew the Luceros, Clyde was very young and the brothers were old enough to suffer from failing eyesight. Clyde used to trail behind them, returning the nuggets they had dropped.

Clyde left Rich Hill at age 15, after an accident with a mule took his leg, though his parents remained until their deaths. He inherited their claims, but sold them years ago. Now he lives in nearby Congress, where he runs a karaoke business with his wife, Jacquie, whom he married in 2008.

On a warm fall day, Elly picks up Clyde for an errand. Johnboy, a man who once worked for Clyde, had recently died. Clyde paid for the cremation and agreed to scatter his ashes where Johnboy lived on Clyde's claims.

Elly drives her green Jeep, easily spotted with its 24 K Club emblem and license plate that reads "AU BUGGY," AU being the chemical designation for gold. Word had reached Elly that Clyde had gotten into a scuffle with a 68-year-old man named Ray. Clyde threw the first punch. Although Elly is the younger of the two, the news of her friend picking a fight against a much younger opponent roused her maternal instincts.

"At 85, you might want to hang up your boxing gloves," she scolds him. "I told Ray if he ever knocked you down again, I'd come after him with a ball bat, and I would, too."

The Jeep bounces jarringly past the ruins of the old stone house Clyde's mother and grandfather built in 1917 and comes to a rest in front of a small area covered with debris. It's hard to imagine that a home once stood there. It looks as if the shack were lifted *Wizard of Oz*-style, leaving nothing but a small, square footprint, flanked by a pair of paloverde trees and marked with rock, sun-bleached wood and rusted pipe.

Clyde stands uncertainly clutching a plastic bag between calloused, tobacco-stained fingers. Then he punctures the bag and pours. The wind blows the ashes like a comet's tail as he picks his way around the refuse.

When he's done, Clyde and Elly stand together in silence. Elly suggests a prayer.

"I don't say prayers," Clyde says.

"That's OK. We're going to say one anyway."

Clyde begins with the only prayer he knows.

"No, that's a table grace," Elly corrects gently.

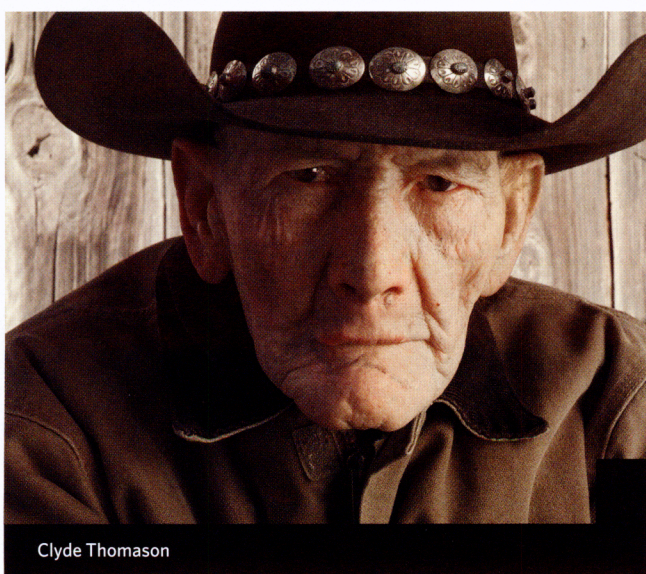
"Dear Father," Elly says, "it's Clyde and Elly, saying goodbye to Clyde's friend and helper, Johnboy. We pray that he is peacefully at sleep, waiting for you to come and get him."

"Lord, take care of John," Clyde adds.

