

The Million-Dollar Day

By Bob Van Camp

Around Thanksgiving 1995, I got a call from an investigator from the local district attorney's office. She had gotten my name from another investigator who had used my services earlier to help search for a murder weapon.

She wanted to know if I was interested in assisting the county again in their efforts to solve another case. I assured her that I was more than happy to help. "What would we be looking for?" I inquired. She didn't have too many details other than this: "...a large quantity of gold coins buried about 3' deep up in the mountains." That got me very interested!



In addition to huge quantities of modern bullion coins, the cache contained quite a few older U.S. gold coins like these.

Unfortunately, I did not have the right equipment on hand for a search that deep, and I couldn't get any soon enough. The hunt was on for the next day. I told her I would do my best with what I had but could not guarantee results. Also, I would have to get time off from my regular job since it was the middle of the week. Whatever I could provide was okay with her, so we agreed to meet the following morning with the other officers involved in the case.

The next morning, I learned that this was a very big deal. The other officers turned out to be agents from the United States Customs Office, the United



The cache contained 2,700 gold coins worth a mind-boggling \$1.3 million!

States Postal Inspector's Office, sheriff's officers from someplace in Texas, and I believe there were some Internal Revenue Service and Treasury agents as well. I also got some more details about what I was dealing with.

It seems that a Texas attorney had become involved in some sort of "white collar fraud." The money he had stolen had been converted into gold bullion coins, Krugers, and American Eagles. Over time, he mailed them from overseas in small quantities to some property he owned in this area. When he had amassed a small fortune, he sealed them in PVC pipes and buried them together on his property. He was eventually caught and confessed all this to the authorities. He even drew them a map with the exact location. The problem was finding and recovering them without attracting a lot of attention. No publicity whatsoever was allowed. "Get in quietly, dig quickly, and get out" was the word. Easier said than done when searching for buried treasure— even with a map!

After a quick briefing, we all drove into the middle of the woods along an old logging road. We stopped in the middle of the road and the agent in charge said, "This is it." We looked around and saw nothing but trees and brush, just like the miles of scenery we had

just driven through. He pointed to the left side of the road, to a huge berry patch and said, "It should be right in the middle of that."

Oh, great! Chest high, thorny vines, 100' around. This was *not* going to be fun.

They got out the map and began checking all the coordinates. Basically, what the guy did was rather clever. All around the location, in a rough circle, he had driven large nails into trees about 2-3' off the ground. If you were to draw a line or run a string between all the nails, they would all cross at one point in the middle of the berry patch. Directly under the crossed lines was the treasure. There were enough points so that if some trees were to fall, burn, or be cut down, it would still be possible to triangulate the spot. He had also noted exact measurements in feet and inches between the various points.

We had people stand at several trees and, with line of sight, come to where we

thought it should be. Looking at the spot, no one would guess that anything had ever been disturbed. There were no dead or broken plants, no sunken or raised spot in the soil, and no bare ground showing at all. I found this very unusual since it had only been buried about three years.

The officers immediately started digging and hacking, throwing dirt everywhere. I tried to suggest that a bit more organized search would be better. Why not clear off all the vines for 10' around and throw the dirt farther away? As it was, I couldn't even get the detector loop on the ground let alone move it to search. But I was ignored. Finally, after about half an hour, they tired out, and I was able to go in and search a little. I received no signals from the surface or from the hole they had started, and the vines did not allow me to expand the search area.

