

Oak Island, Nova Scotia

# The Pit & The Perplexities

Article by Virginia Morell with photography by Eric Hayes

In the summer of 1795, Daniel McGinnis, a Nova Scotia farm boy, stumbled onto an unusual oval depression in the sandy soil of Oak Island. The depression was within the shade of a tall oak tree in a small clearing. One limb of the tree bore the distinct marks of a rope-and-tackle hoisting device, and 16-year-old McGinnis had a sudden vision: that limb had been used to lower something into the depths of Oak Island — something of great value, something which had to be hidden. Here, he was certain, lay buried treasure.

He returned to the island the next day with two friends and three shovels. They set to work digging out the loose soil in the depression. Two feet down, they made their first discovery — a layer of flagstones which were not native to Oak Island and which seemed to have been shaped by man, then carefully fitted together. Beneath this seal was an elaborately engineered shaft about 12 feet across, shored up with oak logs and clay. Then, at a depth of 10 feet, they encountered a solidly constructed oak platform. They pried up these logs, but underneath, the shaft continued. They uncovered another oak platform 10 feet farther down, and a third at 30 feet. At this point, the trio decided they needed more help.

The local fishermen and farmers, however, were not interested in any schemes for recovering what they

believed to be tainted pirate booty. Oak Island had long been regarded as haunted, a home to flitting spirits and to a ghostly hound with fiery coals for

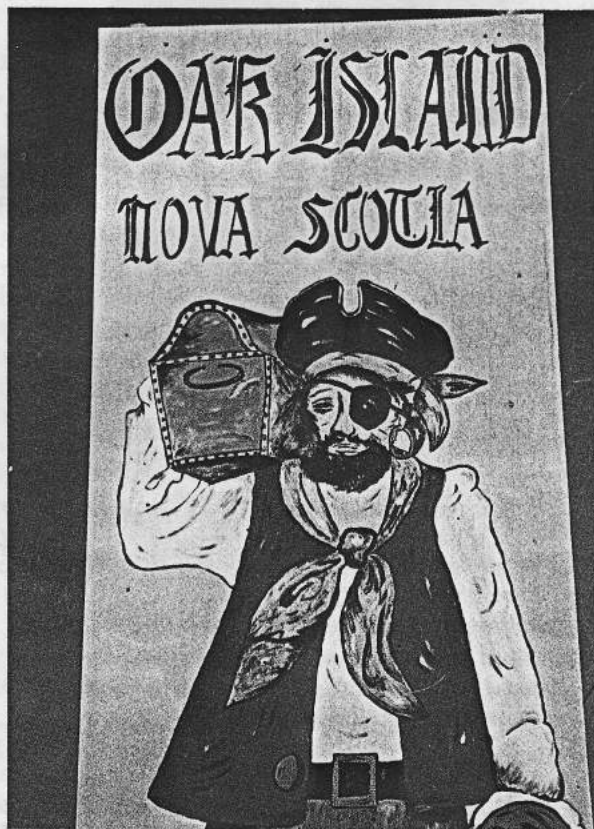
ing the land beside the shaft and told his tale to everyone he met. Finally, seven years later, a group of wealthy Nova Scotia businessmen decided to back his venture. They recruited a large work force and reopened the shaft.

Immediately, the old pattern began anew: oak platforms carefully embedded at 10-foot intervals. They also found layers of charcoal at 40 feet; a claylike putty substance at 50; dark fibres from coconut husks at 60; and more of the putty at 70. The shaft seemed endless. Then, 90 feet below the surface, they uncovered a large, flat stone inscribed with two rows of characters that looked like hieroglyphics. They began to get excited. Perhaps the stone carried a warning or a message of what to do next, or perhaps it explained what lay below. The diggers never found out, although they came close.

Unable to decipher the inscription, they removed the rock and continued digging, reaching a depth of 98 feet by nightfall. Before retiring, they jammed their crowbars down into the increasingly soggy soil. They did this each night, but this time, they hit something

which felt like solid metal and which seemed to be bounded by the sides of the pit.

In his book *The Oak Island Mystery*, Reginald V. Harris, a descendant of one of the investors in this treasure company, wrote: "This circumstance



"That's just for the tourists," says treasure hunter Daniel Blankenship of his museum sign. "Pirates didn't have anything to do with what's here. It's too big . . . it took years to build this."

eyes. At night, there were strange, unsettling lights that had twice lured fishermen to their deaths. If the island also harboured a treasure, they felt it would be better to let it lie. But McGinnis could not forget his vision. He moved to the island, began farm-

put them all in good spirits, and during the evening, a good deal of discussion arose as to who should have the largest share of the treasure. But their great expectations were shattered, for next morning, they found 60 feet of water in the pit!"

The treasure, or whatever was at the bottom of the shaft, had been effectively sealed off by the flooding, and no amount of bailing would reduce the water level. Strangely, the water was salty and rose and fell with the tide. It was a baffling mystery, and the company disbanded in frustration.

McGinnis also quit digging, but he did not leave the island, located 36 miles southwest of Halifax. He settled down to farming again and held tight to his vision. Something, he knew, had been buried on Oak Island. But who had gone to all this trouble and why?

**N**inety years before Daniel McGinnis's discovery, Captain William Kidd, sentenced to be hanged for acts of piracy and murder, penned a last urgent plea to the British House of Commons. In exchange for his life, he promised to lead a ship to an island where he had buried "goods and treasure to the value of one hundred thousand pounds." He felt certain that this treasure would so impress the Crown that he would be pardoned. But the Crown refused his offer. Nine days later, Captain Kidd was hanged by the neck at London's Execution Dock, and in accordance with Admiralty Law, his body was tied to a post and left until the tide had ebbed and flowed over it three times. No one has ever found Captain Kidd's treasure.

But Captain Kidd's is not the only treasure that is missing:

In Panama, at the beginning of the 18th century, Spanish and Indian artisans fashioned a flawless seven-foot statue of the Virgin Mary from Mayan gold. Christened the Golden Virgin, the solid-gold treasure was destined to grace a cathedral in Barcelona — but somewhere en route to Spain, the statue disappeared.

Of all the fabulous golden cities of the New World, none surpassed the jewel-encrusted Incan city of Tumbuz. Pizarro first saw it in 1527. But when he and his conquistadores returned four years later to claim its riches, they found the city in ruins



*At a depth of 98 feet, Oak Island's first treasure seekers encountered an object that felt like solid metal, but their efforts to recover the booty broke ancient seals on an intricate series of tunnels, permanently flooding the Money Pit, seen in foreground.*

and the treasure of Tumbuz gone.

The crown jewels of France, the entire thousand-year-old treasure of the Abbey of the Cathedral of Saint Andrew, the solid 300-ton golden chain that once encircled the Incan city square in Cuzco, the Holy Grail and Atlantis have all vanished without a trace.

