

Raising Steam

A Real-Life Story of a Man & Woman and
Their Quest for a Sunken Treasure



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Over twenty years ago, Tommy Maxwell stood scratching his head and staring at a map. He was a plant foreman in Livingston, Tennessee, but his true passion in life was scuba diving. He had started the only dive shop on Dale Hollow at Willow Grove Marina, and his hard work ethic had served him well as he maintained both jobs. On this day, he had just had an enlightening conversation with an older fellow employee from the plant. As he stared at the lake map in his hands, he couldn't help but wonder if that old machine could still be resting quietly on the murky bottom floor of Dale Hollow. As he studied the ink pen "X" scratched into the Mitchell Creek hollow on the map, he could almost see the huge steel bowl-wheel of that steam engine powering massive log-sawing equipment. The loud whine of the steam whistle filled his inner ear. "Yeah," he thought to himself, "maybe tomorrow is the day."



Tommy's excitement this day had been fueled by an often-told tale of folklore. Legend had it, that during the building of Dale Hollow Reservoir, an old steam engine had been left behind and buried in the rising waters of the newly formed lake. Tommy had often fantasized about finding this old machine and making a dive site out of it. He wanted that old steam whistle so bad he could taste it. He had shared his thoughts about this old relic with numerous friends and family, but never really expected to find this age-old figment. Besides, finding a sunken object in a lake is no easy task...even an object of this great size. Scuba diving in deep, dark water is a challenge. So he put his mind to work on finding another way.

His thoughts and savvy intellect soon brought him to Mr. Larry Shell of Willow Grove Marina. Larry had an immediate suggestion for narrowing down Tommy's dive time. Larry offered to graph the cove in question with his bass boat depth finder. If some

large object could be found near the marked location on the map, then Tommy's crew would have a much better chance of finding something in those murky depths. Nowadays, GPS machines and sonar devices would greatly enhance such an endeavor. But during those days, only the most simple of tools and technology were available for Tommy and company.

Despite everyone's disbelief, Larry quickly located an enormous object on the bottom of Mitchell Creek, right where the old timer had made his marks on the map. It wasn't long before Tommy and his wife, Linda, were preparing for their first dive in search of this elusive treasure. Tommy had expected a difficult dive and had planned an intricate system of ropes and lights to systematically cover the dark depths of fifty-plus feet of lake bottom. But, strangely, that system would not be necessary. Either by happenstance or fate, Tommy and Linda dropped their boat anchor, donned their dive gear, and slipped into the lake. They followed that anchor line to the bottom and found that the anchor had dropped directly onto a huge and shadowy hunk of steel. Could this large object really be the long-lost, sunken steam engine of Dale Hollow? The answer was YES! Tommy passed his hands over the round, moss-covered back wheel of the old steam engine. Even in those dark depths, Linda's voice could be heard shouting through her regulator, "WE FOUND IT! WE FOUND IT!"

The two anxiously examined the entire machine. Steering wheel, bowl wheel, smoke stack, and YES...even the steam whistle! Yep, it's all here.

Tommy and Linda spent the next few months diving around the old engine and investigating the surrounding area of the cove. It wasn't long before Tommy had yet another talk with Larry. It seems that these two men were not willing to let this old machine be a simple dive site. What if the old engine could be raised from the bottom and put on display for all to see? Why not just raise it?

Well, that would prove far more difficult than either man had expected. In fact, if either had known what all would transpire over the next year of their life with this machine, they might have just left it there for the fishies. But that wouldn't be Tommy Maxwell and Larry Shell. Nope. That baby was coming up...one way or another.

After three failed attempts at raising the engine with every piece of equipment they owned, the pair enlisted the help of numerous friends. Mr. Harold Stone and his fellow Corps Rangers offered their help and the giant Corps barge. That would be essential in the recovery of this enormous one-hundred year old anchor.

Also, scuba diver and close personal friend of Tommy, Mr. David Foster, offered his assistance and his large air bags to help float the engine. David hauled his gear from Nashville and generously aided in the cause of what was now becoming an obsession with the crew of Willow Grove...raise that engine!

And so it finally happened. In the fall of 1987, after many hours of pulling and tugging, lifting and dragging, that ancient hunk of cast steel slid up onto the Corps barge.

After over forty years of solitary confinement in the murky depths of Dale Hollow, the 1898 Frick Company steam engine felt its first rays of sunshine since its wood-sawing days. It then made a slow and deliberate trek up the lake to its new home at Willow Grove. For six weeks, it was patiently sand-blasted and painted. It spent a number of years on display in the restaurant at Willow Grove before making one last journey. It was a journey of about thirty miles, to Celina, Tennessee, where it proudly stands for all to see. It is housed at the Clay County Historical Society Museum, near the old high school. I welcome all lake lovers to visit it. I often run my hands over the back wheels, much like how old Tom must have years ago, when moss still covered this iron horse in the cool waters of Dale Hollow. It's missing the old steam whistle now, but most of the rest of it is just how it was sixty-five years ago when fire and steam boiled in its veins.

I am happy to say I was there those days and watched that old and nearly forgotten machine see its first light of day in decades. I stood along side two VERY determined men as they concurred one enormous challenge. And sometimes, when I view that old tractor in downtown Celina, I wonder, "Shouldn't that old whistle still be here with this old machine? Shouldn't it be here with the heart and soul of Dale Hollow?"

Well, regardless of where that old whistle resides, I'm pretty sure it's resting comfortably with the heart and soul of Dale Hollow...and I'm not just blowing off steam.~

Steam Tractor in 1987



Steam Tractor in 1990

