

BURIED GOLD

by Joe B. Cox, Sr.

The lure of buried treasure is a driving force that impels men to action. They will risk their-lives to undergo the worst hardships in their quest for lost or buried treasure. A rumor of a lost mine or lost or buried gold or a lost mine in a locality will start men on a mad search with little or no chance of success, but failure seldom quenched man's desire for wealth.

My father's oldest brother, Uncle John Cox, often talked about gold that the Spaniards had buried in Central Texas.

Many people are prone to believe stories about sunken treasure ships, lost mines or buried gold or silver. These tales circulate freely among people that believe them, often stimulating the imagination to the extreme. Like most forms of communication that circulate principally by word of mouth, the treasure stories grow in some way as they pass from person to person.

When I was a boy, I heard a lot about buried Spanish gold in Central Texas. When the Spaniards left East Texas during the Mexican Revolution, they buried their gold somewhere in Central Texas. They intended to return and recover their gold, but they never did. This story was heard by Uncle John Cox.

Somewhere in his travels over Texas while he was a young man, he had heard that when the Spaniards abandoned East Texas in the early part of the nineteenth century, they took a route north of the Old San Antonio Road and that somewhere between the Brazos and the Colorado Rivers they buried forty jack loads of gold. The Spaniards intended to return and reclaim the gold when conditions were favorable, but Mexico became independent of Spain, and Texas became a Mexican province. The Spaniards never returned and the gold is still waiting for someone to claim it.

According to the tale that Uncle John heard, the Spaniards marked the spot where the gold was buried and left a chain of clues that led to the gold. A clue might be an inscription on a large tree or on a large rock pointing toward the buried gold or toward another clue. These clues were usually a crude arrow or a crude triangle pointing toward a large tree or the point of a hill. In either case, the clue pointed toward another clue, whether it be on a tree or on a large rock that crowned the point of the hill. Somewhere near the last clue the gold was buried.

For many years after the Civil War cattle and horses in Central Texas grazed on the open range. Only the fields were fenced. Farmers and ranchers spent much time riding the range hunting cattle and horses. In their wanderings they became acquainted with large sections of the country. At this time much of Central Texas was a rolling prairie punctuated with occasional large liveoaks or by clumps of liveoaks. Many small pointed mesas rose above the prairie. The points were crowned by large limestone rocks. I have seen several crude inscriptions on these rocks. I have often wondered if these inscriptions were put there for a specific purpose, or were they inscribed by some wandering horse or cow hunter just to pass away the time. Many of the inscriptions had become badly weathered over the years; while some were in a good state of preservation.

Uncle John seemed to have acquired his information from several sources. During the time of his search for the buried Spanish gold there were many People living who were born about 1840, and with some of them the tale of the buried Spanish gold had found a lodging place. Uncle John served on the frontier fighting Indians during the Civil war.

A few years after the war he married and reared a large family in the northeastern part of Lampasas County. During all of these years, the story of the buried gold was upper most in his mind. His wife died after the children were all grown. With wife and children gone, a restless spirit prevailed. He sold his farm for a nominal price and started on the treasure trail.

I do not know whether he had hunted the buried gold before his wife died or not. As he lived in one end of the county, and my parents lived in the other end of the county. All travel was by horseback or horse drawn vehicle and few if any telephones, therefore, there was little communication between him and my father. He had been on the money trail several years before I saw him. By that time it had become an obsession and the driving force in his life.

I came in from school one cold afternoon in 1911. My mother was in the kitchen trying to begin preparing supper, but she was continually interrupted by Uncle John, who was having her move his coin purse from place to place over the kitchen floor while he held what he called a mineral rod in his hand and had her notice that the mineral rod always swung toward the metal coins as she moved them from place to place. I have often wondered what force caused the mineral to swing back and forth. The mineral rod was the instrument that he used in checking around every clue in a circle of several yards radius.

I once had the privilege of watching him make a mineral rod. He thought that the one that he had been using had lost its power of attraction. I watched him closely as he made a new mineral rod and asked many questions. He took a vial about six or eight inches long and about three-fourths inch in diameter and filled it almost full with hartshorn. After adding a green liquid for coloring, he put some coins in the vial and corked it tightly. He inserted a corkscrew in the cork and hooked a coiled limber wire spring in the corkscrew. The mineral rod was ready for testing. Mother was in the kitchen cooking supper. He had her move his coin purse from place to place over the kitchen floor while he made careful observations.

