

Gold in Them Thar Hills

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Some of us are born treasure hunters. We might not all be miner-forty-niners, but most of us enjoy a good treasure hunt. From Flea market finds, to fishing and hunting, an elusive treasure intrigues us all. That being said, I'd like to share a neat old treasure story with you. Let's talk about stolen gold!

I just knew that would get ya! I'd like to tell you the story of The Spanish Gold of old Willow Grove. This stash of buried treasure has eluded the best of hunters for decades. Our tale begins in the mid-1800s.

Just as the inundated city of Willow Grove was coming of age, the winding Obey River stretched for miles through our pleasant valleys. It was a chief mode of transportation for people from all walks of life. On this day, three unlikely souls furiously paddled a stolen canoe downstream. These companions were an early form of guerrillas. They were thugs from south Texas or northern Mexico. They were part of the reason the US was entering the War with Mexico. Aside from the troubles the country was facing with Texas and its attempts to succeed from the Union, there were small bands of ruffians ransacking the remote villages along many waterways like the Obey River. They would steal what they could from these small communities and quickly paddle their way downstream toward their southern homes...thieving all the way.

But unfortunately for our three land pirates, they had pilfered and pillaged just a little too much. Their heavily laden canoe was full of ill-gotten gains, and a posse of local boys had started their own band of treasure hunters. And they had only one treasure in mind...a canoe full of stolen goods and three Spaniards.

This is where it gets ugly. As the story goes, the three were certain the posse was hot on their trail. They elected to hide their gold along the river to make a faster escape. They supposedly edged their canoe onto the rocky bank of a large landmark. It was a huge bluff, recognizable from a long distance. It was a place that these three foreigners could easily remember on a later return.

This ford in the river at the base of this bluff was a troublesome spot. Those traveling the old road would have to ford the river here to get around the steep bluff. In cold weather, or in times of heavy rains, that ford was not capable of being crossed. In these times, a steep trail leading over the mountain was the only path available. The sharp incline of that trail was no easy path to travel, but it was the only route past the bluff. That is where these lads took their leave.

It is said that these men buried their golden treasure on this hillside. It is also said that this is where the posse caught up with them. The waters of the Obey ran red with the blood of Spanish thugs. And time passed.

For decades, rumors of Spanish gold circulated through old Willow Grove and Lillydale. For years, people dug for treasure on what became known as The Spanish Trail. For decades, shovels and sifters littered the hillside overlooking the Obey. It wasn't until the fall of old Willow Grove that the first clue of the treasure was unearthed.

During the demolition of Willow Grove, during the making of Dale Hollow, dozers rumbled far and wide as trees and houses were leveled. On weekends, those dozers sat idle across the landscape. During the summer of 1942, a pair of local boys *commandeered* one of those idle bulldozers. They pushed away at the soil high on that trail. What they discovered was interesting.

Those boys unearthed a hatchet blade. The sides of this ancient metal icon were engraved with Spanish writing...thus proving to the local folklorists that there were indeed Spaniards wandering the early hillsides of old Willow Grove. Those same Spaniards probably left their gold, too.

Unfortunately, that old hatchet has gone amiss. No one knows where that fascinating hunk of cast steel resides. No one knows what those inscriptions once spelled. And once again...time has passed along the shores of the Obey River Valley.

Now, for you history buffs and searchers of local "treasure", this trail holds another fascinating tale to tell. Near the top of this trail on the eastern slope, lives a wonderful old tree. A beech tree of giant proportions stands tall as a reminder to local folks. This tree has many inscriptions carved into its silvery bark. Not the least of which is a name. One Mr. G. W. Sevier, Jr., has carved his name into this bark. And here's the kicker. He carved it in 1899. It is suggested that this tree is the marked location of the death of Mr. Sevier's father...G. W. Sevier, Sr. He was a Civil War soldier returning home from duty. Only a few short miles from his home, he was bushwhacked by enemy fire. As he was coming home from battle, he was killed on the friendly slopes of his own hometown hills. It is said that George Washington Sevier, Jr. carved his own initials here to mark the location of his father's death. It was a healing process for him.

Of course, this is only speculation. No one alive knows for certain. The Sevier family tends to believe the story as I've told it. I know this...I feel something when I touch that silver bark of that centuries old wooden statue high on that hill. It might be George. It might be the lost souls of three Spaniards telling me where to look for that elusive stash of stolen treasure. And it might be my overactive imagination stirring my emotions. But I know this...I like it there. That old trail is just full of history.

So, if you want to hike that old path, I've included a map. That old trail is all grown up with forest. The terrain is remarkably steep. It's no joy ride. But it's a neat place.

I suggest taking entry on the Pulsey Creek side. The terrain is less steep, making for an easier path. Enter the woods on the second point in from the main lake. Follow

the ridgeline straight up. Soon you will see a towering castle of rock near the top. That is the famed hideout for our Spaniards that met their demise. Before you reach that rocky tower, the Great Beech will be standing on your right. You won't miss it. Pause here and say a little prayer for old GW.

To find the Spanish Diggings, veer right after the Great Beech and cross the ravine. Three levels of dozer paths have flattened the terrain there. Another huge lone Beech tree stands there also, guarding this old treasure trove of history. It's gotten many initials carved into it over the years also. Treat both these trees with respect. They have seen many of us come and go. Let's hope they meet our grandchildren.

And that's my treasure story, folks. I wrote a whole book on this old tale. It's called "Lost Treasure". It should be ready for purchase this spring. And even though I am certain no treasure will ever be dug there, I just love that old story. In my research for this tale, I have met new friends and reaffirmed old ones. I've learned the rich history that old trail has to offer. And in that...I believe I've found the treasure.~