LOCAL

Treasure hunters from around the world search for a 40-year-old secret in St. Augustine

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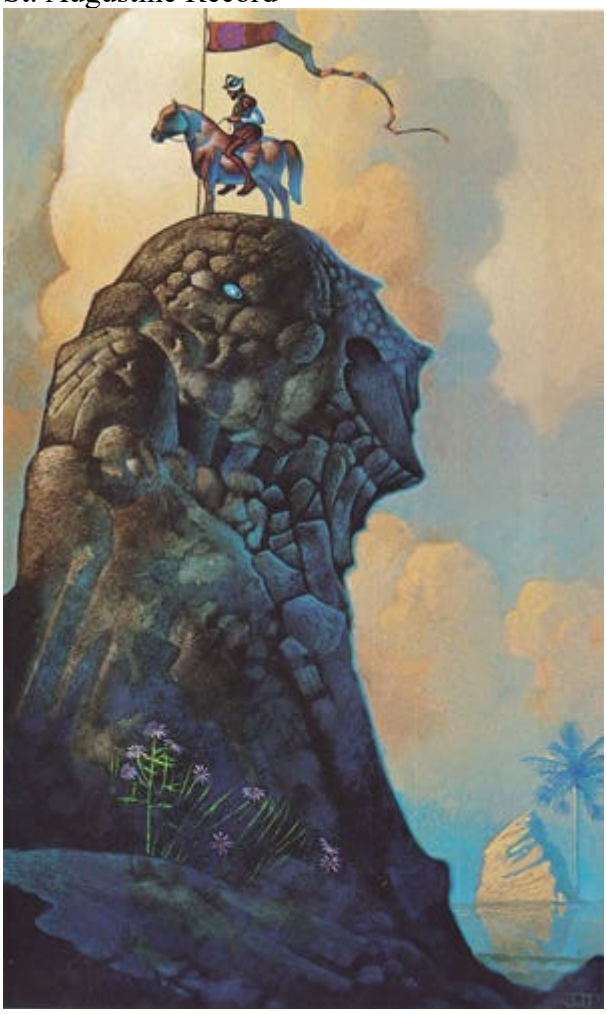
St. Augustine Record



St. Augustine may hold a 40-year-old secret — one that has become an obsession for thousands of people worldwide.

But then again, it may not.

In 1979, author and publisher Byron Preiss traveled across the United States and Canada and — dressed as a maintenance worker — buried 12 plexiglass boxes at historically significant sites,

each containing a key. The treasure hunter was instructed to mail the key to Preiss who would then send them a jewel.

The boxes are thought to be buried in cities like San Francisco, New York, Montreal and — some believe — St. Augustine.

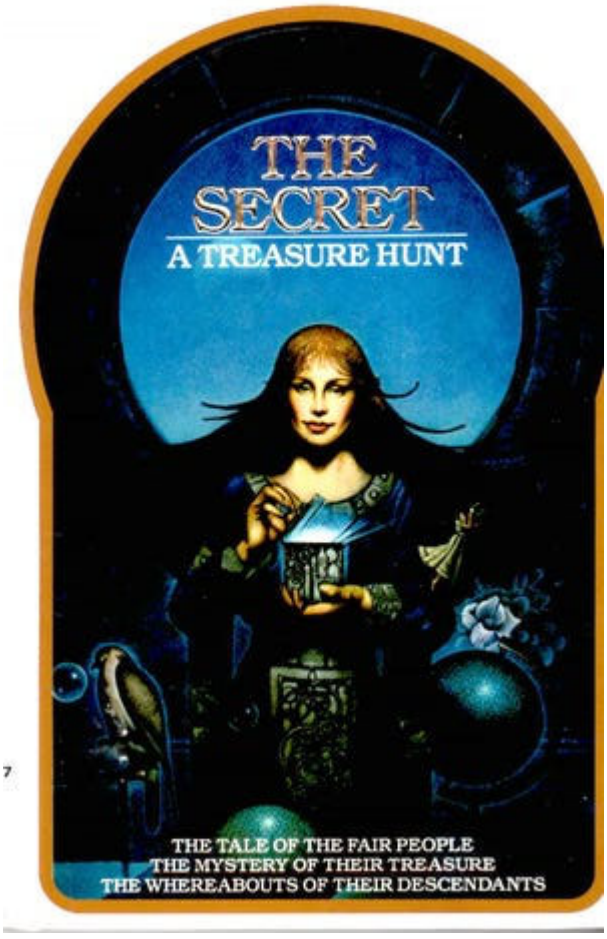
'Everybody came to Scarlett's': Why the landmark restaurant is closing after over 40 years

Flash back to 1987: St. Augustine residents share memories of filming of Rob Lowe movie 'Illegally Yours'

To guide people to the treasures, Preiss published a book in 1982, by authors Sean Kelly and Ted Mann and illustrator John Jude Palencar, called "The Secret, a Treasure Hunt," which contains 12 illustrations and verses as clues to the boxes' locations.

