

Gold on the Florida Coast
Let's get the record straight

by Captain Steadman A. Parker

I read with considerable interest the article in the Saturday Evening Post of Dec. 12, 1964 by James Atwater, "Spanish Gold Two Fathoms Deep". I would like to point out that the story was incomplete and several of the statements of the author's informers were inaccurate. They did not give the whole story.

In the first place Kip Wagner did not know of the existence of these wrecks until I told him in 1950. I, not Kip Wagner, am the man who went to Spain in 1946, when I was the captain of the S. S. Dick Lykes, and acquired copies of documents from the Spanish archives showing the history and approximate location of these wrecks.

I first became interested in them in 1911 when I was 14 years old. I was with my father, J. H. Parker, Arthur Kriegel and Ed Futch (the father of Lisbon Futch) when they found one of these wrecks east of Sebastian. In later years I determined, with the help of a geologist, and other evidence that this wreck was in the place where an old inlet existed before and until 1715.

However, my father and associates did not know anything about the history or the importance of this wreck. They being poor people with a living to make, did nothing about salvaging the wreck. It would have required considerable outlay in capital and labor. However, it always fascinated me.

During the early 1920's while fishing for mackerel with nets from Cape Canaveral to Bahia Honda in the Keys, I located many other wrecks. I also had a living to make, at the time, and not having sufficient capital, I made no attempt at salvage.

Finally in 1946, I had the opportunity to find out the history on some of the wrecks I had been locating most of my life. Then I really became interested. However, I was unable to do anything about it until 1949 when the youngest of my four children finished school.

I then purchased electronic equipment, including World War II mine detectors (now obsolete) went to Wabasso (near Sebastian) and quietly started prospecting. I told the local people that I was looking for elmanite - a metallic substance used as pigment in paint. I knew there was some in the area and if I could find sufficient quantities the Dupont interests, or others, would be interested. This only required part of my time but it gave me an excuse for being there. I was well known in the area, having been raised there, so a reason for my presence was necessary.

My idea, of course, at the time was to avoid publicity. I did not intend to avoid paying the State of Florida their share (12½% at that time) but I knew that once I applied for a lease it would become a public record and the reporters in Tallahassee would give the information to all the newspapers. I wanted to have something positive and definite before I asked the State for the protection of a lease.

I worked for several months, with my brother Henry. At times Lee Hurtado of Cocoa and Jim Russell of Orlando were with us (1950). Hurtado, I happened to run into while looking around Cape Canaveral, and he brought his friend Russell into the act.

Previously at Sebastian (1950) I had found the camp established by the Spaniards for salvage operations in 1716. We found artifacts such as chinaware, coins and skeletons on an Indian mound near the beach (now washed away). I also found the well where they got their fresh water. It was in an area of fine quartz sand that

would hold fresh water after a rain. The salt water tide rises and falls in the coarse shell sand predominant in the area. I also found wild coffee growing about 3 miles in both directions from the camp. Coffee is not native to Florida so I surmised it must have been planted by the Spaniards. They usually did that. They liked their coffee.

But the best proof that I had found the right place was the history - obtained in Spain (the archives), St. Augustine, (Florida Historical Society) and Havana. The fleet wrecked in a hurricane on July 30, 1715. Admiral Jean Estaban Ubilla was leading the fleet. He was not a seaman. His appointment as an admiral was political because of his friendship with the Queen of Spain. Three days out of Havana they encountered this hurricane and he gave orders to continue up the Florida coast. All did, except one skipper who was a seaman. He disobeyed orders and turned back. He knew that hurricanes blow counter-clockwise in the Northern hemisphere. Therefore he maneuvered around the storm to the south and eventually got back to Spain and reported what must have happened to the rest.

They, as we know now, continued up the Florida coast until the Northeast wind became too much for them. Remember they were windjammers (sailing ships). They had to seek shelter or wreck on the reefs. They tried to find these shallow inlets between Sebastian and Stuart during the night time. Only one made it and sank inside. The rest hit the reefs and sank there. Only a few of the crew and passengers survived. Admiral Urilla perished at the place indicated on Roman's map of 1774 (near the camp site of 1716). Some of the survivors walked the 200 miles to St. Augustine. (The records are there).

