

THE TREASURE*

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Matthew 6:21 KJV



THOMAS BLACK

*The treasure was found in 2020. The search is over.

The Treasure

THOMAS BLACK

This book is written In Memory of those who lost their life searching.

and

In Memory of Forrest Fenn

(August 22, 1930 – September 7, 2020)

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Matthew 6:19-21 KJV

Part 1 – The Map

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PART 1
THE MAP

CHAPTER ONE

THE POEM

Early one morning in February of 2013 the Today television show featured a story about a self-made millionaire art dealer in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Forrest Fenn. He had hidden a small, forty-two-pound bronze treasure chest filled with gold nuggets, rare coins, diamonds, and other precious stones in the Rocky Mountains. Even more interesting was that he published a book in 2010 that contained a poem. Mr. Fenn stated, "In my book there is a poem and there are nine clues in the poem . . . and the clues are in consecutive order . . ." that will lead a person to the location of the treasure.

I was intrigued and immediately went on the Today show's website. The poem was composed with six stanzas, each with four lines. I read through the poem a few times and then began thinking. *Fenn must have carefully worded the poem to draw a line from a starting point to the treasure. Not a single word would be arbitrary. Even the punctuation would be important.* I read back through the poem several more times before searching the Internet for more information.

I was surprised to find several news articles already written about Forrest Fenn and the treasure. In one interview he explained the reason for hiding the treasure was to encourage families to get out and explore the outdoors. Fenn said, "I hope parents will take their children camping and hiking in the Rocky Mountains. I hope they will fish, look for fossils, turn rotten logs over to see what's under them, and look for my treasure."

I scanned through a few more related articles before turning my attention to several websites created by zealous searchers.

One website in particular was well organized and easy to navigate. The main page has general information about Forrest Fenn and the poem, followed further down by a topical list of blog discussions between treasure seekers and Dal, the website's author. The right-hand side of the web page had a long column that included general topics for discussion among fellow searchers, latest posts, and most-recent comments. I read several of the comments to get an idea of how other searchers were interpreting the lines in the poem. I dove into several of the treasure-searcher blogs, each filled with pages of posts commenting or elaborating on the meaning of key lines in the poem.

I also spent several hours listening to past interviews with Forrest Fenn. When one reporter asked if the poem would lead a person to the treasure, Mr. Fenn answered, "Yes, if you know where to start." This conveyed to me that the poem was the single best source of information for finding the treasure – it *was* the map.

The poem has nine complete sentences filled with information, and the nine clues of course. Fenn stated that when the clues are followed precisely they lead to the end of the rainbow and the treasure. I began to dissect the poem sentence by sentence, determining if a sentence were a location clue, direction clue, or simply added information.

As I have gone alone in there
And with my treasures bold,
I can keep my secret where,
And hint of riches new and old.

Begin it where warm waters halt
And take it in the canyon down,
Not far, but too far to walk.
Put in below the home of Brown.

From there it's no place for the meek,
The end is ever drawing nigh;
There'll be no paddle up your creek,
Just heavy loads and water high.

If you've been wise and found the blaze,
Look quickly down, your quest to cease,
But tarry scant with marvel gaze,
Just take the chest and go in peace.

So why is it that I must go
And leave my trove for all to seek?
The answers I already know,
I've done it tired, and now I'm weak.

So hear me all and listen good,
Your effort will be worth the cold.
If you are brave and in the wood
I give you title to the gold.

CHAPTER TWO

WARM WATERS

In that first Today show interview Fenn, shown sitting while holding his book, read one line, “Begin it where warm waters halt.” I read back through all of the blog comments pertaining to this line in the poem. I noted that many searchers had sharp focus on “warm waters” being a hot spring in a river. I had never before heard of a river having a hot spring in it. But such a location would make perfect sense because where the hot spring water encountered the colder water of the river, that water could be described as warm. With Forrest Fenn being from New Mexico, that is where I began my search.

An Internet search for “hot springs in New Mexico” resulted in several websites which listed New Mexico’s most popular hot springs, with one compiling a top-ten list. Believing that Fenn would have picked a hot spring near a river with some historical significance, I began carefully reading more about each one.

Each hot spring location consisted of at least one natural hot spring pool fed from either a natural geothermal water source or escaping hot gases from deep within the earth. Most of the pool temperatures ranged from a warm 94° Fahrenheit to a comfortably hot 104° Fahrenheit; some were slightly hotter. Several locations described their spring waters as containing minerals which were thought to have healing properties.

Most of the hot spring pools were shallow and easily overflowed the surrounding natural or man-made barrier into the colder water of the

nearby river. And during the spring snowmelt in the mountains, some rivers themselves overflowed into and through the hot waters of several of the pools. In both cases one website stated that the water in the river just below the hot spring is warm.

Of the ten hot springs listed, I crossed two off the list which lacked any historical significance. I marked a third off that wasn't near a river and a fourth that appeared too commercialized. Then I recalled a statement Fenn made about the first clue: "There are many places in the Rocky Mountains where warm waters halt, and nearly all of them are north of Santa Fe."

With three of the remaining hot springs lying south of Santa Fe and another located more north-west than north, only two remained: Manby Hot Springs (also known as Stagecoach Hot Springs) and Black Rock Hot Springs. To my surprise, both hot springs are located beside the Rio Grande River between the John Dunn Bridge and Rio Grande Gorge Bridge. These hot springs, being in close proximity, satisfied the plurality of waters.



The first two words “Begin it” could mean “Begin the search” and the word “where” simply infer “at the location.” Putting my verbalization of this line all together: Begin the search at the location of the Manby Hot Springs and Black Rock Hot Springs.



The interpretation of the proceeding line, “And take it in the canyon down,” seemed more straightforward. For me the “it,” as in the previous line, simply referred to the search, though some searchers thought it to mean the water. The second part describes the surrounding location – a canyon, and a specific direction to travel – down. Putting these clues in context with the previous line, I concluded that once you begin the search at the warm waters, you take the search down into the canyon.

But if other searchers had followed this same thought process for these two lines, then why hadn’t they been able to solve the remainder of the poem. Maybe this is not the correct interpretation of these lines. So what other locations could fit the description of “where warm waters halt?” After a night of brainstorming, I came up with two possibilities: a dam and a waterfall. The water held back by either a natural or man-

made dam would be warmed by the sun during the day, with the colder water being released by means of a waterfall or a dam's lower flue.

With a quick search of dams in New Mexico, I found two that were in the Rocky Mountains north of Santa Fe: the Jemez Soda Dam and the Santa Cruz Dam. But after thinking more about the purpose of Fenn hiding the treasure, a dam seemed too abstract. Where else would warm waters stop being warm and be a more appropriate place for a family to begin their treasure hunting journey – a waterfall.

I began searching the Internet for waterfalls located in the mountains north of Santa Fe. I found a waterfall located in the Santa Fe Pueblo of Nambé, north of Santa Fe. The Nambé Falls' website stated that its waters originated from the Nambé Lake reservoir, with a picture showing a magnificent three-tiered fall. There were several hiking trails which took a person up and into the pools of each tier. It also had a significant Native American history which would be important to Fenn.

I took out my notes and read back through the first two stanzas of the poem. I convinced myself that a waterfall was a plausible interpretation. Begin at the lake where warm waters halt and take the search down the falls and into the canyon below.

And the second stanza's fourth line of "Put in below the home of Brown" also fit, since the website mentioned that the Nambé Lake reservoir is stocked with trout. I had learned from my research that Fenn was an avid trout fisherman and I, like most searchers, believed he intentionally capitalized the word Brown in reference to German trout.

Then I went on Google Earth and followed the path from the top of the falls down into the valley below. I jumped down to the last two sentences of the poem, "If you are brave and in the wood I give you title

to the gold.” I zoomed in on the computerized map and could see a small patch of trees below the falls . . . possibly suitable for Fenn to hide the treasure.

In one interview Fenn mentioned making two trips from his car to hide the treasure in one afternoon . . . and there was a road close by. Scrolling further down were a few houses and then the small town of Nambé came into view. Could Fenn have walked unnoticed from his car to that patch of trees? I had to admit that was unlikely. But maybe he did; he must have. And the only way to know for sure was to put “boots on the ground.”

PART 2
THE SEARCH

CHAPTER THREE

NEW MEXICO

We were thirty minutes from landing at the Santa Fe airport when I decided to strike up a conversation with the lady sitting across the aisle from me. I looked over at her and asked, "I'm here on business. Have you ever been to Nambé Falls?" "Yes, but the falls are probably closed right now. It usually opens a couple of weeks after Easter weekend," she added.

"Well," I continued, "I hope to meet with the governor. I've read where the governor's residence is near there."

"The governor of Nambé . . . *not* the governor of New Mexico," she quipped. "Each reservation has its own governor," she explained.

"But," she continued, "you will probably need to meet with the governor of New Mexico to schedule an appointment with Nambé's governor. My daughter plays soccer with the governor's daughter."

"The governor of Nambé?" asking inquisitively while trying to conceal my excitement.

"No," she answered, "The governor of New Mexico."

"Great," I smiled, "Can you call him?"

"HER" as she punched the numbers on her phone.

She put her phone down when she realized there was no service (even though the plane was now at its terminal). I told her not to worry about it. Exiting the plane, she turned back and wished me luck.

The Santa Fe Municipal Airport is really small, to say the least. It had one large room for arrivals, departures and baggage claim. I watched as they unloaded the luggage from the plane onto a cart . . . and then drive it a whole seventy-five feet to be unloaded. I could have just as easily waited for my suitcase at the plane. I suppose my sarcasm at the airport's nuances caused my luggage to be the last piece to be unloaded; karma.

The rental car companies were a short walk down a narrow hallway. Each company's office space consisted of only a small room with a walkup window at the front. My plane had been delayed and it was now after five o'clock, but thankfully one company was still open. I struck up some small-talk with the couple behind the counter while filling out the paperwork for a car.

When they asked about my visit to Santa Fe, I skirted around the real reason by telling them I was simply in-town on business. I did not give even a hint of my real reason . . . to look for a hidden treasure chest; that would have sounded crazy to them. But I could tell my lack of travel details seemed to alarm them so I quickly thanked them, picked up the car keys, and headed out to find my rental car.

