

For 177 years the treasure of Oak Island, Nova Scotia, has inspired greed and adventure, killed men and ruined fortunes.

The treasure is now in sight — it has been photographed — but it is not yet in hand. Fortunes are at last likely to be made, though not necessarily by those who did the digging.

The island is a small one in a place where islands are many — there are by myth 365 in Mahone Bay, one for every day in the year.

In 1795 there were more islands than men. The men were fishermen and boys were boys. Daniel McInnes, sixteen, rowed out the hundred yards from shore to hunt birds. There, on top of a hill, he found a twelve-foot wide saucer-like depression directly under the sawed-off limb of an oak. There may or may not have been a ship's block and tackle hanging from the limb.

The hanging block is the first element of the mystery. If it existed it established a paramount point — blocks are made of wood, tackle is rope, and wood and rope rot. If a block did hang from the limb it must have been used to lower treasure into the ground. And if it was there in 1795 the treasure must have been buried not too long before, years perhaps, but not decades.

The block is still at the heart of the mystery. But whether or not Daniel found it, he did see the depression and he dug. He dug ten feet down and came to a spruce platform. He rowed home and got two other boys to help, Tony Vaughan and Jack Smith. They dug and discovered a design. A shaft had been expertly made, then carefully filled. There was a platform every ten feet. The boys needed help. They tried in vain to find it — the island was supposed to be haunted. Two fishermen had vanished there in 1720 when they'd rowed over to investigate strange lights.

Two of the boys, McInnes and Smith, settled on Oak Island. In 1804 a local rich man, Simeon Lynds backed them in a new effort and with the best of modern machinery they dug down to ninety feet. They found, as expected, a spruce platform every ten feet and they also found a mass of coconut fiber, some charcoal and ship's putty. They found a stone, chiseled with mysterious signs. A cryptologist, whose qualifications are lost in the years, read them to say that gold to the value of two million pounds was buried ten feet below. The diggers probed with a crowbar and at ninety-eight feet they hit something solid. They were exultant but tired. They went to bed.

The next morning they went back to the shaft and found it almost full of water. They tried bailing to no avail. The water remained, sixty feet deep.

The next spring Lynds hired miners and they sunk a 110-foot shaft beside the first one. Then they started to dig over, to get under the treasure and come up from below. The wall broke and the new shaft flooded, miners scrambling to keep ahead of



*The best place to dig for gold is in a gold mine, and the best thing to do with gold is to give it to someone for Christmas. Some men, who may not have been wise, put their gold back in the ground for safekeeping.*

## Oak Island

Once upon a time some very clever men dug one of the world's most complicated holes in an island shaped like an exploding pork chop off the pine swept coast of Nova Scotia. They stuffed it with gold. Maybe. Now Dan Blankenship, (top, left) and his cohorts are about to get it out. Maybe.



the rush. Lynds gave up and Daniel McInnes the original discoverer died.

There was a long pause. Treasure hunters get discouraged but they never quit.

In 1849 Tony Vaughan, a man well into his sixties now, tried again. This time he had the backing of a wealthy man named Vaughan Smith, possibly a relative, possibly not. There were a lot of Vaughans and a lot of Smiths around Nova Scotia. A syndicate was formed, the latest equipment purchased, including a horse-driven auger, and optimism was reborn.

The hole was still full of water, but the auger could push right through. Its purpose was to bring up samples of what lay below, which it did with almost mathematical precision. Below the ninety-foot plank flooring was an open space, then four inches of oak, then twenty-two inches of metal, eight more of oak, another twenty-two of metal, four of oak and six of spruce. After that clay. The metal included golds, specifically three links of a gold chain, and a scrap of parchment. The diggers were jubilant.

In 1850 they sunk another shaft, 110 feet deep, by the original two. Once more they tried to dig over to the treasure. Once more the water rushed in. This time they noticed something that had been missed before. The water in the shaft rose and fell

with the tides and it was salty. Tony Vaughan remembered that a half century before he had noticed after the first hole was flooded that water bubbled up in Smith's Cove as the tides went out. Smith's Cove was 520 feet from the diggings. The men went to the Cove and dug again. They found a man-made rock floor under the sand, 142 feet long, covered with coconut fiber and drained by five tunnels. They found neatly crafted tools, a wooden scoop and notched logs with chiseled Roman numerals.

The men who had buried the treasure had protected it with extraordinary ingenuity. The drains were the mouths of a tunnel. The tunnel ran first on a slight slope, then on a precipitous one, 520 feet to the wall of the treasure chamber. When the chamber and the chambers above it were full of clay the water had been held back. When the pressure was removed the water had crumbled the wall and flooded the shaft.

The tunnel was dynamited off. New shafts were sunk. They flooded too. There was, it became apparent, more than one tunnel.

Decades went by with many men trying to get the treasure out of the ground and none succeeding. The latest diggers, a consortium of Canadian and American businessmen, joined as Triton Alliance

Ltd., have been at it for six years. They have at their command the technology of the late 20th Century and have spent \$500,000. The shafts are still flooded, but no matter — men can now dive deep under water and work.

Triton now has a new shaft, 185 feet from the original "Money Pit." It is not a true shaft but a hole eighteen inches in diameter, large enough for a camera. At the bottom the driller found a vault, apparently one connected to the original shaft by a lateral tunnel. A T.V. camera was lowered into the vault last year and it disclosed shapes which were interpreted to be human remains, three chests, bits of wood and a pickaxe. The Montreal Star reported that later still photos showed clearly two skeletons and three chests, one with an inscription.

Plans now are to drill two more twenty-eight-inch holes into the vault through which water could be pumped. The pumps would not attempt to dry out the vault permanently but merely to keep it clear enough so that divers could unload the treasure trunks and send the valuables up on a hoist. The problems ahead are still great. At the depth of the vault a diver could work for only a few minutes.

Still it may be that at long last the hands of man are about to grasp the buried treasure. If they do they may well also solve the basic mystery — who buried it.

The theories are many — it has been suggested that the government of Spain had the formidable underground complex dug and that it contains the legendary Inca treasure which disappeared from the city of Tumbrez in the 16th Century. There is something to be said for that. It is impossible to believe that a pirate or a band of pirates had the time, patience, man power, authority and engineering skill to build the tunnels and vaults. And in the 16th Century there would have been few curious fishermen around to spy on the operations. Any that were could have been left in the vaults.

The solving of the mystery may be the only immediate gain. Triton has already spent a half a million and the vault in question is clearly not the main one. No one knows what is inside these trunks. But if it is brought up it will be valuable. Ralph Surette suggested last spring in The Montreal Star that the real value of the treasure would be as an attraction to tourists. He quoted one Nova Scotia realtor as saying "In five years Oak Island will be the biggest tourist attraction in eastern North America." The south shore of Nova Scotia is becoming a rendezvous for tourists and a summer playground for the rich and super-rich. The rich are building \$50,000 houses on large estates. The super-rich are buying whole islands.

The beauty of Nova Scotia has become more valuable than the gold.