Finally, he was satisfied that the mineral rod performed satisfactorily. Now he was ready to hit the trail.

He would usually come late in the afternoon. Most of the time father would be working in the field or doing the farm chores. He would talk with mother and my brothers and me until dad finished his work. At this time he was about seventy years of age. His short, stocky body and stooped shoulders and little worn black leather bag made a great impression on me. He spoke the frontier dialect of the uneducated person of his time. At this stage in life he traveled in, a buggy. His horse, buggy, little worn black leather bag and mineral rod along with his clothes constituted his worldly possessions. His only income was a pension from the State of Texas. The money from the sale of the farm had vanished long ago. Like many an old prospector he knew that the big strike was just ahead. One time he found a fifty-cent coin with the mineral rod. This find fired his imagination, and spurred his efforts.

After his first visit that I remember he visited us three or four times each year. He usually came late in the afternoon and never stayed over two days unless the winter weather became too severe to travel in a buggy. If this happened, he would leave as soon as the weather moderated. On these trips he usually spent at least one day tramping over the woods and hills looking for clues to the buried gold. We lived on the old home place that was settled before the Civil War. I am sure that he relived part of his boyhood as he trudged over familiar ground. He presented a pathetic figure in the distance as his short, stooped figure moved slowly along with the ever present little black bag containing the mineral rod under his arm.

Many times he would be out most of the day without anything to eat. In the summer time he would carry a small canteen of water. After a day or two of searching, he would move on. He seldom told where he was going.

Several of his children lived in the northern part of the county or, just over the line in a joining county. Sometimes he would go back to some of them to get his pension check. So far as I know most of his activities ranged from the vicinity of where we lived to the southern part of Hamilton and Mills Counties.

He always blamed himself for his failure to find the clues that he was looking for. If the clues ever existed, they could have disappeared over a hundred years. Trees could have been cut down, blown down or died. Rocks could have been moved to other places. Most of the early fences in that part of the county were made of rock. Uncle John never thought of this. He blamed himself for his failure, but he could never decide at what point he went wrong. Perhaps, he did not have a clear mental picture, or he had not followed details correctly. He often consulted his informant in a neighboring county to see if he had followed instructions correctly.

The clues that he usually looked for were flat rocks or boulders with an inscription on them, usually an arrow or triangle inscribed on them. Over the years the informant's memory had failed him, or the country had changed by the removal of landmarks or by the forces of nature. I recall a rectangular shaped boulder with several words and the date 1856 inscribed on it. This boulder stood upright in the bed of Lucy Creek. I passed this boulder often when I was a boy and stopped and read the inscriptions. Thirty-five years after my parents had moved from that part of the county, I returned to check the inscriptions. The boulder was about evenly divided between limestone and sandstone. Only traces of the inscriptions were left in the sandstone, but some of the words and the date 1856 were clearly visible in the limestone portion. Every rise in the creek took its toll along with other forms of erosion. This is one way that clues could vanish. Uncle John called these rocks with inscriptions "marked rock." He was always either talking about or looking for "marked rock."

Uncle John did not rule out any mark on a rock or tree. There was always the chance that the marked object was what he was looking for. With the mineral rod he would carefully cover the ground in the vicinity of the probable clue. The mineral rod was supposed to swing back and forth like a pendulum when it was near metal and stop completely still when it was directly over the metal. When the area around a possible clue had been gone over to his satisfaction, he would begin the search for another clue. After an exhausting search he would return to his current home base to rest, mull things over and plan the next step. Like the desert prospector, he believed the treasure was somewhere ahead. His job was to find it.

Personally, I do not know how many deep holes he dug in his search for the buried gold. Besides the small ones, I know that he dug two that were probably eight feet in diameter and fifteen or twenty feet deep. Since the mineral rod stopped directly over the treasure, the spot directly under the mineral rod would be the center of his hole. He dug round holes going straight down like he was digging a well.

Once the rod came to rest near the confluence of Bennet Creek and a small tributary. After several weeks, he gave up the search, deciding that nothing could have been buried as deep as he had dug that hole. He left the open hole without cover or fence around it. A rancher's calf fell into the hole. After this happened, he always fenced the holes after he had decided to quit them.

