

Lost Treasure of Padre Island

Steve Hathcock

The following is a typical email that I received a few days ago:

Hi Steve, I have a treasure-hunting question that goes back a few years. I have heard that people have found gold doubloons on the beaches of Padre Island. I also heard that a wreck was found around the mid 60s. Is it true the finder and the State of Texas both claimed ownership? Supposedly, there is another missing Spanish ship from a fleet that was lost during a hurricane. Most of the ships that sank were in the location of Padre Island. Can it be it was not found because it is not in the water any longer? Could it have been washed far inland during the tidal surge that accompanies these kinds of storms? Do you know of any stories that might shed light on that type of speculation? – Larry Truex

Here was my reply:

Hi Larry. Your theory has merit. I will do my best to answer your questions. The wreck you are asking about is probably one of three Spanish galleons that foundered on Padre Island during the storm of 1554. More has been written about the fortune carried on these three wrecks than of any other treasures to be found along the sandy white beaches of Padre Island. The one found by local treasure hunters in the early 1960s, was the Espiritu Santo. Its list of recovered items included numerous coins of all denominations, jewels, rare minerals, weapons, and an ancient astrolabe used for navigation, that is the oldest known of its kind to be discovered in the New World.

In his book, "The Nautical Archeology of Padre Island," Barto Arnold III describes his task of surveying the wrecks for the State of Texas in a series of expeditions between 1971-73. He also drew numerous maps and charts accurately detailing everything found by the expedition. One in particular, shows the location of the section of coast where members of the expedition found a veritable "plume" of riches in coins and artifacts strewn along the beach!

The State of Texas, which had no laws of this nature on the books at the time of the discovery, confiscated the treasure. Adding insult to injury, the people in Austin then wrote the present law that deals with Texas antiquities. The treasure hunters took the State to court, winning three times over the course of twelve years. The State appealed each time though. Finally, a judge in West Texas issued the following ruling.

The State of Texas was ordered to build a museum to display the artifacts. An

admission was to be charged, with the treasure hunters to receive a percentage of all monies thus generated, for the duration of their own lifetime.

Many of the artifacts are now on display at a museum in Corpus Christi and at the Museums of Port Isabel. The second ship found, the Santa Maria De Yciar, lie buried under tons of mud and clay for over three and a half centuries before it was discovered during the dredging of the Mansfield Cut.

The large pipes of the dredge had literally torn the old galleon apart before anyone realized what had happened. Silver coins blackened by time, jewelry, numerous artifacts and the rest of the ship's cargo, spewed out of the canvas hoses, littering both the north and south spoil banks that line the channel. In addition, an anchor was found on the north side of the cut in the 1970s. The National Park Service restored it and it is still on display in the museum at Corpus Christi.

The third ship, the San Estaban, is located a quarter mile out in the surf about 2.9 miles north of the Espiritu Santo. This site was been surveyed by the State in 1972-73 and in 1975. Some salvage operations have been carried out, but most of the artifacts are still buried on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico.

Another treasure ship, unrelated to the above, can be found near the surface and somewhere behind the dunes, about a mile or so north of the Mansfield Cut. Periodically I will hear from someone who thinks they have located it, or have found coins along the trail of wreckage left as the ship was washed far inland during the night of that terrible storm.