Treasure hunter strikes pay dirt

But prize remains out of reach

By MERRY FIRSCHEIN
STAFF WRITER

Brian Zinn had memorized the clues – the centaur, the stone arch, the tiny bell, the chalice. He had studied the blueprints until he could see them with his eyes closed.

He was ready.

He also was armed. He took a lunch break from his Saddle Brook law firm to buy a shovel at The Home Depot.

Now, on a bright spring Saturday morning, after an all-night drive to Cleveland, he and buddy Andy Abrams of Wayne stood inside a public garden and prepared to dig – literally – for buried treasure.

The two North Jersey men were on a quest. Their only guides were a fantasy painting and an impenetrable verse from a dog-eared book Zinn had cherished during college days.

Finally, Zinn thought, he had found the place. The search had taken him 22 years.

"Let's go, Magellan," Abrams said to Zinn.

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The tattered paperback that had brought them to Cleveland was "The Secret – A Treasure Hunt." In 1982, it was one of almost two

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MARVIN FONG/THE PLAIN DEALER

Brian Zinn, right, and Andy Abrams digging in Cleveland in May at the end of a 22-year hunt for buried treasure.

Treasure: A 22-year quest ends in a park in Cleveland

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dozen new books whose pictures and passages promised buried treasure. Most aimed to emulate the success of "Masquerade," published in 1979, which had a golden hare as its treasure.

"The Secret," however, had a bit of extra cachet, written by National Lampoon writers as a complex parody of European fairy tales. At its core were 12 mystical paintings of creatures, maidens, and mythical beasts. Each, when correctly paired with one of 12 accompanying verses, offered clues to the location of a ceramic "casque" buried somewhere in the United States. Each casque and attached key could be redeemed from the book's publisher for the precious stone depicted in the corresponding painting.

In 1982, Zinn was a student at the University of Pennsylvania. Browsing in the campus bookstore, he had been instantly hooked by "The Secret." Not surprising – Zinn so loved playing games and solving puzzles that his college buddies nicknamed him the "Grand Master of All Games."

One painting caught his eye. A centaur, holding a chalice, stood astride a stone archway. Inside the arch was a wall and what seemed to be the basin of a small fountain. Two columns bracketed the archway walls.

At the top of the arch gleamed an aquamarine – Zinn's birthstone. This was his puzzle.

Zinn became convinced that the imagery signified Philadelphia. A bell-like symbol next to the letter "L" at the bottom of the painting could represent the Liberty Bell, he thought. The arch resembled many in the historic city. The chalice especially fascinated him – what was its clue? He scoured Penn's research library for hints and walked the city looking for the painting's symbols.

In time, "I didn't need to bring the book anymore," he said. "It was burned in my memory."

Zinn took "The Secret" with him to law school in Boston, where he pondered its imagery for three more years.

Over the next decade, Zinn married, moved to Florham Park, had two children (Noah, now 6, and Alyssa, 3½), and joined a Saddle Brook law firm. Although he'd lost the treasure book, he kept looking at arches and fountains.

Then, in 1997, as Zinn was cleaning up his basement, he found "The Secret" in a box of law books. "I got a little tingle, like seeing an old friend after all this time," he said.

The Grand Master of All Games had to know how this game had ended. He called the editor, Byron Preiss, to ask about a promised second edition that would have the solutions. But Preiss surprised him.

First, none of the treasures was buried in Philadelphia. Second, only one had ever been found, leaving 11 still for the finding.

"He said, 'As far as I'm concerned, the hunt is still on.' That kind of floored me," Zinn recalled.

The Grand Master of All Games took up the challenge. "The Secret" migrated from the box in the basement to a bookshelf in Zinn's office.

Between legal cases, Zinn puzzled over the centaur and his chalice. One day, he confided in fellow attorney Abrams, whose undergraduate major was English literature.

"He said, 'There's this book I was reading 22 years ago. I want to show it to you, maybe you'll have some fresh ideas,' " Abrams said.

Abrams had a fresh idea, all right. "I thought it was insane," he said. "But he was so passionate about it. And I remembered 'Masquerade.' So I said, you never know."

With the treasure hunt never really out of his mind, Zinn started poking around on the Internet. A few years ago, he stumbled upon Quest4Treasure, a British Web site and bulletin board devoted to armchair treasure hunts, including "The Secret." Zinn signed on, calling himself "Egbert," and started working out clues with other devotees.

This March, "The Secret" started giving up its secrets. Bulletin board member "johann" had done a Google search for "Socrates, Pindar, Apelles" – three ancient Greeks who show up in one of the 12 verses. He got an answer, but all he would post was that the three Greeks were in Cleveland. He was keeping the exact location to himself.

