

THE TREASURE OF OAK ISLAND

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SEPTEMBER 1965



THE TREASURE OF OAK



ISLAND

Is it a myth or a \$30 million fact?

by BETTY O'HANLON

with assistance from BASIL DEAKIN

ROBERT RESTALL USED to challenge death several times a day when he rode his spluttering motorcycle round and over and round inside the "Globe of Death" at a side-show at Blackpool, England. To give the customers a greater thrill, another motorcyclist sped in the opposite direction. The two machines looped in and out, missing each other by inches, the riders travelling the wall in defiance of gravity by reason of their speed and the accompanying centrifugal force.

Taking part in this hair-raising show was a young English girl who had been more familiar with the music in the Winter Gardens Theatre, beneath the famous Blackpool tower, where she had been a ballet dancer, than with this cacophony of engines and hurtling machines. But Mildred was the wife of Robert Restall and as such accompanied her husband through many countries. The dare-devil Canadian rider from Hamilton, Ontario, and his motorcycling stunts was billed on both sides of the Atlantic—from Toronto to Berlin, from Blackpool to Miami.

In more recent years, certainly since 1959, an older, greyer, but still wiry and active Robert Restall has been facing another kind of danger; the underground probing for buried treasure on Oak Island, near Chester, Nova Scotia.

After six years of weary search, of digging and pumping, of improvising and living the hard life of a prospecting pioneer, in which the only excitement through dreary months and years was the hope and expectation, but never the certainty, of finding a rumoured \$30 million in buried gold, the end came in tragedy. It came in August this year to Robert Restall and his son, Robert junior, aged 24, and to two other men whose belief in the legend of Captain Kidd's buried treasure led them to gasping suffocation at the bottom of a black, waterlogged pit. And for Mrs. Mildred Restall, who now turns her back on Oak Island, where comforts have been few and life rigorous and unrewarding, there is double bereavement without the satisfaction that she has shared her husband's dream of finding pirate's gold.

Robert Restall senior was one of a legion of men from many countries who have caught the "treasure fever" that is apparently endemic to Oak Island. He first went there on vacation in 1955. Four years later, after long negotiation with the island's owner, M. R. Chappell, of Sydney, Nova Scotia, Mr. Restall returned to the island with his wife and two sons.

They converted a toolshed into a small cabin and lived a pioneer's life while the task of searching and excavating went on. They were aided by various people who had faith in Restall's quest and were willing to back him financially and help