In 1840, 45 years after the initial efforts to recover whatever was buried on Oak Island, another treasure company decided to attempt it. Using a primitive drill, they bored a narrow hole down through the 60 feet of mud and water until they hit that same 98-foot level. At 100 feet, they struck oak again, then continued to drill down through what one worker described as sounding like "loose metal or coin," then more oak and more metal. They were certain that they had penetrated a treasure chamber and imagined a weighty stack of

three treasure chests, set one on top of the other and all resting on another solid-oak platform. But the drill bit failed to bring up any tangible evidence of wealth from the shaft they dubbed the Money Pit.

This expedition also revealed an elaborate underground drainage system connecting the Money Pit, via two flood tunnels, to the Atlantic Ocean. Subsequent digging and probing in Smith's Cove (500 feet east of the pit) uncovered a 145-foot man-made beach lined with tons of coconut fibre, solidly packed eel grass and beach rocks and containing five stone box drains. The Money Pit, it seemed, was a carefully contrived trap: by removing the inscribed flagstone, the original treasure hunters had unwittingly broken what was, in effect, a hydraulic seal.

Efforts to circumvent the flood tunnels proved futile. By 1860, eight sep-



104 arate shafts had been dug parallel to the pit and countless lateral tunnels excavated in hopeless attempts to reach the treasure chamber. Then, in 1861, as yet another treasure company tunnelled into the muddy morass, the Money Pit collapsed. Whatever lay in the treasure chamber disappeared into soupy oblivion somewhere below Oak Island.

But the quest for untold riches did not stop here. Over the next 120 years, 10 well-financed expeditions sought the treasure. They drilled hole after hole into the island, desperately seeking a clue to what lay below. One turned up a few links of chain, another a tiny fragment of vellum parchment bearing two microscopically small letters of the alphabet.

While McGinnis had been happy to believe that the shaft was the work of pirates (the popular theory held that it had been dug by Captain Kidd), these later discoveries produced a multitude of new interpretations. The scrap of parchment led to speculation that Oak Island really guarded Shakespeare's manuscripts as penned by Francis Bacon. Others saw in the tunnels and mysterious treasure chamber a vast underground holding room for a communal pirate cache, a temporary repository for monies owed French troops prior to the Acadian expulsion and the secrets and treasures of a forgotten civilization.

In spite of the negligible success in retrieving anything of substance from the pit, every newly formed treasure company approached the recovery project with swaggering complacency. In 1863, the Oak Island Association announced that it would strike the treasure "before the lapse of one month"; in 1866, the Oak Island El Dorado Company predicted that in a few short months, their equipment would produce "the hidden treasure so long sought for"; in 1909, the Old Gold Salvage and Wrecking Company issued a prospectus boasting that "with modern methods and machinery, the recovery of the treasure is easy, ridiculously easy." They expected the whole operation to last "three or four weeks."

The "modern machinery" of this latter venture was something called Bowdoin's Air Lock Caisson — a mysterious treasure detector invented by Captain Henry L. Bowdoin. His enthusiastic prospectus, promising a



*"I'm probably the only one who thinks the treasure is all the way down in the bed-rock," says Blankenship, who, with the help of reclusive Dan Henskee, above, has bored a cement-walled tunnel more than 100 feet into the island.*

cache of "ten million dollars in treasure," even enticed young Franklin D. Roosevelt to purchase some of the shares. But Captain Bowdoin's dream of a "quick recovery" ended abruptly after two fruitless months on the island.

The Air Lock Caisson was only one of hundreds of technological solutions applied to the Money Pit. Sensitive metal detectors, powerful hydraulic drills, sophisticated drilling equipment, bulldozers and dynamite blasts all failed to produce any treasure. There were also pathetic attempts by men bearing Captain Kidd treasure maps and equipped with nothing more than pick and shovel.

The island was dowsed by psychics, analyzed by a Mineral Wave Ray machine and x-rayed from the air by a "treasure-smelling" device. This particular instrument, its inventor reported, was too sensitive. When it sniffed out a vast hoard of gold in the island's depths, it dashed itself to smithereens.

Searchers walking the island's perimeter turned up strange, elusive clues: stones etched with cryptic symbols, one etched with what resembled a ship, stones shaped like hearts, several drilled rocks and stone markers, and mysterious equilateral triangles made of beach stones that pointed toward the pit.

Legends now surrounded the legend of Oak Island itself. It was said that the island was cursed and that no one would find the treasure until seven men had perished in its pursuit and all the island's red oak trees had died.

By the end of 1982, six men had died and all the red oaks were gone.

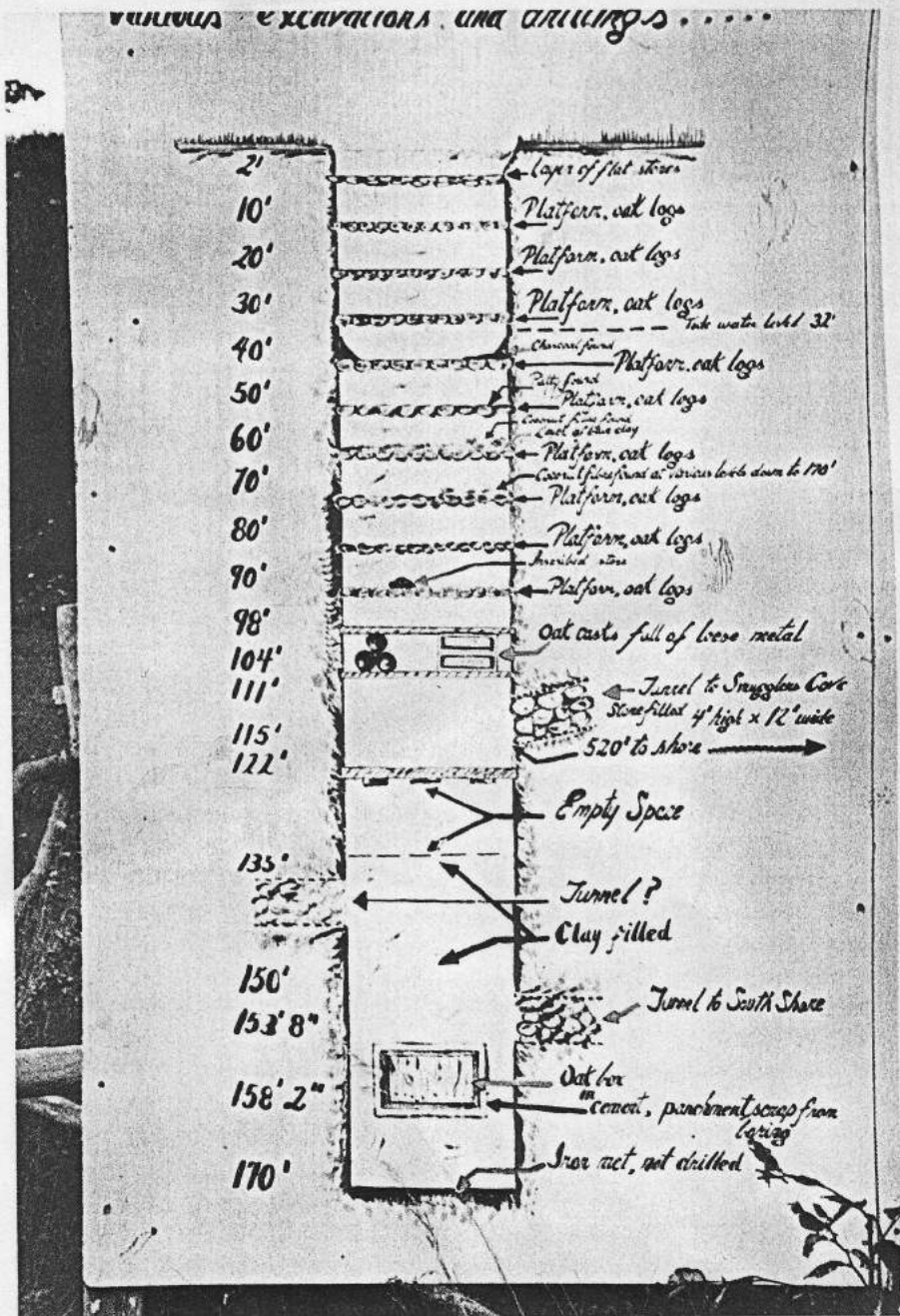
**Y**ou reach Oak Island today by a causeway that leads across the water from the little white-shack town of Martin's Point. Robert Dunfield, a treasure hunter in the 1960s, decided that his operation would proceed more quickly if he could drive heavy equipment - such as bulldozers, drilling rigs, cranes and pumps - to the island, rather than barging it over. So in 1965, he built the causeway, and Oak Island ceased to be an island.