The mystery vanished when "Soonerfan" chimed in and wrote: Do you mean the Cleveland Cultural Gardens?

Zinn's heart beat faster. He had done the same search himself, two years earlier, and found no links. But the Internet changes every day. This time, when he did the search again, a Web site popped up: www.clevelandmemory.org, the Cleveland Cultural Gardens – 23 small gardens that symbolize the city's ethnic makeup, among them Czech, Finnish, Greek, Italian, and Russian.

He clicked on the link to the Greek garden. And there on Zinn's computer screen appeared the wall in the archway that had been imprinted on his mind for 22 years. There, too, were the columns.

Finally, Zinn had information that matched "his" painting to one of the verses:

Beneath two countries
As the road curves
In a rectangular plot
Beneath the tenth stone
From right to left
Beneath the ninth row from the top
Of the wall including small bricks
Seven steps up you can hop
From the bottom level
Socrates, Pindar, Apelles
Free speech, couplet, birch
To find casque's destination
Seek the columns
For the search.

"I didn't get any work done that day," Zinn said. "This is *my* picture, this is *my* baby."

The hunt was on.

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Conveniently, johann had bowed out of the search. After asking fellow seekers to join him in Cleveland, he'd posted a message that his wife had nixed the trip.

Zinn decided to grab the opportunity, and in early May enlisted a skeptical Abrams as his sidekick. Soon, Abrams recognized this could be more than just a weekend lark for two family men with responsibilities. Abrams was now 37, Zinn 41.

"There's not a lot you do at this age that you say, this is *cool*," Abrams said. "And this was *cool*."

But two obstacles loomed. Post-9/11, Zinn worried that two unknown guys with shovels could find themselves digging for treasure in a jail cell. A friend suggested calling the Cleveland newspaper, The Plain Dealer, for ideas on getting access to the garden.

The Plain Dealer put Zinn in touch with groundskeeper Andrew Chakalis, who sent Zinn the original 1930s garden blueprints.

The other hurdle was Zinn's wife, Beverly. This was Mother's Day weekend. Zinn promised he'd leave Friday night and come back Saturday night, in time to help the kids mark Mother's Day.

Beverly said OK.

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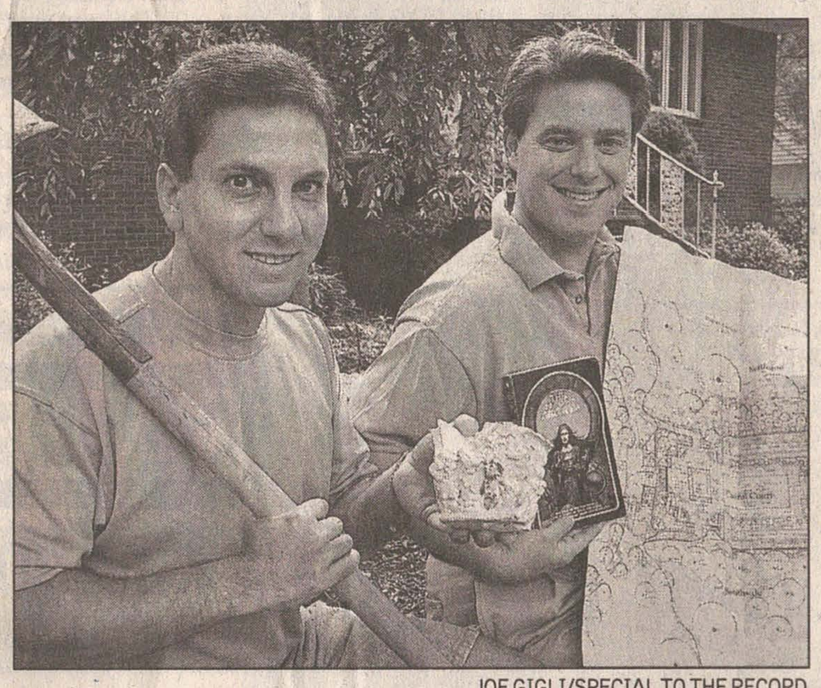
At 5 a.m. Saturday, May 8, an exhausted Zinn and Abrams checked in to a Cleveland hotel after a nine-hour drive from Florham Park. They had filled the interstate drive time with giddy musings about how the treasure hunt would end and who would play them in the movie version.

Abrams immediately slept for three hours. But Zinn, wired with anticipation, managed to doze barely 30 minutes before the wakeup call at 8.



