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Buried Treasure in Western Oklahoma

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— a tale of "what if"

BURIED TREASURE IN WESTERN OKLAHOMA

— by Donita Lucas Shields

31

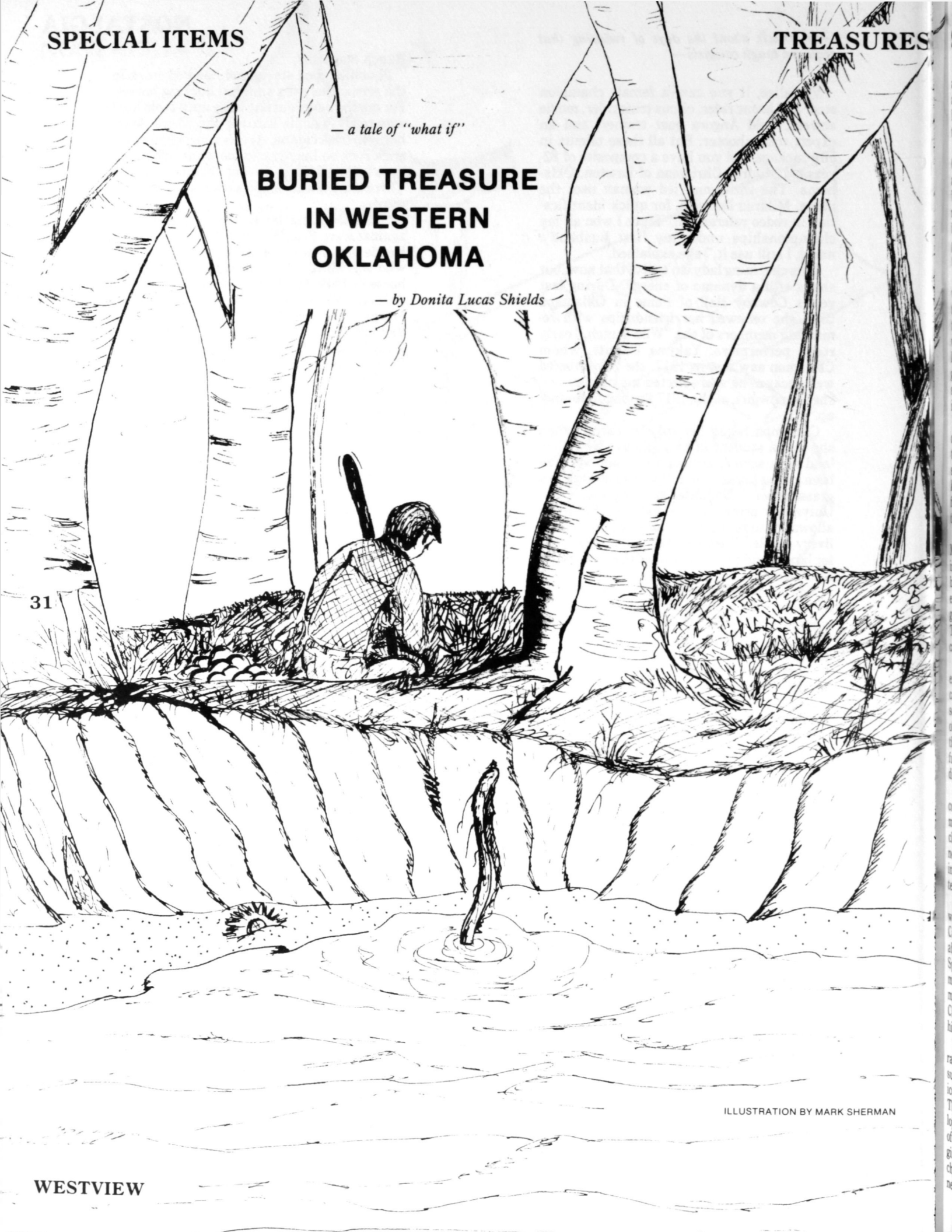


ILLUSTRATION BY MARK SHERMAN

SPECIAL ITEMS

Older than ten-gallon hats, Arbuckle coffee, and barbed-wire drift fences, buried treasures are a part of the heritage of Western Oklahoma. No one can verify these legends, but the tales live on.

These lost treasure stories seem to follow Old Spanish Road, which once traversed the area now known as Roger Mills, Beckham, Washita, and Custer counties. Each legend related a similar situation when the treasure bearers were forced to bury and abandon their gold after savage bands of Indians attacked them.

In most instances, only one or two men survived these bloody attacks. Either they or their relatives returned years later to recover their buried caches. They always brought with them crudely drawn maps marking the location of the hidden wealth, but none of the gold has ever been found. Today, those treasures still remain to intrigue everyone who is interested in buried mysteries and lost caches.

A 1905 edition of THE CHEYENNE STAR contains information concerning a large quantity of gold buried on Sandstone Creek southeast of Cheyenne. Rev. Davis, a well-known, responsible person, received a map from a Mexican claiming to have been one of three survivors of an Indian massacre in 1859.

This story described how Indians attacked Mexican prospectors when they were returning home with their gold. The three survivors buried the treasure before making their escape. Davis' map showed the lay of the ground and trees where the battle took place. The spot was clearly marked where the Mexican buried the gold.

Rev. Davis spent years searching for the exact location. During his diggings for the cache, he found several human skeletons. The soil had been disturbed, and he also found bits of canvas which he thought might have been the bags that contained the gold. Then powerful underground springs forced him to stop digging.