I drove across the causeway to meet with Daniel C. Blankenship, a 58-year-old one-time multimillionaire contractor from Miami who gave up his business 18 years ago to solve the mystery of Oak Island. Blankenship is a field manager for Triton Alliance Ltd., the Montreal-based firm financing the current treasure hunt. We met at Blankenship's privately owned Oak Island Museum, a small, pale yellow building housing a sad collection of the island's treasure-hunting artifacts and letters from various museums and scientific firms verifying their authenticity. In front of the museum, a 20-foot-high plywood figure of a grinning one-eyed pirate salutes visitors, and a skull-and-crossbones pirate flag snaps in the wind.

"That's just for the tourists," explained Blankenship as we headed across the island to the Money Pit. "It don't mean nothing. Nothing at all. It's just the popular image. But pirates didn't have anything to do with what's here, if you ask me. It was too big, too time-consuming a project. It took years to build this."

Blankenship is a big man, his frame muscled and weathered from years of hard work and cold Atlantic winters. His hands are thick and broad, and he sliced the air with them to make a point, shrugged his big shoulders and shook his head slowly over the idea of someone as insignificant as Captain Kidd planning the Money Pit.

"No way. No way. I've found too



Now just a sunken, crumbling weed-covered hole damaged by 40 attempts to sink a workable shaft, the upper portion of the Money Pit was once an elaborate series of platforms, air spaces and tunnels.

many things here - things I haven't told others, and I'm not telling you. But they were busy here a long time, that much I can say."

He turned the pickup down a weedy, rocky lane bordered by spruce and spindly birch trees and pulled to a stop at the bottom of a grassy hill. A yellow sign with black rolling script marks the site of the Money Pit - now just a sunken, crumbling, weed-covered hole, with rotten skeletal timbers poking out of the ground. A two-foot-high rough-hewn fence and warning signs keep out the tourists. We walked up the

hill to the pit, the sky slate blue, the ocean dark and bruised, lapping at the rocks behind us. Blankenship talked about Triton Alliance's current operations, about the shaft they are sinking 200 yards above the original pit.

"You can't work the Money Pit any more," said Blankenship. "The ground's way too unstable. Something like 40 shafts were put down around here, and the ground won't hold any more. We've had some engineers out to check the ground - they've got a new way, they say, to stabilize ground like this."



He turned and swept his hands over the land around the pit, explaining what the engineers had told him they could do. A breeze came off the water and rustled the small birch trees higher on the hill, and I felt sad and lost and weary all at once.

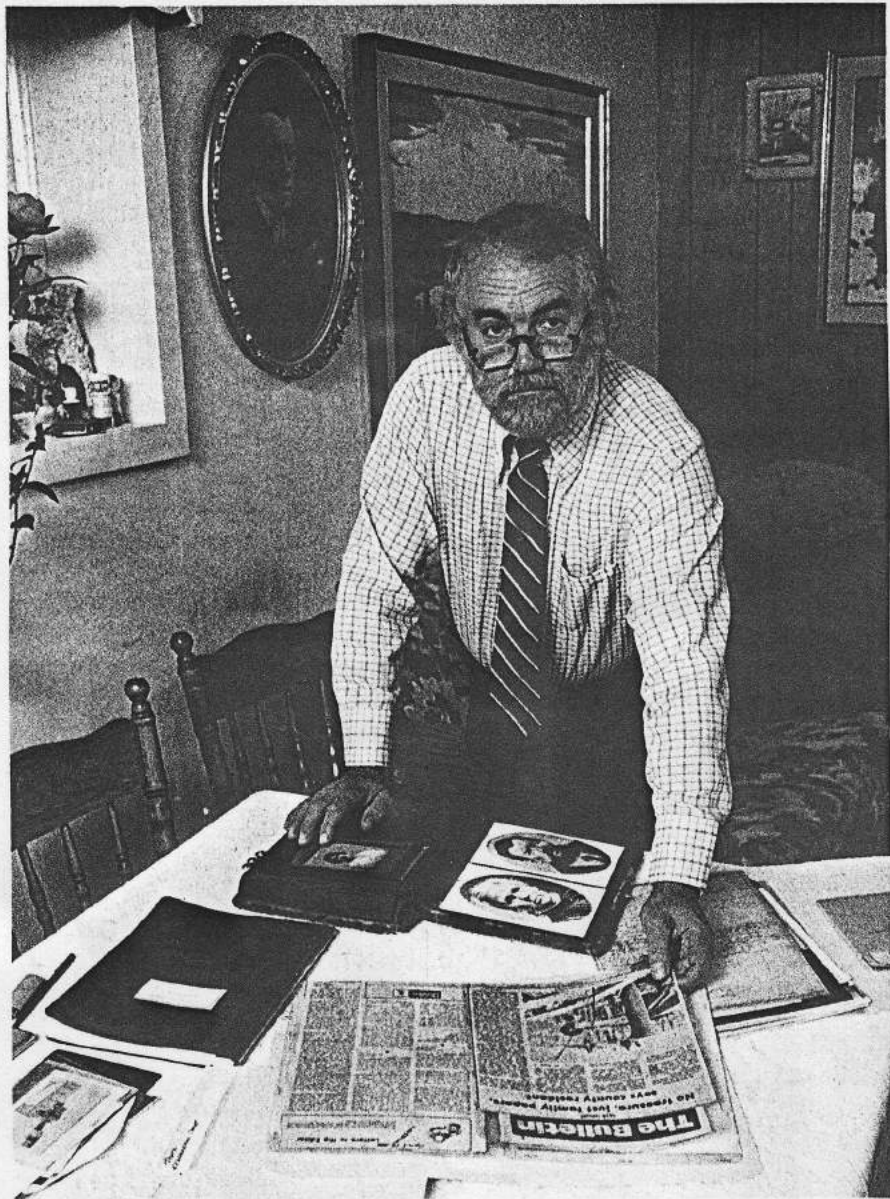
And then there was a sudden hollow *whump, whump, whump* sound coming from the earth behind us. Blankenship stopped his explanation and cocked his head toward the pit. The sound faded, then came again, louder, faster – *whump, whump, whump*. In an instant, Blankenship leaped over the low fence and dropped to his knees at the edge of the pit. He leaned down toward it, but the whumping came more slowly, farther away, then stopped. He knelt awhile longer, listening carefully, then got up with a sigh and eased himself over the fence.