It was almost dark outside so I was thankful for the directions given to me by the couple to get to the main highway. The car's GPS was virtually useless at this point since I did not know exactly where I was going; I did not even have a hotel reservation for that matter. But getting a bite to eat quickly moved to the top of my priority list, so I selected "food" from the GPS' main menu. I continued driving on State Road 599 until it intersected with Highway 84. Then I selected a restaurant that was north of my current location. I now had a "final destination."

I drove for almost ten miles seeing only sand dunes and small patches of trees lining the sides of the four-lane highway. The highway was eerily desolate. Fully trusting in the car's GPS, I exited off on what appeared to be the longest off ramp I had ever travelled. The mere sight of street lights made me feel a little more comfortable. As I signaled to make a right hand turn, I noticed a home-made type wooden fence made out of small trees. I did not see a sign for the restaurant. The fence continued along the side of the road all the way to the entrance to the restaurant's parking lot. There was an open gate. But being a stranger in a strange town I felt uneasy about turning in, so I decided to drive past it.

Then to my immediate left I saw a sign for a gallery and gift shop. Needing a place to turn around anyways, I turned and drove through the open gate. There was only one car in the large, spacious parking lot. I knew that just because the large banner sign inside the fence said "OPEN" it was likely closed, or closing, since it was almost 7 PM.

Getting parked, I exited my car and hurriedly followed the sidewalk to the front door. The inside lights were on but I did not see anyone inside. I gave the door a slight pull – and was surprised when it opened. I peeked inside so as to not scare anyone. I was relieved when a young woman came from the back and welcomed me.

She suggested I look around and let her know if I had any questions. Everything was of Native American origin and appeared to be authentic. Most of the items were for sale except for a few, including a large headdress which had a tiny sign stating "for display only."

Eventually the lady came around and asked me what I was looking for. Her question caught me off guard, since I knew what I was looking for . . . but wasn't sure how I could tell her where I needed to go without

telling her why. So I answered her question with, “I’m here on business” and finished with explaining the need to visit the Nambé Falls.

“Oh,” she said, “they are closed until after Easter. If you want to visit the falls before then, you will need to get special permission from the Governor of Nambé.” “Yes, I know, that is what the lady on the plane explained to me,” recalling my earlier conversation. “Do you know how I can get in contact with him?” I asked. The lady became excited, “I have a list of all the local tribes and their governor’s contact information. Wait here a minute while I go and look for it.”

While she was gone I stood there in amazement, wondering if anyone else looking for the treasure had stopped here to visit. *This lady could be a wealth of information, and if given just a tidbit of information about the treasure, might actually know of other locations for me to search,* I thought. She came back with a big smile on her face.

I could see she was holding a piece of paper. When she got close enough she flipped it towards me as if to say, “Look what *I’ve* got.” It listed the name of each tribe, its governor with their address and phone number. I flashed a slight smile and dropped a hint, “Thank you so much. This will be very helpful in my search.”

“Search?” she asked inquisitively. “Yes,” I confidently answered, spending the next several minutes giving a brief synopsis of the poem, the treasure, and possibilities of where it could be hidden. I paused long enough for her to process all of that information. “Wait here,” she said with a smile as she walked back to her office.

She returned within a few minutes. “Here . . . look at this,” unfolding it and placing it on the counter. She showed me where we were and the town of Nambé and then of course, Nambé falls. She pointed to another

location and explained, “There are small cave-like dwellings built close to the river in this area. They cannot be seen when looking from above, but can only be seen when looking up from the river.” She marked their location on the map.

I took out my phone and realized it was now well past the closing time displayed on the door. I folded the map and the sheet with the addresses, and then asked her if there was a hotel nearby. “Yes,” as she pointed at the map. “At the next exit are two hotels and a large casino,” she continued, “But they may not have any available rooms. The casino is a very popular place.” I thanked her for all the information and promised to come back if I found the treasure.

CHAPTER FOUR

WELCOME TO NAMBÉ

The hotels were just off the next exit as the young lady had indicated. The Hilton hotel sat across from a large, brightly lit building – the Buffalo Thunder Resort casino. I was taken aback for a moment, since this seemed to be practically in the middle of nowhere. The Hilton’s Homewood Suite hotel’s parking lot was full . . . which caused me to doubt any available rooms.

I pulled up and parked under the hotel’s main portico. I grabbed my phone and snapped a quick photo of the vehicle’s license plate, knowing the hotel would need that information when checking in. I certainly did not want the rental car to get towed during the night.

Walking up to the counter I flashed a smile and stated, “I need a room for two nights.”

The young gentleman behind the counter gave a cordial smile, “Welcome to Nambé. Do you have a reservation?”

“Umm, do I need a reservation?” and then jokingly jabbed, “This is a *big* hotel, right?”

“Yes,” he replied, “but did you see that casino when you drove in? It draws busloads of tourists on weekends. I had plenty of rooms last night, but am solidly booked for this weekend. Where are you from and what brings you here?”

“I am from South Carolina and came to meet with the Governor of Nambé. I have some business to discuss with him,” trying to make it sound like an official scheduled meeting – which at this point was not.

He gave a slight nod of approval. “Give me a moment while I check for any cancellations entered within the last hour.”

I calmly stood there for a moment, and then began to fret. I was almost afraid to ask where another hotel was from here. I did not see any road signs for any Motel 6’s anywhere along the highway driving from Santa Fe. Then I wondered how much a room here would cost. *I had not done any planning at all for this trip*, trying not to laugh out loud.

Suddenly the gentleman looked up, “I have one room . . . a studio. It’s a two bedroom suite.” He must have seen the worry come over my face because he quickly added, “But just for you – since you are meeting with the governor . . . I will give it to you for the same price as a regular room.” I thanked him, paid, and rushed out to my car to get my bags.

Standing outside gathering my bags, I gazed over at the massive hotel and casino standing across the road. I had never been inside of a casino. So I hurried up to my room, freshened up, and headed out to try my luck.

Inside the casino, I was surprised at the lack of patrons, given the number of cars in the parking lot. But then I realized those spaces are also filled by the hotel and casino workers. Nevertheless, I was able to stroll around and look at the games up close: roulette wheels, blackjack tables, and several rows of slot machines. I strolled past a person trying their luck, to no avail, at roulette. I was contemplating playing a hand of blackjack until I noticed the minimum bet was twenty dollars. I watched a man casually walk up and drop two one-hundred dollar bills on the table. He walked away after playing only two hands. I kept walking.

Then I saw a gift shop that sold hats. Now an official treasure seeker with a map, I thought of myself as a modern day Indiana Jones. If I found the treasure I wanted to be wearing a signature hat in any pictures taken with the treasure chest. I walked into the store and straight back to the style of hat similar to that worn by Harrison Ford in the movies. The hats were not inexpensive. But my mom, Nona, had told me she would pay for it. So I bought one.

Walking out of the store donning my new hat, a guest attendant stopped and asked if I had been at the casino before. When I told him “no,” he showed me how to register as a first-time guest and receive free game tokens. And after I input my name and phone number and then answered a few basic questions about myself, a screen appeared with a bunch of squares. The game was simple; choose a square and get the number of free game tokens revealed underneath it. I chose the center square and got two dollars in tokens. I thought that was pretty good, but then read that I could have won a lot more had I chosen the “lucky” square.

I took my “winnings” and went straight to the slot machines. They were the luxury model with a comfortable seat. I watched another lady for a few minutes to see how to play. And as I suspected, there was no skill involved in this – just drop in your tokens and push the button. There were some other buttons which allowed a player the ability to slow down one or two of the digital rolling numbers before they would stop, but I did not have enough tokens to figure out how they would increase my chance for winning. And just like that, in less than five minutes, I was out of tokens. I watched as others dropped more tokens into their machine, but decided to leave while I was ahead.

Before pulling out of the casino's parking lot I turned on my GPS and input Nambé as the destination – just to see how far I was from the town. It showed only three miles. This stirred a bit of excitement inside and I started to take the main exit from the traffic circle, but thought better of it and continued around to the exit for my hotel. Sitting in the hotel parking lot, I called the number for the Nambé governor's office. Though I knew no one would answer, I wanted to leave a message requesting a meeting with the governor . . . along with my name and phone number.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NAMBÉ PUEBLO

The next morning I read over the poem and my notes. I had to be able to clearly explain to the governor who Forrest Fenn was, the treasure, and my interpretation of the “clues.” And I realized that IF the governor and his staff had not heard of any of these, then I may come across as crazy. I had to be convincing, because I needed the governor to give me a private tour of the falls before it opened – to search without anyone else observing. I knew that finding the treasure on my first search was probably not going to happen, but hoped that visiting the falls would help to unlock the other clues in my mind. Or at least make them clearer.

Before leaving, and seeing that it was now after eight o’clock, I decided to call the governor’s office again. And just like before, I got their answering machine. Not wanting to “sound any alarms,” I hung up, choosing not to leave a message. My remaining option was to go to the governor’s office without an appointment. I had the address. So that is what I did.

Following the directions given by the GPS, I flipped on my right turn signal as I approached the intersection with Highway 503. I was elated to see the large overhead road sign with the word “Nambé” on it. Then I began looking for any official looking building. The first touristy sign read, “High Road to Taos Scenic Byway” followed by the sign “Nambé Lake and Falls” with a

number eight beside it – which indicated eight miles. I knew the Nambé Falls was a commercialized tourist attraction and, thus, my reason for wanting a private tour with Nambé’s governor. I drove another mile and saw the green Nambé sign, indicating the town limits.

I studied every large building I passed and looked for its sign. There weren’t many signs at the road or on the buildings. Then I saw the road sign for the Nambé Pueblo followed by the sign for the Nambé Falls and Lake Recreation area. Both signs had a right-hand pointing arrow at the bottom. I went past the road and drove a bit farther before deciding to turn around. Coming back there was a nice wooden sign for the Nambé Falls Dam. I knew from reading that the falls were below the dam.

Since I had not heard back from the governor’s office, I continued on Highway 503 to look for their office. The address sheet given to me by the lady at the gift shop listed the address along this stretch of road. But when I got to the small green sign reading “Leaving Nambé Reservoir” I knew I had passed it once again. I turned around at a school and resumed my search. Finding the Nambé government office building was proving to be more difficult than I had envisioned.

