

# "One Piece at a Time"

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Looking north towards *Weaver's Needle*, as seen from Fremont Saddle, in the Superstition Mountains, Arizona

I'll never forget my first sight of the Needle. *Weaver's Needle*, that is. I had just topped the pass in Fremont Saddle, high in the Superstition Mountains, heart still pounding and sweat drenching my clothes, after a quick and grueling hike of several miles. There in front of me loomed one of the most awesome views I had ever seen: a stark wilderness of rock pinnacles, boulders, and chasms, all connected in a great maze of color and crisscrossing patterns. That it was bristling with cacti, ocotillos, and thickets of other thorny shrubs even made it more attractive. Attractive, that is, in the way a flame is attractive to a wandering moth. And there in the midst of it all towered a gigantic rock spire that seemed to be announcing, "come on in, if you dare."

For this was the Superstition Wilderness -- a place that has over the years pulled in its share of wanderers, some of whom never came out. I had heard of these mountains when I was young and growing up elsewhere, and I remembered the tale of the *Lost Dutchman's Gold*. Standing there in that saddle, amidst the midday heat and the sweet, tarry smell of Creosote bushes, I started thinking about the legendary stash that reputedly lay out there in front of me --

somewhere, according to the story, within the shadow of that spire. The thing about the Superstitions is that once you see the landscape there, from a vantage point like where I stood, you know the impossibility of ever finding that hoard of yellow metal, and the sheer futility of even looking for it. Yet one thing I did know. If I ever did stumble upon it, I would probably start going on hikes in those rugged valleys a lot. My friends would probably think I had become some kind of exercise nut: "What's with him? All of a sudden he's a hiking maniac!"

You know, I wouldn't tell a soul what I had discovered, and on every trip there, with my day pack on my back, I would walk out with the treasure, one piece at a time.

One piece at a time. That's geology for you. It's not the big violent events that shape the Earth, like earthquakes and exploding volcanoes. Sure, they provide the foundation of things. It's the erosion, however -- one little sand grain today, one tomorrow -- that sculpts the land. Within a few million years, things start looking pretty different. That's what made *Weaver's Needle*.

If you have never seen the Needle, you don't have to do the long slog up the Peralta Trail in

the Wilderness area to Fremont Saddle. You can see it from the Beeline Highway, as you drive back to Phoenix from Payson (look off to the south or southeast, into the distant Superstition Mountains), or you can see it towering above other peaks in the Superstitions (look to the north), as you drive towards Superior or Globe from Apache Junction.

Some twenty-five million years ago, give or take a few, a horrendous series of volcanic eruptions took place east of present day Apache Junction. These explosions were not like anything you are familiar with from today's world. A crater approximately *ten miles* in diameter opened up, and in several sequences blasted many cubic miles of white hot ash into the skies. The ash particles then fell back to the ground and fused to form the rocks we see today in the Superstition Mountains. These events were repeated nearby millions of years later, several more times, adding to the layers of rock in the vicinity.

But what made Weaver's Needle into the striking monumental shape now seen was not vulcanism *per se*. In other places in the west, there are lofty vertical stone structures known as volcanic necks -- the most notable of these include Shiprock, New Mexico, and Devil's Tower, in Wyoming. You can see others in the area of Kayenta, Arizona.

True volcanic necks are formed when softer rock of a volcanic cone erodes away from around once fluid but now hardened rock left as filling in an old volcano's main conduit. Weaver's Needle is not such a neck, though it is a common impression around central Arizona that it is.

Weaver's Needle, by the way, is named after one *Powell Weaver*, who wandered into Arizona into 1831, prospecting, trapping, and making a living as a scout. He liked the more Spanish-sounding name *Paulino*, which English-speakers then morphed into *Pauline*. Many colorful place names in America, especially the in the West, owe their derivation to preoccupations of the early inhabitants of the surrounding areas. Some were rather suggestive. Think of those lonely French fur trappers and the *Grand Tetons* (aka "Sweater Girl Mountains").

Maybe it wasn't Pauline Weaver's sewing equipment that prompted this designation.

What formed the monument to Mr. Weaver was (and is) erosion. The gently rolling, wildly fractured blankets of hardened volcanic ash now lying across the Superstitions have eroded *from the sides inward*, leaving in this case the impressive pinnacle so often photographed by everyone that ventures into its shadow, whether they have gold fever or not.

Look at the picture and see the barely discernable horizontal layering, especially visible on the vertical rock. That rock is eroding sideways, *one piece at a time*.

--- Richard Allen

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