"Must be the wind in the shaft," he said. "That's it – the wind in the shaft."

**I**t is not just the wind that keeps Blankenship on Oak Island. It is other things – the pieces of old china, brass and steel chain his drill brought up from one shaft, the curious leather boot and corroded Mexican scissors he dug up on a beach and the warped remnants of a wharf and a sunken stone wall he found along the shore. There is the handful of cement and soft unoxidized metal he recovered from 165 feet down. Fragmentary but tangible evidence that someone was busy on Oak Island long ago. And there is also the floating severed hand.

The hand appeared in August 1971 when Blankenship and his crew lowered an underwater television camera into the 27-inch-wide shaft they had dug northeast of the Money Pit. The camera dropped slowly down the water-filled shaft and eventually came to rest in a limestone chamber 230 feet down, deep within the bedrock of the island. Blankenship sat in a shack next to the shaft watching a closed-circuit television screen and waiting for the camera's eye to provide a first glimpse of what lay below.

It was the hand – a human hand severed at the wrist and floating above what appeared to be a treasure chest. Blankenship gave a shout, half horror, half surprise, then called his workmen in one at a time to verify



Tracing legends that link one of his ancestors to the Oak Island Money Pit, Earl Pentz relates a tale ripe with royal intrigue and the African slave trade.

what he was looking at on the screen. They all agreed: it was a hand. One even said that he could see the "damn bones sticking out."

"I saw a hand down there," said Blankenship. "I know it was a hand. I don't need proof from anybody. No way, no way it was anything other than a human hand."

Gazing at the misty image on the television screen, Blankenship and his crew also saw what looked like three treasure chests – one with a human figure slumped against it – several large wooden beams and a pickaxe. Blankenship photographed the screen, and these photos are now displayed in his museum. Grey and grainy, with arrows pointing to the hand and to the treasure chests, they are reminiscent of photos of unidenti-

fied flying objects: all promise and possibility, but not proof. //

Blankenship's glimpse into the island's interior prompted him to go one step further. He donned diving suit and helmet and was lowered by cable 230 feet into the very chamber in which the television camera had revealed the severed hand. But visibility was poor, and he found nothing worth bringing to the surface.

"You can't hardly see your hand in front of your face because of all the silt and mud that's stirred up," he explained. "The chamber is really big, and I wanted to explore around in it. But you don't dare move away from the shaft; it's just too dangerous."

Blankenship and his crew made several dives over the next few years, all of them inconclusive. Then, in



110 1976, even this small window into the island's mystery was closed.

"I was working down in the shaft," Blankenship recalled. "We were using this sonar equipment to search for tunnels, cavities, that type of thing. So I was down at the 145-foot level when I heard the shaft start to go. Thinking about it still gives me the jitters. All that rock and mud falling in. I could hear it about me, crashing down. And I was shouting, 'Bring me up! Bring me up! Out! Out! Out!'"

The shaft continued to collapse, crumpling about him like a thin egg-

shell. But Blankenship was lucky and got out with seconds to spare.

Others have not been so fortunate. The first man to die on Oak Island while searching for the treasure was scalded to death when a steam boiler burst in 1861. A second man died in 1897 when the rope hoisting him to the top of the shaft slipped off its pulley, and he plummeted to his death.

In 1965, there were four more deaths. Robert Restall, a motorcycle daredevil turned treasure hunter, was overcome by fumes in a shaft that he was attempting to pump dry.

He toppled into the shaft and apparently drowned. Three more men, including Restall's eldest son, died while trying to rescue him.

Restall's death opened the way for Blankenship to begin his treasure-hunting operation.

"I didn't just happen onto Oak Island," said Blankenship, narrowing his eyes. "I was drawn to it. There was a story about the mystery in *Reader's Digest* back in '65. I read that, and it got me to thinking that I could solve the problems they were having. Something told me I could do it. Now, you figure how many millions of people must have read that story — maybe 20, 30 million? And out of all those people, I was the only one who showed up here."

There was one obstacle in Blankenship's chosen path: Robert Restall. Restall had been living in a shack on the island with his wife, two sons and a daughter since 1959, investing all of his money and his time in an obsessive search for the treasure. But his life savings of \$8,500 were barely enough to live on, so Restall began to sell shares in his venture to Robert Dunfield, a high-pressure geologist from Los Angeles. Dunfield (who built the causeway to the mainland) wanted to extricate the treasure from the island by force, wresting it out with dynamite and bulldozers. But Restall insisted that the answer lay in an understanding of the elaborate flood tunnels. He had spent most of his time mapping their course underground and felt that he was close to figuring out how to plug them and thereby stop the flow of water into the pit.

Then Blankenship read the *Reader's Digest* article and showed up on Oak Island, eager to be part of the action. Restall, however, was not interested in any more partners, and Blankenship left.

"That was on a Monday, and Restall died the next day," said Blankenship. He looked across the island to the blue Atlantic and jammed his big hands in his pockets, then gave me a swift, keen look.

"That Blankenship — he's so paranoid about that silly treasure. He thinks he's the only one who can solve the problem. He really does, you know," said Restall's widow, Mildred.

After the accident, Mrs. Restall

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moved to the town of Western Shore, only a mile from Oak Island, and took a job as a receptionist to support her young family. From the window of her bungalow's front room, you can see the dark band of spruce marking Oak Island. She stayed near the island, not because of any interest in the treasure but because she "didn't know what to do. There I was all alone with two children to raise. I had to get a job. All that time on the island — six years — it was just an escape from the real world."

