

## **Buried Treasure on Assateague Island**

*Published: May 2016*

The British Navy hanged pirate Charles Wilson for his crimes in 1750. But his legend lingers on... Charles Wilson plundered merchant vessels in the mid-Atlantic between New Jersey and North Carolina. He often stayed on Assateague Island where he could find fresh water and game...

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In WWII, as the Allied Forces began to close-in on the Nazis, there was a race between the Russian and the US forces in Berlin, to see who would capture the most territory in Germany. In an attic apartment, in the city of Berlin, the US forces recovered an old steamer trunk that contained a mysterious map, and some letters from Charles Wilson to a relative.

One letter referred to the map of Assateague Inland, with directions to where Captain Wilson had buried his treasure, in a grove of cedar trees, alongside a creek, towards the north end of the Island...

When my brothers and I were younger we surfed on Assateague Island, before the Maryland side of the Island became a National Park. We would throw our surfboards into my Dad's old 1950 vintage, red International pickup truck and travel to Assateague, in search of new adventure.

The weather pattern had been unusual that spring. A Nor'easter had just blown through the coastal town of Ocean City. We left our house in Takoma Park, in late afternoon that Friday, arriving at the dunes of Assateague sometime after dark. As we pitched our tent, I remember that it was a calm night with no wind. The sky was black as obsidian. I could see the Milky Way swirling, against millions of stars, stretching as far as the distant galaxies...

The next morning we woke up at Sunrise, to see a strange phenomenon. The tides were way out, further than I ever

remembered. We decided not to surf, We wanted to explore how far this low tide stretched along the northern side of the Island. As we jogged alongside the shoreline, we could see the devastation of the Nor'easter. For about 300 yards out, the sandy bottom was littered with detritus, shells, and sea creatures, that hadn't managed to escape the sudden low-tide...

I can't remember how far we had traveled toward the inlet between Assateague and Ocean City. After a while we came upon a Gut that was open about 6 feet down. We could see that water was running eastward in the bottom of the Gut. We looked for a place to cross, moving eastward, in the direction of the water flow, toward the ocean, now shallow water, only inches deep, with sea-life and sunken junk scattered about on what had been the sea floor, the day before. Suddenly, my brother John, who had been walking eastward, toward the surf, yelled something that was drowned out by the sound of the waves. When Paul and I arrived, we saw what John had yelled about. Deep down in the Gut, tangled in cedar roots, were three wooden chests, bound at the corners, and along the seams with grey green metal.

Immediately we knew what we had found; Captain Wilson's buried treasure.

Quickly, John jumped down into the tangle of cedar roots to try to break the top-most chest loose. Without any tools, he had soon broken through almost all of the ancient roots holding the chest in mid-air over the Gut. He turned up to look at me, and Paul, "All right, I am going to break the last of these roots, and I will try to pull the chest up to you..." Sounded like a good plan to me. But unfortunately the plan did not take into account the weight of gold

and jewels inside the chest. Once he broke the last roots holding the chest, the chest wobbled a little as he pulled on it, and then fell headlong into the Gut, and took our brother John along with it. Along with the chest, John disappeared into the muck that was in the bottom of the Gut.

It only took me a second before I jumped in after him feet-first. Below

the surface in the muddy water, I groped around and found his leg, grabbed it securely, and kicked for the surface as hard as I could.

Now

above the flowing water in the Gut, I realized that the Gut had no bottom. It had swallowed the pirate's chest entirely. I looked over at my brother John, to make sure he was all right. His face was unrecognizable, covered with brown mud. He looked very much like the birthing of an Orc, from J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings"....

John coughed and sputtered—having swallowed a good mouthful of the muddy water but he was all right. As we swam in the Gut toward the tangle of cedar roots, we both realized that Paul was not peering down from the edge of the Gut. Paul was nowhere to be found...