In the past 40 years only three of the boxes — in Cleveland, Chicago and Boston — have been found.

Although Preiss died tragically in a car accident in 2005, the hunt for his treasures continues.



The verse

Following is the verse that has led many to believe the treasure is located in town:

The first chapter

Written in water

Near men

With wind rose

Behind bending branches

And green picket fence

At the base of a tall tree

You can still hear the honking

Shell, limestone, silver, salt

Stars move by day

Sails pass by night

Even in darkness

Like moonlight in teardrops

Over the tall grass

Years pass, rain falls

The illustration is of a conquistador on horseback standing on a large rock that some say resembles Florida with a sailing ship on the water in the background. Embedded in the rock is a blue gem.

"I have to preface what I say — first of all — is nobody should be digging unsolicited on public or private land without permission to find this thing," said Nicole Diehm, digital collections librarian for the St. Augustine Historical Society Research Library. "A lot of people look at the illustration and read the verse and say it must be at the Fountain of Youth, or on Anastasia Island or at the lighthouse, just somewhere in St. Augustine.

"But that is all part of the game. Finding this thing is not easy," she continued.

According to Diehm, the research library gets requests for information to help people in their search five or six times a month.

"People from all over the country and the world contact us looking for old photographs and maps," she said. "You can always tell when people are looking for 'The Secret' because they are being so secretive. You know when they won't tell you what they are doing. It is really funny."

Diehm is also a fan of the book and gives lectures about both the treasure and St. Augustine. Her next speaking engagement will be sometime in September.

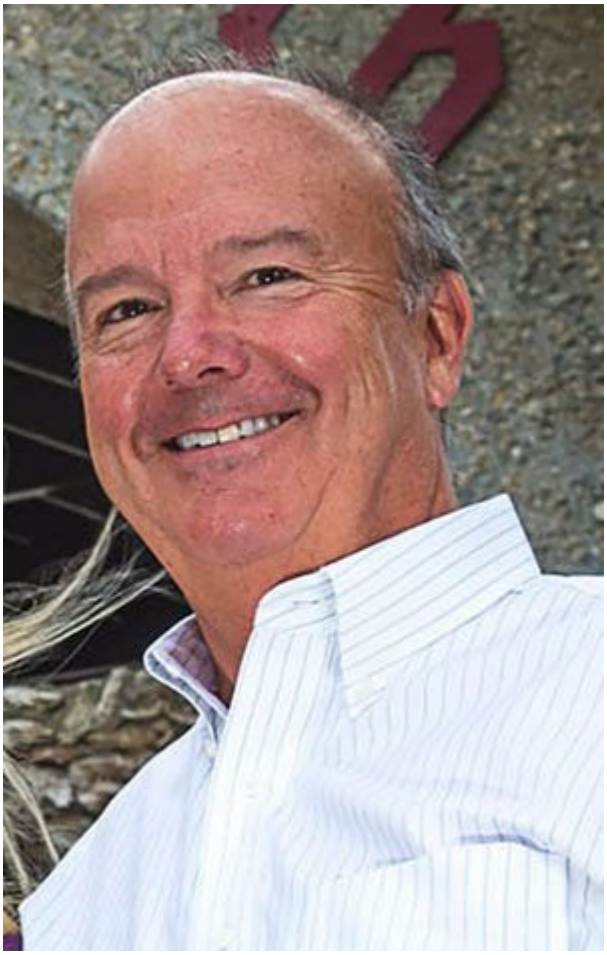
"It's like my stupid little obsession. I'm dying to know where it is," Diehm said. "If someone does find it, let us put it in our (the historical society's) collection because I think this is a fun piece of history."

People search the Fountain of Youth

Many people think the clues in the book lead to the Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park on Magnolia Street. In 2018, the Discovery Channel's "Expedition Unknown" program joined the hunt and scanned sections of the park with ground penetration radar. They didn't find it.

"I became aware of the book in 2004 and I got interested in it myself," said John Fraser, president of the Fountain of Youth and whose family has owned the park for generations. "Two ladies came down from Ohio and visited with me and explained to me what was going on."