This time I drove a little slower as I passed by the Sacred Heart Church on the right and then a cluster of paved roads immediately to the left. A few more houses on both sides of the road and then a few roads to the right, but again I did not see any signs for the Nambé government building.

After passing several large farms and a stretch of road surrounded by beautiful forests, I came to houses on both sides of the road surrounded by smooth, mud walls. A few had fancier masonry walls. I had a gut feeling that the Nambé governor lived in one of these homes.

The GPS again indicated I was practically on top of the address, though I did not know if the address was for the governor's residence or the governor's office. Passing by a dirt road on the right I noticed a small, inconspicuous sign at ground level. I quickly turned in and stopped to read it: "Nambé Government Offices." I continued driving until I came to the front of a small building. This was it. My heart sped up as adrenaline started flowing. I was one step closer to testing my solution and finding the treasure.

CHAPTER SIX

NAMBÉ FALLS

I eased the door open and walked into an open room. I was immediately greeted by an office assistant, “Good morning. May I help you?”

“Yes ma’am. I am Thomas Black from South Carolina. I have something very important to discuss with the governor. I called and left a message last night.”

“Yes, Mr. Black, I listened to your message,” she replied. “The governor is very busy. Whatever it is you need to discuss with him you must tell me first, then I will decide if he will see you. Otherwise, you have wasted your time coming out here.”

This is my one and only chance, I thought. I must make a convincing presentation. I sat back for a moment, trying to decide the best place to begin.

“A man from Santa Fe, Forrest Fenn, has hidden a small treasure chest somewhere in the mountains north of Santa Fe. It could contain one-million dollars in Native American artifacts, rare jewels, and gold nuggets. He wrote a book that contains a poem. The poem contains nine clues that, if followed in order, will lead a person to the location of the treasure. Last month Fenn appeared on the Today television show to begin giving searchers hints.” Judging by her demeanor she at least seemed interested, so I continued.

“I have read and studied the poem. The first clue is ‘Begin it where warm waters halt.’ Since Fenn is an avid collector of Native American artifacts, I believe the Nambé Falls Dam is the location he is referring to in that line. And the second line, ‘And take it in the canyon down,’ he refers to the colder water coming over the Nambé Falls and flowing down into the valley below. I believe he hid the treasure at the base of the waterfall.” I took a deep breath as I studied her gaze.

At that moment another lady stepped from an office holding a piece of paper, “You mean this treasure?” holding a printed article in her hand. “I could not help but overhear your story. Do you really think that it is up there . . . at the falls?”

“There seem to be a lot of people looking for the treasure. I have read a lot of blog posts and have found no one considering the second clue of ‘and take it in the canyon down’ as a waterfall.

“But the falls are presently closed to the public,” she interjected.

“That is why I am here asking permission from the governor to go and search below the falls now, before its open to the public. Until I can go and look, no one will know if the treasure is hidden there,” I explained.

“I am sorry,” she said, “but the governor is out of town in Washington D.C. and will not get back until late tonight. I will leave a message on his desk explaining your request, and to contact you about meeting him on Monday.”

“But my flight leaves New Mexico on Sunday. Can you ask about Saturday,” trying not to sound confrontational.

“He has been out of town all week and will probably want to spend time with his family on Saturday,” she rebutted. “I will leave your name and number on his desk . . . that is all I will do for you.”

“Thank you. That is all I am asking,” I said with a slight smile.

“But please do not tell anyone else about the treasure being up there,” she pleaded, “because even though the gate at the entrance road is locked, the people living below the falls will be crawling up the hill to look for it. They will destroy the place.” I agreed and thanked them for their time.

I drove away with a satisfied feeling inside. Getting to the end of the road, I turned right onto Highway 503. When I saw the sign for Nambé Falls I turned right. I drove almost four miles until stopping in front of two steel gates with an attached sign “Closed for Season.” There was a heavy gauge chain locking the gates together. I got out of my truck and just for kicks, checked to make sure the lock wasn’t just “dummy locked,” meaning the lock was only fastened to look locked; it wasn’t.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HIGH ROAD TO TAOS

I continued north on Highway 503, taking in the beauty of the rolling hillsides as far as the eye could see. The landscape looked very dry – like a desert. There were no houses or businesses anywhere. Then I caught a glimpse of the nearby mountains, which appeared as large heaps of dirt and rocks topped sparsely with trees. The road was relatively flat with long curves connected by long straight-a-ways. This repeated itself for the next five miles.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared the sign “Santa Cruz Lake Overlook Campground” with a number one beside it, followed by a dirt road to the left. There was a green pipe gate across the road preventing access, so I kept driving. Then I passed a sign on the opposite side of the road. I quickly glanced back – it read the same as the first sign. From this I deduced the campground was down that dirt road but just closed for the season.

The sharpness of the curves increased as the road continued winding its way through the hillsides. Then I came to the town of Cundiyo, a small town snugly tucked between two mountain ranges. Then the road suddenly became increasingly narrow. The stores and houses were practically *in the* street. I kept both hands on the wheel and tight focus on the road until it finally widened back out.

Then I saw a really colorful house in the distance. It was an art gallery. With no real agenda for the day, I decided to stop and take a look around. Stepping inside I was greeted with a warm welcome by an older gentleman. His name was Frank McGuire. I spent about twenty minutes talking with him and walking around, admiring his artwork and sculptures.

I came upon a beautifully detailed eagle carved from a brilliant black stone. Written on the price tag was a shocking figure of ten-thousand dollars, if I remember correctly. He came over and explained where he got the stone, the hand process involved in sculpting it, and how long it took him to finish. I was so intrigued that by the time he had finished I was almost ready to buy it! I told him how beautiful it was before leaving. I also decided it would be one of the first things I would buy after finding the treasure.

I drove several more miles enjoying the rural countryside when I came upon a road marked with the Santa Cruz Lake Road street sign. I turned and continued driving until I stopped at the U.S. Fee Use sign – with five-dollars listed as the daily amount. There was really no reason for me to waste five-dollars just to see a lake. I waited for an oncoming truck pulling a fishing boat to pass by before turning around.

I continued on Highway 503 until coming to an intersection where I had to either take a left or a right turn. Straight across the intersection was a road sign which listed Chimayo to the left and Truchas to the right. Surprisingly the sign did not list the town of Taos. After all, the road I had been travelling had the road sign at

the beginning which read, “High Road to Taos Scenic Byway.”
The car’s GPS indicated to turn right . . . so I did.

I travelled some twenty miles through the hilly, barren countryside on Highway 76, passing through the towns of Truchas, Tramps and Chamisal. I finally spotted another “High Road to Taos Scenic Byway” sign with a small right-turn arrow. At the next intersection I made a right turn and continued on Highway 75 towards Taos.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TAOS

It was almost noon before I made it to Taos. Unlike the previous towns I had driven through, Taos appeared rather large. There were a couple of the big box chain stores and several fast food places scattered along the streets. I was looking for a more authentic local restaurant to eat lunch when I saw a sign for a boot store. I had come to look for treasure in the mountains and had only brought my tennis shoes. I really did not own a good pair of waterproof boots. I wheeled into the strip mall – parking in front of the store.

Opening the door and walking inside, my jaw immediately dropped. The store attendant was a spitting image of the Mexican-American comedian and actor Cheech Marin. Just for fun I asked to have my picture taken with him. We shared a good laugh.

I told him I needed a good pair of waterproof hiking boots. I selected a boot in what I considered my “price range,” but he did not have my size. Then I picked up another boot, looked at the price sticker, and quickly put it back down. He laughed and said, “You want a good quality boot, but do not want to pay for it. You are cheap, man.” Then he selected a boot, put it in my hand, and said, “This is one of my best boots. It has great grip for climbing on rocks and is waterproof. And . . . I have it in your size.” I looked them over, read the attached information tag, and agreed with his assessment. I looked at him and said, “I will buy them.”

Now the proud owner of a great pair of hiking boots, all I needed now was a good place to eat. So after signing the credit card receipt, I asked him where was the best place in Taos (I pronounced it as Tā-ōs) to get good Mexican food. He instantly laughed at my mispronunciation of the town's name, and then stated, "It is pronounced tous, like mouse; and where are you from man?" I almost burst out laughing at the way he sounded asking the question. I answered him back in my best Cheech accent, "No man, I'm not from here. I'm from South Carolina."

Then he flashed a big grin and said, "The best place to get really good Mexican food in Taos is Orlando's. Their taquitos and blue corn enchiladas are the best you will ever eat. They hand roll fresh ground corn on the grill. It is located at the end of town." Now I *was* hungry.

I drove past several Mexican restaurants – and almost stopped at one which practically had an empty parking lot – but did not. I did want the best. And just like he said, Orlando's was at the end of town. Surprisingly, there were still a few empty parking spaces.

I chose a table close to the grill. I ordered two taquitos: one beef and one chicken. I watched the chef as he placed fresh ground corn on the grill, placed beef onto it, and slowly rolled it into a round shape. This was definitely going to be worth the wait. And it was!

After lunch I continued my excursion on Highway 64. Just before the next intersection was a small green sign reading, "Rio Grande Gorge Bridge." This piqued my interest. I was not sure what could be so special about a bridge that it required a touristy sign, but I was going to find out.

Approaching the bridge I could see from the horizon an enormous gorge snaking its way towards the bridge. Then I saw a great number of cars parked on each side of the road. Driving onto the bridge I saw people on the bridge's sidewalk taking pictures in both directions. I slowed down to a crawl before looking to the right to see the gorge's depth and width. I was spellbound.

The gorge was huge – like Grand Canyon huge. I was at least five-hundred feet above the river. I felt a little scared so I sped up to get to the other side. Based on my vehicle's odometer, the bridge was almost a quarter-mile long.

On the other side I was greeted by people selling things out of the trunk of their car, even though there was a sign prohibiting it. The tables they had behind their vehicles reminded me of a yard sale. An official visitor center was just off to my left, so I pulled in and parked in the first space.