I learned later that when Paul saw both of us disappear into the Gut, he had the presence of mind to run toward the ocean, hoping to find something that he could dangle down in the Gut to help his drowning brothers. When he saw me jump in after my brother John. He didn't say a word... He just took off. Meanwhile John and I were fighting the heavy current in the bottomless Gut. There was also the problem of quicksand around the edges. When either of us tried to get a footing, we could feel the quicksand under us pulling us into the depths. Quickly the fight with the current and the quicksand was sapping our strength. Slowly, but surely, as we struggled between the current and the quicksand, I began to feel, with

great dread, that something bad was about to happen. I tried to put it out of my head. Yet, there was a path upward, that each of us could see. The ancient roots held the two remaining wooden chests in their embrace. Finally I mustered all the strength in my body, and like a fish jumping for a mayfly, kicked with my legs to propel myself upward to reach a thick piece of root. Using my upper body strength, I pulled myself out of the flow of water, over the wooden chests, and upward into tangle of ancient cedar roots, toward the surface.

Just at the moment Paul appeared on the southern side of the Gut with a very thick rope that he had found in the detritus of things scattered in the low tide. Quickly, he secured the rope in the tangle of ancient cedar roots near the top of the Gut and lowered the rope down to us. Both John and I climbed upward across the wooden chests, out of the Gut, and onto dry land.

On the surface again, we danced around, hugged Paul and lifted him up, then tackled him to the ground, rubbing sand in his hair. We laughed at our extremely good fortune to have eluded, what was certain death in the “Hell-Hole” at the bottom of the Gut.

## Sequel to Buried Treasure on Assateague Island

*Published: February 10, 2018*

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Afterwards we sat for a few hours on the beach. The sun came out, but there were no gulls to be seen. Perhaps the birds were sensing that the Nor'easter would be returning.

When you are in the clutches of Death, you instinctively fight to get free. Everything moves in slow motion. Then, either you succumb to death, or you are free and alive again. This brush with your own mortality can knock the wind out of your sails.

John and I were feeling lucky to be alive.

Later that day, while walking back to the truck we were silent, lost in thought. I don't remember how long it took us to walk back from the northern tip of the Island to the gravel parking lot, where the red International truck was parked. Seeing the "Red Rooster" lifted my spirits, a little. It was late afternoon, and the sky was turning an angry blue-grey, with the wind blowing from the northeast. We were dog-tired and hungry. We secured the surfboards, then jumped into my dad's 1950 International truck and headed back to town.

As the torrential rain of the Nor'easter hit the windshield, Paul broke the silence.

"What are you guys going to do with your share of the Treasure," he asked?

"What are you crazy, I don't ever want to get in that Hell-Hole again," I said!

But I could see the wheels turning in John's head as he drove through the torrential rain. Paul's innocent query was making John think about the Treasure.

"I don't know if I could ever do that again," I repeated.

"OK. I'm just saying..." Paul started out. But he was interrupted by John's question to me.

“How much do you think the gold in three chests would be worth today?”

“I dunno, maybe \$100,000 each chest, if its just gold, maybe more if there’s jewels?”

“That’s three hundred thousand,” said Paul, (who at just 11, was already a math wizard).

“The one chest that fell in the Gut is lost forever,” said John.

Now fully in the game, I said “That’s two hundred thousand, unless there are precious stones.”

“That’s a lot of money,” we all yelled at once!

We all laughed. It was good to laugh again. It kept the evil thoughts away.

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The storm alternatively rained down buckets of water, mixed with hailstones. Again, the local road to Ocean City, State Road #611 was partially flooded in the low-lying areas. But we knew the Red Rooster would make it. Internationals trucks were all manufactured for farming in the fifties, especially the  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton models. We drove around the Back Bay, and crossed the Route #50 Bridge to make our way into Ocean City on Baltimore Avenue. After making the turn on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, we pulled the truck up behind the Star of the Sea Hotel. John and I had stayed at the hotel, during other adventures, at 14 years of age, and then again at 15. We chose this hotel because there was a back entrance that was always open. Old Lady Wilson, the owner would rent to young boys, if you looked presentable, and wore a winning smile. The drill was to have one brother present identification at the front desk and pay \$5.00 for the room, while the other brothers sneaked in through the rear entrance.

The Star of the Sea was a wooden structure built in the 1880’s, when there was still a ferry from the mainland to the barrier island that was now Ocean City. The Victorian style Hotel had once been an Ocean City icon. In the twenties and thirties rich farmers and their wives populated the wrap-around porch, and wore their woolen swimsuits into the surf. But the beauty had faded from this hotel long ago. Its tenants now were more middle class folks, and students.