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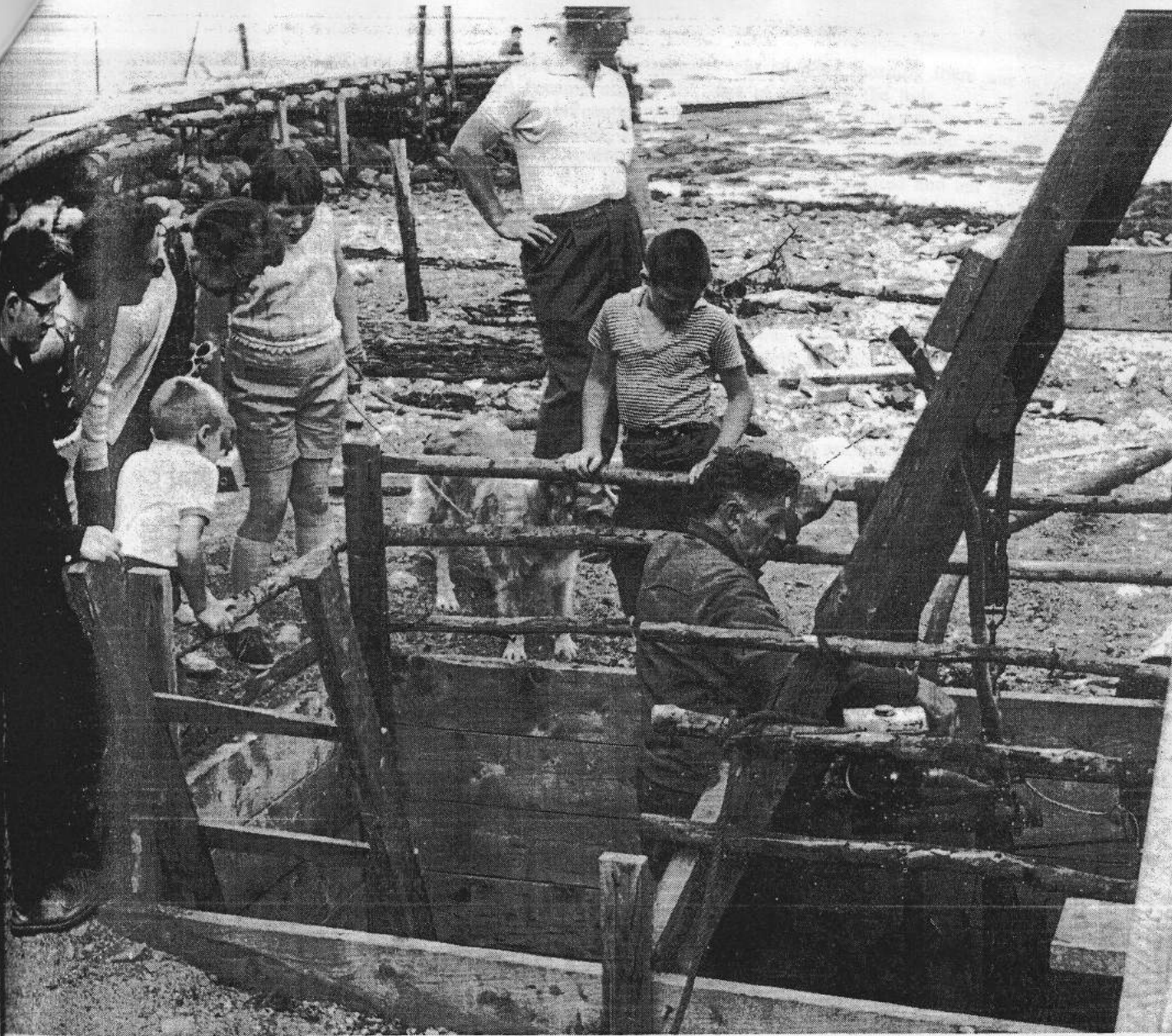
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Tourists gather to watch Robert Restall, who died recently in his attempt to recover the legendary treasure of Oak Island, whilst he manipulates a pump at the head of the shaft leading to the underground workings.

him physically. When Restall's lease from Mr. Chappell expired at the end of 1963, it was extended for a further two years.

Millionaires from Texas and elsewhere and poorer men too—miners, businessmen, professors and many others—have believed with varying confidence in the reality of treasure buried under the island's soil. Two of those who did so died with the Restalls when poisonous gas filled the bottom of the working shaft. They were Karl Greaser, of Massapequa, New York, a partner in the project; and 16-year-old Cyril Hiltz, of nearby Martin's Point.

Restall and his fellow prospectors were confident that they were within feet of final success. Even on the day of his death, he was sure that only a few feet of earth separated him from a prize which, even after paying his partners, the island's owner and the Nova Scotian

government (which could claim a percentage of any cache as treasure trove) he estimated at \$7 million.

The persistence of this enduring belief in the Oak Island treasure, despite the confusing and circumstantial origins of the legend and the lack of success on the part of generations of treasure seekers, is remarkable. And there is little sign of it evaporating, despite August's four-fold tragedy.

The owner, Mr. Chappell, appalled by the deaths, has said he has not yet made up his mind whether to allow excavation to continue when the present lease expires at the end of this year.

On the other side of the Atlantic, a team of Danish engineers who first planned to look for the treasure in 1963, greeted the news of the tragedy by announcing that they had "top secret" equipment which they would bring to

Oak Island if they could secure the prospecting rights from Mr. Chappell. And one of the survivors of the accident said: "I don't see why this accident should stop us."

It is doubtful whether the long line of men who have crossed to the island from nearby Chester, there to dig and sweat and come away, saddened and poorer, has been halted.

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The line began one summer day in 1795 when three boys, Jack Smith, Daniel McGinnis, or McInnis, and Anthony Vaughan sailed their boat to the island where they discovered an oak tree standing near the shore with one limb broken off about fifteen feet above the ground. The limb was scarred along its upper side. Beneath was a depression in the ground some thirteen feet across. To the three young boys this discovery took on a



"Pirates had buried a treasure beneath the tree."

romantic significance; pirates had buried a treasure beneath the tree, and the scars on the limb had been made by a ship's block and tackle used to lower the heavy gird into the hole.

