



*Insect galls on Scrub Oak (**Quercus turbinella**). Such **Quercus** "nutgalls" figured prominently in the most flagrant case of desert land fraud perpetrated in North America during the Nineteenth Century.*

Land Fraud and Nutgalls. Visitors to the Boyce Thompson Southwestern Arboretum at Superior may want to walk out on the "High Trail" where *Quercus turbinella* is native to examine these plants for insect galls. There is some almost unbelievable history associated with such galls. Insect galls of *Quercus* have been used for centuries in medicine and manufacture under the designation "nutgalls." During the last century James Addison Reavis used nutgalls of *Quercus* in an elaborate hoax to lay claim to a vast tract of land covering the better part of southern Arizona.

Reavis was good enough as a scholar to know that old Spanish land grants in the new world had been written using an ink made from *Quercus* nutgalls and rusty nails. He practiced making such ink and writing with it using a pen fashioned from the quill of a bird's feather.

He visited archives in Mexico City and Madrid, Spain, posing as a scholar conducting research. After the keepers of the archives began to trust him they would sometimes leave the "harmless scholar" alone with old deed books and dusty documents. Upon finding an unused page, Reavis would rip it from the book in secret, or simply remove it if not bound, and hide it in his briefcase. Then in the privacy of his own quarters and with the carefully prepared *Quercus* gall ink, he would painstakingly imitate the old Spanish court calligraphy to forge a document which in some way supported a fictitious land grant to a fictitious Peralta family. On the next trip to the archive he would return the sheet to its original position and conve-

niently "discover" the defect in the volume, suggesting to the archivist that such a priceless volume should be repaired or rebound. Each new document supported the previous forgeries.

Reavis adopted a young girl and forged an elaborate chain of documents to show that she was a descendent of the Peralta family and heir to the land grant. As she grew up she had no reason to believe that she was not, indeed, "the Baroness of Arizona" as the documents forged by Reavis indicated. Eventually Reavis married her and adopted the name "James Peralta-Reavis" for himself.

Reavis had perpetrated the fraud so cleverly, availing himself of almost forgotten knowledge concerning *Quercus* nutgalls, that he was received by the royal court of Spain as the "Baron of Arizona" and had an audience before Queen Victoria of England as such. The United States government recognized pre-existing land grants in the territories transferred from Mexico after the Mexican War and the Gadsden Purchase. Grudgingly, residents of southern Arizona began paying rent to the Baron for land which they had previously thought was theirs.

The wealthy Silver King Mine near Superior paid royalties for every ounce of silver extracted and even the Southern Pacific Railroad was hoodwinked into paying rent for every mile of track that had been laid down! Readers of this almost unbelievable but true story can pick up a fact sheet at the Arboretum for more details on the Peralta Hoax and to learn how the fraud was discovered.