From the visitor center I walked to a fence which prevented direct access to the Rio Grande River. From this vantage point I admired the steel framework of the – it was a massive arch bridge. Then I followed a narrow path to the top of a small hill. I stood there for a moment visually tracing the gorge as it made its way through the seemingly flat countryside. I continued to the highway and made my way to the bridge's sidewalk.

Walking on the bridge was a thrilling experience, especially when a large truck would pass – causing the bridge to move slightly up and down. I also felt the bridge sway slightly when a strong gust of wind slammed into it. The wide gorge seemed to naturally funnel the winds up from the river to the bridge.

Getting to the center of the bridge, I looked straight down. The river was slender in comparison to the gorge. The view out onto the horizon was picturesque.

Getting to the other side, I looked around and began wondering how the gorge was formed. It was hard to fathom that the Rio Grande River alone could have made such a wide and deep path through here. Not satisfied with any of my hypotheses, I walked back across.

Back at my car, I looked at the GPS and then got out my paper map. Both showed a secondary road, Upper Rim Road, running parallel with the gorge; this would be a much shorter distance than taking the main highway back to Nambé. And the road was less than a mile from the bridge.

CHAPTER NINE

THE CLIFFS

I made good time getting back to Nambé. Sitting in my hotel's parking lot, I looked over map given to me by the lady at the gift shop. She had circled several locations to visit during my weekend stay in New Mexico. I looked at the time and then back at the map: the Puye Cliff Dwellings. The thought of people digging into the side of a mountain to make their homes was intriguing. The GPS indicated only a twenty-minute drive, so I turned out of the parking lot onto Highway 84 north . . . and then a left onto Highway 502.

I drove almost ten miles before seeing the exit sign for the Puye Cliffs. The mountains in the distance looked the same as all of the others I had seen driving that day, but a lot farther away. Then I realized the GPS had only routed me to the Puye Cliffs Welcome Center. The dwellings were another seven miles up Puye Road.

I parked and walked up to the main building. From here I saw it would be a long hike just to the base of the mountain. I wasn't sure if I was up for a long hike. But being a recommended tourist attraction, I went inside to see what it was all about.

Inside the exhibit hall was a scaled replica of the top of the mountain. The details were incredible and included large cave-like holes dug into the side of the mountain. Some holes were at the base of the mountain, while others were higher up on the mountain, with small stone steps to access those. I was amazed.

I walked around looking at several detailed pictures, taking time to read the history of the Pueblo Indians who once lived on and “in” the mountain. I went to the counter to purchase a tour ticket and noticed the last tour departed at four o’clock. I made light of that when purchasing a ticket and was told the early time was so the adventure tour could be completed before dark. I looked at the time and it was already three-thirty in the afternoon, so I decided on the basic tour of the dwellings.

The tour guide was very knowledgeable and eager to answer questions from the group. Walking up to the first dwelling, or cave for lack of a better term, I noticed was that it was huge. It was hard to imagine a family living inside one of these – with just rocks for the walls and beds. It must have been hot in the summer. But the deeper excavations in the mountainside must have been cooler. And there appeared to be no nearby source of water.

Walking up a set of steps to another dwelling, the tour guide suddenly took out his phone and answered it, “Hello. Governor . . . it is good to hear from you. When are you arriving back home?” A thought immediately came to me, *What if that’s the Governor of Nambé? What are the odds of that?* I eavesdropped a little closer, until catching the eye of the tour guide.

Seeing I now had his attention, I whispered, “Is that the Governor of Nambé?” “Yes, it is,” he answered. “Why, do you know him?” he continued. “Yes,” I said half-truth. “Tell him you are with Thomas Black from South Carolina. Ask him when his flight arrives tonight,” trying not to be too invasive. His relayed answer was not what I had expected, “The weather has been bad.

He is flying standby and will arrive Sunday evening. He got your message . . . and can meet you early Monday morning at his office.”

CHAPTER TEN

A DECISION

I woke up early Sunday morning knowing I had not slept well. My current flight from Santa Fe to Houston was scheduled to leave at 4 PM today. I wrestled all night with the decision of whether to stay one more night to be able to meet with the Governor of Nambé on Monday. I had already built in an extra day into the trip. But if I did not stay, the whole trip would be a wasted effort – since my primary objective was to search at Nambé falls for the treasure.

My other option would be to come back after the falls opened and search while amongst other visitors. But with so much money and time invested in this trip already, I had to make staying this additional night happen.

I began by calling my wife, Cynthia, to discuss my new plans – she agreed. Then I called my boss, Bill, to ask him for a last-minute request for Monday off – he approved. And finally, I drove to the airport and changed my flight schedule . . . and added another day to the car rental.

Now staying in New Mexico another day, I decided to drive around and get more acquainted with the Nambé area. I knew there was no guarantee the treasure was at the falls. However, I had a strong gut feeling that the treasure was in this general area of New Mexico.

I could not imagine Fenn, an old man, driving farther than thirty-minutes from a populated area to hide the treasure. Why? Because the areas north of Nambé involved long stretches of sparsely travelled and populated highways. An older driver carrying a chest filled with one-million dollars in gold and rare jewels would not likely travel too far into these areas for fear of their car breaking down. And finally, a short trip to the Nambé area from his home in Santa Fe would allow him to easily check if anyone had found the treasure.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GHOST RANCH

Leaving the cliffs I continued north on Highway 84. It wasn't long before the busyness of the small towns disappeared. I was now driving alongside undeveloped land and hillsides. And as the afternoon sun stretched its rays onto the horizon, I let down my window and took a deep breath.

I was ready to turn around when I saw a sign in the distance. Getting nearer I made out the words, "Ghost Ranch." It sounded like an interesting place, so I turned in and drove up to the first building. There was a woman standing at her car in the parking lot, so I asked her what this was? She smiled, "This is a spiritual retreat center. We are closed right now, but please feel free to take a look around." I thanked her and drove further into the facility, looking at the names on each building as I passed.

Turning around at the art center building, I noticed a well beaten path off to my left. I saw several signs along the path. Curious, I parked and began walking down the narrow path. At first they appeared to be just randomly placed rocks in a circular pattern on the ground. But getting closer I saw they were neatly arranged in expanding circles, with several larger rocks placed in the center. I initially thought it was our solar system – then a maze, except at the entrance was a sign explaining the purpose of the life sized . . . labyrinth. I stepped in and began walking.

Winding my way around one path, I quickly came to a dead end. I looked at the center and decided to save time by stepping over the small rock pathway. In the center was an inspirational poem to read. Now I felt bad that I had cheated. I started back at the beginning and this time followed the correct path to the center. I sat down on one of the large rocks, collected my thoughts from the weekend, and said a prayer.

Before leaving Ghost Ranch I looked through the visitor brochures again. I read one about a church – the El Santuario De Chimayo church. This would be my last stop for the evening.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE CHURCH

I made a left turn off the main road and then an immediate right to access the church's parking lot. The pedestrian entrance from the parking lot was through an iron gate. Beside the gate was a sign with the historical and spiritual significance of the El Santuario De Chimayo church. I grabbed hold of the wooden cross on the necklace I was wearing – purchased while building the pedestrian walking bridge in Nicaragua in 2011. I was entering Holy Ground.

A paved walkway took visitors to the back of the church property. From a distance I saw what appeared to be a wishing station. But getting closer and seeing all the dangling cross necklaces and candles, I quickly realized it was a prayer station.



I looked around, then slowly took off my cross necklace. I said a prayer and hung it in the midst of the others. I prayed that God would allow me to find the treasure so I could share it with the church. I faintly recalled Fenn stating, “I hope the person who finds the treasure does the right thing.”

I continued walking to the main sanctuary; a short line had already formed. People were single file through the front door and down the center aisle. I gazed around the inside of the church. It was very basic, with bare wooden pews and a beautifully adorned altar at the front. Continuing with the flow of the small crowd, I followed a few people through a small doorway into a small, dimly lit room.

A few lit candles cast shadows around the room, which was merely the size of a small bathroom. The room’s floor was bare earth, with a small hole filled with dirt in its center. The only sound was that of a man and a woman on their knees, frantically raking the loose dirt from the hole into plastic drinking bottles. I was mesmerized. Suddenly a woman pressed by me, dropped to her knees, and began filling her small pill bottle with dirt. I slowly leaned in closer to get a better look, and then took a step back towards the door.

At that moment a man stood up and started to leave, but stopped at where I was standing. “What are they doing?” I softly whispered. “That’s Holy Dirt,” he explained, “and those people believe it has healing power. They will take it back home and place it on a loved one or a friend who is sick with cancer or an incurable illness.” I stood there for a moment . . . processing his words; I had never heard of anything like this. Then I quietly turned and eased out of the room.

Gathering my thoughts, I realized something. It was late in the afternoon, yet there was still plenty of dirt in the hole for these people. Even after seeing several bottles filled with the dirt, the hole still appeared to be full. It was as if the dirt was replenishing itself, like a well refilling itself with water from the earth. But this was dirt. How could this be? Yes, I *was* standing on Holy Ground.

Walking towards the exit, I looked on the walls. There were dozens of pairs of crutches, walkers, and canes hanging on the walls. I imagined each was from an individual who had been healed, giving the church their walking aid as a “witness.” My eyes filled with tears just seeing these items.

Once outside I saw a brown building . . . an older church sanctuary. I walked and stood in front of it, admiring the painted murals decorating its front. Santo Niño Chapel was painted across a wooden beam above the entrance. Off to the right I noticed a path, so I followed it. The path led down to several benches and a large wooden gazebo. I looked back and realized I was standing at the back of the church property.

Behind the gazebo was a rock retaining wall running along a creek bank. Continuing to stand there and study my surroundings, I noticed a small set of steps in the wall; *this obviously made for a very scenic baptismal setting behind the historic church.*

Walking back to the parking lot, down near the creek were seven large crosses constructed of hand laid stones. Each cross was adorned with flowers and smaller, handmade crosses placed by visitors. It was obvious these churches and their grounds were a significant spiritual focal point to the surrounding communities.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MEETING THE GOVERNOR

I got up early Monday morning and drove straight to the governor's office. He pulled up about five minutes later. Getting out of our vehicles I immediately thanked him for meeting with me at such short notice. He assured me it was no problem, and then asked me to tell him details about the treasure. I started at the beginning, just as I had done with his office staff, and then explained my interpretation of the first two stanzas of the poem.