With high hopes and armed with picks and shovels, the boys returned to the island next morning to start the digging that has continued off and on up to the present day. The soil appeared to them to have been dug up before as it was softer than the surrounding ground, and before nightfall their shovels struck wood. Feverishly they worked to uncover what they knew must be a wooden chest. It proved to be a layer of spruce and oak logs without nails or fastenings of any kind. When the boys lifted it out they found only more earth beneath. Convinced now that they were on the track of a buried treasure they worked all summer. They had unearthed two more log platforms by the time they had reached a depth of thirty feet, and realizing that they could go no further without financial help they abandoned the work until spring.

Before they left the island that year the boys, standing around the hole they had dug, made a solemn vow that they would stick together and work to recover the treasure they were so sure lay buried beneath their feet.

They kept that vow as long as they lived, although they eventually signed away most of their rights to the treasure for the needed financing. Still far from fame and fortune, and soon young no longer, their hopes must have dimmed at times as they remembered their vow taken so many years ago; long years that saw high hope and bitter disappointment, and struggles to interest capital in their venture.

Financing did not come easily, but they finally enlisted the support of a young physician from Truro, Nova Scotia, Dr.

Lynds, who maintained a lifelong interest in the venture, and became one of its leading exponents. Other influential Nova Scotians later lent their support, and one of these, Frederick Blair, became so intrigued by the treasure that he turned down a chance to run for the Canadian Parliament in order to continue the search.

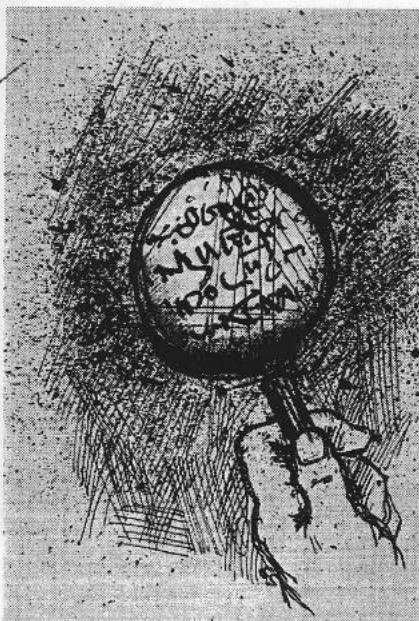
The work was abandoned many times over the years, but digging progressed gradually as the rumour of buried treasure spread, and new expeditions were organized. As the hole deepened and widened it was shored up with timbers, and more long platforms were found, along with several layers of a tropical fibre resembling sisal. Each time hope flared, and then died as only more earth was found beneath.

As the years rolled on Smith, McGinnis and Vaughan all built homes, married and raised families. Vaughan built his house on the nearby mainland, but Smith and McGinnis built theirs on Oak Island so as to be even closer to their beloved treasure. As their children grew up they too became obsessed with the idea of the treasure they felt so sure of finding.

Smith's house was used over the years as headquarters for the treasure hunters as one expedition followed another. He and McGinnis and Vaughan all lived to see the pit deepened to ninety-five feet, and Smith built a fine new house in expectation of the great wealth that was soon to be his.

At the ninety-five foot level the workers found a thin slab of stone, three feet long by eighteen inches wide with peculiar markings that no one could decipher. The stone was removed, and work stopped for the weekend. There could be no digging on the Sabbath in Nova Scotia.

They "found a thin slab of stone . . . with peculiar markings that no one could decipher."



On Monday morning there was sixty feet of water in the hole.

All efforts at bailing proved useless. In an attempt to drain the pit another pit was dug alongside. This went down to a depth of one hundred and ten feet, and a horizontal cut was made through to the "money-pit", as the original shaft came to be called. As might have been foreseen, the second pit flooded also, and as the capital had all been spent the work was again abandoned for many years.