Like her husband, Mrs. Restall had been a motorcycle stunt racer, performing in circuses around the world: "Bob and Mildred and the Globe of Death." They gunned their motorcycles in tight loops inside a giant steel-mesh ball, 16 feet in diameter, timing it so that they missed each other by a split second. But the glamour of circus life paled after 20 years, and they retired to Hamilton, Ontario, where Restall began working as a contractor. A restless man driven by challenge and risk, Restall found his new life singularly boring. Then he read an account of Oak Island.

The mystery of the unknown treasure and the maze of tunnels seemed to offer all that his life was missing: a puzzle, adventure and wealth. Upon visiting Oak Island, Restall signed a contract with Mel Chappell, who then owned the Money Pit, to begin searching for the treasure. The Restalls set up housekeeping on the island in two old cabins, isolated pioneers seeking their El Dorado.

"That was before the causeway was built, and when the boat dropped us off and I stood on that beach and looked out to sea, I remember my heart fell right to my boots," said Mrs. Restall. "Oak Island . . . after that, all he ever talked about was the search. I watched my husband change overnight from someone who was so logical to a man with an obsession. Morning, noon and night, it was just read, read, talk, talk, talk about Oak Island and the treasure. Oh, I got sick of it."

Mrs. Restall never shared her husband's enthusiasm or his obsession. She did not even believe the treasure was there: "It's quite possible that there was something there at one time, but I've always believed that it was taken long, long ago. I'm sure they'll find evidence that there was a treasure — not ordinary gold bullion and definitely not Captain Kidd's."



An animated white-haired woman with eyes as blue as the sea, Mrs. Restall showed me photos of her husband and her garbed in black-leather outfits, sitting confidently astride their motorcycles — a young, vibrant couple, certain of their dreams. She then handed me an album that her eldest son had made of their quest for the elusive treasure on Oak Island. It had a frontispiece that he had sketched in white ink, showing McGinnis's vision of a pirate lowering a treasure chest from the branch of the red oak. Inside were colour and black-and-white snapshots: their home, the pit, her smiling family sitting on a fence, Mrs. Restall walking on the beach, the many shafts, her husband pointing to stone markers, the strange stone triangle. Today, the markers are in museums, and the triangle has vanished.

"Oh, everything was there then. The triangle was there and the 35- and 75-foot pits. Between tides, with the pumps going, you could walk in the tunnels from the Money Pit to the Cave-In Pit. But Dunfield destroyed everything; he bulldozed it all into the sea."

She turned the pages slowly, reminiscing: "It was the prettiest island in the world before Dunfield tore it up. But hardly a day went by when I didn't wish I could get off it. I never imagined it would happen the way it did. And, of course, I have a real bitterness about it. I wish we'd never heard of Oak Island; now I wish it would just go away. But I *still* want to know what's there, why it was made, who did it. I don't care if there's a treasure there or not — just if they could solve the mystery, be done with it. That at least would justify Bob's faith in what he was doing."

**T**here is something about Oak Island — its mazes of underground tunnels, indecipherable stone markers and messages, mysterious coconut fibres and elaborate shaft — that bewitches people. It seems to strike some deep, universal chord. Over the years, hundreds of people have succumbed to the legend's lure as quickly and as strongly as did Robert Restall.

During the 1950s, an 80-year-old retired salesman living at the YMCA in Great Falls, Montana, sent urgent letters to Chappell explaining that not only did he know what was buried

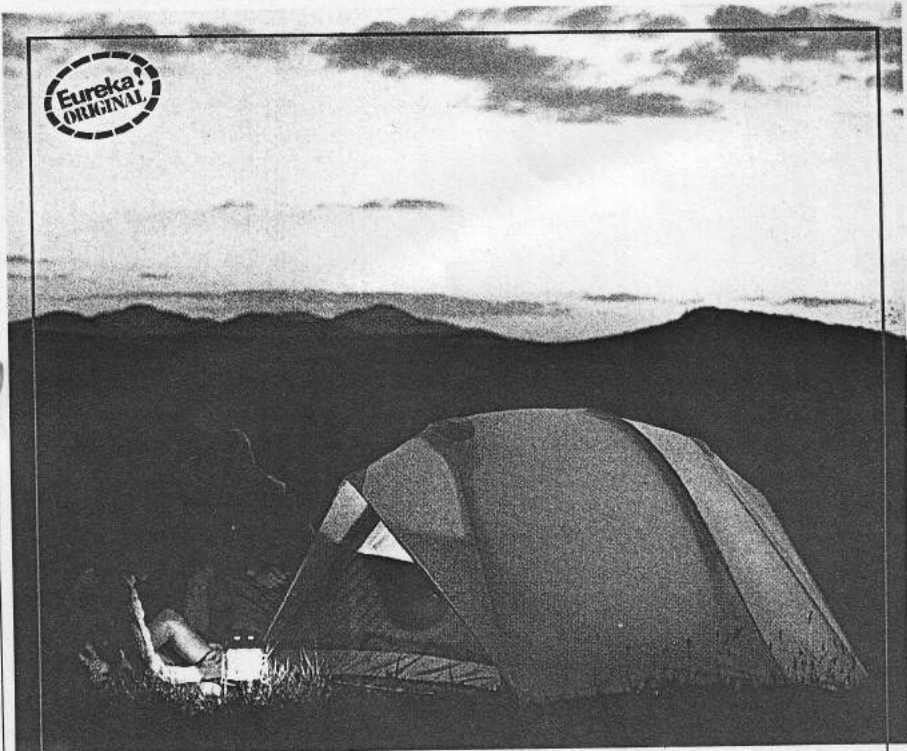
on the island, but he also had blueprints of the treasure chambers. He claimed that beneath the island lay an inverted duplicate of the Great Pyramid of Egypt, which housed fabulous religious secrets that would save the world from destruction. The salesman worked on his theories about Oak Island until his death in Montana in 1960.

A retired sailor from San Diego, California, sent Reginald V. Harris lengthy epistles explaining the precise meaning of the stone triangle in

terms of the changing relationship between true north and magnetic north over the past 300 years.

Another person wrote to say that he saw in a dream that the underground tunnels were laid out in the pattern of the nine nails of the Crucifixion.

Since 1968, an ex-machinist from Chicago has devoted his life to untangling a myriad of codes that he claims pertain to the island. Using the stone triangle, inscribed symbols and supposed pirate maps, he has created



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Letters arrive for the current treasure seekers from all over the world – England, Japan, Spain, Bulgaria, Holland – each giving specific directions on how to find the treasure. In 1965, P.J. Mallon read an account of Oak Island in a newspaper in Belfast, Ireland, and immediately penned a letter announcing that he had uncovered "vital information" about the mystery. A part-time ornithologist and archaeologist, Mallon explained that he had studied both Irish and Egyptian drainage systems and knew that they were identical to those on Oak Island. By deciphering the stone triangle, he was certain that he could locate the three traps which flooded the pit. Mallon arrived on the island in 1972, saying that he would stake his "life on being able to find these traps." He was escorted off the island by police but returned undaunted in 1980. Blankenship still ignored his advice, and Mallon finally left – but only after swearing to the local press that he alone knew the solution.

