

There is something down there—  
but for 170 years no one has been able to  
solve the riddle of how to get at it

## Oak Island's Mysterious "Money Pit"

Condensed from THE ROTARIAN DAVID MACDONALD

**J**UST OFF the rugged southern shore of Nova Scotia lies a tiny island shaped somewhat like a question mark. The shape is appropriate, for little Oak Island is the scene of a baffling whodunit that has defied solution for almost two centuries. Here, ever since 1795—not long after pirates prowled the Atlantic Coast and left glittering legends of buried gold in their wake—people have been trying to find out what lies at the bottom of a mysterious shaft dubbed, hopefully, the "Money Pit."

Using picks and shovels, divining rods and drilling rigs, treasure hunters have poured about \$1,500,000 into the Money Pit. To date, they have taken precious little out—only three links of gold chain and a scrap of ancient parchment. Despite more than 20 attempts, no one has yet reached bottom: each time a digging or drilling crew has seemed close to success, torrents of water have

suddenly surged into the shaft to drown their hopes. Although it's now known that the Money Pit is protected by an ingenious system of man-made flood tunnels that use the sea as a watchdog, to this day no one knows who dug the pit, or why.

One legend makes the pit the hiding place for the plunder of Captain Kidd, who was hanged for piracy in 1701. Other theories favor the booty of Blackbeard and Henry Morgan, both notorious buccaneers; or Inca treasure stolen by Spaniards; or the French crown jewels that Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were said to be carrying when they attempted to flee during the French Revolution; or Shakespeare's missing manuscripts. Whatever the pit may contain, few other treasures have been sought so avidly.

The long parade of searchers began one day 170 years ago, when Daniel McInnes, a 16-year-old boy from Chester, Nova Scotia, paddled



over to uninhabited Oak Island to hunt for game. On a knoll at one end of the island he noticed an odd depression, 12 feet in diameter. Sixteen feet above it, on a sawed-off tree limb, hung an old ship's tackle-block. McInnes's heart raced, for in the nearby port of La Have, once a lair for pirates preying on New England shipping, he had heard many legends of buried treasure.

Next day he came back with two other boys, Tony Vaughan and Jack Smith, and began digging. Ten feet down they hit a platform of aged oak logs; at 20 feet, another; at 30, a third. In the flinty clay walls of the shaft they could still see the marks of pickaxes. As the work grew harder, they sought help. But no one else would go near Oak Island. It was said to be haunted by the ghosts of two fishermen who vanished there in 1720 while investigating strange lights. So the boys gave up, temporarily.

Later, McInnes and Smith settled on the island. In 1804, intrigued by their tale, a wealthy Nova Scotian named Simeon Lynds joined them in forming a treasure company. They again found oak tiers every ten feet down the pit, to a depth of 90 feet. They also uncovered layers of tropical coconut fiber, charcoal and ship's putty, plus a stone cut with curious symbols that one cryptologist took to mean, "*Ten feet below, two million pounds are buried.*" At 93 feet, the diggers drove a crowbar five feet deeper and struck a solid mass. Lynds felt sure that it was a treasure chest.

But next morning he was amazed to find 60 feet of water in the pit. Weeks of bailing proved fruitless; the water level remained constant. Lynds assumed that this was due to an underground freshwater spring. The next year, his hired miners dug 110 feet down, off to one side of the Money Pit, then began burrowing toward it. When they were only two feet from it, tons of water burst through. As they scrambled for their lives, the shaft quickly filled to the same depth as the Money Pit.

Beaten and almost broke, Lynds gave up. McInnes died. But Vaughan and Smith never lost hope. In 1849, they took another stab at the Money Pit, with a syndicate from Truro,



Nova Scotia. The results were dramatic.

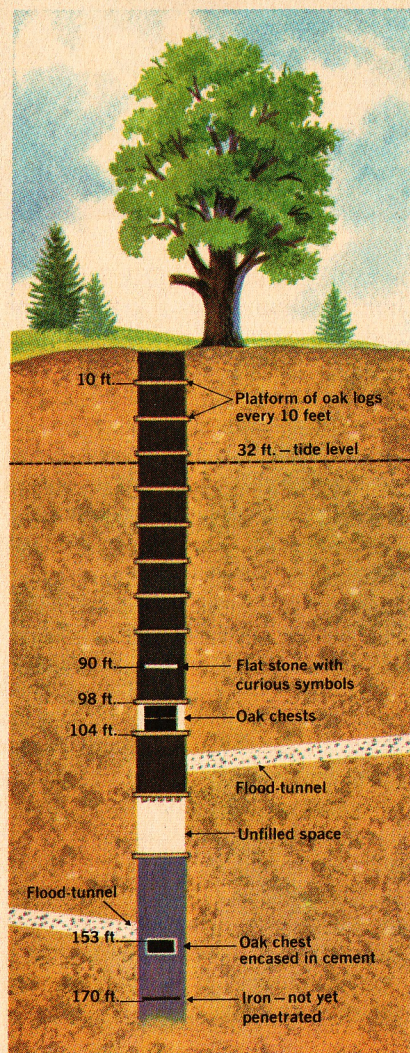
At 98 feet down, just where the crowbar had hit a solid mass in 1804, a horse-driven pod auger (which picked up a sample of anything it passed through) pierced a spruce platform. After dropping through an empty space, it cut into four inches of oak, 22 inches of metal pieces, eight of oak, 22 of loose metal again, four more inches of oak and six of spruce, and then into deep clay. To the drillers this suggested an exciting prospect—a vault containing two chests, one atop the other and laden with treasure, perhaps gold coins or jewels. Moreover, the auger brought up a tantalizing sample of what might be there: three links of a gold chain!