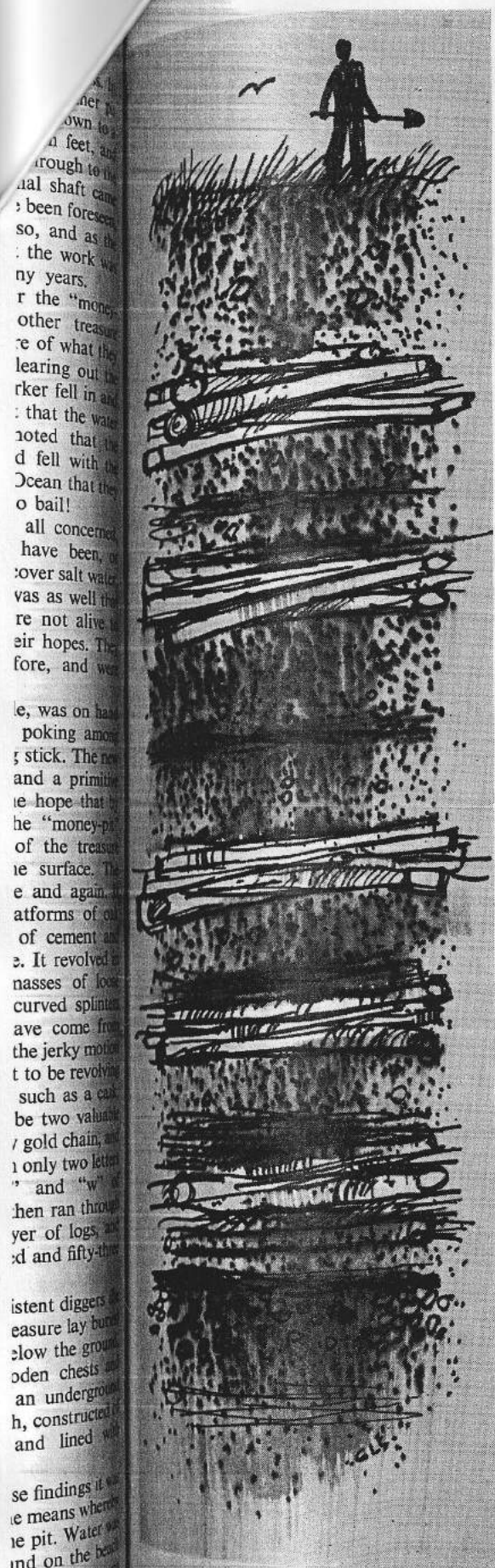
It was forty years after the "money-pit" first flooded that other treasure hunters became fully aware of what they were up against. While clearing out the pit one day a careless worker fell in and found to his astonishment that the water was salt. Then it was noted that the water in the pit rose and fell with the tides. It was the Atlantic Ocean that they were trying so earnestly to bail!

This was a surprise to all concerned, although why it should have been, or why it took so long to discover salt water, passes belief. Perhaps it was as well that Smith and McGinnis were not alive to see this latest blow to their hopes. They had died some time before, and were buried on the island.

Vaughan, old and feeble, was on hand for the 1849 expedition, poking among the ruins with his walking stick. The new group brought to the island a primitive boring apparatus with the hope that by drilling down through the "money-pit" some tangible evidence of the treasure might be brought to the surface. The drill was sent down time and again. It went through several platforms of oak and spruce logs, layers of cement and more of the tropical fibre. It revolved in what appeared to be masses of loose metal, and brought up curved splinters that were thought to have come from the outside of a cask. By the jerky motion of the drill it was thought to be revolving against a curved surface such as a cask. There were also said to be two valuable clues: three links of a tiny gold chain, and a piece of parchment with only two letters that resembled the "i" and "w" of English script. The drill then ran through more cement, a final layer of logs, and at a depth of one hundred and fifty-three feet into solid rock.

To the weary but persistent diggers the answer was obvious; a treasure lay buried over one hundred feet below the ground, carefully packed in wooden chests and casks and protected by an underground vault some forty feet high, constructed of spruce and oak logs and lined with cement.

On the strength of these findings it was decided to try and find the means whereby the ocean poured into the pit. Water was seen to flow from the sand on the beach below the "money-pit" when the tide was low, so the workers started exploring there. They soon made a new discovery.



The "money-pit."

A narrow channel led up the beach and connected with the "money-pit" by a tunnel cutting through the land. Near the high-water mark this channel ended in five drains radiating outward from the main channel toward the sea. These drains were filled with stones and covered with several inches of eel grass and the same tropical fibre as that found in the "money-pit". Over all were the natural stones and gravel of the beach.

This construction acted as a giant sponge, controlling the flow of water at high tide, and allowing it to seep slowly into the tunnel at low tide. It led to the conclusion that whoever had buried the treasure did not expect to come back for it, unless the inscription on the stone found at the ninety-five foot level held the key to a secret water-gate that would control the flooding.