I clambered up the broad stairway to the front porch. There was a cracked floorboard that groaned and sagged, as I walked across the porch. The lobby had oriental rugs, with painted wainscoting topped by a chair rail, along the walls. The tall reception desk was just to the left, where Mrs. Wilson sat on a tall stool, designed to elevate her higher than the accidental tourist. She had once been a handsome woman. Her face still had the high cheekbones and sharp blue eyes of landed gentry. Noticing her watching me as I approached, I bowed deeply as I stood before her.

“What can I do for you young man” she inquired arching her eyebrows as she looked down at me over her bifocals?

“Mrs. Wilson, I have stayed with you before, last summer, with my brother John,” I said, smiling, and desperately trying to turn on the charm.

“You have been here before,” she questioned me?

This made me nervous. So I decided to use my brother John’s charm instead.

“Yes, I was with my brother John, who is a little larger and taller than me, I explained. He’s a football player. Do you remember, I asked with a pleading look in my eyes?”

“Oh I love athletic men, my husband was an athlete; played for Villanova!”

She tilted her head a little as she recited these facts. I thought I saw a tint of sadness in her face for a moment.

“He was a letterman in football, and track and field sports,” she recited.

The sadness went away. I began to feel I was winning her over now.

“Is your brother at letterman, she queried?”

“Yes ma’am, I countered.”

The tension between us evaporated, as she motioned to the Guest Register on a side table.

“How long will you be staying,” she asked?

I signed the Guest Register and paid for one night, with crisp dollar bills from my wallet.

Before I left the lobby, she motioned me to come over her high perch, and handed me a key. While looking at the clock behind the desk, she spoke to me.

“Except for the traveling salesman, who came in before you, there is nobody else in this hotel. While this storm is howling, I don’t believe that any one else will be registering tonight. So I am going to give you a special room.” She smiled warmly, as she looked over her bifocals at me.”

“It’s the room in the Witch’s Hat,” she stated.

She recognized my hesitation, this so she repeated herself, with a different phrase.

“I am referring to the Cupola,” she made a triangle shape with both hands.

“I call it a witch’s hat because that’s what it looks like.

It’s on the ocean side, northeast corner of the Hotel. There are two beds. I am certain that you will find it quite comfortable.”

“Thank you Ma’am”

I took my room key, and proceeded to the special stair leading to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor.

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I met Paul on the rear stair. As we climbed the stairway he told me that John had taken the truck to find a chicken place. In a few minutes John was back with some “Delmarva Delight” chicken, cornbread, and RC sodas.

We wasted no time, happily gorging ourselves on the meal.

After the meal, John and I chose the queen bed, leaving the double bed for Paul. John took out a deck of cards and we proceeded to play card games. We were teaching Paul the poker game of Texas-Hold-EM. We both believed that he had a future as a “card-counter”. The Witch’s Hat had a tall ceiling where all the roof beams joined together at the peak. Its shape was domed roof with octagonal sides. There was a round table with four chairs, set off to the side.

The Nor'easter, pouring buckets of rain and hailstones stopped, at least for the moment. The heavy clouds cleared away. We could see lightning, and hear the thunder crackling in the distance.

The large windows in the Octagon gave us a fine view of the ocean. Two windows in the middle were French Doors, but a sign, posted prominently read. "Do not open-dangerous." We ignored the posted warning. After twisting the knob one way, and then the other, all three of us walked out into the damp night. There was a narrow catwalk with a railing, circling the Witch's Hat. The streetlights on the Boardwalk swayed with the gusting wind. We watched the lights from a couple of ships, navigating up the coast in the distance. But there was an empty black space in the shape of Assateague Island, to the southeast.

"Take a good look, brothers, John said out loud. Our future is in that dark black shadow."

"I don't like it, I replied. After the struggle that we both had today, I have no wish to go back there."

"But we can all get rich," John insisted.

"I still don't like it. I think that Captain Wilson's Treasure is cursed."

I had a sinking feeling that Captain Wilson's treasure was cursed. He had killed the men who helped him bury the chests.

"Don't you remember what we found in that old library book?" John began reciting because he had literally memorized the passage from the letter that Charles Wilson had written to his brother in 1748.

"There are three creeks lying 100 paces or more north of the second inlet above Chincoteague Island, Virginia, which is at the southward end of the peninsula. At the head of the third creek to the northward is a bluff facing the Atlantic Ocean with three cedar trees growing on it, each about 1 1/3 yards apart. Between the trees I buried in iron-bound chests, bars of silver, gold, diamonds and jewels to the sum of 200,000 pounds sterling..."

