The MAN Who Buried a TREASURE

Hopeful hunters are scouring the Rockies for a chest full of gold, jewels, and artifacts reportedly worth millions. Where exactly is it? The clues lie in a mysterious poem.

BY Eric Spitznagel
FROM THE NATIONAL
“Please don’t say I buried it,” says the e-mail from Forrest Fenn, the 88-year-old retired antiques dealer from New Mexico who engineered one of the biggest treasure hunts of the 21st century. “Just say I hid it.”

I read this line over and over, wondering what Fenn meant—and looking for a clue. He didn’t write, “I never buried the treasure.” He just doesn’t want me to tell anybody else he did. Which means ... what, exactly?

My mind races, and I briefly consider giving up on journalism to become a full-time treasure hunter. That is the power of Forrest Fenn’s treasure, a prize that in the past eight years has lured a surprisingly large and enthusiastic group of treasure hunters.

Fenn and his wife ran a high-end gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and amassed a personal collection that included Sitting Bull’s original peace pipe and a mummified falcon from King Tut’s tomb. In 1988, Fenn was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Faced with his own mortality, he came up with a crazy scheme: He would bury some of his favorite artifacts somewhere in the Rocky Mountains and then die next to them. “My desire was to hide the treasure and let my body stay there and go back to the soil,” he explains.

He beat the cancer and put the treasure idea on hold for two decades, until his 80th birthday, when he decided to finally go through with it (minus the dying in the wilderness part).

Fenn filled an antique bronze lockbox measuring ten inches by ten inches with hundreds of treasures: gold coins and nuggets, rubies, diamonds, emeralds, Chinese jade carvings, and pre-Columbian gold bracelets. The contents are worth somewhere between $1 million and $5 million, based on estimates Fenn has given over the years. Then he took his treasure chest out into the Rockies and hid it.

He wanted it to be found. That was the whole point. But he wasn’t going to just give it away. “This country was going into a recession,” he writes to me. “People were losing their jobs, and despair was the headline in every paper. I wanted to give some hope to those who were willing to go into the mountains looking for a treasure.”

In 2010, Fenn self-published his memoir, The Thrill of the Chase. In addition to stories about his adventures as an Air Force pilot and selling moccasins to the Rockefellers, it includes a 24-line poem that Fenn claims contains nine clues that “will lead to the end of my rainbow and the treasure.” (See page 77.)

At first, nobody really noticed. The Thrill of the Chase was sold only in a local New Mexico bookstore. But word spread, and by 2011 there was a small community of determined hunters. Once the media told Fenn’s story, the chase was on. (The book is now out of print, and copies show up on Amazon for as much as $3,200.) Fenn estimates that 350,000 people from across the globe have searched or are currently searching for his treasure. Yet nobody has found it. How, one might reasonably wonder, could that be?

The problem with Fenn’s poem—or perhaps the reason it has become such an obsession—is that the “clues” can be interpreted a million different ways.

The “home of Brown,” for instance, could be Browns Canyon National Monument in Colorado, or Brown Cemetery in Montana, or Brown Hill in New Mexico. Or a cabin or a bear. Maybe it’s the color brown. Or maybe the treasure is hidden under some porta-potties. (Don’t laugh; several people have already looked.)
The treasure has attracted an eclectic bunch of hunters, including “Tim Nobody,” who collects pinball machines; a one-legged motorcycle rider named Michael Hendrickson; and a Connecticut woman everybody calls Grandma.

Dal Neitzel, 72, manages a community cable TV station in Bellingham, Washington, and has taken about 70 road trips in search of the treasure. He runs a blog named the Thrill of the Chase that has become an online hub for hunters to post theories about where Fenn might have stashed all that gold. He gets thousands of visitors a day.

Marti Kreis from Blue Ridge, Georgia—better known by her handle, Diggin’ Gypsy—searches an average of seven times a year, for weeks at a time. The 49-year-old grandmother is usually joined by her extended family and, room permitting, a pet rooster named John Wayne. She searches only in West Yellowstone, Montana, no longer bothering with Wyoming, Colorado, or New Mexico, the other three mountain states where the treasure might be hidden. She says it’s because Fenn once blogged about her, claiming, “If I were a betting man I’d bet on this woman.” That was enough for Kreis to think she was on the right track.

She’s hardly the only optimist. The truly devoted meet in June for an annual gathering in New Mexico called Fennboree. Since 2014, when only ten people attended, it has grown to become a hot ticket, with hundreds mingling around campfires and sharing stories.

With so much at stake, there are also rivalries and infighting. Some people claim that the treasure never existed—“[Fenn] should be arrested for scamming,” a local once grumbled to the *Santa Fe New Mexican*—or that it was discovered long ago and never reported.