In the little cluster of farming and fishing villages that surround Oak Island, the townspeople have their own ideas about the mystery. Many just laugh and smile, not wanting to be viewed as treasure-mad kooks. But behind the laughter and smirks, there is usually a story – someone they knew who worked for one of the treasure-hunting operations, an uncle or grandfather or long-lost friend.

**A**t the Oak Island Inn, a waitress confided to me in hushed tones that her grandmother knew a man who was very poor. He moved to an Oak Island farm and was not seen for a long while. Then one day, he appeared in town dressed in top hat, black coat and tails, sporting a fancy gold watch. He now had money for everything, as well as a chest that he always kept locked. He moved to her grandmother's rooming house, and it took four women to lug that chest upstairs. Everyone naturally assumed that he had found the treasure. One day, a strange ship dropped anchor in Mahone Bay. It set sail that night, apparently bearing away the man and his chest because he was never seen again. This is the most

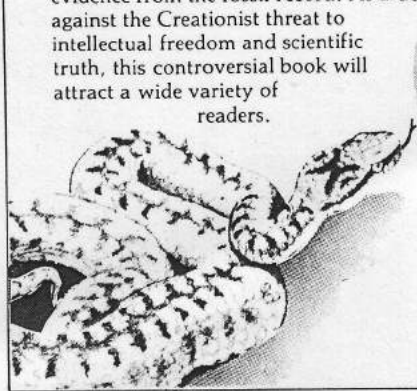
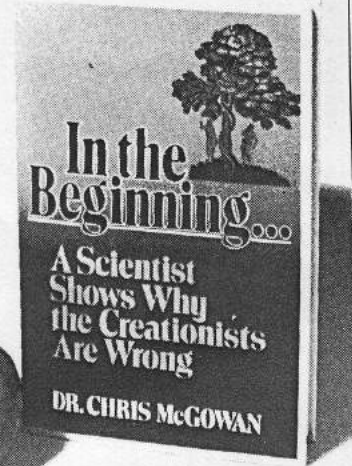
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A Scientist Shows Why the Creationists are Wrong

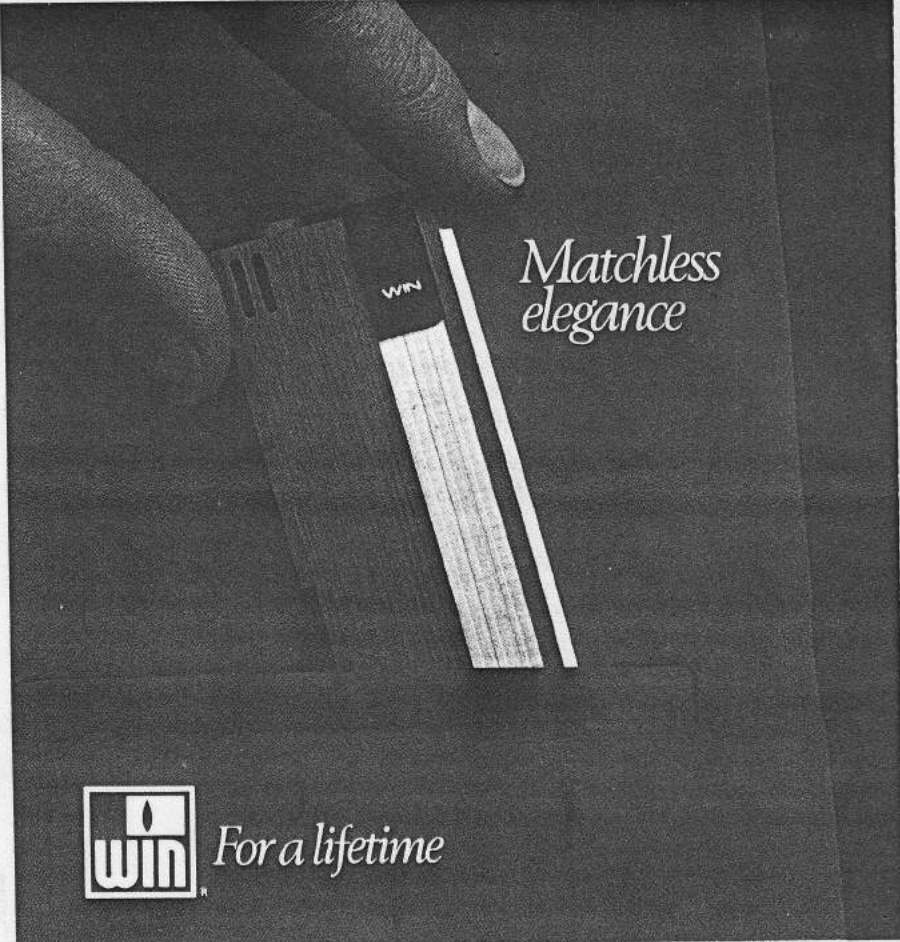
Dr. Christopher McGowan

In this important contribution to the Creation versus Evolution debate, Dr. McGowan, a respected Canadian zoologist, meets the Creationists head on. This movement disputes the validity of evolution and supports a literal, biblical interpretation of the origin of life on earth. Using non-technical language and numerous illustrations, the author systematically demolishes the non-scientific arguments of the Creationists with a wealth of documentary evidence from the fossil record. As a defense against the Creationist threat to intellectual freedom and scientific truth, this controversial book will attract a wide variety of readers.




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popular local theory, but it is not the only one.

PENTZ \*

Near the end of a finger of land known as First Peninsula lies the tiny town of Pentz. It is a good 20 miles from Oak Island, but Earl Pentz, a descendant of the town's founder, claims that the island guards his family's secrets. A portly man in his 50s, who shares his ancestral home with his mother, Pentz has a bushy grey beard and meticulous manners. He is a painter, splashing canvases with colourful, somewhat crude renderings of the Nova Scotia coastline. But during the last 10 years, his painting has been supplanted by fervid efforts to explain a family legend about a great-great uncle who lost his life when he fell into a pit on Oak Island. Peering over his half-glasses, Pentz riffled through fat files containing correspondence with genealogy experts in Denmark and historians in England and America, as well as copies of elaborate familial hierarchies. He flashed each documented piece of evidence and hurriedly related an incredible tale linking royal intrigue, the African slave trade and the lost manuscripts of the Danish Countess of Ulfeldt to Oak Island. The slaves, he says, were forced to build the chambers on the island and were kept there until they were shipped south. Later, his great-great uncle stored three chests containing the countess's manuscripts in the underground rooms but died trying to retrieve them. Pentz hopes to publish a book about his theory.