Some of the "Passengers of Distinction" were unable to make this long trek and they remained near the scene of the wrecks. Later a ship from Spain to Havana stopped with mail and supplies, off St. Augustine and learned the where-abouts of these "Passengers of Distinction". Soon after, they were rescued and taken to Havana and eventually to Spain.

The following year (1716) a Spanish salvage crew returned and camped on the site mentioned previously. After the Spaniards had salvaged part of the gold the pirates showed up. After a brief battle the pirates realized that they were out numbered and out gunned. (The Spaniards had already mounted some of the ships' cannons on shore). So the pirates withdrew and went to Nassau, which was pirate headquarters in those days, and got re-enforcements. When they returned in a few days, the battle eventually went in their favor. But during the battle they ran out of cannon balls, so they rammed their cannons full of ships spikes about 12 to 14 inches long and fired them at the Spaniards. I found hundreds of these spikes in the area 234 years later. I also found some cannon balls. I often wonder which I would rather be hit with, a spike or a cannon ball. I think I would prefer the latter. They played rough in those days.

Anyway, after the pirates won the battle, they took all that had been salvaged. The Spaniards knew of course that the pirates would return after the first skirmish and buried what they had salvaged, with the help of their slaves who had been doing their hard work. In this of course the Spaniards made a mistake. The slaves turned pirate and showed them every place that gold had been buried. I spent many months 1950-'51 looking with my instruments for some they might have missed but found only spikes and cannon balls.

The mine detector (W.W.II vintage) was designed for the beaches and land. They were not much good under water even when converted for that purpose. In 1950 I heard of a man in Miami (Arnold Kent) who had an instrument designed for underwater work, so I bought it. This enabled me to pinpoint 2 more wrecks. Mr. Kent told me that David O. True, Secretary of the South Florida Historical Society had information on the area. I talked with Mr. True and found that he had less exact information than I did, although some of his historical information did verify some I already had.

He also told me about a friend of his, Jack Prince of Naples, Florida, who was interested in financing treasure hunting. I told him I was not interested in a financial backer at the time. However, a few days later I had been working in the jungle back of the beach with Arthur Kriegel - then 82 years old. (My father and Ed Futch had died several years previously, and Mr. Kreigel was the only surviving member of the 1911 trio). As we came out of the jungle onto the beach we met a man who said, "I'm looking for Capt. Parker who is over here somewhere looking for treasure. Do you know where I can find him?" I said "Who are you?" He replied, "I'm Jack Prince from Naples and Mr. True told me Parker was working here." I informed him that I was Parker but that I didn't appreciate the publicity. He assured me that he hadn't talked to anybody else, but I learned later that he had broadcast to everybody in Wabasso and Sebastian about who he was looking for and why. So I was unable longer to avoid publicity. Exit almanite alibi. That is how Prince, with confidential information I had given True, horned in on my project.

Everybody now knew what I was doing and many wanted to be in on the deal. Shortly after, was when Kip Wagner first eased into the operation. He worked with me for several months and was

of help at times. He also acquired as much information as possible. I foolishly gave him some of the historical data that I had acquired in Spain 4 years before. He now seems to claim full credit for this knowledge. At least he doesn't even mention his original source of information, according to the article in the Post, but claims to have acquired the data from the archives of Spain himself. This, of course, is not true. He does seem to have acquired more information later.

Jack Prince in the meantime, continued to come over every week to assist me, but never a mention of financing anything. After a few weeks (night of Oct. 20, 1950) I had a call from a friend in Orlando named ^Rash (who with Mr. Mobley had assisted me previously with a small suction dredge.) telling me that he heard over the radio that Prince was broadcasting from Tallahassee that he was after a lease on the area where I had located the wrecks. I immediately contacted my attorney, Jim Vocelle of Vero Beach, and we established the fact that my knowledge of the wrecks dated from 1911 and that I had been actively engaged in survey and salvaging cannons since 1949, long before Mr. Prince ever appeared on the scene.

The result was that both Prince and I got non-exclusive leases of large areas. Mine, #765, was dated Nov. 22, 1950, signed by Fuller Warren and the I.I. Board. Sinclair Wells was the land agent at the time. I was the first to pinpoint the wrecks and got exclusive leases of one acre each on Dec. 13, 1950 and July 25, 1951.

