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TRAGEDY, TRIUMPH & TREASURE

BY MARC HOOVER

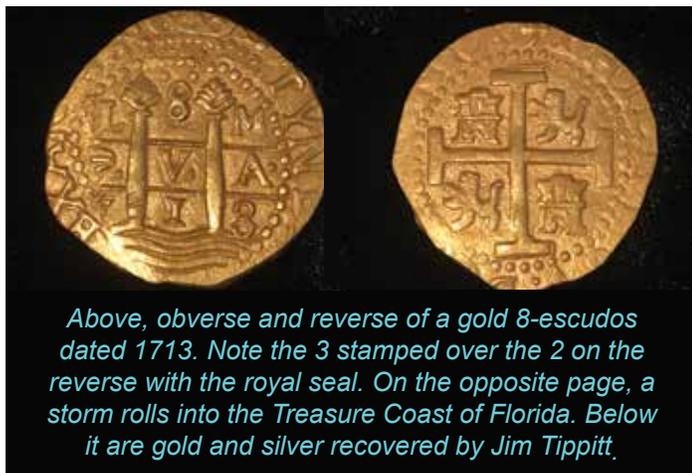
ONE MAN'S STORY OF
RECOVERING INCREDIBLE
SPANISH TREASURE ON A
FLORIDA BEACH



Every year, millions of visitors travel to Florida for recreation and fun in the sun, and every year they leave something behind. Floridians and vacationers alike flock to over 660 miles of Florida's famous beaches, depositing treasure and trash to seemingly be lost forever, that is until someone else comes along and finds it. For some metal detectorists it is a dream. If there are people, there will always be something left on the beach. Coins, rings, jewelry, and all kinds of valuable items like cell phones are lost and found every year. On many occasions the owner is tracked down and the lost item is returned. Often, the newly found treasure becomes the possession of the person who found it. I still have the first silver cross I found on the beach with my metal detector. For others, the constant recovery of pull tabs, bottle caps, cans, and every kind of trash imaginable can be a real nightmare. However, the best detectorists have learned how to increase their odds of successfully finding more treasure and less trash. And that success is what keeps them going.

Florida is also well known for another kind of treasure: Spanish gold, silver, jewels, and priceless artifacts. Over the centuries, hundreds of ships have sunk off the coast of Florida and along the eastern seaboard of the United States. In fact, one region of Florida is now famously called the "Treasure Coast," comprised of the coast in Indian River, St. Lucie, and Martin Counties. The term Treasure Coast began to be used in the early 1960s as treasure hunters discovered the remnants of the now well-known "1715 Fleet."

During those early years, a local building contractor, Kip Wagner, embarked on a project to conduct extensive research of the 1715



Above, obverse and reverse of a gold 8-escudos dated 1713. Note the 3 stamped over the 2 on the reverse with the royal seal. On the opposite page, a storm rolls into the Treasure Coast of Florida. Below it are gold and silver recovered by Jim Tippitt.



Clipped silver 8 reales coin stamped with a cross.



Ornate gold cuff links from the 1715 Treasure Fleet.

fleet and where its treasure might be located. In 1966, by then a well-known treasure finder, Wagner co-wrote the appropriately titled book, *Pieces of Eight, Recovering the Riches of a Lost Spanish Treasure Fleet*. Many other books and articles have been written about the 1715 Plate Fleet, its treasures and its salvage since then.

The fleet was an armada of twelve Spanish galleons fully loaded with untold riches, personal items, contraband and provisions for the ship's crew. They were sailing north from Cuba along the east coast of Florida back to Spain to fill the King's treasury with the riches of the New World. Tragedy struck in the early hours of July 31st 1715 as the

ships were engulfed in the full fury of the wind and waves of a raging hurricane. The captain and crew fought heroically for hours to save their ships and their own lives. Despite their best efforts, eleven of the twelve ships were lost at sea. Over 1,500 sailors perished during the storm, though there were some survivors. Almost all the treasure and cargo was scattered along the ocean floor for miles around the area from south of Fort Pierce to Sebastian in the north. For decades, professional and amateur treasure hunters alike have been searching with some success for the treasure, with a dozen or more dive boats setting out each summer to search the shallow waters of the area. They do this legally under the auspices of "1715 Fleet—Queens Jewels LLC" which owns the salvage rights under lease from the State of Florida. To date, millions of dollars in valuable treasure in the form of

gold escudos, silver reales, and valuable artifacts have been recovered by the divers on these boats. But it is well known that there is still a large amount of treasure to be found and that is what drives the treasure hunters to keep going.