On Second Peninsula, 75-year-old David Stevens — a wooden-schooner builder who enjoys an international reputation — shook his head at the mention of Oak Island. "I met a man there in the 1930s. He had a pickaxe, and he told me he'd invested all his life savings to find the treasure. He was digging, and he looked a little worried." Stevens paused a moment and then said sadly, "How many people have been bilked of their money for that treasure in my grandpa's days, my daddy's days and in my own days? I think of Oak Island, and I think of that poor old man with his pick. I know he died a pauper."

Like the Restalls before them, Blankenship and his wife live on the island. Blankenship is aided in



his treasure hunt by Dan Henskee, a 40-year-old recluse who lives in one of Restall's old cabins. These three are the island's only year-round inhabitants, and they rarely visit the mainland. Few of the locals know them, and when Blankenship is mentioned, they smile and shake their heads: "Oh, is he getting ready to dig again?"

A pall of paranoia hangs over Blankenship's treasure-hunting operation, and it begins with the folded corner of a lace curtain. During the summer, Mrs. Blankenship tends the museum, playing solitaire at a small table, listening to radio soap operas and waiting for the tourists to arrive. But she also watches for unwanted characters, the curious people who arrive with their strange theories, the suspicious ones who might return late at night and slip away with the treasure. The lace curtain is tacked to the front window of the museum, and Mrs. Blankenship keeps one corner artfully pulled back. From here, she can spy on anyone coming across the causeway. Behind the lace curtain, she keeps a lonely, vigilant watch.

The Money Pit itself is guarded by Henskee, who provides much of the technical support for the search and who is reluctant to say anything without Blankenship's approval. Blankenship is equally coy, warily skirting every question. But he did give me a tour of the island and explained his current efforts at Borehole 10-X. This is the pit where he saw the hand, the pit where his life nearly ended. "People always ask me how I knew to dig here. Well, I can't tell them. It just felt right, somehow, that's all."

The ground surrounding the pit is littered with work equipment — old rusted pipes and drums, cables, black hoses, a cement mixer, tin buckets, the crumpled casing from the shaft. Weeds and tall, pale clumps of Queen Anne's lace poke up through the rust and metal, and water drips steadily into the shaft. Borehole 10-X now seems little more than a weary and worn dream gone bust.

Still, Blankenship persists in his search and is now lining the shaft with a metal casing and a one-foot wall of cement. Shoring up the walls is a long, arduous process — it takes three days to go down two feet — but Blankenship is slowly reaching bedrock again. "It's down now over 100

feet. Just how far down, I'm not saying. I'm probably the only one who thinks the treasure's all the way down in the bedrock."

Blankenship continues in his efforts to reach the treasure because, he said, giving a determined smile: "I never failed at anything before in my life. This is a challenge. I've accepted it. I've got to finish it. Of course, there are times when I wish I'd never heard of Oak Island. If I'd had any idea it was going to take this much of my life, that I'd be like the rest of those who'd gotten involved before me, I'd never have taken it on. No way. No way. But it gets hold of you. You look at the pieces, try to guess their logic,

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**"Whoever sealed  
the chamber  
took a lot of  
precautions. They  
had something  
very valuable to  
protect . . ."**

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and there seems to be a pattern to everything. You think you have solved it. And then it turns out to be wrong. Wrong again."

Blankenship has combed the island for every possible clue and investigated countless theories. He has also read every piece of material even vaguely connected with the island, called on geologists and psychics to locate tunnels and even participated once in a type of *séance*. "That was a joke — another waste of time," he said.

But the psychics still fascinate him. He alluded to them more than once. Blankenship is full of such intimations, suggestions, hints and clues. He cloaks himself in mystery, winks and grins and hints at incredible discoveries that he has made on the island but is not free to divulge. Here is a man who believes that he was chosen by some power to find the treasure and that underneath Oak Island, a veritable maze of man-made tunnels leads to several treasure caches.

One afternoon, as we stood outside his museum, I tried once more to pin Blankenship down on who might

have buried the treasure. But he has fielded such questions a hundred times before and makes a game of it, dropping bits and pieces of clues as if the mystery were mine to unravel. He told me of an analysis of pollen grains that were found in the pit: "It shows that the pit had to have happened before the 1600s. Now who might have been around here then?"

"The Spanish?" I ventured.

"Right. And didn't they have something to hide? They had all that treasure to transport to Spain. Now what if there were a storm or they were blown off course? What would they do? They'd store the treasure, that's what they'd do."

He paused, then asked, "What do you make of that little pile of cement and metal in the museum?"

He had lost me, and I shrugged.

"I keep wondering about that and wondering about that," he said. "It's just a handful of material, but you look at it closely and you'll see it's little bits of metal flattened over the cement. And that metal was unoxidized when we brought it up. Now what do you make of that?"

"Maybe you should tell me . . ."

"Well, obviously, whoever sealed the vault or chamber took a lot of precautions. They had something very valuable to protect, and they didn't want water or air leaking in."

He took a deep breath, shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned close, conspiratorially: "You saw those stakes over there in Fred Nolan's museum? Now Fred [who owns half of Oak Island] and I don't see eye to eye on a lot of things. But I think he's got somethin' in those stakes. Go ask him about them. See what he has to say. He never should have moved those stakes; it was wrong of him to do that, and someday I'm going to have to go to war with him about that. But I don't think he's ever talked to anybody about them before either. Go ask Fred about his stakes."

Blankenship believes that many of his problems in solving the mystery of Oak Island stem from vital pieces of the puzzle that are missing. What Dunfield bulldozed into the sea continues to bother him. He is also convinced that Mrs. Restall is withholding some of the charts her husband drew of the underground tunnels. And he knows for a fact that



118 Nolan, his archfoe and rival, is holding back key material.

When I mentioned this to Nolan, he grinned in agreement. It was a half-embarrassed, mischievous grin, as if he had been caught short in a game of bluff poker. "Well, I guess Dan blew the whistle on us – and I'm only telling you about it because I want it told right."

Nolan's name is not readily associated with Oak Island because he is not a permanent resident; yet he does have a summer home there and owns the point where the causeway tethers the island to the mainland. Here, in his own Oak Island museum, he displays artifacts he has found. But Nolan's real business is land surveying, not treasure hunting, and his home is well away from the island in the town of Bedford, Nova Scotia, a comfortable suburb just outside of Halifax. Perhaps it is this distance that gives his theories about the island a plausible ring, perhaps it is just his friendly low-key manner. A dark-haired man in his 50s, Nolan stretched back in a grey overstuffed chair and told his story while his wife served tea and cookies. A clock ticked steadily in the dining room,

and foghorns sounded in the harbour below. The sorrows of Oak Island seemed very far away.