All this appeared in the newspapers of that era, viz Fla. Times Union of Oct. 31, 1950 - (also Oct. 30, Nov. 15, Dec. 13- of 1950) and Nov. 22 and 27, 1951. Newsweek Nov. 13, 1950. There is also a story in Colliers magazine of Mar. 10, 1951 showing

a picture of me at work on the beach at Sebastian with a mine detector, the Miami Herald of May 6, 1951 gives a story and pictures of machinery in operation when George E. Bunnell Inc. was working with me at the site. Later Orlando Sentinel Mar. 4, 1953 and recently Fort Lauderdale News (Wesley Stout) Sept. 16 and 21, 1964 had articles about same.

There was nearly \$50,000,000 in gold on the 12 ships, at today's prices. I was waiting until I had definitely located a substantial part of it before I asked for a lease, which would become a public record. But Mr. Prince forced my hand and I acquired leases on the three ships that the Spaniards and pirates had already salvaged in 1716. I came to this conclusion after much labor, time and expense. I had as partners George E. Bunnell Inc. of Miami, also Carl Wild of Fort Pierce. All we found were cannons and few coins.

After I was broke, I got some help from Kip Wagner and Carl Wild, but neither was able to finance a real effort, at that time, to go after the other ships that had probably not been salvaged previously.

So I went back to work as a ship's captain. I even left my instrument with Kip for about six months (1951-1952) while I made a trip around the world. He later continued with various partners until Bruce Ward found one of the other wrecks containing a large amount of coins. But he hasn't found the real cargo yet. I only revealed the location of the three wrecks I worked on. Since I left, Kip has renewed the leases in his name - on those I had decided were completely salvaged.

One thing the Real Eight had done for me -- they have proven that I was correct, and I appreciate it. When I was operating there, most of the natives thought I was a "screw-ball". Even Lisbon Futch, now a part of Real Eight, was inclined to be skeptical

Also the late Alf Michael told one of my partners, George Bunnell, that if all that gold had been there he would know about it, having lived there most of his life - and that Steadman Parker and his father had always lived in a dream world. This was a factor in causing Bunnell to pull his equipment out and return to Miami. His partner Ludwig had always been skeptical.

A few days later Carl Wild became my partner. He produced equipment which we used until the weather got too bad to operate. By this time we had reached the conclusion that at least 2 of these wrecks had been completely salvaged in 1716.

I probed around the area again in 1952, '54 and '55 but never had sufficient capital to get the equipment necessary to resume salvage operations. I do know the location of a number of wrecks, some of which are sure to be part of Ubilla's fleet.

Even the location of the one where the Real Eight made their big find off Fort Pierce was known to me in 1920, but of course I did not know that it was one of the 1715 fleet at that time.

Kip Wagner went to Ohio in 1951 and interested a financier, who came to Wabasso to see me. During the process of negotiations it became apparent that he wanted the major part of the profits, if any, and we would become merely his hired hands. I refused to do business with him. After all, I had spent many years, money and labor in acquiring historical data and learning the locations. I couldn't see selling out for a song.

Art McKee who has the museum of sunken treasure at Plantation Key was also interested in the area. He acquired some cannon from a wreck off Sand Point in 1955 while associated with Roger King, Willie Dahl, and Jack Carr. I also knew this wreck was there in 1921. After their operation fizzled out I used their two divers Bob Chobot and Warren Smith to check on one of the remaining wrecks near Sebastian. Bill Arnold provided the work boat. We did not produce anything of value, except elimination of one more wreck.

I have documentary evidence to prove most of my statements. Some are merely statements of fact as I know them, and some are the result of logical reasoning.

I worked on the Missile Recovery Operation from Cape Canaveral in 1957-'59, down range as captain of various ships. I now have electronic instruments somewhat superior to those I used previously. However, age and arthritis prevent me from doing the hard physical labor required in salvage work. But I still have the know how acquired by experience.

In 1960-'61, after acquiring some capital I worked a different area of the Spanish Main, also on knowledge obtained in 1946. But as usual I ran out of capital too soon and my health failed.

