

Man says he found, then lost, Fenn treasure

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Tom Hoesten, a College of Santa Fe graduate who lives in Florida, provided this image to show similarities between the Forrest Fenn treasure chest and an image from a photograph snapped by chance in the mountains above Red River. (Courtesy of Tom Hoesten)

Tom Hoesten says he knows where Santa Fe art and antiques collector Forrest Fenn hid his treasure and that there's a photograph that backs him up.

Fenn says, in no uncertain terms, that Hoesten is wrong. "There's no story here," Fenn told me several weeks ago.

It's important to note up front that Hoesten does not have the treasure – said by Fenn to be a valuable antique copper chest full of gold, jewelry and artifacts, including a 2,000-year-old fetish necklace, altogether worth a guesstimated \$1 million.

And Hoesten, a College of Santa Fe alumnus who lives in Florida, is only one of several people who say they've solved the puzzle that Fenn provided in his 2010 "Thrill of the Chase" book in the form of a poem laden with clues that are supposed to lead to the chest.

As the Santa Fe New Mexican has reported, one searcher is certain the Fenn poem leads not to bounteous riches but to a Christian shrine at Silverton, Colo. – and that Fenn’s intention was to send people on a spiritual quest, not a monetary one. Fenn said he’d never heard of the shrine.

The poem and treasure hunt have become a national phenomenon, with coverage on The Today Show and in Newsweek, and made Fenn a cult celebrity. The intense interest of serious treasure hunters leads them to parse Fenn’s every word, written or spoken, and even interpret pictures of his home and backyard that he’s posted on the web.

A look at Hoesten’s part of the story shows just how much passion Fenn’s challenge can provoke. An executive in television entertainment, Hoesten says he’s worked on the search “pretty much every day for 2½ years” and has made three trips to New Mexico to look for the treasure.

Originally from New York, his claim to fame as a College of Santa Fe student is that he appeared opposite Greer Garson herself in a 1976 production of “The Madwoman of Chaillot” staged in the campus theater named after benefactor Garson. (Hoesten’s got a picture of that, too.)

I’m not going to go through Hoesten’s interpretation of Fenn’s poem/puzzle in detail here (you can check it out at ttotc.com by clicking on Tom’s Solution), except to say it is largely based on Fenn’s experience as a Vietnam War pilot.

For instance, the poem says to start hunting “where the warm waters halt.” Hoesten believes this clue takes you to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire, because of warm ocean waters around Vietnam and tears shed at the memorial. There’s also a Laos/Taos link.

But Hoesten also finds other kinds of clues – Fenn’s “it’s no place for the meek,” Hoesten believes, refers to an ammonite fossil called Rhaeboceras Meek found in parts of northern New Mexico. He says the clues led him to the vicinity of Goose Lake in the mountains above Red River.

After that, things took a strange twist, kind of a post-Internet version of the classic 1960s film “Blow Up,” where a photographer realizes only after the fact that photos he took at a park show evidence of a murder.

In Hoesten’s case, he was trying to figure out how to get to from Red River to Goose Lake to look for the treasure, went to Google Earth and found a photo that had been posted in mid-July. He noticed something under a small tree stripped of bark, zoomed in on the image and “there it was.”

Hoesten believes a dark shape with sharp, rectangular edges atop a white rock behind and obscured by grass and tree limbs is Fenn’s treasure chest. He says close-up examination shows there are six markings or features on the shape that match the chest seen in photos that Fenn has published.



One searcher for the Forrest Fenn treasure believes the dark, angular shape shown to the left of a small tree trunk is the antique copper chest Fenn says is full of gold, jewelry and valuable artifacts. The photo was taken during the summer near Goose Lake in the mountains above Red River. (Courtesy of Michael Calhoun)

Even the tree is missing

Hoesten and his brother went to Goose Lake on July 26, expecting to find the treasure. They couldn't locate a section of mountain meadow that looked like the photo from Google Earth. But then camera magic intervened again.

After the July trip, Hoesten said he looked at video he'd taken around Goose Lake during the unsuccessful visit, and finally spotted the meadow and the tree in the Google Earth picture, with more plant growth than when the photo was taken.

Hoesten said that when his brother went back to Goose Lake in September, however, not only was there no treasure, but also the stripped tree under which it supposedly had been stashed was gone. (In Hoesten's theory, the tree is a crucial "blaze" marker mentioned in Fenn's poem.) "The flat white rock that was in the original photo of the meadow is still there, but the blaze tree is gone," said Hoesten.

So his theory and strong belief is this: The treasure was in the Goose Lake meadow, someone found and is keeping it, or has moved both treasure and tree, but no one is saying a thing about it.

He considers the Fenn poem solved, emphasizing that he'd already pinpointed the Goose Lake surroundings as the treasure spot before he saw the Google Earth picture. The photo, he said, was "nothing more than a confirmation and a bonus."

Hoesten got hit with blowback when he proclaimed online that he'd cracked the Fenn code. "Nasty and condescending" is how Hoesten described some web reactions. He acknowledges he should have said that his solution to the treasure hunt represented his opinion instead of a statement of fact.

'No evidence'

Hoesten says he used to communicate with Fenn regularly, but that exchange stopped after he made his solution public.

Also, Hoesten's suggestion that he'd "found" the treasure was taken down and banned from another "Thrill of the Chase" site, run by Dal Neitzel. His site gets 8,000 hits a day and has the distinction of being the one on which Fenn's books are sold. Fenn himself sends in random thoughts on art, life and other topics, along with photos, for postings in "Forrest's Scrapbook." Ever wonder what Fenn's shower, dog or closet look like? It's all there.

Of banning Hoesten, Neitzel said it's "just unfair for him to go on claiming the chest has been found when he has no evidence." He said he didn't want newcomers to the Fenn treasure hunt believing "that there's no sense in looking for it."

Neitzel, who's searching for the treasure himself, added that "there are probably about six or eight people who have claimed they found it (the treasure) or found the place or that it was missing, and each has been at a different place.

"None has had any proof and, without proof, I ban them. It doesn't help the rest of us go look for it and it's a huge negative for folks who just started looking."

Pic by Red River native

The Google Earth photo that Hoesten discovered was taken by Michael Calhoun, a Red River native who works in Los Alamos, during a family backpacking trip. Calhoun, who said he has been to Goose Lake "scores of times," was surprised to learn via my phone call that his picture had become part of the "Thrill of the Chase" universe and that he's supposed to have been within several feet of the treasure.

Hoesten isn't backing down from his theory and seems to be garnering some support online these days. For him, the only mystery now is what happened to the box he believes Calhoun photographed by chance on a summer hike in the mountains.