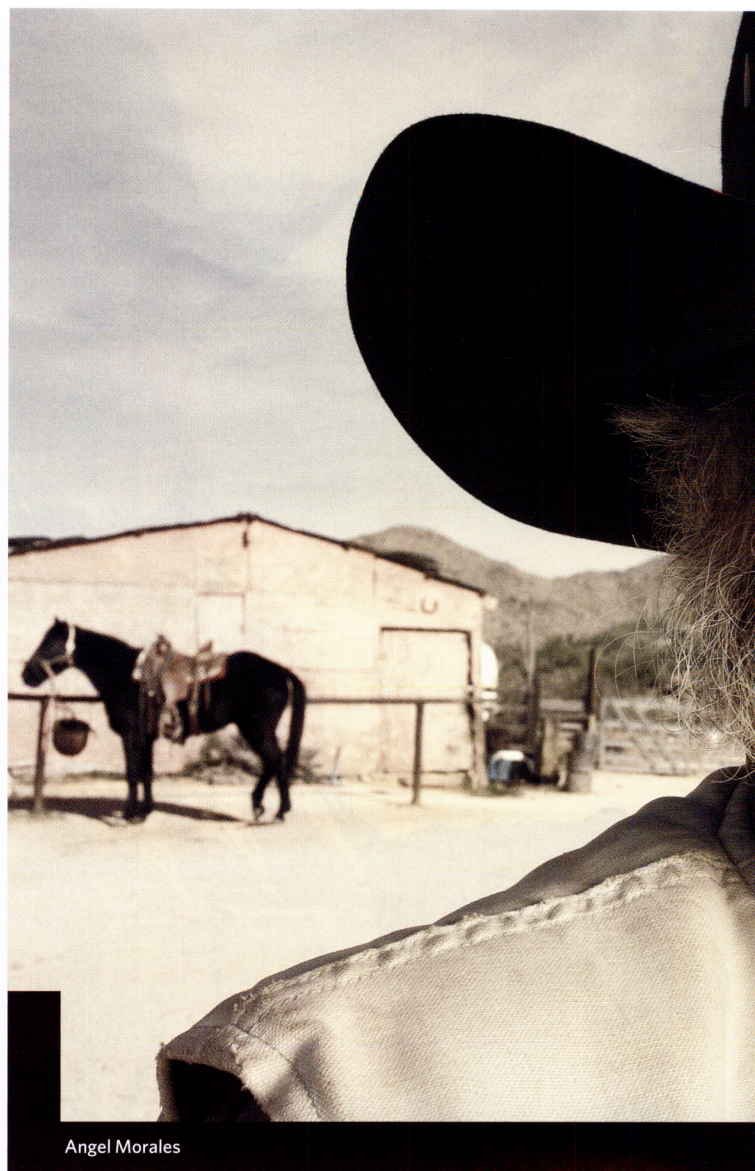
"Amen," Elly says. "See, you can pray."

Clyde shakes his head wonderingly as he climbs back into the Jeep. "I worked with him for 14 years, and didn't know a thing about him."

It wasn't unusual for people on Rich Hill to keep to themselves. Crazy Willie did. His solitude and otherworldly appearance contributed to wild rumors about the prospector. He was crazy, people said. He was a killer. But Elly and Dan Edwards knew better. Originally from Alabama, Dan lived on Rich Hill off and on since the mid-1950s. Dan is tall and lanky, with a gun perpetually attached to his hip and a voice that retains the molasses-slow cadence of his youth. He lived across the creek from Willie before Willie lost his battle with cancer.



Clyde Thomason



Angel Morales

On a clear day, Elly and Dan ride out to see what's become of Willie's place. Dan's shack is gone. Just the border of four stone walls still stand. Willie's cabin remains, though Elly and Dan shake their heads at the sight of it. It doesn't look like the same place. The little wind generator that used to be on the roof is gone, Elly notes. So is the entire front porch.

"Do you remember he had a preacher's license on the wall?" Dan asks. "I tell you what I think. Personal opinion. I think wild Willie ordered that out of one of those magazines or something."