Like most people in Nova Scotia, Nolan heard about the mystery as a child. When he acquired a heavy drilling rig for his own business, he offered the use of it to Chappell, who then owned the treasure-hunting rights. But Chappell was not interested.

"Chappell came across as being honest and straightforward, but he was also sort of a fox, clever and shrewd," said Nolan. "And he only wanted to work with people from far away, like Oklahoma and England. The farther away they were, the more he seemed to like them. So I got a little suspicious after a while and went to the registry offices in Halifax and looked up the Crown Land records. And I couldn't believe it. There was a hole in his title; it stood out like a sore thumb, it was so obvious. It was hard to believe too, because it was right in the middle of the island."

Nolan located the owner of this land and purchased the rights to it. "Then Chappell and I really locked horns," he said with a laugh. Over the years, a feud developed between the

two, a feud that was passed on to Triton Alliance and to Blankenship. There have been toe-to-toe arguments, court cases (settled in Nolan's favour), fisticuffs and once, rumour has it, drawn guns. Matters are quieter now, but Blankenship still insists that Nolan does not own any piece of the island and that anything Nolan uncovers legally belongs to Triton.

Nolan has discovered some very strange clues – most significantly, 60 old spruce stakes. He keeps them piled and unlabelled in one corner of his museum. The stakes are two and one-half to three feet in length, about four inches in diameter at the top and whittled down to a narrow two-inch peg. He found them pounded deep into a swampy area on his part of the island.

"It took us three years to find them all," he said. "They were that cleverly hidden. They were hammered almost all the way into the ground, so that just the little round circles of the top were showing. As I found each one, I marked its location on a chart of the island. If you line these points up, they intersect in some curious ways." Nolan gave another grin but would say no more. "Dan's upset because I



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found them - he didn't - and he doesn't have my charts. I keep them in a bank vault." (APPEAL)

Nolan stumbled onto the first stake by aligning what he calls "two key rock markers" on the island. These produced a line across the swamp, and he traced it carefully, probing the ground every two inches with a steel rod. He turned up the stakes along this line. The stakes were carbon dated to just before the 1700s, "not too many years before the Money Pit was built," he said. "Blankenship will tell you that they're older, but they're not. He wants them to date back to before 1600 because he thinks the Spanish built the pit. He has that firmly set in his mind."

Nolan's theory is based on the 1762 British attack on Havana. Beginning in 1511, Havana was used as a Spanish stronghold, and fleets of galleons laden with gold and silver treasures assembled in its harbour before sailing across the Atlantic. Then the British naval force captured the city and diverted this wealth and millions of dollars in gold ransom monies from Havana's nobility to Britain's coffers. But Nolan thinks that some of the treasure was secretly shipped north

to Nova Scotia and stored on Oak Island in the Money Pit and in several other caches. "There are some other things tied in," he added. "Havana is not the total picture. We've done a lot of research and have people in Spain checking on things for us."

The stakes are not all that he has found. At some of the intersecting points on his chart, he has uncovered holes "shaped in size to hold a chest." He thinks that some of the treasure has been removed, but not all of it, and that a goodly portion still remains in the swamp.

"That entire swamp is man-made, just like the beach at Smith's Cove. I don't know why yet, but with time, I think I will. It's a continual thing. With any mystery, whatever it is, if you have the knowledge to unlock it, you will. That's the key to Oak Island - knowledge. I doubt if I'll ever solve it by myself; it will take a great number of people to come up with the final answer. People and cooperation - and we're a little short on that right now." He laughed softly.

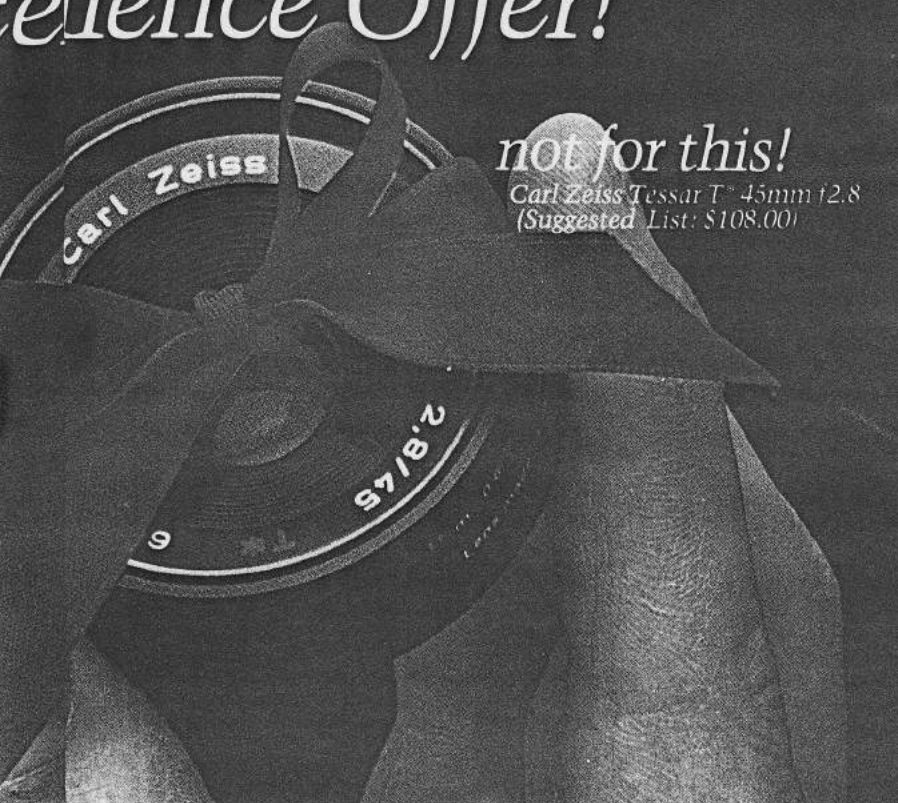
Two years ago, Nolan and Blankenship tried working together, but the old differences, the bitter feelings, were still there, and they went

their separate ways. Nolan gave a sheepish grin as he recalled buying an island next to Oak Island and "driving Dan crazy" with his surveys there. Now they are politely cordial whenever they see each other but carefully keep their distance. Nolan talked about wrongs committed on both sides ("We blocked them and they blocked us, but what did anybody gain? We all just got older") and about the tragedy of the Restalls:

"One word accounts for all the sorrow, feuds and unhappiness of Oak Island: greed. Whoever owns that pit wants it all. The island has been notorious for this for hundreds of years. Chappell always wanted 90 per cent of whatever was found, his predecessor 80 per cent. But the thing of it is, you have to try to be rational. That's the hardest part - it's so easy to lose perspective because the place is like a magnet, the way it draws and keeps you. But if any of us found anything there, what would we do? I mean what do you really find? Is it trouble for the rest of your life, or is it the end of the rainbow? Do you dare to actually open the treasure box?" He turned his hands palms up and shook his head. ■

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