"They had a book that was about 6 inches thick with photographs, postcards, old maps that the park issued, and brochures, guidebooks, stuff from the city of St. Augustine and the Historical Society. I let them dig, but they didn't find it," Fraser said.



"Initially, I was very accommodating in trying to help people realize their dreams of finding buried treasure," he continued, "but then we started to get overwhelmed. We don't put a shovel on the ground now unless we have a viable solution – unless we have a theory and it's gotta be pretty convincing these days for me to allow anyone to go in there and dig.

"We have had 25 or 30 written requests of people who want to go in there and poke around since Jan. 1, but I just haven't found many that are fresh or new. If the perspective is different, yeah, I'll give them a shot," Fraser said. "I'll go with them and supervise. Make sure that they don't break anything and of course, I check with archaeologist Dr. (Kathleen) Deagan to make sure the area is not historically significant."

Deagan is a professor of anthropology at the University of Florida and has studied the grounds of the Fountain of Youth for many years.

Fraser said he let a group in last month.

"He was from Arizona, one of the members was from Texas and another one was from Melbourne. They all came to St. Augustine and stayed in an Airbnb. Just so that they could build their vacation around this moment," Fraser said.

Fraser watched as the group dug a 1-foot square hole and came up empty.

“Every time I do this I am really hoping for the people to find it. It means so much to them,” he said.

"We had one guy come from Georgia and he wanted to dig out in the marsh. We own the marsh out in front of the Fountain of Youth between our place and the river. He called me and I said let's talk about it. Let's look at what you came up with and let's see if it fits the puzzle. The guy got so excited, so overzealous, so obsessed.

"The guy comes. He buys one of these cheap rubber rafts you could buy in any gift shop on St. Augustine Beach."

"His girlfriend is in the rubber raft with him. He's got a little shovel. He's got one paddle and puts in at Hospital Creek and paddles to this oyster mound.

"This guy was convinced, so he goes out there and guess what, the tide goes out. The rubber raft lands on the oyster shells. The shells puncture the raft. The raft is now not a raft anymore, so he gets out of the raft and sinks into the mud up to his knees.

"Now he's in real trouble and he's running out of power in his cellphone and his girlfriend is sitting there, very unhappy.

"He calls me and I tell him he is too far out and there is nothing I can do for him and to hang up, call 911 and … let them decide what to do."

After several hours, the authorities rescued the man and his girlfriend.

"That was dangerous for him, dangerous for the people involved in saving him," Fraser said. "And that's the extreme of what it is."

Fraser doesn't know if the treasure is located on the Fountain of Youth property.

"I was absolutely convinced four times in the last 20 years that it was on our property. I was absolutely convinced I knew the spot and I dug for six hours on a Saturday in July. It was very close to my birthday. I thought it would be a great birthday present. The hole was about 6 feet long and about 4 feet deep and I'm gonna tell you something – with a shovel and one guy, in the middle of summer when it's 100 degrees in the shade and I'm digging a hole and I'm finding a brick and a lot of dirt, that can be very frustrating. At the end, I closed up, took a shower, had a big, big bottle of water and I said 'I don't think I'm gonna do this again,' and I haven't.

"I believed in my heart four times and I just can't afford the time anymore to play that game. Life is short and I just won't do it. I'll leave it to somebody else, and somebody else's dream and I'm happy to help."

'The Secret' strengthened bond between father and son

Joe Bristow and his son Chad are positive they know where the treasure is buried. The men, who live in Virginia, have spent more than 1,000 hours researching the mystery.

"I must have looked at more than 50,000 different photographs in our research," said Chad Bristow, "Two of our largest pieces of evidence are photographs."

Joe Bristow said it's more than just hunting for treasure.

“What it is all about is spending time together and coming together on a project as father and son."

Last year the two took a road trip to San Francisco to look for a box.

“We really didn’t spend much time together in the past 10 or 20 years, but we watched the 'Expedition Unknown' show one night and just got hooked,” Chad Bristow said. “When you are together and have nothing else to talk about you can always talk about 'The Secret.'

“It makes you spend time with the people you are doing it with,” he continued.

The Bristows have sent their information to the Fountain of Youth and are waiting to hear back.

“This is about more than a box and a key. This is a cool story to tell for the rest of your life,” Chad Bristow said.

“I am just so anxious to get down there and find this thing. I would leave tomorrow if they would let me dig,” said Joe Bristow.

The hunt brings out awe and wonder

According to Fraser, Hastings resident George Ward probably knows more about The Secret than anyone else alive.

He has what he calls a museum to the book in this home office; records podcasts on the subject; hosts a Facebook page with more than 12,000 followers; and runs a website— 12treasures.com — about the hunt.