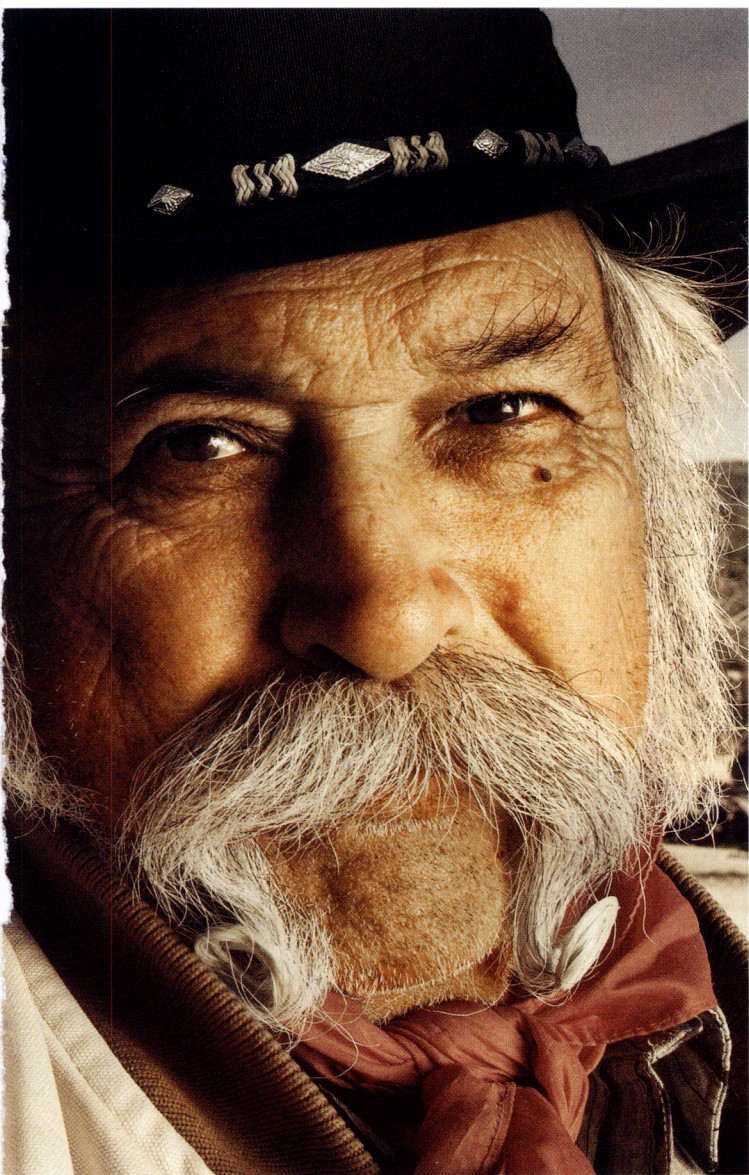
"He did," Elly says, chuckling. "It said, 'Universal Life.'"

Elly points to several refrigerators lying tipped over on the ground outside. They were full of oozing dynamite, she remembers. The bomb squad almost burned the place to the ground getting rid of it.

"Coolerator," Elly says, reading the chrome script. "How long do you think since they made those?"

Gesturing up the hill, Elly points out where Willie's orchard stood. "This was the garden," she says. "He had little chairs out there. We'd go out there and sit and drink coffee and visit. The garden had wires over it. Willie said, 'I don't want to kill the rabbits,' so he'd just kick them out."

Dan points to another area and chuckles. "All up there was wild Willie's private vineyard, where he made his wine," he says. "He got me high a lot of days passing by his house. If I could slip past his house going up that way prospecting, I was in great shape. If he saw me,



though, he was hollerin', 'Come here.'"

Inside, Willie's tiny cabin looks like it's been ransacked. A dirty tatter of a curtain hangs from a dusty window. A boot lies orphaned on the floor, next to a wreck of a couch with rusted springs.

"Oh, boy," Elly says. "What a trashy mess."

"Yeah, well, every time you move out, you know, they've got to look for the gold," Dan says.