When I finished, the governor asked one question, "Thomas, why do you think the treasure is near the falls?"

"Because one line in the poem is, 'Put in below the home of Brown.' I believe that Fenn capitalized the word brown because he was referring to the German brown trout that is stocked in the Nambé Lake."

Immediately the governor's demeanor changed from one of enthusiasm to disappointment. "Thomas," he interjected, "the Nambé Lake is stocked with rainbow trout."

"So, the Nambé Lake doesn't have brown trout?" I asked to verify his statement.

"That is correct," he affirmed, and then matter-of-factly stated, "The Santa Cruz Lake is stocked with the browns. That is the home of brown."

"I know where that is. I went by there yesterday," I said somewhat elated before thanking him for his help.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SANTA CRUZ DAM

I drove a short distance from the governor's office before I pulled over on the shoulder of the road to park. I read back over several pages of notes taken from the Internet. I, as well as others, had noted the word Brown as being the only capitalized word within the poem, as if Fenn was purposely drawing attention to its interpretive importance. Whether or not the first line in the second stanza referred to a waterfall or a dam was still up for debate, but the fourth line and clue "put in below the home of Brown" had to refer to the German brown trout stocked in a lake. Other searchers also shared a lake as a possible interpretation of the second stanza's fourth line.

I had noted several rivers north of the city of Santa Fe had a dam. And knowing Forrest was from Santa Fe and assuming that a person of his age would not travel more than an hour from his home to hide the treasure, I had narrowed the search to three dams: Abiquiu Reservoir dam, Santa Cruz Lake dam, and the small Jemez Soda dam.

Now, if the Santa Cruz Lake dam above the small town of Chimayo was the beginning, then the next line of "and take it in the canyon down" fit perfectly since once the water leaves a dam it flows away from it. So after checking my phone for emails and texts, I began driving northward on the High Road to Taos towards the Santa Cruz Lake Road.

Passing the road for the Overlook Campground, I saw the gate was still closed. I kept driving and soon turned onto the Santa Cruz Lake

Road. I knew the treasure was not hidden at the lake, but needed to establish its dam as the starting point for the search – and the lake as the “home of Brown.”

I had driven what seemed like a mile down the winding mountain road, and had started to become worried, until I saw a large colorful sign on the right side of the road: Santa Cruz Lake Recreation Area. And there displayed in the middle of the sign, amongst those words, was a graphic of a brown trout. The governor was correct! And knowing from my research that Fenn was an avid fisherman, I was now confident that the Santa Cruz Lake was “the home of Brown.”



Thanks to the Governor of Nambé, I had just solved the first four clues in the poem (*Or at least I thought I had*). Now I needed to find out how to get to the other side of the dam. There were still more clues in the poem to decipher.

I stopped at the small check-in station beside the road. Knowing there was a fee, and knowing the treasure was probably hidden somewhere

below the dam, I asked the young men if I could turn around without paying. They both agreed that I could.

Before driving off, I asked them how to get to the other side of the dam. The older one spoke up, “When you leave here take a left and follow the main highway another mile or two. Then take a left onto State Road 98 into the town of Chimayo. The dirt road beside the fire station will take you below the dam.” I thanked them both for their help. I felt one step closer to finding the treasure.

I found the dirt road by the given directions, and continued driving until the dam came into view. Excitement grew inside of me as I continued driving until my car’s windshield was completely filled with concrete. The dam was not that wide, but was really high. Water slowly trickled down its stair-stepped face.

Getting out of my car to gain a clearer view, I noticed that each step had painted names and initials from one end to the other. The design of the dam’s spillway made it relatively easy for a person to travel up and down the face of the dam. If Fenn made two trips to hide the treasure as he stated, then one trip could have been to paint the blaze and the second to place the treasure.

At the bottom of the spillway was a large pool of water. There were a few teenagers walking around it. I walked to the opposite side to get a better view of the pool and the dam. Around this side were large rocks to maneuver, and then the shoreline became small loose pebbles. Looking into the water I saw it immediately became sandy with an extremely steep descent as far as I could see. I became somewhat frightened just thinking if someone accidentally slipped into the water – the person frantically clawing in the sand trying to get out.

Then I saw something shiny a few feet from the surface of the water – almost completely buried in the sand. Could this be the top of Fenn’s treasure chest? I leaned in to get a closer look. I could a-l-m-o-s-t touch it. My right foot began slipping into the water. I was frantic while regaining my footing . . . then struggling to get back from the edge of the water. That was a close call.

After taking a few deep breaths, I gingerly moved forward to get another look at the object. I deduced it to be a piece of fishing tackle – maybe a spoon lure – partially buried in the sand. It was not the treasure.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE SEARCH

I looked across to the other side of the small pool of water. There were several small bushes near the edge of the water and two fallen trees hanging precariously over the water. I waited for the two teenagers and family with three small children to leave before going to the other side.

I walked back-and-forth along the shoreline several times, moving the small bushes and looking underneath the fallen trees from every possible vantage point. I was certain the treasure had to be hidden here. But the more time that passed, the more feeling of doubt sank in. I took a copy of the poem from my pants pocket and read back through it.

In the fourth stanza in the poem Fenn penned the line, “If you’ve been wise and found the blaze,” followed by “Look quickly down, your quest to cease.” Fenn had a long discussion on his Facebook page explaining the blaze as being a trail marking. When asked to give an example, he posted two photos: one of a hand-drawn stick figure and a second of a thickly painted “F,” both shown on the trunk of a tree.



Another searcher then asked if Fenn thought the blaze could be gone, to which he responded, “While it is not impossible to remove the blaze, it is not feasible to try. I am certain it is still there.” Further down a searcher commented he believed even the blaze was hidden or cleverly disguised. This type of thinking can be both challenging and at the same time discouraging. A searcher could literally be looking for a needle in a haystack.

I looked around the shoreline . . . and then up and down the surrounding hillsides for the blaze. I used binoculars and studied the face of every large rock on those hillsides, and then on the surrounding trees. When I looked over at the dam, I thought about one possibility: *What if Fenn painted his initials on the face of the dam?* The blaze would indeed be hidden amongst the other graffiti.

It could take an eager searcher several hours to walk each step of the dam – looking for Fenn’s painted initial, or initials, among the hundreds of others. And if found the searcher would do as instructed by the poem, “Look quickly down,” and immediately see the treasure chest. This made sense because the searcher would be high up on the face of the dam.

Then I remembered Fenn stating the treasure would not be found by accident. I believe he meant the treasure was hidden out of plain sight to a person not actually looking for it, but could also mean that someone simply walking by would not notice it. Only someone standing at a higher elevation looking down would recognize the treasure chest.

I spent fifteen to twenty minutes with my binoculars looking at most of the initials on the dam, and then scanned the surrounding hillsides for additional markings. After finding none, I went back to my truck and got a snack and a bottle of water. It bothered me that I had not seen any other

searchers. Maybe I was not in the right place. Maybe I was walking in their wasted footsteps. I read back through my notes.

Fenn had stated in an interview, “The problem searchers make is that they do not dwell long enough on the first clue. If you cannot find the first clue you do not have anything. People driving down the street looking for a blaze because that is one of the clues, but you cannot start in the middle of the poem and find the treasure.”

I focused on the second stanza in the poem. The first sentence “Begin it where warm waters halt” definitely referred to a dam. “And take it in the canyon down” meant to take the search below the dam. “Not far, but too far to walk” implies either driving or boating from the starting location – not walking. From where I started at the Santa Cruz Dam Lake road, I did in fact drive to where I was sitting now. The next line “Put in below the home of Brown” directed the searcher to get into the water below a lake filled with brown trout. I was sure the Santa Cruz Lake was the home of brown.

The next stanza provides a lot of information to decipher, starting with “From there it’s no place for the meek.” I looked at the surrounding area, and then at the overgrown creek bed – which at this time was completely dry. I interpreted “The end is ever drawing nigh” as simply meaning that as the searcher following the creek they had just entered, they were getting closer to the end of the search – or to finding the treasure.

The “There’ll be no paddle up your creek” fit the description of the dry and overgrown creek bed, since there was no way to paddle any type of boat – even when water flowed in it. And the next line, “Just heavy loads and water high,” referred to the large rocks (heavy loads) in the

creek bed and the lake (water high) above. Excitement grew inside as I again read the third stanza, "If you've been wise and found the blaze."

Satisfied with my re-analysis of the poem, I took a deep breath and stepped out of the car. I walked to the edge of the wood line, looking for an animal path leading to the creek below. Seeing none, I began high-stepping through the tall grass.

I maneuvered through the thick brush and around a few small trees to reach the creek bank. There were trees on both sides, which meant the blaze could be nearby. I stepped into the middle of the dry creek bed. The sunlight barely penetrated through the canopy of trees. The creek was relatively straight at this location, so I was able to see several hundred feet in both directions.

I began walking in the direction of the dam, scanning the trees on each hillside for any type of trail marking, or blaze. When I got to where I saw the dam, I turned around and began walking back, being careful not to miss a single tree or rock. Eventually the creek bed narrowed and the overhanging tree branches became too low to walk under them. At that point I decided to retrace my steps, but this time walked up each bank at several locations to view the trees from above. I walked completely around the larger trees, looking up and down the trunk as I did.

Continuing walking in the creek bed, I came to a point where the creek split into two paths. I had not noticed this before. I took the path to the left to see where it would lead. I continued my search method of looking at the trees and rocks while I walked before coming upon a large pipe. I peered inside. It was large enough to almost walk into without having to bend over. I did not remember seeing a pipe anywhere near the pond at the dam. What if this pipe went under the dam?

I went in a good ways before getting scared and scampering back out. At that moment I had the thought, *What if the other searchers had found this pipe and not went in. What if the treasure was inside?* Putting my fears aside, I went back into the pipe. The natural light filling the pipe quickly faded. I got out my small flashlight.