“I found The Secret on the internet probably 12 years ago and I just sort of never looked back. I kind of fell head first into it," Ward said. "I actually told my fiancée, Rachel, that this looked so easy that I was just going to find it. We're going to get the gem and put it in a wedding ring and then we would get married and she kind of held me to that. And we haven't gotten married yet.”

Ward offers two reasons as to why the book and the treasure hunt are so popular.

“I think people look at it and they think it's easy and that starts them down this rabbit hole, and then once they get interested in it, they get kind of get hooked,” Ward said. "And the second reason is, when you're a kid, you look at the world differently. You look at it with some sort of awe and wonder. I think The Secret brings that back out in adults and forces you to look at things in a different way, it forces you to focus on interesting details of towns and beautiful parks. It forces you to focus on things that, as adults, we just kind of overlooked."

The book is popular all over the world. Ward’s Facebook page has active members from New Zealand and Australia. He has been interviewed by a magazine from Norway. The book is available in Japanese.

When asked if he thinks the treasure is at the Fountain of Youth, Ward is undecided.

“I'm torn, I really don't know. I am kind of 50-50 on the Fountain of Youth versus the Amphitheatre because of the giant rock that's sitting out front of the amphitheater and the history of the Amphitheatre.

"One of the puzzles is buried somewhere right around a park in Roanoke, North Carolina, and the whole puzzle is based around this play called 'The Lost Colony,' which is about Virginia Dare and the English coming to America,” Ward said.

“That play happens to be in an amphitheater inside of a park. Written by Paul Green, it is basically the exact same scenario as the 'Cross and Sword,'" he said.

"Cross and Sword" was a play, also by Paul Green, about the settlement of St. Augustine. It played at the Amphitheatre from 1965 to 1996.

"A lot of the clues in the verse seem to point to parts of the story or things right around in the Amphitheatre, and then we've got that giant 6-foot rock that sits outside of the Amphitheatre … the same as the one as in the painting."

Ward doesn't hunt much himself anymore.

"It is just as much fun to help other people look for the treasure," he said.

His search led him to a very big tree

World Golf Village resident Dave Ellenberger is positive that he knows where The Secret is buried in St. Augustine and it is not the Fountain of Youth or the Amphitheatre.

"I got interested in the thing after watching "Expedition Unknown," and a little over four years ago, I moved to St. Augustine, so I figured, well since I'm here, I might want to dig a little deeper into it."

"So I started doing more and more research. I looked at what a lot of other people said online and what their thoughts were and where they thought it might be. I went to several parks all over St.

Augustine and walked around and looked at my notes and said to myself, ‘Nope, this isn't it’ and ‘This isn't it.’ Ellenberger said.

"I have watched 'Expedition Unknown' probably 100 times and I'm sitting there one day watching it again and they're in the Fountain of Youth, and they're kind of following the verse and then (host) Josh Gates says, 'OK, so, it's at the base of a tall tree and there are a million trees in the park. How do we know which one it is?' Ellenberger said, “That's when it dawned on me.

"So I went straight to my computer and read all my notes, which kind of took me around the Fountain of Youth. And I searched for famous trees near the Fountain of Youth, and one popped up 600 feet away. I went down there and walked through with my notes, which are all in my book, and it took me exactly to where the tree is at and I believe that where the treasure is.”

Ellenberger’s search took him to the 650-year-old live oak called the "Old Senator" growing on the grounds of the Villa 1565 Hotel on San Marco Avenue.

"The verse does bring you to the Fountain of Youth, but if you follow the verse, it actually takes you out of the Fountain of Youth. So the bending branches is Magnolia Street and at the end of the trees you look to the right and there's the big tree. The Old Senator,” Ellenberger said.

Ellenberger also sees clues in the illustration that points to the tree, including a symbol of an elephant to represent the Republican Party, the party of Sen. Paula Hawkins who was in office in 1982.

Ellenberger has reached out to the management of the hotel for permission to search around the tree but they refused in fear of damaging the Old Senator.

“It is private property and it is their tree. You can’t just go and start digging anywhere to find this thing. It is against the rules of this game. I want to find it but I want to find it the right way,” Ellenberger said. “I just want everybody to know that I was the one that figured it out even if somebody else goes digs it up.”

In case the hotel owners change their minds, Ellenberger always carries a probe and a shovel in the back of his truck and is ready at anytime to dig.

"The Secret, A Treasure Hunt" is available from the St. Johns County Public Library as well as Amazon and Barnes & Noble.