"Tore his bed apart, threw his clothes on the floor, looking for gold!" Elly says. "What a bunch of greedy, dummy people."

"When he lived here this cabin was so neat. His stove was there, remember? It was so old and pretty. They took that little table and chairs, too. He had curtains on the windows. Even his little light bulb is gone. It came right down into the middle of the room, and he'd read there by that light."

"He started playing the lottery when it came out," Dan recalls. "Every week he had the same numbers, I mean *religiously*. He didn't miss a time. He never won."

"I don't think he would have lived differently," Elly says. "Willie was a good, good person — just different, is all."

"Hell, if he wanted to be rich, he wouldn't have been a prospector."

"Right," Elly agrees. She stops and turns to Dan. "It would be nice to see Willie one more time, wouldn't it?"

On New Year's Eve at the Arrowhead Bar in Congress, Elly wears a paper tiara in place of her trademark hat. She's come in hoping Clyde is working, but he's not. AC/DC blares from the jukebox.

Patrons file by Elly's table in a steady stream. Some sport 24 K Club ball caps. Others are locals. Everyone gets a hug. Elly takes a club member's hand in both of hers and says she hopes this is his best year ever.

She points to a spot in the wall. "There's a bullet hole there," she says.

In the old days, she explains, there was a sign that said to check your weapons at the bar. And, mostly, people did. But every now and then, someone would keep a gun hidden and there would be shooting. Nothing too serious. It's a lot calmer these days, she says, but that's not to say there aren't fights from time to time.

A year earlier, Elly watched a young cowboy get jumped by seven men she'd never seen before. When she couldn't get anyone to intervene, she jumped in herself. In the confusion that followed, she walloped a man with her sandal only to find out that he was "one of the good guys," who was trying to help. Elly chuckles at the memory of it.

A few minutes later, the guitar player in the band that night walks in. Elly reminds him of the incident and they share a laugh. "I wish I could remember what I was playing," he says.

Elly smiles and sips from her drink, Baileys on the rocks. In a few hours, she will be 70.

"It bothered me for a while," she says of her impending birthday. "But not anymore."

Meanwhile, the old boys continue to slip away, taking with them their way of life. Just a month ago, another of the old boys was found unconscious. He was taken to the hospital and put on life support. In a few days, her good friend Angel Morales, whose family homesteaded a ranch near Rich Hill, will undergo heart surgery.

In a few weeks, even Elly will sell her claims and disband her club.

Dan Edwards insists the old ways were better. Elly isn't so sure. "It's a lot calmer and nicer out there," she told the group at the schoolhouse the previous summer. "The adventurous side misses the old days, but the common sense side says this is really better, and it is."

"There have been some sad moments and some happy moments," she concluded. "But what a wonderful thing to be here." ■

When You Go

DIRECTIONS: From Wickenburg, take U.S. Route 93 approximately 6 miles to State Route 89. Continue north on SR 89 for about 10 miles to Congress. Turn right at Stanton Road (Yavapai County Road 109) and continue for about 6 miles to the ghost town of Stanton.

TRAVEL ADVISORY: Stanton Road, which runs from Congress to Stanton, is a heavily graded dirt road, drivable with a passenger car, but washboarded in spots. Beyond that, roads can become rough and conditions vary. Aside from Stanton, there are no restroom facilities. The privately owned town of Stanton welcomes visitors, though only LDMA members are allowed to camp there. Much of the land around Rich Hill is owned by the Bureau of Land Management, though there are pockets of state land and private property. Most of the BLM land is open to the public, though the mineral rights are privately owned. You must have permission from the owner of the mining claim to remove rocks or minerals. An MVD off-road decal is required for ATVs and other off-road vehicles.

INFORMATION: Bureau of Land Management, 623-580-5500 or www.blm.gov; Lost Dutchman's Mining Association, 800-551-9707 or www.goldprospectors.org.