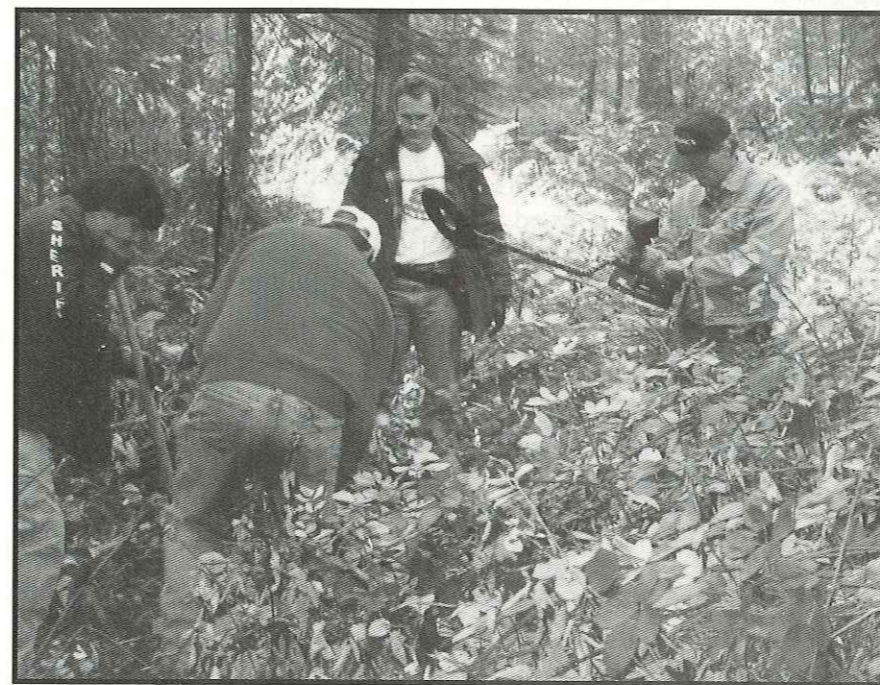


Authorities recovered 21 PVC tubes and an ice chest, all loaded with gold!

This went on all morning. Every so often, I would go in and search the hole and the ground. The vines were bad enough, but the fact that the investigators were throwing dirt on top of unsearched ground meant that I could not get the depth penetration I needed. They rechecked the coordinates several times, and I probed the ground with a long steel rod, looking for soft spots. Each time I failed to get any good-sounding signals.

Around noon, they called for a stop. Tired, thirsty, and hungry, they decided to regroup after lunch. Someone would go into town for lunch and some string to run between the nails to see if they were somehow off. I took this opportunity to clear off some of the dirt, move away the brush, and go over as much area as I could slowly and carefully. It was quiet now, and I could hear better and did not feel as rushed. The hole was now about 4' wide and 3' deep—the depth at which they expected to find it.

It should be noted here that the officers who were closest to the crook weren't even sure he was being truthful. He could have been stalling for time or any of a hundred different reasons. At this



Author Bob Van Camp (right) used his detector to help investigators locate the million-dollar cache.

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time, there was even talk of cordoning off the whole area and bringing in a bulldozer. They were not going to leave until they were 100% sure that there was nothing there.

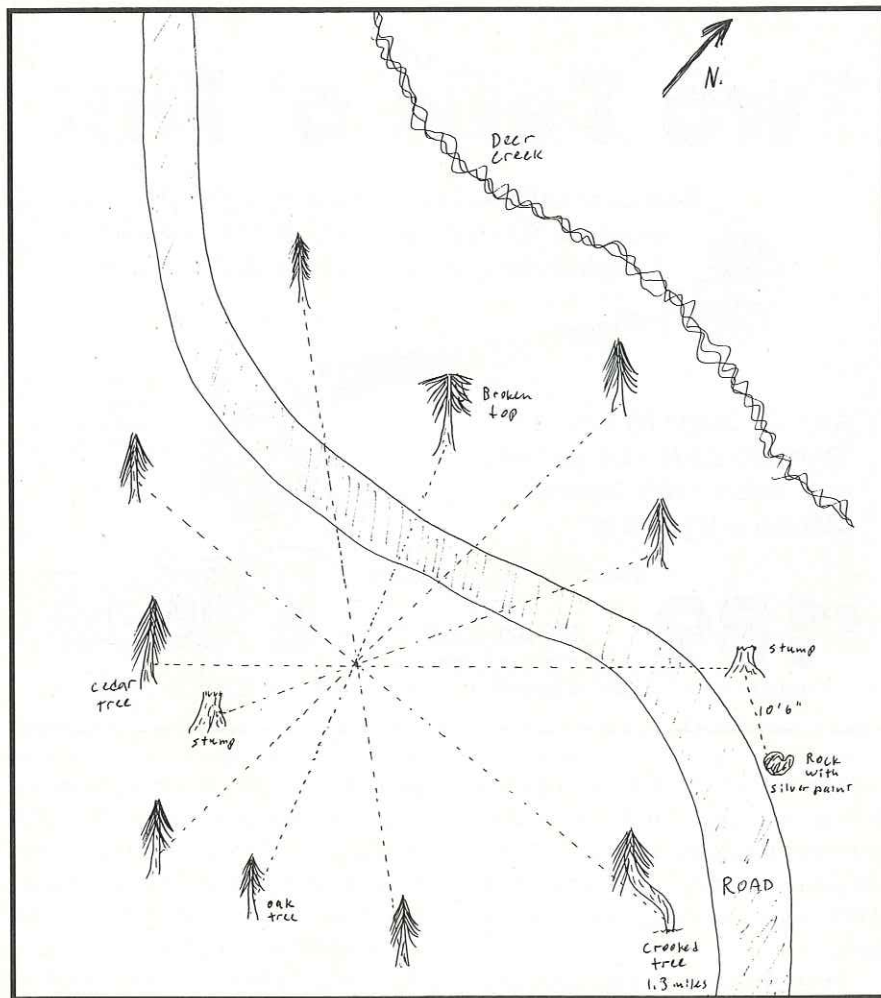
In the meantime, I was down in the hole. No area gave me the large response I was listening for, but one side of the hole at the bottom caused a slight increase in the tone of my machine. It was the only