JOE GIGLI/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Brian Zinn, left, in Florham Park with the object of the search. Andy Abrams displays the book of clues and a map of the hiding place.

The Cleveland Cultural Gardens are scattered across a hillside within the city's Rockefeller Park. Zinn and Abrams parked above the Greek and Italian gardens, which slope down to a winding road. A curving pathway divides the two gardens. Was one of these the spot *Beneath two countries/ As the road curves*?

There to meet Zinn and Abrams was groundskeeper Chakalis, who supplied two stout metal rods to probe the earth. Also waiting were a reporter and photographer from The Plain Dealer. This had become a story.

Zinn and Abrams looked around in wonder. They saw the columns, the wall, and the lion's head fountain from the painting in "The Secret." They saw the rectangular plot of land from the verse. But there was something else. There, among the trees, were preparations for a wedding – scores of folding chairs and vases of white flowers. Zinn's jaw dropped. This was an unexpected complication.

Then, before that could sink in, his eyes widened. He looked over to the Italian garden, then down at the painting of the centaur. There, just across the path from where they were standing, was a fountain. He recognized it instantly as the chalice in the centaur's hands, imprinted on his mind since 1982.

Zinn took a quick timeout. "I had to take five minutes out to go to the Italian fountain," he said, remembering the thrill of identifying the chalice at last. "My life is fulfilled now – even if I don't find the treasure – because I found the fountain."

Just as quickly, Zinn ran back to the Greek garden. If the treasure was buried in front of the wall, he had to finish digging before the bride walked down the aisle.

Then Abrams called out. Behind the wall was another rectangular plot and some stone steps, he said. Could this be the *Seven steps up you can hop/ From the bottom level*?

Zinn thought yes. "As soon as we saw that, we said, 'This is it!' We set up shop and started."

It was 10:30 a.m. Zinn faced the wall and started counting.

Beneath the tenth stone/ From right to left/ Beneath the ninth row from the top

He took one of Chakalis' probes and thrust it into the soil until he hit something. He dug. Tree root. Probed again. Hit something. Another tree root.

Hidden away from any curious wedding guests, the digging took on a rhythm. Probe, hit something, dig. Try again. The area of disturbed soil got wider and wider. No treasure.

After a couple hours of digging, the wedding had come and gone. Zinn was sweaty and dirty. Abrams looked on, unsoiled. Zinn had insisted that only he would dig – he had to be the one to find the casque.

After four hours of digging, a discouraged Zinn dropped the shovel. The book had said the treasures would be buried no deeper than 3½ feet, and he was already at 4 feet. The photographer had left long before, after extracting a promise he would be called if the treasure was found. The reporter hung around.

Zinn sat on the ground and chewed on a slice of cold pizza. "He was the most dejected I had ever seen him in his whole life," Abrams said.

Then Abrams had a flash of inspiration. Instead of facing the wall to count the stones, Abrams stood with his back to the wall. He counted off the stones to the opposite end of the rectangle.

Abrams sunk the probe into the soil. It bent. Ruined.

But when he pulled the probe out, both men heard a scraping noise – not the noise of probe scraping tree root.

Abrams bent down and pulled from the dirt a 3-inch piece of clear plastic. He tossed it at Zinn. "The Secret" had said the casques would be protected by "lustrous transparent boxes."

He found another piece, which he also threw to Zinn.

Then he shouted. There in the soil was what looked like a piece of pottery. In a flash, Zinn was plunging his hands into the dirt.

"He was like a kid at the Christmas tree on Christmas morning," Abrams said.

Using only his hands, Zinn dug for 30 more minutes, carefully making a trench around the casque's likely resting spot. The reporter called his photographer to come back and scribbled furiously in his notebook.

At 3:26 p.m., five hours after he first put a shovel in the ground, Zinn had his hands on the treasure – a box 6 inches on each side. A plaster fairy with wings graced one side. What looked like a mermaid swam on another.

But after 22 years in the dirt, it wasn't much to look at. The casque's lid was broken, and both box and lid, once brightly painted, were now blanched white.

Zinn used Abrams' toothbrush to scrub his treasure in the Greek garden's fountain. The photographer snapped away. Zinn called Beverly.

The Grand Master of All Games had won again.

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And then Zinn and Abrams began the long drive home. Finding a treasure does not absolve a husband from making his wife breakfast on Mother's Day.

When Zinn got to work that Monday morning, he logged on to quest4treasure and posted a photo of him holding the casque. Cheers jammed the bulletin board.

More modest glory arrived June 13, when The Plain Dealer made Zinn's treasure hunt the cover story of its Sunday magazine section. Zinn keeps a copy on his desk.

