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If you were a member of GPAA prior to May 2017, you may remember my story in the May/June edition of Gold Prospectors Magazine titled “Gold in the Gully.” It was a tale of my husband, Bill, and I on our first trip to our newly acquired gold claim in Nevada City, Calif. What a great adventure it was, driving through flooded and muddied roads and ultimately panning the tires of our four-wheel drive for gold! Since I wrote that article, we have made a few trips back to the claim, but our focus was more on the adventure in the story to follow.

On March 5, 2014, I had just opened my own rock shop when Bill and I attended a local “rock hound” meeting where we lived, in Lake County, Calif. A member of the club had come into my shop and invited us to join. We had been members before, but it was 10 years since we had attended a meeting. We were excited to go, hoping to reunite with friends from the past. To our surprise, many were still active members. We enjoyed catching up and talking about things to come. One member took the podium and began to tell her tale of a treasure hunt from which she had just returned. I was still chatting in the back of the room and not too attentive until I heard her begin reading a poem. This poem, she had said, contained clues to the location of the treasure she was after.

As I had mentioned, I wasn’t fully listening when she started, so I missed the first few lines of the poem. My focus intensified as she continued to read:

"Begin it where warm waters halt
And take it in the canyon down,
Not far, but too far to walk.
Put in below the home of Brown."

Just then, my husband jabbed me in the ribs with his elbow and whispered in my ear, “Put in, that’s a boating term.” That was all I needed to get me hooked! As soon as we left the meeting, I began my research on this mesmerizing poem and the man who wrote it.

Forrest Fenn is a retired Air Force pilot who served our country for 20 years. Following that, he began a career in art making bronze sculptures, which are highly sought after today. He then started an art gallery in Santa Fe, N.M., that became very successful. There is much more to his story, and in 2010, he released his first of three memoirs, titled “The Thrill of the Chase.” Within the pages of this book you learn about Forrest and why he decided to fill an antique bronze chest with gold, coins, gems, jewels and more, said to be worth over a million dollars, and then hide it somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. He wrote a poem, which is also in the book, that he says will direct you to the cache. If you can find it, you can keep it.

Since then, numerous blogs, forums, YouTube channels and Facebook pages have been launched, all dedicated to the chase. Forrest still releases stories, random quotes and words, answers
questions, and responds to some emails via a few of these forums. Most of the members of these forums use secret code names, myself included. I go by the handle “jidgins.” I chose this moniker because I love to venture the gold diggings in the mother lode, and it was the name of my rock shop. I say was the name, because I closed it down shortly after I began my search for Forrest Fenn’s treasure!

I have been involved in the hunt for four and a half years and have become part of what I call the chase family. Forrest Fenn and “The Thrill of the Chase” have changed my life, and I am not the only one to claim as much. He has given so many the chance to learn new things. He has taught us how to think, how to communicate more effectively, and how to experience life in ways we never imagined possible. His story has encouraged and inspired many to follow their dreams. I am certain if you asked any one of the several thousand people involved in the search for Fenn’s treasure, they will admit the same. I can say with absolute certainty that my life is better because of Forrest Fenn, the chase community as well.

I had never blogged before the chase, and once involved, it became routine several times daily. I had to learn as much as I could, and in doing so I have formed friendships that will last. Bill has never touched a computer in his life and until recently, had a hard time understanding my obsession with the forums. He has always been 100 percent interested and involved with this treasure hunt, and we have made 19 trips into our search area, but it was I who maintained the blog connections.

Along with the forums, there have been book signings and get-togethers that Forrest himself has attended. Most notably is the annual Fennborree, held in the summer near Santa Fe. Fennborree is a chance for searchers to get together, meet the people who talk to each other on the blogs, and talk treasure solves. I have met some amazing people during my tenure in the chase, which has led me to this story.

On July 29, 2018, Bill and I were evacuated from our home of 15 years, on 10 beautifully forested acres, within the Mendocino National Forest. The Ranch fire, one of the two rapidly spreading wildfires dubbed the Mendocino Complex, was quickly approaching.

There have been many fires all around us in recent years so we strived to keep the area around the home clear. We had 200-plus feet of defensible space, as well as a reserve of more than 10,000 gallons of water. We were also prepared for evacuation, though never imagined it would really happen. Still, we loaded our truck and trailer with as much as we could, brought the dog, and we left. We tried to load the cats, but they wanted nothing to do with a running vehicle, and escaped. We never believed it would be the last time we would see our home and kitties.

The same day we evacuated, the fire had already consumed our business about 10 miles away as the crow flies. Our entire year’s work, financial investment and income for the next fiscal year was all lost. On Aug. 3, our home was incinerated, and everything around it. All total, the flames devoured our business, all of our equipment and tools, our home and everything in and around it, and all of our retirement. We lost everything. To top it off we were uninsured due to the fact we were within the boundaries of a national forest, and our home was “off the grid.” This made insurance virtually impossible to obtain, unless we were extremely rich. That was why we worked so hard to take preventative measures to protect our home, but this fire proved too big an adversary.