Davis attempted to draw out the water and continue his efforts. Unbiased parties saw his map and the pieces of canvas. His story was claimed to be an authentic one. However, the newspaper failed to publish any follow-up information concerning his success. The mystery still remains.

Another 1905 article in the same newspaper was told by people living near Antelope Hills at Crawford. They had always heard stories about successful prospectors returning from Spanish Peaks, Colorado, in the 1850's. The miners were traveling with heavily laden pack mules and were attacked by roving bands of Cheyennes and Comanches. The Mexicans hid their gold in one of the caves in the Hills.

The men fought with the Indians until they ran out of ammunition. Two brothers-in-law survived the ambush. After returning to Mexico, they gave a crude map to a young relative. This fellow did not make the journey to Antelope Hills until he was an old man. Residents of Crawford watched the elderly Mexican digging for the treasure, but fifty years of erosion changed the terrain of the Hills. The gold was never found.

According to Truman Morgan, whose parents homesteaded southeast of Elk City in 1892, a \$40,000 payroll of gold coins was buried near Soldier Springs. Morgan remembered two stories concerning this money, which was being transported in leather saddlebags by a troop of soldiers.

One legend related that the soldiers feared an Indian ambush and prepared themselves by burying the gold near the main springs which flowed from a red sandstone bluff. During the night Indians attacked and killed all of them except two. These men returned years later to recover the money, but they could not find it.

For years farmers living near Soldier Springs have continued the fruitless search. Today the sandstone bluff and springs are obliterated by years of eroding soils, but old-timers vividly remember the cliff with soldiers' names carved upon it.

Morgan's second version of the lost payroll stated that Indians attacked the soldiers before they buried the gold. The men separated after several were killed. Four of the troopers survived the Indian attack and raced upstream for more than two miles to the head of Soldier Creek. Here they buried the gold and then marked the spot with two cottonwood tree limbs.

Many years later two of the surviving soldiers returned for the payroll. Again the terrain was completely changed by erosion, and they found nothing. The \$40,000 cache of gold still remains somewhere along Soldier Creek.

An 1895 edition of the CLOUD CHIEF HERALD-SENTINEL contained information concerning mining claims that were staked fourteen miles southwest of Arapaho. Early miners set up camp at the mouths of Boggy Creek and Turkey Creek. This article claimed that \$500 of gold had already been mined and a Colorado mining company had sent carloads of machinery and several men to work the new gold field.

The article stated that miners found graves of seven skeletons and a Spanish inscription that translated "Gold discovered here in 1676 (or 1876)." Gold seekers also found two ancient crucible ladles used for smelting, a set of apothecary balance scales, various rusty tools, an old saddle and bridle, the remains of a rotting wagon, and eleven Mexican silver coins dated in the 1840s.

According to this article, there was additional evidence of old mines and crude smelting ruins farther west in Roger Mills County. Someone had found lumps of gold as large as grains of corn in a creek which Spaniards once called Kasharado. No one knew where this creek was located.

An edition of the Cloud Chief paper dated August 30, 1895, contained a story told by Pedro Jaungonzales, who was then 75 or 80 years old. He claimed that Indians captured him when he was a boy and brought him to this area. He escaped from his captors and wandered into a Mexican fort where miners lived while digging and smelting gold.

TREASURES

Pedro remembered that this ancient fort was located on Turkey Creek, two or three miles southwest of present-day Canute. Those investigating the area in the 1890's found evidence of ruins that were 200 feet wide and 400 feet long. Inside these ridges were mounds that could have been buildings of various sizes. Jaungonzales said the Mexicans called the place Cascorillo, and that they took all gold they mined and smelted to Nacogdoches, Tx.

An early Washita County surveyor made drawings of Cascorillo which were published with the 1895 article. The surveyor believed that the buildings and fort walls were made of adobe and had crumbled away until nothing remained but ridges and mounds.

People exploring the ruins claimed to have found artifacts and gold within the area. The Cloud Chief newspaper article predicted that gold mining would become one of the greatest industries in Western Oklahoma.

An article in a 1909 ARAPAHOE ARGUS related that Edward Mershow found a large gold nugget while digging under a tree on his farm near Butler. Neighbors said it made him a wealthy man and that he immediately left the droughty area to buy an irrigated farm in Arizona. They never heard from him again.

Another legend claimed that 26 loads of gold ingots were abandoned between Elk City and Hammon on White Shield Creek. A Mexican convoy, transporting these gold ingots valued at \$3 million, was ambushed by Indians when they topped a high ridge of hills west of the creek. The miners were forced down into the creek, and all were killed.

In 1890 an Indian brave appeared at Darlington Indian Agency with a gold ingot. The Indian said his grandfathers took part in the attack, but he refused to tell more. No one was able to follow him to the location where he supposedly found the ingot. The gold was presumably abandoned somewhere southwest of present day Carpenter, but it was never found.

Today, most people assume that early newspaper editors acted as dedicated supporters for their towns, communities, and counties. These treasure tales could have been published as hoaxes to lure more people into Western Oklahoma. Still, the historical facts and evidence remain that Old Spanish Road from Santa Fe to Natchitoches did travel through this region.

Who know but what all the old legends of hidden gold are true and the caches are still waiting to be discovered. Or if the tales are no more than prairie lore, the stories will continue as a memorable part of the exciting heritage of Western Oklahoma. ■