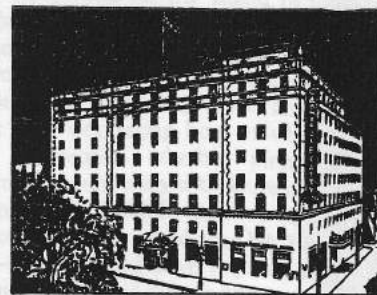
A belated search was made for the stone. It had been used in the fireplace of Smith's new home, and had later been taken to Halifax to have its inscription studied. No one had been able to decipher it, and the stone had last been seen in Creighton's bookshop in Halifax where it had been used to beat leather on. Its inscription had been worn off, and then the stone itself had disappeared and its secret, if any, with it.

In the meantime the syndicate's money had again been spent, and Vaughan had died. With all three of the original discoverers gone some of the spirit went from the treasure hunt, but a legend that has persisted for so many years does not die easily, and in 1896 another attempt was made. It too failed. Other expeditions tried in the early part of the 20th century, and more recent ones in 1951, 1955 and 1961. Each expedition over the years came with a new theory worked out for recovering the treasure, and for a few weeks the silence of the bay would be shattered by the roar of machinery and the blasting of powder. Each expedition left its mark on the island until the ground was riddled with bore-holes and torn up by bulldozers for yards around. The oak tree with its scarred limb was uprooted to make way for the machines and a power line was laid from the mainland. While the methods varied the results did not; collapsed tunnels, floods of water and final defeat. Whatever mysterious secret lay at the bottom of the "money-pit" remained there while the expeditions came and went and spent their money on a useless fight.



It is popularly supposed that Captain Kidd buried a treasure there, but there is not a shred of evidence to show that Captain Kidd buried a treasure anywhere, let alone on Oak Island. Pirates are seamen and cut-throats, not engineers.

It has also been suggested that ancient Norsemen buried their money and records



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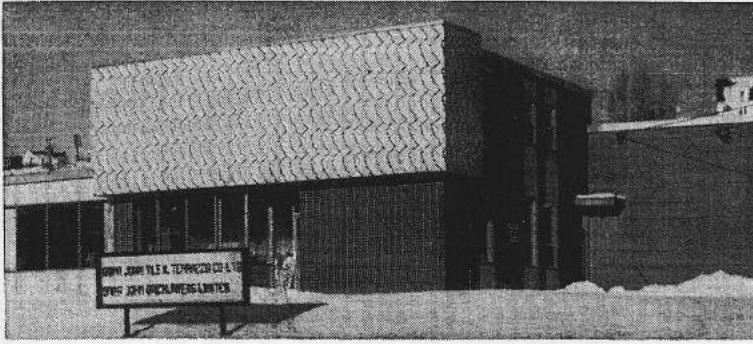


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while beleaguered on the island by Indians, but it seems less than likely that men on the Viking ships had either the earth-moving equipment or the engineering ability for such a project, and one cannot help wondering how or why any group of people, whether pirates or Norsemen, would bury a treasure in such a strange and difficult manner. A construction like that found on Oak Island, if man-made, would have required a tremendous amount of labour and engineering skill, and would have made it impossible for the people who buried the treasure ever to recover it.

There is also the suggestion that the treasure was planted by the defenders of Louisbourg. But why would they carry a treasure 340-odd miles by sea or land to bury it on Oak Island when the whole country was a virtual wilderness and they had their choice of burial sites, the closer to Louisbourg the better? And again: why bury it so that no one, themselves included, could ever recover it? They might just as well have taken it out to sea and chucked it overboard, thereby saving themselves an awful amount of work.

It is a fact that the legend of buried treasure on Oak Island started only because no one could think of any other explanation for the strange markings on the tree and on the ground. It is also a fact that, to my knowledge, no attempt was ever made to find an alternative explanation. Eyes seem to have been blinded to any evidence other than that pointing to buried treasure, and wishful thinking and imagination have taken over when a careful survey might long ago have exploded the whole myth.

After visiting Oak Island and studying its history I suspect that the whole mystery is due to a natural phenomenon; that the legendary treasure is non-existent and the mysterious people who were supposed to have buried it merely a figment of the imagination, and I do not believe that there is any evidence of human workmanship on Oak Island, prior, that is, to 1795.

There is, however, plenty of evidence to show that an agency other than man has been at work on Oak Island; namely the wind, the sea and an age-old upheaval of the earth's crust.

The south coast of Nova Scotia is extensively faulted. Many deep fissures running inland from the sea are common in that area. There is strong evidence of such a fault on Oak Island, extending along the artificial beach, the tunnel, and directly through the "money-pit". Over many thousands of years debris, washed in by high tides and heavy seas, could have accumulated in this fault until it has completely filled it up.