Abrams, although he didn't get to dig, got his own prize. Zinn had a piece of the broken casque mounted in a plastic keepsake case for souvenir hockey pucks with this inscription: "Good friends are harder to find than buried treasure."

And Abrams, who now works at a Jersey City law firm, is hooked on treasure hunting. For Father's Day, his wife bought him a copy of "The Secret" on eBay, and Abrams carries it every day in his briefcase. He now posts on quest4treasure under the screen name "siskel." He's working on the clues in another of "The Secret" paintings – but he and Zinn are keeping their theories quiet.

Part of the treasure, however, remains elusive – the aquamarine stone.

Zinn e-mailed Preiss to announce his success, but the editor had to admit he had no idea where he'd stashed the key to the Chase Manhattan Bank vault box that holds all the precious stones from "The Secret."

Ten weeks after Zinn's Cleveland adventure, Preiss still hasn't found the key. Zinn is waiting, more or less patiently.

He's got a great idea for his aquamarine, which was worth about $1,000 when "The Secret" was published and might be double that now with inflation.

His wedding anniversary is July 26. "I'm going to put it in a setting, with a key or fairy, and give it to my wife as a necklace," Zinn said.

But it's not the final prize, not *really*, that has satisfied the Grand Master of All Games.

"It's all about pursuing your dreams," Zinn said. "This was my Holy Grail. Never give up."

For the Grand Master, this game's finished.

"I feel that I've achieved closure on something that I wrangled through my mind for a long time," he said. "It's like the end of a story. I never have any stories to tell. Now I have a good one."

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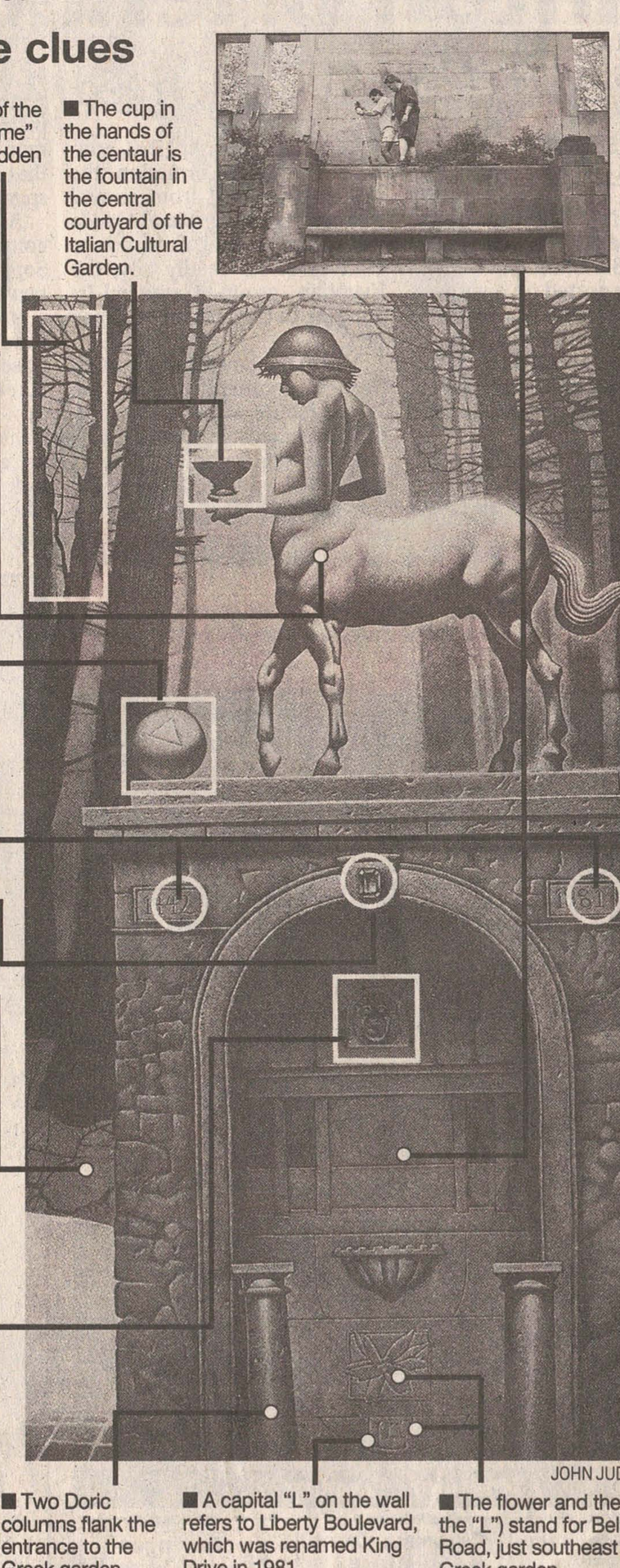
Revealing the clues



JOHN JUDE PALENCAR

PHOTOS BY MARVIN FONG/ THE PLAIN DEALER

■ Zinn found the treasure casque buried in the Greek garden in front of this wall.