I travelled deeper into the darkness until stopping to catch my breath. I looked ahead and saw an object lying on the bottom of the pipe. Getting closer, I discovered it was a large pipe wrench. I picked it up and inspected it. It was open and looked like the letter F. *If this is the blaze, then it is definitely hidden.* Then I wondered how it got here. There was no reason for anyone to have brought it in here. And why was it left here?

I continued and, with only a few more crawling steps, reached the end. It was actually a large closed valve. I shone my light all around the walls of the pipe, but saw no markings. I had at least learned where the treasure was not hidden. Exiting the pipe, I climbed on top of it and began briskly walking.

At the other end was a small metal catwalk. Standing on the catwalk I peered underneath; there was the other side of that closed valve. Directly beneath my feet was the mechanism one would turn to open the valve to allow the water to flow into the pipe. It was apparent the last time the valve was opened the person dropped the wrench into the water, and the rushing water swept it several feet into the pipe.

Then I looked at my phone and realized my return flight home was scheduled to leave from the Santa Fe airport in a little more than three hours. I had at least solved one mystery. As for the treasure, the search was over . . . at least for now.

PART 3
NEW CLUES

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A KEY WORD

The following weekend I started with a blank page. I began recalling the places where I had searched and the people whom I had met. And now, in addition to revealing clues on Internet blogs, Fenn began giving weekly clues on the Today show. Most of these clues seemed vague, like “The treasure is hidden higher than five-thousand feet above sea level” and “No need to dig up the old outhouses; the treasure is not associated with any structure.”

This brought me back to a previous thought – how can someone be one-hundred percent confident they are on the correct path? Even Fenn had revealed this fact when he said, “Some folks correctly mentioned the first two clues to me in an email and then they went right past the other seven, not knowing that they had been so close.”

If some searchers had correctly solved the first two clues, then why had no one correctly solved the third and fourth clues? Was the wording in each line specific enough to take a searcher to one distinct landmark? Maybe there was intentional vagueness such that a line could refer to two different locations. Or maybe it was Fenn’s intention to make several places fit each clue, so that either interpretation would steer a searcher in the correct direction. Fenn’s hints were obviously meant to give some searchers confidence to continue on the path they were looking – increasing the chances of the treasure being found.

Then Fenn made an intriguing statement, “Many are giving serious thought to the clues in my poem, but only a few are in tight focus with a word that is key.” But which word? In the fourth line of the poem, “Put in below the home of Brown,” Fenn purposely chose to capitalize the word brown. This gave many searchers the idea that he was referring to the home of brown trout, or a lake. I agreed with them since my initial search took me to the Nambé Lake and waterfall.

When that location did not pan out, the Nambé governor gave me a more plausible location, “The Santa Cruz Lake . . . that’s the home of brown.” And in fact the road leading to the lake had a painted sign with a brown trout symbol – giving me more confidence in his statement. But if Fenn, an avid trout fisherman, was referring to the home of Brown being the trout filled Santa Cruz Lake, I had taken my search down below it – or at least as far as a person could travel on foot after “putting in.”

So why else would Fenn choose to capitalize the word brown? Maybe the word brown did not refer to brown trout at all but to a place more significant; an important place requiring the pronoun itself be capitalized. What if Fenn was referring to the small brown church in Chimayo? Fenn had included a reference to a church in the statement, “My church is in the mountains and along the river bottoms where dreams and fantasies alike go and play.” I was convinced I was on the right path. At that moment I made the decision to go back to New Mexico. This time I would search in the creek below the brown church.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TOO FAR TO WALK

A missed connection flight in Dallas the night before provided for an early start that Good Friday morning. Travelling on a religious holiday, I had chosen to fly into the larger Albuquerque International Sunport airport. After grabbing my bags and choosing a rental car, I travelled on Interstate 25 north towards Santa Fe.

About five miles from the airport I came upon an individual walking in the emergency lane of the interstate. He was carrying a large object on his back. It was a cross. It was Good Friday, a religious holiday where Christians give remembrance of Jesus Christ being placed on the cross for our sins. But where was this man carrying the cross to? My GPS indicated another sixty miles to Santa Fe – and that was too far to walk.

I was about twenty miles from Santa Fe when I came upon another person walking. He was carrying a much larger cross and was being closely followed by two other people. This appeared to be a team effort. And the closer I got to Nambe, the number of people walking with and without crosses increased exponentially.

After making a right turn onto the High Road to Taos, I had to drive in the middle of the road because of so many people walking. There were people with tables set up on the shoulder of the road handing out water, while others watched and cheered as the cross bearers walked by. This was a pilgrimage, but to where?

Approaching the road to turn to go to Chimayo, there was a police officer standing in the intersection stopping traffic. People were parking their vehicles and walking down the road from this point. Others had set up tents and were handing out water. The police officer was instructing everyone else to turn around in the intersection and head back to Nambe. I now realize the pilgrimage was to the El Santuario De Chimayo Church – one of the most holy places in New Mexico.

The next morning I went to visit the church. My mind kept wandering if this was the home of Brown, could Fenn have hidden the treasure on the near the church? I veered from the paved pathway which took visitors to the sanctuary and walked over to a well. It was an old style hand-dug well with a small roofed structure, a rope, and a bucket with which to draw water. I peering down into the well, just to make sure there was no way that Fenn could have placed the treasure box down in it.

Adjacent to the well was a grand oak tree, one large enough to have a hollowed out center. I remembered reading a story of another man who wrote a book containing riddled clues which, when solved, revealed the location of a hidden treasure; the treasure was hidden deep within an old hollowed out tree. The last two lines in Fenn's poem gives the location of his treasure, "If you are brave and in the wood, I give you title to the gold." I began to wonder if Fenn had read about this other story and chose to hide his treasure in a similar way.

I walked around the tree, stopping briefly to inspect a small hole in its center. Then I walked to the back of the property and walked into the gazebo. I looked back and scanned the area for anything I thought could be a blaze. Seeing nothing obvious, I turned and stepped from the top of the retaining wall and walked down into the creek.

Standing in the shallow water, I looked both ways as far as I could see. I turned and began walking in the creek towards the Santa Cruz Lake Dam, having to walk around two fallen trees and stoop underneath several low hanging limbs. If the church was the “home of Brown” and a person was to “put in” below it, then walking through this creek would definitely qualify for “no place for the meek.”

Further down there were several trees whose roots had been exposed from years of erosion. I made sure to stop and look underneath each one, knowing Fenn said the treasure is placed “where a child could pick it up.” Then I came to a part of the creek that was thick with overgrown bushes and low hanging branches. I had to crawl in the water to go under them.

When I was finally able to stand up straight again, I was behind the church’s parking lot. There was a four-foot chain link fence. Interwoven in multiple sections of the square fence fabric were hundreds of small crosses crafted from twigs and sticks. Could these crosses and the crosses placed around the church property form the blaze? I also looked for an “F” hidden among them. I looked several more minutes before moving farther up the creek, paying close attention to the trees and looking for any man-made markings on them.

Of course Fenn could have marked a tree on the other side, such that someone simply walking in the creek bed would not see it. Fenn had revealed in response to a question, “There are several people that have deciphered the first two clues. I do not think they knew it, because they walked right on past the treasure chest.” I felt confident enough to look on the other side of the larger trees near the creek.

I continued walking until coming insight of several houses. The creek made a turn towards them, so I decided to stop. It seemed too risky for Fenn to have hidden the treasure beyond here without being seen.

Walking back to the church, I studied the trunk of every tree for any type of marking. I even stopped at the chain link fence to relook over those hand laced stick crosses too. Stepping out of the river behind the church, I stopped to catch my breath and give the grounds another once-over. I looked for anything which the poem could be referencing. Seeing nothing, I went back to my truck to retrieve my backpack, a bottle of water, and gather my thoughts.

If Fenn had written the clues in the poem such that each line referenced an exact location, then I had to be on the right path. “Put in below the home of Brown” meant to get into the river or creek, and putting in behind the brown church would be below it. I headed back to the creek behind the church.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE BLAZE

Walking downstream and away from the dam, I came to a place where the river widened slightly and flowed a little more swiftly. I looked and saw a small, narrow stream flowing through a green grassy field and into the creek. Snow-capped mountains on the horizon completed the picture.

A little farther was the main road with a large solid concrete bridge stretching over the creek. I made my way underneath it. Some places were barely four feet high. The sunlight pushed out most of the darkness underneath it. There was a large hollowed out tree trunk lying on the sandy bank underneath the bridge. I stopped and took out my flashlight, then took a look. There was nothing inside.

Exiting from underneath the bridge to the other side, both creek banks consisted of thick wooded forests. I stood there for a moment studying my surroundings, trying to envision if this is where Fenn had found a place to hide the treasure. I spent almost an hour looking around the larger trees for the “blaze” before venturing a little farther down the creek. The creek was still shallow but had widened out a little more. I was thankful for investing in a good pair of waterproof hiking boots.

I walked for about fifteen minutes before I came upon a small dam. The dam was made completely out of steel and not much wider than the stream itself. I climbed onto the dam’s walkway and looked as far as I could see in both directions; nothing but an overgrown creek bank. I stepped back down into the creek and began walking further downstream,

looking up into the woods for any sign of a trail marking. Then I came to where a small branch entered the river.

By this time I was exhausted. It had been almost an hour since I had finished my last bit of water. Thankfully there was a trail leading to a road. After walking a little way back towards the town, I noticed a large water tank sitting on top of a hill. I began contemplating an alternative to a dam being where warm waters halt.

I knew water pumped out of the ground was generally cold, but when held in the tank could be warmed by the sun. It would become cooler once it exited through the piping in the ground to the houses below. I knew this was a real stretch, but considering different interpretations of the clues I believed was necessary in correctly cracking the poem. So I walked up the narrow dirt road and stopped at a gate.

The gate was locked, but I easily walked around it and up to the water tank. I walked around the tank several times, and then looked down into the valley below at the town and the two churches. I thought back over one line in the poem, “Begin it where warm waters halt.” Regardless of the possibility of that place being a dam or the water tank, I had put in and diligently searched along the creek below both of these. Then I began to get discouraged.

Fenn could have stopped his car anywhere and travelled into the woods wearing a small backpack with the empty treasure box. After finding a suitable location to hide the treasure, place the box there and paint a trail marking. Then make a second trip with the backpack carrying the Native American artifacts, gold and jewels – and placing those inside the box.