A second 110-foot shaft was dug in 1850. It also flooded. But this time a workman fell in and came up sputtering, "Salt water!" Then someone noticed that the water in the pits rose and fell like the tide. This discovery jogged old Tony Vaughan's memory: years before, he had seen water gushing down the beach at Smith's Cove—520 feet from the Money Pit—at low tide.

The treasure hunters stripped the sandy beach, searching for a hidden inlet of the sea. Under the sand, to their astonishment, they found tons of coconut fiber and eel grass on a stone floor that stretched, 154 feet wide, the full distance between high and low-tide marks. More digging uncovered more surprises: five rock-walled box drains slanted in from

the sea and down, converging on a line aimed at the Money Pit.

In effect, the beach acted as a gigantic sponge to soak up tidewater and filter it into a conduit. This con-



duit dropped 70 feet straight down, later exploration proved, then sloped back to a point deep in the Money Pit—all of it filled with loose rock to prevent erosion. This brilliant baffle was no natural obstacle; it was the work of a genius. As diggers neared the cache at 98 feet, they had unwittingly lessened the pressure of earth that plugged the mouth of the conduit.

Undeterred, the Truro crew built a cofferdam to hold back the sea. The sea promptly wrecked it. Next they dug 118 feet down and burrowed *under* the Money Pit. But while the diggers were at dinner, the bottom of the pit collapsed into the tunnel, then dropped even farther—into a mysteriously empty space.

Though the Truro syndicate lost \$40,000, its discoveries excited wide interest in Oak Island. A series of costly expeditions followed, all dogged by bad luck. One outfit gave up after a huge steam pump exploded, killing a man. In 1893, almost a century after the dig began, still another syndicate was organized, this time by Frederick Blair, a Nova Scotia businessman who was to spend almost 60 years trying to solve the mystery.

His company was the first to locate the flood-tunnel outlet, 111 feet down the side of the Money Pit. To block it at the source, dynamite was set off deep underground near the shore at Smith's Cove. After filling the Money Pit with water, well above sea level, Blair threw in red dye. Not a trace of it seeped back to

Smith's Cove—proof that the dynamite had been successful.

But on the *opposite* shore of the island, 300 feet from the pit, red stains appeared at three places! This meant that there was at least one more flood tunnel to cope with. No one has yet found it.

Blair and his partners also resorted to core-drilling in the Money Pit. At 153 feet—the deepest yet—their bit chewed into seven inches of cement, five of oak, 32 inches of metal pieces, then more oak and cement. Finally, at 170 feet, it rattled against impenetrable iron.

To Blair, this indicated a treasure chest encased in primitive concrete, larger and buried deeper than the ones drilled through in 1850. This time, along with flecks of gold, the bit brought up a tiny scrap of parchment bearing the letters *vi*—written with a quill pen and India ink, according to analysts in Boston. "That's more convincing than a few doubloons would be," Blair claimed. "Either a treasure of immense value or priceless historical documents are at the bottom of that pit." But the syndicate never found out. After spending more than \$100,000, it folded.

Only Blair carried on. He secured treasure-trove rights to the island for 40 years, then offered to lease them for a share in any bonanza that might be found. The first taker was engineer Harry Bowdoin, of New York. With several prominent backers looking on—including a young lawyer named Franklin D.



Roosevelt—Bowdoin dug and drilled in 1909, to no avail. Then he wrote a magazine article, claiming that there had never been any treasure on Oak Island anyway.

Next came syndicates from Wisconsin, Rochester, N.Y., and Newark, N.J. All failed. In 1931, William Chappell, of Sydney, Nova Scotia, a wealthy contractor who had run the drill that brought up the piece of parchment, sank \$30,000 into the Money Pit. Then the Depression made him quit.

Chappell was followed in 1936 by Gilbert Hedden, a New Jersey millionaire who spent \$100,000 more. Hedden ran submarine power lines from the mainland to drive high-speed pumps, and hired a Pennsylvania mining firm to clear the 170-foot shaft. He finally concluded that all the digging and flooding had probably shifted the treasure as much as 100 feet—in *any* direction.

At the time of Blair's death in 1951, Oak Island and its treasure rights were acquired by William Chappell's son, Mel, who had worked with his father's expedition in 1931. Mel Chappell spent \$25,000 on one excavation, which quickly became a small lake, then leased portions of his rights to a series of other fortune hunters, the latest being Bob Restall, of Hamilton, Ontario. A 59-year-old steelworker, Restall quit his \$150-a-week job in 1959 and moved to Oak Island with his wife, Mildred, and their sons, Bobby and Rickey, now 23 and 15.

The Restalls have lived there ever since, in a one-room cabin beside the Money Pit, a caved-in crater filled with sludge and rotting timbers. Restall has managed to clear a 155-foot shaft sunk in the 1930's. He has added eight holes, 25 feet deep, trying to intercept the flood tunnels that have foiled all previous searches.

To finance his hunt, Restall has already sold about half of his half-interest in any treasure to friends and interested strangers who have written from as far away as Texas. In all, including his savings and five years of hard labor, Restall figures that his quest for Oak Island's elusive hoard has cost almost \$100,000. Yet all he has to show for it so far are an olive-colored stone chiseled with the date "1704," which he found in one of the holes, and a profound respect for whoever designed the Money Pit. "That man," he says, "was one hell of a lot smarter than anyone who has come here since."

Is there really a treasure at the bottom of the Money Pit? According to mining experts, its elaborate safeguards could have been built only by an engineering wizard with plenty of help—and plenty to hide. As petroleum engineer George Greene put it in 1955, after drilling on Oak Island for a syndicate of Texas oilmen, "*Someone* went to a lot of trouble to bury *something* here. And unless he was the greatest practical joker of all time, it must have been well worth the effort."