■ An upside-down silhouette of the Terminal Tower, the "grand dame" of Cleveland skyscrapers, is hidden between the tree trunks.

■ The centaur, a half-man, half-horse mythical Greek creature, symbolizes the Greek theme to the quest. Illustrator John Jude Palencar used his younger brother Rick as the model.

■ A ball and triangle refer to Euclid, the father of geometry. Euclid Avenue intersects with Martin Luther King Drive, which runs along the western slope of the Greek Cultural Garden.

■ The last two digits of each of these years, 1442 and 1881, appear in the latitude (41.42) and longitude (81.87) of Cleveland.

■ The aquamarine gemstone, worth about $1,000, is the treasure. Zinn was spurred to find this jewel because it is his birthstone.

■ A map of Ohio borders the tree roots that mark Interstates 71, 70 and 75.

■ The lion's head and basin are part of a sandstone fountain in the lower plaza of the Italian garden, which is next to the Greek garden.

■ The cup in the hands of the centaur is the fountain in the central courtyard of the Italian Cultural Garden.

■ Two Doric columns flank the entrance to the Greek garden.

■ A capital "L" on the wall refers to Liberty Boulevard, which was renamed King Drive in 1981.

■ The flower and the bell (above the "L") stand for Bellflower Road, just southeast of the Greek garden.

Treasure-hunting books were a popular genre of the Eighties

By MERRY FIRSCHEIN
STAFF WRITER

In 1979, a slender book named "Masquerade" set off a publishing storm.

Filled with intricately painted pictures and verses on each of its 32 pages, all offering clues to lead treasure hunters to a golden hare buried "somewhere in the British Isles," the book was marketed worldwide to children and adults.

The book's beauty made it an instant collector's item. The lure of treasure made it a bestseller: More than 1 million copies were sold, and scores of people, from as far as Australia, descended upon Britain and dug up public gardens. Author Kit Williams received about 30,000 letters with possible solutions.

"Masquerade" also launched a wildly, if briefly, popular new genre. In the 1980s, more than 20 "armchair treasure hunt" books were published. One of them was "The Secret – A Treasure Hunt," which editor Byron Preiss said sold 28,000 copies and was "a modest success."

Preiss, who now runs the e-book Web site www.ibooks.net, said he buried all the treasures in 1982. He also made up the verses, which he thought would be easily unraveled. "I made it as hard as I could," he said. "I thought it would be found in a week."

He was wrong. Ten of the 12 casques Preiss buried 22 years ago remain hidden. One was found in Chicago the year after "The Secret" was published. This spring, Saddle Brook attorney Brian Zinn unearthed a second treasure in Cleveland. So "The Secret" still offers treasure hunters plenty of challenges.

Not so for "Masquerade." In 1982, the golden hare – worth $5,400 – was dug up in Bedfordshire, north of London, near a statue of Catherine of Aragon.

Six years later, it was revealed that the hare's finder had collaborated with the author's former girlfriend, who knew where the treasure was buried. Fans of the book were crushed, especially because two legitimate treasure hunters had solved the puzzle the right way, using the book's clues, but Williams read their solution only after the cheater had been declared the winner.

The old way of sleuthing in libraries has changed with the Internet, whose Web sites link aficionados and whose search engines can help untangle obscure clues in seconds.

Among Web sites devoted to armchair treasure hunters:

■ www.quest4treasure.co.uk, a British site with sections for assorted hunts, including one devoted to "The Secret."

■ www.treasureclub.net, the site of the Armchair Treasure Hunt Club, an English group founded in 1992 by a puzzle author.

■ http://homepage.ntlworld.com/mparry/treasure/, a personal site of puzzler Mark Parry. It lists many links to hunts.

■ www.armchair-treasure-hunt.com/, the Armchair Treasure Hunt Resource site. This British site lists all current armchair treasure hunts plus background information on the genre.

In February, a new treasure-hunt book surfaced, "The Whistle Pig," written under the pseudonym Duck Miller. Its 10 short stories give clues to an "unmistakable key hidden on accessible public property" somewhere in the United States. The book has a Web site: www.thewhistlepig.net.