But this scenario would be in conflict with the clue about being wise and introduce blind luck into the search, which I believe was never his intent. The places and directional clues in the poem, when followed in exact order, MUST lead the searcher on the path to the treasure's location. Fenn said, "When the clues are followed precisely they lead to the end of the rainbow and the treasure."

At that moment I looked up and saw a cross on almost every hilltop within sight. I began slowly walking up the first mountain, really a small hill. Reaching the top, I looked around and soaked in the surrounding horizon.

When I looked from where I was standing to the nearest cross, I could almost see a trail along the top of the connecting ridgeline. I began walking, thinking these crosses could be the blaze, and the treasure could be hidden near one of them. In an early draft of the poem Fenn included the line "Then take the chest and leave my bones." In the final version of the poem Fenn penned the line, "Just take the chest and go in peace." "I will not die in a hospital bed if I have a few breaths remaining," Fenn had stated, "I do not want to give any more clues, but if I am not too feeble to return to the chest when my turn comes, I cannot think of any better place for my bones to rest for a few millennia."

After some careful stepping – and even taking a small leap across a gap in the trail, I made it to the trailhead leading to the nearest cross. I reverently approached the cross and looked around it . . . and then down each side of the steep hill, being careful not to lose my footing. I fully realized the danger of where I stood, even though others had made the same trek to place flowers at the base of the cross. For a brief moment I stood in silence – in respect for the person buried beneath it.

Looking over at the adjacent hillside bearing a cross, I looked around to determine the safest route to descend. The sun was setting. Gazing out onto the horizon one last time, something moving towards the hillside below caught my eye. I wiped the dust off my eyeglasses. The only suggestive feature from this distance was its slow walk on four legs. I continued watching while my mind frantically raced through possibilities, finally settling on one frightening thought – mountain lion!

From the direction the wind was blowing I knew he could easily pick up my scent. Looking down the other side, there was what appeared to be a faint trail leading downward. I quickly began my descent. Several portions of the “trail” were steep. Even wearing my hiking boots I still slipped more than once on patches of loose pebbles.

Not far down the hill, past heavy rains had eroded the hillside into dozens of slender, deep ravines. This made the descent a lot more difficult. Then I saw what appeared to be a flat, leveled out plateau – a good place to catch my breath. But before taking the final steps to reach it, I lost my footing and quickly began sliding down the hillside.

I slid almost ten feet before finally able to break my slide. Regaining my footing, I slowly crawled back up to the small plateau. It had a circular diameter of about five feet and did not fit with the surrounding hillsides. It was flat and free from even the tiniest of pebbles, swept clean like the dirt floor in a house in Nicaragua.

Then I noticed several small bones scattered at the back against the hillside. There were a few fragments of hair, too. The thought of this belonging to that mountain lion flashed through my mind. I scanned the hillside for any movement. Seeing none, I *s-l-o-w-l-y* began crawling down, trying not to make even the faintest sound.

As soon as I was below the small clearing, I jumped down into one of the ravines. It was over head high when I stood up. Making my way down in the winding, narrow pathway, I noticed several small bushes growing on top of the walls separating the ravines. Then I looked up to the top of the mountain and there, walking along the ridge of the hillside – the same trek I had taken earlier to reach the cross on top of the hill – was the lion! I panicked, knowing he was probably headed back to his resting pad where he would easily pick up my scent.

I began running, bumping into the hard dirt walls, bouncing off, and picking up my speed again. It was still a long way to the bottom. Then I tripped on an exposed tree root and fell face down into the dirt and pebbles. As I was falling I caught a glimpse of something yellow woven in the small, lower lying bush. I looked up from where I was laying and was both astonished and frightened at the same moment. It was a long, golden yellow snake!

As I continued staring at him I caught sight of his head . . . he was staring right back at me. I scrambled and crawled to a safe distance before getting up to run again. This encounter made me almost forget about the mountain lion who, thankfully, was now nowhere to be seen . . . at least for the moment.

Exiting the ravine, I found myself walking in large flattened plain area. I passed by a pile of old lumber and firewood and recalled the line in Fenn's poem, "If you are brave and in the wood," and thought, *Would Fenn choose to hide his treasure in such an obscure place? Probably not.* I continued walking towards the base of another small mountain with a cross.

I made it to the top of that second mountain and again paid reverence at its cross grave marker. I looked around and recognized that Fenn would really have no place to hide his treasure here or at any of these cross locations. From the hilltop I walked down a winding dirt road to the main road, then toward the church.

As I walked past an intersecting road, I noticed a cemetery in the distance. It was unkempt and surrounded by a rusting fence. This was definitely a place for Fenn to lay his bones. I looked over each grave marker, and then continued up the roadway.

I came upon a dry creek bed which ran under the road. This appeared to be the same dried up branch that I had looked earlier, but further down. A hard summer rain or winter snow melt from the above hillside would serve as its headwater. So if the water tower on the hill above was the place where “warm waters halt” and this creek the “no paddle up your creek,” then I may be on the right path.

I looked intently into the overgrown creek bed for any clues that Fenn would have ventured in to hide his treasure. Fenn had said, “When I am in the mountains or in the desert, the last place I want to be is on a trail.” And the first line of the treasure poem stated, “As I have gone alone in there.”

But “there” could be anywhere. This was crazy. Fenn could have stopped anywhere along the road to hide the treasure. Could anyone find the location of the treasure from the lines of the poem? This was Fenn’s game . . . and Fenn’s rules. But if his intention was for someone to be able to find the treasure by exactly following the clues found in the poem, then each described location must be deliberate and exact, with only one interpretation.

If someone was on the right trail, then each place and turn of direction must exactly fit the words penned by Fenn. If a searcher had to stretch the meaning of a clue to fit a location, then that location was wrong. I had to believe that Fenn truly intended for the treasure to be found by following the clues in order.

Finally arriving at the small town center near the church, I walked into the first open door I saw; thankfully it was a store. I quickly glanced around and located the drink cooler. Unfortunately they did not have a candy counter.

I approached the lady at the counter with the drink and an exhausted look on my face. She asked me what I had been doing all day, which I replied, "Climbing to the top of those hillsides to see the crosses up close. I'm looking for something. And . . . do you have any candy bars?" "Ah, you are on a spiritual journey," she quipped, as she stepped from behind the counter to a small room behind her.

I watched as she reached into her purse and retrieved an item. She walked back out and approached me, then placed a giant sized Snicker bar into my hand. "I do not have my wallet with me," I admitted, "so I only have enough money to pay for the drink. My truck is parked at the church; I promise to come back to pay you." She smiled and whispered, "It is my gift to you."

I sat down and quickly ate the candy bar. I had finished most of the soda before I reached into my backpack and pulled out a copy of my book, "Ten One-Dollar Bills;" this would be my gift to her. She smiled, thanked me, and then asked if I had visited the El Santuario de Chimayo church and its healing room. "I have," before thanking her again.

I grabbed my backpack and headed back to my truck. This day of searching was done. I would leave New Mexico disheartened, knowing that Fenn's riddled statement now applied to my search attempts too: "A good solve is frequently lost in poor execution." I would be back.

PART 4

X MARKS THE SPOT

CHAPTER NINETEEN

NOT A DAM

After arriving back home that Sunday night, I could not wait to read back over the treasure hunter blogs and seek out alternate interpretations for each line of the poem, particularly for the first clue – “where warm waters halt.” Forrest Fenn places a lot of importance on correctly solving the first clue when he stated, “Although many have tried, I doubt that anyone will find the blaze before they have figured out the first clue.”

Forrest Fenn was explicit in revealing to searchers that the first clue is “Begin it where warm waters halt.” This implied the first four lines in the poem were penned only to provide introductory information, and did not contain any of the nine clues.

Forrest Fenn also said this: “The most common mistake that I see searchers make is that they underestimate the importance of the first clue. If you do not have that one nailed down you might as well stay home and play Canasta.” And that following week Fenn would help searchers eliminate one possibility for the first clue.

Fenn clarified a statement made in an earlier interview with an explanation, “Many searchers have thought that warm waters halt at a dam because water being released through flues near the bottom of the dam is much colder than water on the surface of the lake. I have discussed around that subject with several people in the last few days and am concerned that not all searchers are aware of what has been said. So

to level the playing field to give everyone an equal chance I will say now that WWWH is not related to any dam.”

Now knowing that a dam is not where warm waters halt, it had to be the home of brown. This meant the correct interpretation of the first clue must be the hot springs in the river. It was at this point in my thinking that I had a hypothesis.

With the first clue giving the starting location for the search, then the second line of “And take it in the canyon down” gave the direction. Was the second line the second clue in the poem? Or was the poem written such that two consecutive lines combined to form a single clue, giving the searcher a location and then the direction in which to travel?

Forrest Fenn said, “Some folks correctly mentioned the first two clues to me in an email and then they went right past the other seven, not knowing that they had been so close.” In keeping with my two line “location and direction” clue hypothesis, the third line of “Not far, but too far to walk” gave the distance to travel to get to clue number two and the fourth line of “Put in below the home of Brown” gave the location for the second clue. My interpretive execution of the second clue was for the searcher to enter the river or creek below the Santa Cruz Lake dam.

But why had no one correctly interpreted the third clue: “From there it’s no place for the meek.” The only place I have seen the word meek is in the Bible in Matthew Chapter 5 Verse 5 KJV, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” And in keeping with a religious focus, the next sentence could be making reference that the return of Jesus Christ is drawing near. Considering these two lines together and confident of the correct interpretation for the home of Brown, I believed the place for the meek refers to the El Santuario de Chimayo church.

I had now come to the conclusion that Fenn had carefully worded each line in the poem so it would only lead a searcher to one unique place or in one specific direction. The place or direction could not be subjective to human reasoning or rely on luck in finding it or going the right way, but must be a clear and definite “leave no room for error” interpretation. Every line in the poem and every subsequent hint given by Fenn must fit exactly. There could not be – in any possible way – an alternate solution. Fenn had stated that when the clues are followed precisely they lead to the treasure. There could only be one path.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NO SHORTCUTS

In an interview Fenn was asked if the nine clues from the poem were in existence when he was a kid and his answer was, “The clues did not exist when I was a kid but most of the places the clues refer to did.” And Fenn also said, “The spot where I hid the treasure was in my mind from the time I first started thinking about the chase. It is special to me and there was never another consideration. I was going to make it work no matter what. In my reverie, I often find myself stealing away to that place and I will always consider it to be mine.”

