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There is something down there—
but for 170 years no one has been able to
solve the riddle of how to get at it

Oak Island's Mysterious "Money Pit"

Condensed from THE ROTARIAN DAVID MACDONALD

JUST OFF the rugged southern shore of Nova Scotia lies a tiny island shaped somewhat like a question mark. The shape is appropriate, for little Oak Island is the scene of a baffling whodunit that has defied solution for almost two centuries. Here, ever since 1795—not long after pirates prowled the Atlantic Coast and left glittering legends of buried gold in their wake—people have been trying to find out what lies at the bottom of a mysterious shaft dubbed, hopefully, the "Money Pit."

Using picks and shovels, diving rods and drilling rigs, treasure hunters have poured about \$1,500,000 into the Money Pit. To date, they have taken precious little out—only three links of gold chain and a scrap of ancient parchment. Despite more than 20 attempts, no one has yet reached bottom: each time a digging or drilling crew has seemed close to success, torrents of water have

suddenly surged into the shaft to drown their hopes. Although it's now known that the Money Pit is protected by an ingenious system of man-made flood tunnels that use the sea as a watchdog, to this day no one knows who dug the pit, or why.

One legend makes the pit the hiding place for the plunder of Captain Kidd, who was hanged for piracy in 1701. Other theories favor the booty of Blackbeard and Henry Morgan, both notorious buccaneers; or Inca treasure stolen by Spaniards; or the French crown jewels that Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were said to be carrying when they attempted to flee during the French Revolution; or Shakespeare's missing manuscripts. Whatever the pit may contain, few other treasures have been sought so avidly.

The long parade of searchers began one day 170 years ago, when Daniel McInnes, a 16-year-old boy from Chester, Nova Scotia, paddled



over to uninhabited Oak Island to hunt for game. On a knoll at one end of the island he noticed an odd depression, 12 feet in diameter. Sixteen feet above it, on a sawed-off tree limb, hung an old ship's tackle-block. McInnes's heart raced, for in the nearby port of La Have, once a lair for pirates preying on New England shipping, he had heard many legends of buried treasure.

Next day he came back with two other boys, Tony Vaughan and Jack Smith, and began digging. Ten feet down they hit a platform of aged oak logs; at 20 feet, another; at 30, a third. In the flinty clay walls of the shaft they could still see the marks of pickaxes. As the work grew harder, they sought help. But no one else would go near Oak Island. It was said to be haunted by the ghosts of two fishermen who vanished there in 1720 while investigating strange lights. So the boys gave up, temporarily.

Later, McInnes and Smith settled on the island. In 1804, intrigued by their tale, a wealthy Nova Scotian named Simeon Lynds joined them in forming a treasure company. They again found oak tiers every ten feet down the pit, to a depth of 90 feet. They also uncovered layers of tropical coconut fiber, charcoal and ship's putty, plus a stone cut with curious symbols that one cryptologist took to mean, "Ten feet below, two million pounds are buried." At 93 feet, the diggers drove a crowbar five feet deeper and struck a solid mass. Lynds felt sure that it was a treasure chest.

But next morning he was amazed to find 60 feet of water in the pit. Weeks of bailing proved fruitless; the water level remained constant. Lynds assumed that this was due to an underground freshwater spring. The next year, his hired miners dug 110 feet down, off to one side of the Money Pit, then began burrowing toward it. When they were only two feet from it, tons of water burst through. As they scrambled for their lives, the shaft quickly filled to the same depth as the Money Pit.

Beaten and almost broke, Lynds gave up. McInnes died. But Vaughan and Smith never lost hope. In 1849, they took another stab at the Money Pit, with a syndicate from Truro,

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