Some frightening people have come out of the woodwork in search of the valuable cache. A Nevada man pleaded guilty to stalking after he became convinced that the treasure was actually Fenn’s granddaughter. Another searcher, a Pennsylvania man who was certain that it was hidden in Fenn’s home, was arrested after he used an ax to break in. And Fenn wrote to one overeager sleuth, “Please don’t dig up my parents’ graves.”

Then there are the fatalities. Four people have died while searching, three of them in the summer of 2017: Jeff Murphy, who fell 500 feet while hiking in Yellowstone National Park; Eric Ashby, who drowned while rafting the Arkansas River in Colorado; and Paris Wallace, whose body was discovered seven miles from his car in the New Mexico mountains. It’s a peculiar plot twist, given that thousands have been searching for Fenn’s treasure since 2011. Has the terrain gotten inexplicably more treacherous, or have the searchers started taking bigger risks?

Fenn, who has been loath to give away additional clues—“It’s all in the poem,” he would tell inquisitive hunters—has recently started sharing more details. After Ashby’s drowning, he wrote in a blog post, “Please remember that I was about 80 when I made two trips from my vehicle to where I hid the treasure. Please be cautious and don’t take risks.”

More clues he has revealed: The treasure isn’t in a mine—“I mean, they have snakes in ‘em,” he has said—or a tunnel. It’s between 5,000 feet and 10,200 feet above sea level. It’s not in Canada or Idaho or Utah or a graveyard. “Where warm waters halt” is not a dam, and it’s not “on top of any
SEVERAL PEOPLE
HAVE BEEN WITHIN
A FEW HUNDRED FEET
OF THE TREASURE.

mountain [though] it may be close
to the top.” When I asked why the
searchers didn’t seem to be getting
any closer, Fenn told me that “they
don’t seem to be focusing on the first
cue.” He of course didn’t reveal what
the first clue was.

Why are Fenn’s treasure hunters
so into what seems like a ridiculous
thing to do with their time? Many are
quick to say that their lives have been
enriched by their experiences. Neitzel
says that prior to learning of Fenn’s
treasure, he never took a walk that
wasn’t necessary, but in the past
decade he has climbed mountains. Kreis
will tell you how she used to cover in
her tent, terrified of grizzlies or other
wild beasts, but now feels fearless.
“It’s changed us,” she says. “My sis-
ters and daughters, we’re brave Viking
women. Nothing scares us anymore.”

For some, such as Bill Sullivan of
Seattle, the mystery of Fenn’s trea-
asure chest is literally all they have.
Sullivan, 60, is homeless and lives
mostly out of his car. He’d like to have
a roof over his head and dependable
meals. But that’s not why he’s fo-
cused on Fenn’s elusive jackpot.
For him, it’s about following
READER'S DIGEST  Only in America

he’d like to keep the chase going for a new generation. “Wouldn’t it be a hoot to be the wise guy writing the new poem?” he says.

As for Fenn, he hopes someone finds the treasure while he’s still alive. Several people have been within a few hundred feet, he says. He knows because they’ve e-mailed him and asked whether they were close. Fenn, who’s not about to give anyone a free pass, said nothing.

But he reads every e-mail, many of which can be surprisingly revealing about the type of people who would drop everything to go hunting for gold. They confess their fears. They thank him for saving their marriages, for giving them a reason to take a risk, for giving their lives meaning.

Fenn received one e-mail from a law student thanking him “for reminding me of a part of who I am that has waned greatly during the last years of my legal studies.” Responding with an impassioned plea that offered more clues to his real intentions than any of the secrets hidden in his poem, Fenn told the man, “Don’t you dare work as a lawyer. If you do, you will wear a coat and tie, sit at a desk all day. You will not have time to smell the sky or experience the soft breeze ripe with sun. Go looking for my chest full of gold and all of the other treasures that lurk once you leave the fluorescent lights behind.”

Another hunter had this tantalizing insight: “Somewhere deep inside, I hope that I never find your treasure. The journey will be treasure enough.” And so the hunt continues.

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An Inspired Choice

After God created 24 hours of alternating darkness and light, one of the angels asked him, “What are you going to do now?”

God said, “I think I’m going to call it a day.”

REDDIT USER BOT_10

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LAUGH LINES

I don’t see why I should have to clean the shower. In my opinion, it’s the shower’s job to clean me.

@warmyellowlight

Not sure who this “dry-clean only” shirt thinks it’s dealing with.

@OhNoSheTwitnt

When your wife asks what’s on TV, dust is not the right answer.

@RunOldMan

Dishwasher broke, so now I’m washing them all by hand like some sort of motherless Disney princess.

@robin_991

My son keeps running around naked, so I sprayed him with Windex. It’s supposed to prevent streaking.

@weirdralph

It’s funny how your parents tell you it’s their house, but as soon as something needs cleaning, it magically becomes yours too.

@causticbob

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Good Clean Fun