area where I got any sort of positive response. So, I called over the man in charge and told him to concentrate his digging in that direction. Everyone but two people left for town, and I left to go back to work. However, I promised to return that evening after work to continue the search. The two people who remained at the scene continued to dig in the direction I had indicated.

About two hours after I got back to work, I got a phone call from the D.A. investigator who had originally contacted me.

"Bob," she said excitedly, "guess what? They found it about an hour after you left! They dug down and sideways in the direction you said, and about two feet deeper they hit a big rock. Under the rock was the treasure. It turned out to be 21 two-foot-long PVC pipes sealed at both ends.

"Not only that, but there is also a large plastic ice chest. They didn't open anything up there because of legal requirements, but they are sure the pipes are full of gold coins, and they suspect that the ice chest has jewelry or antiques in it. They're taking it all down to Sacramento to the postal headquarters so that a proper inventory can be taken. I'll let you know what the final tally is." →



thought many times about this treasure. Even though the details of the crime have finally been revealed to me, I still have questions. How did he bury such a large item so deep? How did he do it without leaving a trace on the surface? How was he able to do all this by himself in the middle of that thick berry patch? The only explanation I can come up with is that he did it using a tractor-mounted auger which would dig a large, round hole straight down. This would be quick and cause a minimum amount of disruption to the surrounding area. I guess I'll never know for sure unless I talk to him, but the information would be useful to those of us who are looking for other, unrelated caches.

Which leads me to my final thoughts on this treasure. For three years it sat in the ground, unknown and untouched. What if something had happened to Mr. Erickson? What if he had not made a map to be found? That's right. It would still be there to this day. How often has this happened in the past? How many other treasures are out there just like this one? How often do we say, "There's nothing left to find. Someone's already beat me to it." Don't you believe it!

There is the potential for something like this everywhere you walk and swing a detector. Sometimes it's just a matter of luck and timing, but usually it's hard work and research that will reward you. Don't give up. There is more money going into the ground now than ever before. Respect private property and the laws of ownership, do your homework, master your detector, and always be curious. Remember, "Today's the day!"

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"Just be sure to send me pictures," was all I could think to say.

Rats! Why didn't I stay around? I was right about the direction and location, but I wasn't there to see it! And it turned out to be 5' deep instead of 3'. No wonder I couldn't pick it up.

A few days later, I got the phone call. The ice chest had turned out to hold more coins in boxes and sealed in different plastic containers. I believe they were all Krugerrands and American Eagles, although there may have been some rare coins mixed in as well. The final dollar value was calculated at an incredible \$1.3 million dollars!

It is now late 1997, and the case has finally been settled. The crook pled guilty and cooperated with the authorities, all the details have come out, and most of my initial questions have been answered. Until now, I have not been at liberty to discuss or publicize what happened, however.

Scott Erickson was an "international jet-set" attorney who was in charge of selling loans and other assets from failed savings and loans and insurance companies. He was supposed to liquidate the company's assets and pay creditors. Instead, he converted \$3.5 million into cash and money orders, hiding some \$700,000 in bank accounts on the Isle of Man in the British Isles. Some of the money he invested in stock and real estate. Finally, he bought and stashed 2,700 Krugerrands and American Eagles in PVC pipes and an ice chest and buried them on some property he owned near Magalia, California. A pattern of large money order purchases aroused the suspicions of postal inspectors and search warrants were obtained. One of these searches uncovered the map which was initially thought to be a hoax. But after his arrest the whole story came out and this led us to this fateful day in the mountains.

In the last two years I have