With searchers now in multiple countries applying their knowledge, wit, and logic to the poem, why had not the treasure been found by now? I believe Fenn knows the answer when he made this statement, “Look at the big picture, there are no shortcuts.” This statement gave me an idea: Google Earth. That night, using Google Earth, I placed a yellow location marker at three locations: the Manby Hot Springs and Black Rock Hot Springs, El Santuario de Chimayo church, and the Santa Cruz Lake dam.

The final litmus test would be if these three clues could be woven with the remaining clues in the poem to place an X on the map.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE RIO GRANDE

I zoomed in to the location of the Manby Hot Springs in the Rio Grande River (begin it where warm waters halt). Up from the sides of the river grew huge walls – a canyon. I followed the twisting canyon for a long way (and take it in the canyon down) until the walls began to flatten out. There were several large towns on both sides of the river at this point.

Fenn mentioned in an interview to follow the clues in order. I read the next line in the poem, “put in below the home of Brown.” I rotated the globe until the El Santuario de Chimayo church and the Santa Cruz Lake dam location markers came in to view. I zoomed in on the creek behind the church – where I searched during my previous two trips. I followed the creek until it intersected with a river. Could this be the Rio Grande?

Curious, I zoomed out to see where I was in relation to the Manby Hot Springs. And there, in the distance, was the location marker for the hot springs (not far, but too far to walk). This *was* the Rio Grande. For a moment, I just stared at the screen in awe.

Fenn had also stated, “What surprises me a little is that nobody to my uncertain knowledge has analyzed one important possibility related to the winning solve.” Looking at where the creek intersected the river, and then over to the Santa Cruz Lake dam, it became instantly clear what Fenn was referring to. I had started at “the home of Brown” and went the wrong way, going down the creek, past the place for the meek, and towards the Rio Grande River.

To follow the clues in order, I needed to put in where the river intersects with the small creek and travel up the creek towards the church (From there it's no place for the meek and the end is ever drawing nigh). I could now confidently draw a line from the first clue to what I considered to be the third clue in the poem. And Fenn's statement of "you cannot start in the middle of the poem and find the treasure" now made perfect sense.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PIÑON NUTS

I had now methodically worked my way through half of the lines in the poem. Before my second search attempt, I had identified a dam as the location for the beginning of the search . . . but now found myself in the middle of the poem. Undeterred and still using Google Earth, I followed the creek until I got to the Santa Cruz Lake dam. I saw a camera symbol near the dam, so I clicked to open the link to the photo.

The photo was obviously taken after the snow melted and spring rains had fallen in the mountains, as water was flowing over and down the stair-stepped face of the dam. At the time of each of my previous searches there had been only a trickle of water – just enough to wet a narrow path down the concrete face. Then I began thinking about a dam near Great Falls that I was familiar with – the Nitrolee dam.

As a child I remember riding on Highway 200 and crossing the bridge in front of the dam. After a heavy rain, I was always mesmerized seeing the water from the Fishing Creek reservoir gushing through the open gates of the dam's spillway. When the water got high enough to overflow the small coffer dam, it would follow a small creek into Stumpy Pond, the small reservoir for the Cedar Creek dam.

The Santa Cruz Lake dam was similar to the Nitrolee dam, except for its single spillway and absence of a power generator. Envisioning myself standing at the base of the dam and considering the eleventh line (There

will be no paddle up your creek) and twelfth line (Just heavy loads and water high) of the poem as the fourth clue, I began to pick it apart.

The first part of the clue mentions a paddle, which to me means a boat. The shallow creek I had searched in during my previous two trips was too shallow to maneuver a boat, except when the water was higher during periods of heavy rains. Remembering the dam and its stair step design, and considering the water flowing over the dam as the origins of the creek, it would be impossible to paddle a boat up its one-hundred twenty five foot spillway. Thus the “there will be no paddle up your creek” means you cannot take a boat up the creek from this point.



The second part of “just heavy loads and water high” describes what is above you at this point, or what you will find at the top of the dam – only mountains and deep water; the Santa Cruz Lake is at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

With the fourth clue placing me at the lake above the dam, and assuming Fenn did research when writing the poem, I went to the Santa Cruz Lake's website. I was surprised to read swimming was not allowed in the lake due to dangerous underwater currents. To me this could imply a paddled boat would also be prohibited, giving a second plausible interpretation for the eleventh line in the poem.

The lake's website describes the eastern shoreline being bordered with juniper, piñon pine, cottonwood, and mountain mahogany, and the western shoreline dominated by a large buttress of granite. I immediately equated the granite with the heavy loads in the twelfth line. Then further down it states the lake is periodically stocked with rainbow and brown trout by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, which gives credence for the lake being the home of brown.

The lake is not small, so where exactly is the treasure sitting? In a video interview Fenn reveals several details about the surrounding area: "If I was standing where the treasure chest is I would see trees, I would see mountains, I would see animals, and I would smell wonderful smells of pine needles or piñon nuts . . . and sagebrush. And I know the treasure chest is wet." I believe it was his intention to drop a very specific clue in a public interview that would be accessible to all searchers. And it is apparent he did research on the Santa Cruz Lake before this interview.

Fenn mentioning seeing trees, mountains, and animals is very general and could describe any number of lakes in the Rocky Mountains north of Santa Fe. "I would see trees;" the treasure is located within or near a forest of trees, and not in a desert or open field. "I would see mountains;" the treasure is surrounded by mountains. "I would see animals;" the

treasure is in the wilderness. “And I know the treasure is wet;” the treasure is hidden outside in the weather.

But specifically including being able to smell piñon nuts points to a much smaller portion of the map. Piñon pines have a growth pattern limited by elevation and are typically found in the higher elevations of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming; the Santa Cruz Lake is included.

The next day Fenn issued a variety of corrected statements, “That video did not have any clues. If the treasure were in the wilderness, of course it would be wet” and “Looking back I think I wanted to say I could smell pine needles, not piñon nuts.” By specifically clarifying not being able to smell piñon nuts but pine needles, Fenn intentionally points the searcher away from the lake’s eastern shoreline and to the lake’s western shoreline, where there are no piñon nut pine trees.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TAKE A FLASHLIGHT

I was now at a disadvantage. Two trips to New Mexico and a gate was locked each time which would have given me access to search the Overlook Campground and the western side of the lake. Now I must rely solely on Fenn's remaining hints in solving the remaining lines in the poem.

These hints include: "Shut your engine off until spring." "If you know precisely where it is, you can probably retrieve it in any weather." "The spot where I hid the treasure was in my mind from the time I first started thinking about the chase. It is special to me and there was never another consideration. I was going to make it work no matter what. In reverie I often find myself stealing away to that place and I will always consider it to be mine." "The clues did not exist when I was a kid but most of the places the clues refer to did. I think they might still exist in one-hundred years." "Bring a sandwich and a flashlight." "I will say that I walked less than a few miles if that will help." And, "When I am in the mountains or in the desert, the last place I want to be is on a trail. There is not a human trail in very close proximity to where I hid the treasure."

Fenn also wrote, "The treasure chest is not under water, nor is it near the Rio Grande River. It is not necessary to move large rocks or climb up or down a steep precipice." And finally, Fenn revealed people have been within five-hundred feet of the treasure based on emails, and has since mentioned "searchers have been within two-hundred feet."

I searched the Internet and found several maps of the Santa Cruz Lake. I clicked on one, and then zoomed in to the western side of the lake. I saw the Overlook Campground and several crooked lines marked “human trails.” Another website listed the names for the four main trails which encompassed the lake: Overlook Trail, Debris Basin Trail, La Caja Trail and the Laguna Vista Trail. There were no trails near the Santa Cruz Lake Overlook Campground itself.



The website stated the campground is open year round, which correlates to Fenn’s statement that the treasure can be retrieved in any weather. The campground has restrooms, picnic tables, fire rings for campfires, and overnight camping facilities. Fenn’s statement of “bring a sandwich and a flashlight” perfectly described the camping experience at the Overlook Campground, since the campground did not have a general store or electricity. And I could not think of anywhere else a person might take a sandwich and a flashlight except when tent camping.

The Overlook Campground’s website specifically stated the collection of firewood was not allowed . . . and campers should bring their own fuel

source. Campfires are only allowed in firepans operated in the fire ring. This warning statement related directly to the fifth clue (If you are lucky and find the blaze). With the restriction on the type of campfire allowed, finding a blazing campfire would be a rare occurrence inside this campground. So if the blaze referred to a campfire at one of the campsites, then the luck would be choosing the correct one to look into.



Taking into consideration how close Fenn revealed a person had been to the treasure, it was more probable he parked his car at the campground and walked into the woods towards the lake. Then chose a random location and built a small mock fire pit with the areas natural stones.

Near the end of the poem is the clue, “If you are brave and in the wood,” indicating he placed the treasure box within the fire pit and covered it with pieces of wood. The final hints given by Fenn are these, “Do not go anywhere an eighty year old man cannot go,” “The treasure is where a small child can pick it up,” and “You need gloves.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE TREASURE

And the treasure, it is still out there to be found* . . . by someone. So if you trust in what you just read, and believe in your heart, then pray. “For everyone who asks will receive. Everyone who searches will find. And everyone who knocks will have the door opened” (Matthew Chapter 7, Verse 8 NCV). Now, take a step of faith . . . and go.

*Jonathan “Jack” Stuef found the treasure in June of 2020.

PART 5

THE TREASURE IS FOUND!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE TREASURE IS FOUND!

Shiloh Forrest Old, grandson of the late author and art dealer Forrest Fenn, has confirmed on a website dedicated to the treasure that 32 year-old Jonathan “Jack” Stuef, a medical school student from Michigan, found in June, 2020 an over \$1 million treasure chest that Fenn stashed in the wilds of Wyoming more than a decade ago.