

XLIII. A NEW VARIANT OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE MYTH

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The Hidden Treasure Myth is everywhere on the Great Plains. I have run across it as far south as the Rio Grande and as far north as the Black Hills. It flourishes both along the bluffs of the Mississippi, and among the granite peaks of the Rockies.

The myth, however, seems to attain its most virulent form in the hill country of eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas. Whether or not this is due to the general credulity of the inhabitants of these regions is a mooted question. It is my present opinion that although the habitat of the hidden treasure myth and Thoburn's Natural Mounds coincides very slovenly, there is not necessarily any connection between the two.

It is safe to say that there is scarcely a county in any one

of the states of the plains where the hidden treasure myth is not known. One is so constantly encountering it that he soon begins to expect it, and is really disappointed if some native does not spring it the first few days he is working in a new country. Not infrequently a geologist will be followed for days by those who think he is hunting lost gold. The novelty wears off soon, however, and the scientist must sooner or later become bored with the "vain repetition" and is interested chiefly in watching for variants of the main stem of the story. The orthodox tradition is something as follows:

Many years ago (time usually indefinite) a wagon train from Old Mexico loaded with treasure was attacked and the men massacred by the Indians at the particular place where the story is being told. The people who were with the train seeing that they were to be killed, succeeded in hiding the treasure and marking the spot; but two boys who happened to be away from the main party, escaped and made their way back to Mexico. Long years afterwards one of these boys, now an old man, returned to this neighborhood with a map, trying by means of mysterious marks and signs to locate the treasure, but failed.

Trimmed to the bare skeleton, this is the hidden treasure myth. The variants, however, are legion, and many of them positively unique. A very few of the most common may be cited.

Instead of a wagon train from Mexico, loaded with gold and silver, it is frequently a government train from Washington carrying money to pay off soldiers at an army post, or sometimes a wagon load of gold which the 49ers sent back from California. One story designated a jennet load of Spanish doubloons. Once it was a load of jewels sent by the Pope from Rome to a new cathedral in Mexico.

The attacking parties are quite varied. Usually they are Indians. Cheyennes seeming to have the preference, although the crime has at various times been laid to the Comanches, Apaches, Arapahoes, Osages, and even to the Cherokees. Sometimes it is renegade soldiers who had deserted from an army post. Frequently it is Mexican herders, and sometimes such notorious outlaws as Billy the Kid, Apache Kid, Cherokee Kid, or members of the Starr, Dalton or James gangs.

The places chosen for hiding the treasure show wide range. Perhaps most frequently the money was hidden in an iron chest under a rock ledge, or in an iron pot in a spring. In many cases it was supposed to have been concealed under a flat rock, or perhaps there were two flat rocks leaning together like the comb

of a roof. Hollow trees also serve as hiding places, and not infrequently it will be out on the flat prairie in direct line half way between two natural objects, such as a cottonwood tree and a rock ledge.

The marks of identification are varied. Usually there is a map, with curious markings, letters and signs, showing the location of the treasure, but there are also marks on the trees and rocks that serve to guide the searcher. Three notches on an oak or an arrow cut on a rock are common, but one also learns of five stones in a row pointing to a spring, and a bois d'arc peg driven in an oak tree. In one case prominent limbs on two oak trees growing 100 yards apart on the point of a hill pointed to the fatal spot half way down the slope.

Usually the only people who escaped were two boys who happened to be off at a spring getting water, but often it was two hunters who had left the party to kill game. Once it was two Mexican girls who escaped and once a five year old child who was adopted by the Indians and grew to manhood with the tribe but who never forgot the experience and late in life left the Indians and set out to find the treasure.

So it goes. Incidents and instances might be multiplied almost indefinitely, but all are variants of the main story.

Recently I ran onto a variant which in my experience is absolutely new and I pass it on for what it is worth. While hunting "structure" (not treasure) in Oklahoma a few weeks ago, I ran onto an old cattle man who came to that country from Arkansas 15 years ago. I had in my hand a U. S. G. S. topographic sheet of the region and noted that the map showed that on the next hill to the west there was a symbol indicating that surveyors had there built a tower such as are used in the preliminary steps in making contour maps. I asked the cattleman if he knew just where the tower was located, and he said there was no tower on that hill, and that none had been there since he came to the country. "But," said he, "There was a mighty queer thing happened up there. We found a stone with some queer marks and letters on it, and some pieces of pine scantling and big spikes." We climbed the hill and came out on the flat woods country. There we found where great piles of dirt and rock had been thrown out from an excavation that at one time might have held a small house. My friend the cattleman explained that the man who found the stone with the queer letters in it had been digging there for hidden treasure. I asked him to describe the stone. He said, "It was a flat stone about 6 or 8 inches thick and I should judge about 14 or 16

inches square. At the top was a letter U, at the right the letter G, at the bottom the letter S, and at the left the letter S. In the middle was a cross or X. We did not know what it could mean. I studied and studied over the matter, and one night, I woke up and the thing came to me like a flash." Taking a stick he drew a diagram on the ground and pointing to the letters, spelled out this message:—

"U—Go—South—Ten—Steps." And they went south ten steps and that is where they dug the hole hunting for the hidden treasure.