The End of a Golden Age

When did we, Coronado's children, lose the treasure-hunt bug?

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by Ann Japenga

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP IN THE SAN GABRIEL VALLEY in the late 1960s, people still believed in treasure. My parents took my three siblings and me gold panning on the East Fork of the San Gabriel River, and families all over Southern California stashed sluice boxes in their station wagons for impromptu prospecting jaunts to the Mojave.

Rock-hounding and gold-seeking were nearly as popular as stamp collecting in those days. We tore maps to buried treasure out of magazines and studied stories about dehydrated prospectors who stumbled into town muttering "Black Butte" or some such clue with their last breath, all the while clutching a scrap of bandanna concealing a lump of gold.

Collectively, we believed there was something of value out there in the dirt, be it fossils, gems or relics.

I never thought about those teenage treasure trips again until I moved to Palm Springs a few years ago and found legends of loot up every canyon. I heard stories of Gus Lederer, the well-loved Corn Springs prospector who baked hotcakes for his 18 burros each morning. Then there are Peg Leg's lost gold, the Lost Pearl Ship of the Desert, treasure caves guarded by balanced rocks and an endless number of forgotten mines.

In fact, when an index to Desert magazine — a now defunct compendium to the desert and a valuable resource to us desert folk - - was published recently, it contained no fewer than 11 pages of entries under "Lost Mines and Treasure," a glut that prompted the editor to ask: "Could there be more things lost in the desert than found?"

The treasures lost in the 1960s are for the most part still up for grabs, but there's one big difference today: The treasure seekers are gone.

The people I run into on the trails and back roads are not out looking for purple glass or fire agates. Their SUVs are not equipped with metal detectors. There could be a pot of jade pebbles jammed in the crotch of a mesquite tree in plain view on the Bump and Grind Trail, but 99 out of 100 hikers would trek right past.

So what happened to the fortune-finding itch? For one thing, there are more restrictions on the land now, making it difficult to cruise up just any canyon and start digging for your prize. And antiquities laws, meant to protect artifacts, have left us with a vague sense that anything we might find most likely belongs to the feds. And otherwise, it's "take only pictures; leave only footprints," right? The land is there to admire but not to touch.

But there has to be more to it than that. After all, treasure seeking is not a fleeting fad that can be suppressed by a few rangers with rule books. Humans throughout time have hunted for some version of El Dorado. The drive has been especially irrepressible here in the West. It started with Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, the Spanish explorer who trolled the Southwest for the Seven Cities of Gold more than 400 years ago.

We who inhabit the West today are Coronado's children, says Western writer J. Frank Dobie, and we also have the blood of the Argonauts sluicing in our chests. Our real or symbolic ancestors risked everything for gold.

To be sure, it's easy for me to believe I'm a daughter of Coronado because I fall so easily into the treasure seeker's trance. I've felt it while stalking metal scraps at Patton's desert training camps, foraging for pottery shards at an ancient hunting camp and scouting for bighorn tracks along a creek. Head down, feet moving, eyes scanning — it's completely absorbing, and it feels like I was born to do it.

It's hard for me to see why an entire generation would give that feeling up. Maybe it's just that the masses don't believe anything of worth is out there anymore. We know L.A. real estate is valuable, and so is a patent for a digital music player, but something you find in the dirt? For free?

The belief hangs on in fringe bands of modern-day prospectors at places like the Tucson and Quartzsite gem shows and on websites such as Treasure Hunter's University, dedicated to the "hunter or huntress in all of us." University president Mike "Hawkeye" Pickett tells me in a phone call that historic documents prove lost treasure is not a fantasy: The questing Spaniards left treasure all over the Southland.

Even if history convinces me that hidden treasure is real, there's a second hurdle: I have to believe I can be the one to find it. A child of Coronado must believe in personal luck.

When I was growing up, the radio asked, "Do you believe in magic?" and the universal answer was "Yes." Today the people who talk most about belief, faith and hope are scientists who get grants to dissect these intangibles.

So here I am living in the treasure-laden desert, thinking I'd like to go looking for that Spanish pearl ship gone missing in the Salton Sea region about 400 years ago. I've read the accounts and even looked at aerial maps of the search area. Now I just need a dose of old-fashioned belief. Those days on the East Fork were not so long ago.