After every major storm or hurricane, treasure hunters and metal detectorists alike hasten to the area to try and find treasure that may be lying along and just under the newly revealed sand on the beach. More than a few have been successful over the years at finding treasure and artifacts.

I am often asked by people not familiar with the hobby of metal detecting if I think that Spanish treasure can still really be found on a Florida beach. The prospect of that is hard to fathom for the uninformed. My answer is a resounding yes,



Above, Jim Tippitt pauses on the beach as a storm rolls in at New Smyrna Beach, Florida. Note the top of the search coil painted bright yellow for better visibility underwater. At the top of the page, a gold 8-escudo sees the first light of day in over 300 years.

qualified of course by the caveat that one must be in the right place, at the right time, with the right conditions. And it helps to have the right equipment and know how to properly use it. But it is possible, and the rest of this story is about a man who did just that. Meet my friend Jim Tippitt, aka Jimmy Crossbones (a fitting moniker) who found a trove of Spanish treasure and relics on a Florida beach with his metal detector.

Jim is a friendly sort and easy to talk with. With a slight smile and a reserved manner, he makes you feel comfortable in conversation. His southern drawl immediately gives away his heritage. Jim grew up in Tennessee and is a rugged outdoorsman, tanned and fit with short cropped white hair and a goatee. It would be appropriate to mention that Jim is a distant relative of Davy Crockett, a popular hero of American folklore who also hailed from Tennessee. However, Jim has replaced the famous Crockett coonskin hat for a Minelab baseball cap embroidered with his custom Jimmy Crossbones logo.

Jim speaks softly and not often, but one should not be fooled. He draws on years of experience and knowledge garnered within the hobby and has multiple displays of relics and artifacts as evidence of his success. He and his wife Linda love being near the ocean and Jim is even certified as a SCUBA diver. When I think about the Spanish galleons that sailed across the Atlantic, I can almost imagine Jim captaining one of the ships, although he probably would have been just as successful as a pirate.

My wife Gail and I first met Jim and Linda in 2016 at a meeting of the Central Florida Metal Detecting Club (CFM-DC) in DeBary, Florida. After getting to know Jim I learned that he grew up around the Nashville, Tennessee area. In his early years he enjoyed hunting and fishing and being in the outdoors. Eventually, he encountered a friend who had a metal detector and was intrigued enough to want to give it a



Although Spanish gold and silver are easily recognized as treasure, the associated historical items should never be overlooked. In the above photos are shown a musket side plate, musket balls, a key escutcheon, ship's spikes and buckles found by Jim. Below is the Spanish gold he has found on the beaches of the Treasure Coast.

try. After acquiring his own metal detector and getting out and using it, Jim was hooked; so much so that metal detecting replaced hunting as his new hobby and passion. Jim liked finding coins and relics and his very first recovery with his new detector was a gold ring. Who wouldn't be hooked?

After retirement in 2008, Jim and Linda moved to New Smyrna Beach, Florida where they joined the CFM-DC club and quickly made friends. Working and traveling with some of those friends, Jim became very accomplished in the hobby of metal detecting. These days his detector of choice is a Minelab CTX 3030, considered by many to be one of the best game-changing metal detectors ever developed. Jim will tell you that knowing every aspect of the detector is key to being successful in pursuit of coins and relics.

If you asked him, Jim would also tell you that his favorite kind of detecting is searching for Civil War artifacts, closely followed by finding colonial era relics. In fact, he has quite a collection of both. He often travels back to Tennessee and other states in the south and mid-Atlantic region to pursue his hobby. And thanks to where he lives, Jim spends a fair amount of time metal detecting along the beaches on the east coast of Florida.