After this failure the area of operations shifted to the other end of the line to a place near his boyhood home on Lucy Creek about eight miles north east of Lampasas. I do not know how much time that he spent searching in this area before I knew him, but he spent a lot of time in this vicinity over a period of two and one-half years that I know about.

After many possible sites had been passed over, all things pointed to a spot on the west side of Lucy Creek near the confluence of a tributary that made an oblique angle with the creek. In the narrow part of this angle near the foot of a high bluff that came down near the creek Uncle John decided to dig. This was to be the final try in that area. As he was over seventy years of age, he was not able to do much digging. He had been staying with a nephew who lived in the neighborhood. Since farm work was slack he finally talked his nephew into helping with the digging. Nobody wanted to take his money, but he would not take no for an answer.

The nephew got his brother-in-law, who lived nearby, to help in the digging. Work started in either December of 1914 or in January of 1915. Sometimes when the fields were dry enough, the men stopped digging and plowed their fields. When Uncle John's pension check was all gone, he had the men stop work until the next check came in. They tried several ways to discourage him, but he realized that time was running out on him. He felt that this was the right spot, and that he might not have another opportunity. When it rained much, water stood in the hole, stopping work for a while.

His pension checks were to be sent to him at Lampasas. They usually came the first week in the month, but mail was not always on time. He might make three trips in a buggy to Lampasas before he got his check. Nothing discouraged him, but he chafed at the delays. As the weeks passed, the hole grew deeper, and the mound of earth near it grew wider and higher.

When the hole was ten or twelve feet deep, they found what appeared to be a wide plank about an inch thick. This was taken out in small pieces as it was fairly rotten. Uncle John was excited. "It's right under thar," he said, pointing to the center of the hole.

Work resumed with renewed energy, but the expected treasure did not show up. As the top layers of alluvial soil had been passed, the digging became harder and harder. The bottom of the hole was full of large rocks that had to be broken into small pieces and pulled to the top with a rope and pulley. After the first few feet all of the dirt was put in a large bucket and pulled out with rope and pulley. The time finally came when they struck a large rock that extended across the entire width of the hole. It was too thick to penetrate. After several hours of hard work without making headway, the workmen persuaded Uncle John to give up the idea. He did so reluctantly.

Corn planting time was at hand, and the men felt that they had taken enough of his money. He could not get anyone else to work for him. This was the end of his dream. He still believed that the gold was “right under thar,” but he could not do anything about it. He had the men put a fence around the hole.

I found the place several years later. The place had grown up in brush and briars. One side of the hole had caved in and the fence posts were leaning over letting the wire sag. Thus ended a dream, but nobody offered an explanation about why the rotten board was found at that depth. We were kept informed about the operation by the nephew and the man who helped him.

When I found the place years later, I stood and looked at what had been the high point in an old man's life. A feeling of sadness came over me as I surveyed the scene. I wondered if this failure had extinguished the spark of hope that had furnished the incentive that kept him on the treasure trail.

I do not recall seeing Uncle John again until the Spring of 1924. At that time we were living in the, northeastern part of Lampasas County about three miles southwest of Uncle John's old place on Bennet Creek. At this time he was staying with a daughter and son who lived in neighboring communities. He was too feeble to travel himself. He had one of his children take him wherever he wanted to go. He visited us several times during the next two years.

About one-half mile northwest of our house the prairie rose in gently until it culminated in an irregular shaped brush covered mesa with several rock-crowned points. Someone had told him about the marked rock on this mesa. He talked about trying to find them. I promised to go with him.

When he visited us during warm weather, he would set a day to look for the marked rocks, but when the day came he would decide that there was too much danger of rattlesnakes and postpone the trip until cold weather. When he visited us during the winter, the weather would become too inclement for him to be outside. He never got to search for the marked rock.

I found marked rock in two different places on the mesa. Most of the markings were not clear, weathering had taken a toll. On the last one that I found the inscriptions were clear, but some had been poorly made. The date 1890 and an arrow pointing toward a high hill about a mile to the southwest were quite clear.

Uncle John passed away in March 1926. I have often regretted not getting his life story. He never talked much about his past. I am sure that the story of his life would be interesting. I do not know what became of the little black bag and mineral rod. Since they were his constant companions during the latter years of his life, they should have been buried with him and be his companions in death.