

A Sad Day When Oak Island Has No Mystery

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Some sadly sombre day somebody is going to settle the Oak Island question. At the rate his crew has been digging, Robert Dunfield, Los Angeles petroleum geologist-engineer, may make that 7-day either today or tomorrow or the next by uncovering a hoard of gold and jewels, loot from the treasures of Mexico or Peru or from ships laden in Madagascar and the Spice Islands. Or, on the other hand, some successor to Dunfield may solve the mystery permanently by shovelling the last of the rocky, gravelly islet into the Atlantic whose waves largely built it.

In either case, it will be a sad day even if, maybe, one individual will be rich. Legends place the treasure's worth at \$30,000,000, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the times and degree of inflation.

(Continued From Page One) Page 13, Col. 1-

One rich, and nobody else able to dream of getting that way merely by digging and draining as they have been doing since 1795 when three men in a boat started it all. The three spotted a gnarled old tree with strange carvings on it and began the Oak Island diggings which go on to this day, the only change being from locally-made pick and shovel to sophisticated power implements.

THE STORY

.....	2
.....	3
Coal Assistance	6
.....	16
.....	18, 19
.....	20, 21

WELL CHOSEN

The men in the boat chose their location well and if the trove is not found there it may well be somewhere nearby. Perhaps even on the La- have a few miles away by water. There, a lady, out of favor, with the court at Versailles, subsequently, if not consequently, became religious, built a fort and an outpost of her faith. They were burned later by the English but, a hop-skip-and-a-jump ahead of them, the faithful tossed the sacred vessels into a pond, or so the story goes.

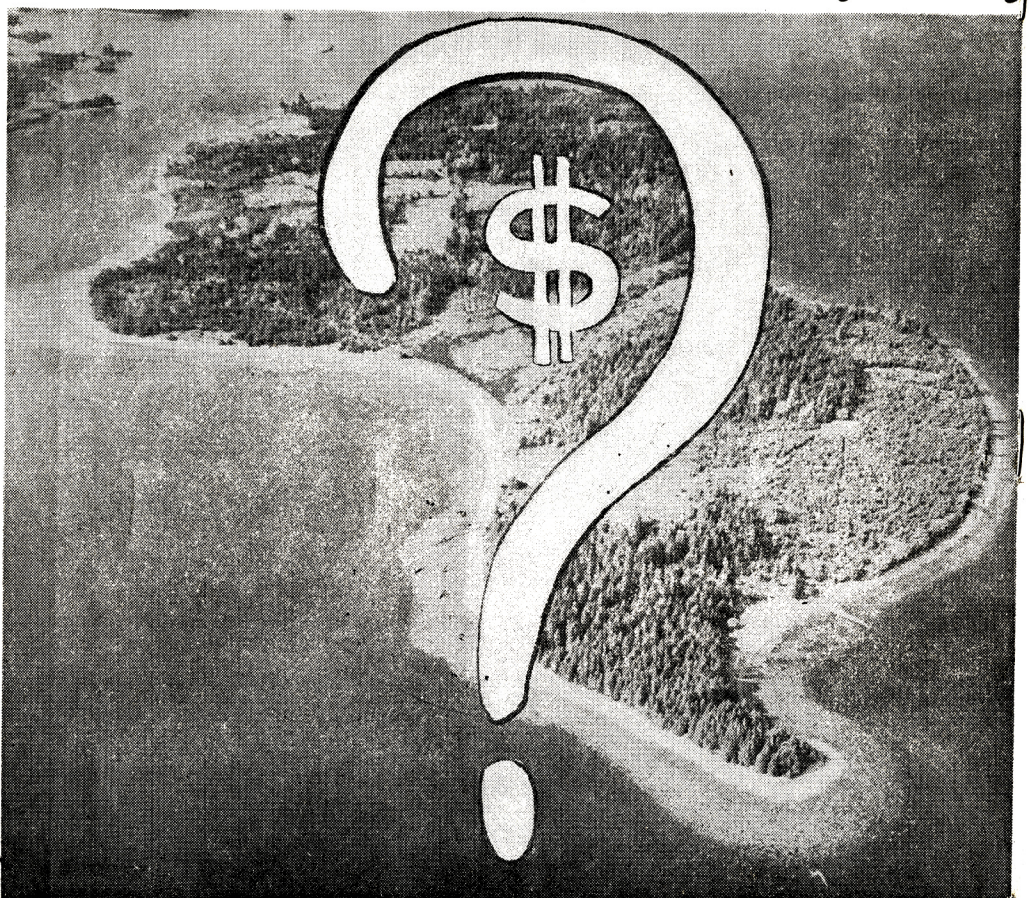
For a couple of centuries, that was as hard to prove as the tale that the lady had sent a huge amethyst from Blomdon to France, reminder to the king and courtiers of happier days, a glittering bit for the royal crown.

SOLD FOR CENTS

Then, a few years ago, one of the sacred vessels, silver, blackened by two centuries in mud and slime, was fished from the pond only to be sold for a few cents not long afterwards, to a tourist. That's the local legend anyway.

Boys were behind that find; they were fishing for just plain fish and caught a trea-

sure instead. The boys who saw the Oak Island tree and its inscriptions were closer to the time when Mahone Bay got its name from the pirate vessels congregated there. They were only 36 years from the era in which the French spent a reputed 15,000,000



OAK ISLAND

gold livres to fortify Louisbourg—gold that never was found in Acadia, though often hunted. It might have been buried at Oak Island, just as some of it was buried in Yarmouth County by victims of the expulsion. They sent back and got it, though.