One morning, he was detecting along a stretch of beach that had a significant amount of sand washed out from winter storms. It was just another partly cloudy day on the beach. Soon Jim recovered what appeared to be a flat and blackened, odd-shaped piece of metal. Intrigued but not sure what it was, he just put it in his pocket and kept searching. Not long after, he found two more of those unusual metal objects. Now he was beginning to wonder if these were silver cobs of Spanish origin. After detecting a little longer, Jim discerned a good signal on the detector's headphones, a signal he



knew was worth checking out. Could this be gold? Perhaps even a gold ring? It was gold and it was small, but it was unusual. It looked like a cufflink, but not just any cufflink. This one looked special. Jim called a friend and received confirmation of what he suspected. This was more than likely a tiny lost treasure from the 1715 fleet. Now his excitement was growing rapidly. Could there possibly be more here?

Without knowing it, Jim was about to embark on an amazing adventure and encounter a few sleepless nights over the next several weeks. Another morning, another signal and more gold. This time it was a gold 8-escudo coin and distinctly dated 1712. Now there was no doubt, this was from the 1715 fleet! The almost indescribable feeling of finding a 300-year-old gold coin and seeing that beautiful golden glint in the sunlight was breathtaking. As he continued to search, Jim was finding more escudos, silver reales and other shipwreck artifacts. And soon he realized that this was the recovery of a lifetime. A metal detectorist's dream!

Still, with all the excitement, there was a problem. Jim's emotions were torn. He knew that there was a window of opportunity and he needed to spend as much time as possible detecting the area before the window closed. Unfortunately, his mother was in ill health back in Tennessee and he needed to join his family to be with her. That was the most important thing. Time was of the essence. He left the treasure behind to travel back home to Tennessee to be with his mother and family during this difficult period. Knowing his dilemma, Jim's brother encouraged him to go back to Florida and finish looking for the rest of the treasure. There was nothing else he could do now and that is what his mother would have wanted.

During his drive back to Florida, he had a lot of time to think about life, his family and friends and the treasure. The treasure was always on his mind. Was there even more to be recovered? As it turns out, there was. Over the next few days, he continued to add to the total. Jim eventually recovered dozens of gold and silver Spanish coins and a plethora of other shipwreck relics.

The total count of the Spanish Fleet treasure recovered on the beach by Jim Tippitt is as follows:

- Four gold 8-escudos
- Nine gold 2-escudos
- One silver 8-reale
- Twenty-seven silver 2-reales
- Six silver half-reales
- One gold cufflink
- One small gold ring
- Dozens of Spanish shipwreck artifacts



The small gold ring (above left) was either a personal item belonging to a crewman or stolen contraband. The item at right, also gold, remains unknown but is believed to be a fitting from a dagger or sword.

As fate would have it, Jim's mother passed and soon he was unable to find any more of the treasure. The adventure was over. Jim had his earthly treasure and his mother was now at peace with her treasure in heaven.

While Jim was blessed to be part of an incredible experience going way beyond his wildest expectations, he knows the real treasure is in the memory of his mother and his family growing up as a young man in Tennessee. These days he is making memories with Linda and his own family. And if you are on the beach you might even find Jim next to Linda while she looks for one of those very special shells that she adds to her own collection. After all, treasure is in the eye of the beholder.

Jim still enjoys the thrill of the hunt and looks for every opportunity to get out and use his Minelab metal detector. Today, that same stretch of beach is now covered over with many more layers of sand. However, we know that more treasure is there, just waiting to be found.



Marc Hoover has been fascinated with treasure hunting since the early days of Mel Fisher's quest to find the wreck site of the Spanish galleon *Senora Nuestra De Atocha*. He was first certified to SCUBA dive in 1973 and purchased his first metal detector in 2011. Marc loves history and travels around North America looking for his next adventure. He started his own Facebook group, "Adventures In History," where many amazing stories of both adventure and history are collected and shared.

