

Estimated 100,000 abandoned mines are in state, but 4 out of 5 haven't been found

By Chris McCrory

CRONKITE NEWS

PHOENIX — After he started hallucinating, John Waddell began to believe he would die. He had fallen 100 feet to the bottom of an abandoned gold mine in western Maricopa County, leaving him with a broken leg and rope-burned hands.

“It’s like a black cloud that’s a little stringy, and these figures were coming out of this little cloud: It almost looked like animals,” he recalled during an October news conference at Banner-University Medical Center in Phoenix. “They were going around and

around inside the mine.

“That was kind of freaky. If I stayed down there, I knew I was going to die.”

Waddell, 60, survived three days in El Tigre mine, fighting off rattlesnakes and praying somebody would look for him. He had explored the mine, which is on his property near Aguila, for decades, hoping to find gold still glittering in the dark tunnels.

He’s among potentially thousands of people — often spurred by curiosity, greed or dumb luck — who seek out or stumble into Arizona’s vast store of mines abandoned by long-

dead prospectors.

The state has an estimated 100,000 abandoned mines, according to the Arizona State Mine Inspector’s Office. However, officials have only identified about 19,000 of them, and they’ve secured even fewer. As more people move to and visit Arizona — many eager to explore the state’s more remote lands — the chances of coming across one of these hazardous mines only increases.

“We run into new mines every day,” said Laurie Swartzbaugh, deputy

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