I believe that what the original discoverers found when they landed on Oak Island in 1795 was not a treasure site, but only a sink hole caused by slumping

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in of the debris in the fault. Several feet wide, this filling would be softer than the surrounding ground, and give the impression that it had been dug up before.

As the treasure hunters dug on down and found layers of logs, tropical fibres and cement, they assumed that these had been put there by man. Yet the logs were roughly laid without fastenings of any kind. They still had bark on them, and bore no signs of human workmanship. Storms and high tides, and fluctuations in the sea level relative to the land which took place from time to time over the years could have forced the logs into the fissure and arranged them roughly in layers.

The tropical fibre could have come from the Gulf Stream which passes very near Nova Scotia. Strong gales could have blown the fibre onto the shore, where it would become trapped in the fissure in the same way as the logs.

The cement, considered one of the most important clues, was probably a natural cement. This can be formed in the ideal conditions within a fault. Clay and angular pieces of stone can be bonded by a natural cementing agent such as iron oxide, which forms a breccia almost impossible to distinguish from cement. That found in the pit was sent to a laboratory for analysis, and the report that came back stated only that it "resembled man-made cement".

The treasure hunters jumped to some hasty conclusions from the curved splinters and the jerky action of the drill, but the action of the drill would be the same, and the splinters brought to the surface would be curved whether they came from the side of a cask or the side of a log.

The "masses of loose metal" the drill revolved in could as well have been masses of loose stones. No traces of gold or silver were ever found on the drill, with the exception of the three links of the gold chain, which cannot be produced today, nor can any eyewitnesses be found who claim to have seen them since. The parchment fragment is still in existence, but it could quite easily have blown into the pit, or been dropped in by a member of a previous expedition. Or, and this could account for the gold chain as well, it could have been planted by a prankster from the town of Chester on the mainland. There are rumours to the effect that the people of Chester, who never believed in the treasure anyhow, have more than once amused themselves by dropping "evidence" in the "money-pit".

It was thought that the removal of the flat stone at the ninety-five-foot level had caused the flood of water into the "money-pit". This assumption was made, as earlier pointed out, forty years after the "money-pit" first flooded, because someone remembered the markings on the stone. And when we consider the markings, they could have been other

than human writing. Possibly they were a series of tracks left by a worm eons ago when the stone was soft mud, or scratches left by a glacier, or a freak of crystallization. Graphite in solution, for instance, will often crystallize on a fractured surface in patterns resembling writing.

There is no proof that the tunnel leading to the beach was built by man. No timbers or other material were found that could have been used to shore up the sides. It seems more likely that the tunnel is merely a continuation of the fault dipping out to sea. Although choked with rubble when found it would still admit the passage of sea water, and flood the "money-pit" further inland.

The artificial beach is also strongly suggestive of a fault crossing the island and branching as it runs out to sea. Below the high water mark the fault would trap such debris as eel grass and the tropical fibre, and beneath these the heavier stones. The tides, flowing in and out of the fault, would arrange this debris in a fan-like pattern converging on the land side.

A fault may dip at any angle. The one of Oak Island would be close to the vertical, and at the one hundred and fifty-three foot level the drill apparently penetrated the footwall, and passed out of the "money-pit".

When my husband and I visited Oak Island my father was with us. He was a civil engineer and geologist with fifty years experience with Dosco iron mines. He spotted the fault at once. It is not difficult to see how such a fault could give the impression of being man-made, and treasure hunters are ever prone to jump to romantic conclusions. In this case it may well be that imagination and a natural structure aided by wind and sea have conspired to create a legend of buried treasure that has endured for over a century and a half.

If this sounds fantastic, consider for a moment the alternative; that a group of people prior to 1795, using primitive equipment, buried a treasure one hundred and fifty feet below the surface of the ground, far below sea level, built a vault of timbers and cement to protect this treasure, and dug a tunnel one hundred yards to the ocean with a flooding system controlled by a small flat stone!

Certainly there is geological evidence of a fault on Oak Island in the vicinity of the "money-pit". That this fault is responsible for the tunnel, the artificial beach and the findings in the "money-pit" seems to be the most realistic theory so far advanced. A geological survey would provide the answer, and would seem to be the logical step to take next for anyone sincerely interested in solving the mystery. It might well save much more wasted money and heartbreak, and surely Oak Island has exacted full measure of these in the past.

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