It is important that I tell you how grateful we are to have ex-
cap ed with our lives, and our dog. They say that home is where the heart is, and the three of us together can make a home anywhere, as long as we are together. For that, we are thankful, and able to accept this setback, however great it is. I always believed that everything happens for a reason, as corny as that sounds. For whatever reason it is that all this has occurred, we are alive, and now it is our journey to discover, and start anew. Similarly, I don’t believe in pity, or blame, or dwelling on the past because it doesn’t do any good. Always look ahead and remember to enjoy today along the way.

After over a week of absence from the chase forums, I logged on and a fellow member welcomed me back and questioned my unusual absence. Normally I do not talk about anything negative because the chase is a positive thing, but I was asked, so I answered.

I never imagined my response would trigger what followed. Kristie Thor, who goes by Kpro on the forums, runs a blog of her own called “Hint of Riches.” Searchers were asking Kristie what could be done, and how could they help Bill and me. That’s when Kristie took it upon herself to contact Forrest with the idea of a fundraiser. He agreed, and it was on!

Kristie enlisted the help of fellow searchers beginning with Mike Cowling, known as Cowlazars. Mike set up and managed a PayPal link where those who wanted to could donate. Toby Younis worked tirelessly through my own technical challenges to get me on his YouTube vlog. Several other YouTubers held weekly programming dedicated to the fundraiser for three weeks straight. A raffle was initiated and associated with the donations, as there were those who wanted to donate items to the cause. The idea was that everyone could donate and get tickets to win search-related memorabilia, or refuse tickets, or donate the tickets to me. There was a goal set, an official deadline, and a get-together for the drawing. All of the forums collaborated and promoted it; the addresses I will list below so you can watch how it all came together.

I received countless messages, notes, and posts offering words of encouragement and inspiration. These words alone lifted my spirits and left me feeling less a victim and more blessed than I thought I could ever be. As the donations came pouring in, it grew to over 70 items to be won, and Forrest challenged all that he would give a set donation if a certain goal was reached. Not too long after, he was able to keep his word. A silent auction for an original drawing from Forrest’s book “The Thrill of the Chase” added to the excitement. The deadline for the drawing entries and silent auction was Aug. 31. The drawing would be in Santa Fe, at the Collected Works bookstore, on Sept. 6.

At the event in Santa Fe, several searchers showed up in support. Some traveled from as far as the East Coast, and even from Canada. Cynthia Meachum and D'cAll Thomas joined Mike and Kristie to help facilitate the event. Forrest attended with two of his grandchildren. Toby Younis live streamed, and others took their own videos for YouTube shows. Many pictures were taken, and many more friendships were formed and/or reinforced. The excitement and positive energy of this event was extremely high, and you could feel it over the three days we all converged in Santa Fe. After all was said and done, the donation total reached $58,994.84! Bill and I each choked up as we expressed our appreciation to this amazing group of people.

Because of this fundraiser, we have been able to form a plan to move forward. The cleanup of the property will take three to six months, and it will be virtually barren for many
years to come. It will be hard to sell, as frankly, it will never be what it was before. It saddens us to leave what we built together and loved for so many years, but we feel extremely blessed to have the opportunity before us to move on and make a fresh start.

While in New Mexico, we decided to purchase a ranchette listed as a fixer. With the money from the fundraiser as the down payment, and to start renovations, we could make it work. Since the loss of the business, we were left with no income, and therefore no loan, but were able to get financing from the homeowner.

Our plan is to refurbish the guest home into a vacation rental dedicated to Forrest Fenn and the chase community. It will also be a haven for all treasure seekers and prospecting enthusiasts! We will work hard to make proud those who invested in our recovery.

Another plus side is that we recently received the new GPAA Mining Guide in the mail, so it wasn’t burned. You can bet the New Mexico pages will be as worn as the old ones in California!

The reason for my story is to tell of the great humanity and enormous goodwill of Forrest Fenn and my fellow searchers in the chase community. I lovingly call them my chase family. Please take a moment to learn about the wonderful man named Forrest Fenn, and the fabulous people involved in the search for his treasure.

Bill and I have listed our gold claim for sale, and the donation link is still open as well. As I mentioned above, it will be a long road, but it has become a lot easier to see the direction we are headed, as many of our financial worries are not as extreme as they could be. We are excited to be stepping into this next chapter in our lives. For the opportunity before us, we are extremely grateful and feel very blessed. We owe a world of thanks to Forrest Fenn, and all of my chase family, for they are our saving chase!

For more on Forrest Fenn and “The Thrill of the Chase,” visit:
oldscreenfetttradingco.com (Forrest Fenn’s site)
dalneitzel.com (Dal Neitzel’s site)
forum.hintofriches.com (Kirstie/Kpro’s site)
mysteriouswritings.com (Jenny Kile’s site)
chasingfennstreasure.com (Cynthia Meachum’s site)

Watch on YouTube:
A Gypsy’s Kiss with Shelley Carney and Toby Younis
Cowlagars Grand Adventure with Mike Cowling
The Flip Side of Forrest Fenn’s Treasure Hunt with Sean Dodson

Search Facebook for several searchers’ pages dedicated to “The Thrill of the Chase”
If you would like to donate, visit: paypal.me/jjdiggins