Bruce Ward of Vero Beach, mentioned in the Post and Argosy articles, apparently came into the area about the time I ceased operations there. I have never met him. It seems from the reports that Real Eight Inc. also took advantage of him in regard to lease and division of profits. They apparently have him over a barrel as Bunnell and Ludwig had me in 1951 when Kip was associated with me. The veteran treasure hunter seems to be learning.

There is sometime an amusing incident that occurs in treasure hunting. In 1950 a girl friend of Lee Hurtado's sometimes accompanied us on our expeditions. On occasion we camped out and her job was to cook. She was an excellent cook, provided one of us built the fire and opened the can of food. She could then dump it into the pot and warm it up. This, in her opinion, entitled her to one half of whatever we found.

Later when she heard that I had interested George E. Bunnell Inc. to come in with his machinery, she hitchhiked a ride from Cocoa to Wabasso and brought two big straw suitcases to carry

her half back home. She didn't seem to know that the specific gravity of gold is 19.26. If she had filled them and the bottom had held she could not have lifted them because they would have weighed over a thousand pounds apiece. I won't mention her name.

When Prince appeared on the scene he had a curious type of instrument which he called a "sniffer". Hand grips were held in each hand with a wire between and suspended in the middle was a kind of pendulum. This was supposed to swing toward any gold or silver in the vicinity. I put a "piece of eight" on the sand about 20 feet away in plain sight and after a few minutes of erratic swinging it settled down perfectly on the piece of eight. He was operating the instrument. - It would not work for me. I lacked magnetism.

I then asked him why the sniffer was not influenced by the nearer silver in our pockets. He explained that it was controlled by the metal below the horizontal plane of the pendulum.

That night in Wabasso I acquired a quantity of silver. Next day I asked him to demonstrate how it would work on a silver dollar instead of a piece of eight. This was placed about 20 feet away and sure enough the sniffer indicated it perfectly. It ignored the much larger quantity of silver I had in my shoe only 3 feet away and below the horizontal plane of the pendulum.

When I related this incident later "Mr. Sniffer" said I had taken an unfair advantage of him. I leave it to the reader to judge.

Ubilla's flagship was the Almeranta, wrecked off Sebastian about 2 miles south of the present inlet. This inlet was not dug until about 1920. The old inlet about 2.6 miles south closed up a year or two after the Panchita sank crosswise in 1715. The Capitana sank on the reef at the entrance.

Recent finds seem to indicate that the one off Negro Beach south of Fort Pierce, where the coins were found, was the La Hollandsea or Hollandasia. I have a complete list of the entire fleet but their identification and present location remain a problem for divers and salvagers.

Now that my age and health prevent active competition I can at least set the record straight. It is quite obvious that this is the story of a loser, but I would like to have credit for being the guy who started it all. I did learn what to do and not to do with machinery and people. Trust nobody. Listen to advice of others but operate according to my own ideas, as proven correct by trial and error. The acquisition of my knowledge was costly.

In Kip Wagner's story in the National Geographic of January, 1965, his historical information regarding the salvage operation of the Spaniards differs somewhat in detail to what I got in Spain in 1946.

It is also true that many silver coins were found along the beach prior to my operation there in 1950 but nobody apparently knew the exact locations or history of these wrecks as no attempt at salvage had been made in recent years. Kip found his first silver coin there with my mine detector when I showed him where to look. He didn't know what they looked like until I showed him one I had in my pocket.

Now I see that he even takes credit for finding the Spanish camp site after "clambering through dense growths of spiky palmetto scrub". Actually he "found" this campsite and fresh water hole mentioned previously when I pointed it out to him. I had found it 6 months before. In fact, my camp was only a few feet away.

This story of mine would never have been written if Kip

had been fair enough to have mentioned his original source of information.

I do admire his persistence and tenacity. He has stuck with it and became much more successful than I was. His reward should be at least equal to that of William Phips in 1687. He should be knighted and made governor of ~~Florida.~~

OHIO

Capt. Steadman A. Parker
Master Mariner (unlimited)
License #304731 Issue #5-8

The number 5 - means that I have been an unlimited master for 25 years, as the U.S.C.G. requires them to be re-nued every 5 years. The 8 - means that I have had a total of that many licenses over a period of 28 to 40 years.