

Mystery Ship Wreck Found on Padre Island



The Model A Ford was famous for it's rumble seat

© 2011 Steve Hathcock

Recently I received the following email from Joe Hagan who lived with an aunt and uncle on the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station from 1949-50. "Being just an 11 year old kid in paradise was great! Padre Island was a desert with just a long pier, lots of sand and a small store," Hagan wrote. "Gosh, how I miss that time! My uncle, Ray Cummins, had a model A Ford with the old rumble seat. I have wonderful memories of those times. We used to travel down the Island about an hour to his favorite place where we always tied a rope to a post that stuck up out of the sand. The other end was tied to the car and we had a good canvas tarp for a shade. Little did we know that post was a mast from an ancient shipwreck! A few years have past and I heard of someone who was excavating a spot on the Island! I have always wondered if they were checking out our favorite spot. Do you have any knowledge of that story? It would be great if you could respond to my curiosity! Thanks, Joe Hagan

Hmmmm.... let me think for a minute I thought as I finished J reading Joe's email. After a short search through my journals I found the material I was looking for.

Shortly after Hurricane Beulah, (1967) Corpus Christi treasure hunters, Richard Clements, Gene French and Ed Page began salvage upon a wreck (uncovered by the storm) that lay about 3 miles south of Bob Hall Pier. (Located at North Padre Island)



Hand crafted pegs from similar wreck found by author near Bagdad Mexico
“The hull construction indicates the ship is a Spanish nao, approximately seventy five in length with cannon ports, two decks and double planking,” Page told Grady Phelps, a reporter for the *Corpus Christi Times*. Over the next couple of days the three recovered human bones, musket balls, about twenty five pounds of oxidized silver, enough beeswax to fill a five gallon bucket, a Roman coin dating back almost two thousand years and plenty of river rock that undoubtedly was used as ballast and packed around cargo to keep it from shifting during transit. Within weeks of the discovery several museums around the country had made offers to buy the hull of the ship. “The top offer was \$20,000” Page said. Clements was the discoverer of the wreck. He said it was hard to describe the thrill when he spotted one of the wooden pegs sticking out of the sand after the storm. He tried to yank it up but couldn’t. He decided then that it must be attached to something big which further excavation revealed. Realizing the value of the discovery, Clements immediately pitched a tent over the spot. From that time on at least one of the men was present at all times. Clements said he kept a shotgun nearby but never felt threatened. Clements and his partners also posted claims at five other sites that had been uncovered



Typical Spanish silver "splash" bar.
during the storm but this was the one that held the most promise. Hundreds of sight seers descended upon the site to watch the diggings and for the most part were very

cooperative. But some of them were not as nice and began digging holes of their own. “We just ignore them” Clements said at the time. “We let them dig until they get tired. That’s the way to fix that. Some of them have pretty big mouths too,” he added. Texas State Archaeologist Curtis Tunnell was unable to determine the age of the vessel though he did feel it was not a Spanish galleon and dated it somewhere in the mid 1800s. Page and French disagreed, pointing out that lead sheeting fastened with bronze nails indicated the ship was not early American or English as it was the custom for shipwrights in both those countries to use copper nails to fasten lead sheeting. We may never know whether this is where Joe and his family spent their vacations but it was discoveries like these that led to the Texas State Legislature writing a new Antiquities law that expressly forbids any excavation of shipwrecks found on public land.