INTRICATE

But no one seems to have been able to retrieve that at Oak Island. Yet it is there. Instead the various expeditions have been finding what they believe to be the remnants of oaken platforms, strange mats made of tropical plants, a stone with inscriptions which no one could decipher, seaweed down a hundred feet or so. They have found intricate tunnel and channel systems which seem to have been man-made. Geologists say not, that aeons ago, nature contrived them while hoisting the Appalachians above a boiling sea.

There always have been such sceptics, the latest being the one who suggests that the people of Chester and thereabouts don't put much stock in talk of the island treasure. However, almost everybody believes the tale of the Teazer which, aflame, is said to float up and down past their village every now and then.

Did not the school books relate that story, give detailed accounts of the battle which preceded Teazer's obviously temporary destruction? Were there not, at least until recently, copper pots in humble use there which proved her existence?

There are cynics, too, who say that the treasure could not possibly be Captain Kidd's.

WELL BURIED

Pockets of his high-placed friends were too capacious for any of his loot to have gotten past more than customs in Boston and New York. They held it while he was hanged.

Whoever's treasure is on Oak Island, it is well buried . . . 150 or 180 feet down at least. It may be in a cement chamber because what looks like cement has come up in drill cores. To make cement in that territory means that either clam shells were hauled from Cape Sable where the Indians piled huge heaps or that suitable rock was transported from Hants or somewhere near. Maybe, but a gentleman farmer says his land, not far from the island, is rough with gypsum outcroppings.

All sorts of rock, so goes the report, is found amid the debris they dig up and wash carefully in the manner of archaeologists or California and Klondike miners. Every scrap is examined. It is just as well because the next bit to the next might be gold from the hidden hoard.

Some actually was found once, links from a chain, so it is said, though they have disappeared long since. The links may have been left by a careless pirate. That is the hope.

SCOFFED

On the other hand, it may be a lonely object like the one Spanish coin from the early 13th century found years ago at the foot of a New Brunswick dune. Boys hunted; aunts scoffed and, eventually, contractors power-shovelled the whole half-mile sand bank away to put it into

concrete and mortar. They didn't find, so far as it is known, its mate, not that they were looking.

A lot of dreams were built on that single coin years ago, just as they have been built on Oak Island's story. The last, by the way, ante-dated by far Edgar Allen Poe's thriller "The Gold Bug," all about a tree, inscriptions, treasure, pirates, coded messages on parchment. A parchment fragment has been found on Oak Island, it is said. Poe might have heard of the island itself, the hunted treasure. He could have and then dreamed up his colorful non-located account.

The Oak Island parchment, no larger than the little finger nail of a little hand, still exists, its letters, two of them inked in, still a mystery.

That trifle is said to have been brought up by a drill from almost exactly the depth reached by today's diggers. However, these men are not depending on anything as small as a drill. They count on the digging capacity of a huge, toothed bucket which they drop 150 feet to splash into six feet of water at the foot of a 30-foot wide hole.

That bucket lately has not been bringing up much besides fragments of wood. Another of the mysterious platforms which previous searchers said they found?

The roof of an enclosed chamber holding the gold which Montezuma knew or the Incas treated so lightly in their Andes fastnesses? If either, who put them there? Who took the stoppers from the passages they had dug and let the sea in? Who laid down the triangle of stones said to point exactly to the money pit and the tree above it? Did the planters of the hoard come back and get the gold or did they perish at sea? Will the present search uncover nothing more than an empty cell, like the tombs of the pharaohs looted by grave-robbers, or does Oak Island conceal another like King Tut's resting place untouched and gleaming?

BUT ONLY ONE

Dreams and guesses. See what is meant by saying it will be a sad day when Oak Island's secrets are bared? Everybody then will feel like the Halifax man who once broke a chair. He found that its previous owner had used its arms as a bank for gold-pieces — but just one chair. This was discovered only after all others in the house had been carefully taken apart. Or they will feel like the Halifax laborers building foundations on the North End for the first grain elevator. When their shovels uncovered a bagful of Spanish gold pieces they thought their fortunes made. But there was only one bag full so all they got was enough to pay their way into and out of the nearest grog shop, where they drowned their disappointment.

The reality was too much for them just as the law was for the local woman who sought to prospect for gold where geologists said it was and still is, the site of Halifax homes and a grocery store. That was less than a generation ago but much much too late, authorities say, for any such antics within city bounds.

HOPE RUNS HIGH

In more rural surroundings, like Oak Island, though, dig-

ging is allowed and hope runs high. It is not based on the iron stove lid lifted by the bucket not long ago. That can be explained away, as can the boulders. They were tossed into the money pit by an earlier hopeful when he was forced to give up his attempt, perhaps after the sea had seeped into the workings, forcing his retreat.

But what about the platform of slate, not native to the island?

That is just one of the things that has not been talked out of existence. It is like the workings encountered far below the surface. Nobody but a slave would have labored there. And who had slaves at their command? Pirates who gathered their crews from captured ships and, of course, the Spanish conquistadores who made full use of every Inca and Aztec they could find to load with gold and man their high sterned, unyielding galleons, and French engineers from Louisbourg who had the levee at their command.

THAT'S LIFE

That's the stuff that life is made of, not computer tape or cards.

Every child dreams of treasure and some children fortunately for all, just don't grow up.

Happily for themselves they sometimes actually find the substance of their dreams. Such a one for instance, was William Phipps, late of Maine, where he is said to have been of "lowly birth." He had his misadventures in Nova Scotia, then under Boston's aegis. He sailed south to Haiti, raised a galleon with millions worth of gold and silver bars and other like trifles, returned to New England, became governor, wed, and fathered 15 children. He found his treasure.

Perhaps Mr. Dunfield or some other will repeat at Oak Island at least part of the Phipps' performance.

Who knows?