

Is Captain Kidd's pirate gold buried here? Now, the best-ec

Oak Island Treas

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Put^d July 14/53 Toronto Star
Truly written June 1953

OAK ISLAND, N.S.

OAK ISLAND, 50 miles south of Halifax, has been a treasure hunter's paradise and nightmare for 161 years. Now a new search is under way and this could be the last.

A Texas oil engineer who failed last summer has returned with banners flying. He says this is the end of the trail. If it is, a riddle dating back to 1795 will at last be solved.

Is Captain Kidd's booty buried in the money pit? What's the secret behind the sunken oak platforms? And where does the water come from—that fiendishly frustrating water which has stymied all expeditions up to now?

George Greene is the man who thinks he can supply the answers. He's an old hand at bucking water and the way he figures, Oak Island's secrets will come to light through simple engineering. He spent a month here in 1955 and now he knows the score.

"Last summer we blasted a hole beside the main shaft which got us nowhere," he explains. "We had poor weather and borrowed equipment.

But this year we're shooting down the middle and bringing our own machinery—\$30,000 worth all the way from Texas. Fourteen men are on the job and we expect results by late July.

Assuming he is successful, what will he find? "Treasure," says Greene. "Somebody went to a lot of trouble burying something and they went to still more trouble making sure it would never be found. I don't put much stock in the Captain Kidd legend. I think this is a cache laid down by Spaniards—there could be oaken chests or maybe a vault. The gold may be worth as much as \$120,000,000."

Only part of the boodle would go to Greene and his associates. R. M. Chappell, a Sydney contractor, enters the picture because he owns the property. That entitles him to 45 per cent. of the findings.

By now the island is a punchboard—22 shafts have been sunk, one man has been killed and at least \$500,000 has been spent. Diggers by the hundred have come and gone; the records are filled with bizarre developments and even among fishermen fact and fiction are happily wed. Treasure—sure, but clearing the air of jinxes and hoodoos is something to be desired.

"It's unbelievable," says Greene. "I've heard weird stories about the island and they've travelled the world. No wonder my company has returned—I'm curious like everybody else."

Who Buried the Treasure?

ONE zany aspect of the Oak Island treasure hunt has been that everybody always knew where to dig. At least, they thought they knew. It's an open slope measuring maybe 30 feet by 20 and through the years, with one expedition following another, this one spot has been torn up, blasted, tunnelled, flooded and torn up again all to no avail. A tourist has to step smartly to avoid drill holes, and there are signs on trees and fences saying, "Beware of cave-ins."

Assuming loot is buried here, who put it there and how much is it worth? Captain Kidd is the popular favorite—he promised to ring London with gold coins before he hanged another buccaneer; Sir Henry Morgan roistered around these parts and so did Captain Tech (Bluebeard). Then again, it may have been the Spaniards as Greene thinks—or the Egyptians or the Incas. Take your choice.

For that matter—and this would be unspeakable—the bottom of the shaft may contain exactly nothing. The sunken platforms could be the ingenious product of a practical joker.

The excitement started in mid-summer of 1795. There weren't many Nova Scotians in those days, but among them were three young lads who noticed a sawn-off stump of a branch on a strange-looking tree. The stump had been used for a pulley and underneath was a depression of ground. That did it. They grabbed their spades.

After digging 10 feet they came across an oak platform. Their joy knew no bounds. They pried up the woodwork and found nothing but earth underneath, so they dug another 10 feet, found another oak platform, pried it up and found earth again. Undaunted, they continued to platform No 3 where results once more were negative. At that point, probably doubting their senses, the intrepid three went home and rested for six years.

The blasting bit high gear in 1804. This party sank a shaft to 95 feet—having gone through nine oak platforms en route. One platform had several inches of putty on top; another was covered with charcoal; two had coconut fibre indigenous to the tropics and at 90 feet came a trophy—a large flagstone covered with hieroglyphics.

Then the demons appeared. The diggers went to the mainland for supplies and, lo and behold, on their return the shaft contained 60 feet of water. So they built a platform into the side and started bailing. They threw water out and more water ran

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Public Archives of Nova Scotia
HALIFAX, N. S.

in—it got discouraging, but they refused to surrender. They punched an adjacent shaft to the side, going down 110 feet. Then they tried to tunnel through. Swoosh! They almost drowned.

Since then hordes of people have tried their luck on Oak island with remarkable lack of success.

Ironically, the stone bearing the hieroglyphics was no help whatever. It was sent to Halifax to be deciphered and somehow it wound up in a bindery. Before anybody could say, "Shiver my timbers," the magic letters were pounded out of shape.

Digging through island archives, I discovered that every search party had at least one startling experience. Here is a sample: "The next year, 1850, the men went at it again. Again the rush of water stopped

them. They discovered it was salt water rushing into the pit and water was also oozing out on the sand of Smith's cove. The diggers supposed the pirates had dug a tunnel to allow the water in if any person tried to get at their treasure. They decided to outfox the pirates by digging in the beach. They built a dam to keep out the tide but a high one broke it down. Next they sank a new shaft near the original one. They went down 118 feet and then tunnelled toward the pit. Just as they were near, the whole thing caved in—10,000 feet of cribbing crashed with it and the pit again filled with water. They packed their belongings and left."

By 1866 there were 20 shafts in a circle about the money pit, all filled with water. There was talk of one jewel being brought up and three links of gold chain, and in

1896 to compound the mystery, a drill was sent down 153 feet. Results border the incredible—listen to this:

"At 153 feet the drill struck cement. It went through seven inches of this and then struck hardwood, five inches of oak, three inches of metal and then it hit a hard surface it couldn't penetrate."

Opinion of the Elders

THE late Judge Fred L. Blair of Amherst, who died in 1951, spent 50 years trying to solve the problem. He leased the island from the Nova Scotia government and when he wasn't hammering the earth hundreds of other candidates sought his permission. The late Franklin D. Roosevelt turned a spade in 1908, when he was a young lawyer, and at one time seven women sailed from England to join the hunt, while movie stars and opera singers have financed other forays.

By now Oak island is quite a tourist attraction. Visitors hire boats at Western Shore, a fishing village, and ride 400 yards across open water to the island. Facing the mainland are two farm buildings in disrepair. These are mute testimony to

sporadic attempts at settlement. Thirty years ago a colored family manned the rocky ground. They were replaced by a Scottish family. Both found rough going.

"We take visitors around the island, but all they want to see is the hole," said Arthur Mosher, a boatman. "They don't bring shovels themselves, but it's surprising how much they know when they see the hole with a few beams on top."

Residents of Western Shore have been watching the parade so long they should be tired of treasure hunts. But far from it. Get the old-timers together and they talk about Pizarro the conquistador who amassed great riches for Spain, and the "Queda Merchant"—Kidd's most famous capture. They know their history.

The opinion of the elders is that Oak island does contain treasure—no doubt about it—and the trouble all these years has been that people looked in the wrong places.

"There's a pond on the island," confided Firman Swiner, 72, "that's the logical place to hide sea chests. Why don't they dig there?"

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