“Yeah, let’s go get the treasure, we could all be rich,” Paul yelled!

I turned to Paul, “Even though you saved us, you were not with us in the Gut today.” Even as I said the words, I was reliving the horror of being back in the Gut, fighting the quick sand and the torrential current.

“I have this horrible feeling that the Treasure is cursed. Anyone who touches the Treasure will be cursed forever!”

“Look, the hardware stores open early, John said. We can rent a “come-along” to hoist the heavy chests out of the Gut. There’s a set of tools in the box on the Red Rooster, we can use the tools to break open the locks on the chests.”

“Compared to the struggle and the danger we had today, tomorrow will be a piece of cake.”

There was no use arguing with John, once he was set on an idea, He had inherited our mother’s stubbornness.

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We played cards for a while in silence and then retired to bed. I laid awake for some time. I was dreading going back to the Hell-Hole tomorrow, even though this time we would have the advantage of tools and planning. I tossed and turned. I had horrific dreams of being in the Gut again.

I woke with a clap of thunder, and went out through the French Doors, onto the catwalk. The skies were clear in Ocean City but roiling and dark over Assateague Island. After another clap of thunder, I counted in my head, one-thousand-one; one thousand-two. The thunder and lighting were getting closer.

A bolt came out of the sky and landed on the catwalk, just a few yards away. I fell over from the jolt that hit the catwalk. When I got up, I could smell something burning, and see a cloud of smoke a few feet away.

A dark figure emerged from the smoke. I stood frozen on the

catwalk.

“Hey there, boy, said the voice.” The accent sounded British, with a Worcester County dialect. I was speechless, rubbing my eyes, thinking I was dreaming.

“I am talking to you, boy” said the voice again!

I couldn’t move.

I watched the dark figure, now fully emerged from the brimstone and sulphur-smelling cloud of smoke. He wore cutlass at his side, and a bandolier with two pistols. He had a purloined hat and a red bandana. I recognized him from historical pictures as Captain Charles Smith, the pirate who had sailed with Edward Teach (Blackbeard).

“ I am talking to you boy, he said as he stepped toward me. I had to kill three good men who dug the holes to bury that treasure. So that treasure is cursed, and I am destined to walk forever in this netherworld between heaven and hell.”

“What does that have to do with me and my brothers, my voice quivered, and I felt a sudden chill.

“Since you both touched the treasure, you and your brother John, are equally cursed, the pirate spit the words back at me. Each of you will have business success in life, mixed with financial struggles.”

“What about Paul, I asked?”

“Since he was not in the Gut, he will have financial success and retire a wealthy man.”

Another bolt of lighting zigzagged across the starry skies and the pirate was gone.

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I don’t know that whether my time with the pirate was real or a dream. So I never told my brothers about my conversation with the ghost of Captain Charles Wilson.

The next day we got up at first light, went to the Ocean City hardware store to rent the tools and equipment that we would need to pull the chests out of the Gut. After breakfast, we again drove on Route #610 to circle the Back Bay. We arrived at the causeway to

Assateague Island just after 9:00 AM. The sky was a beautiful cobalt blue. We parked the Red Rooster and loaded the equipment into the wheelbarrow. As we wheeled the wheelbarrow down to the firm sand near the surf, our hearts fell. Furiously, we jogged for about 30 minutes to where we thought we might have encountered the Gut the day before. The returning storm had washed all evidence away.

With the Nor'easter gone, now the tide was back in. All of our dreams of riches were dashed by a strange quirk of weather; the returning Nor'easter. We came so close to possessing the fabled treasure. Now, at least for us boys, that opportunity was lost forever. The surf was back in, against the soft rolling dunes of Assateague Island. The Gut was somewhere about 300 yards out the Ocean.

Not wanting to waste the day, we retrieved our surfboards from the Red Rooster. Surfing was that *miracle elixir*. How can anyone feel blue when you are riding in the curl of a wave? We surfed until the sun was going "over the yardarm". Then we packed the rented equipment back into the truck to Ocean City, before heading home across the Route #50 Bridge.

It is *always* a good day to be in the surf on Assateague Island.

The End

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