

The Buried Gold of Hog Hollow

by Charles Rice

A fortune in antique gold coins lies awaiting a lucky finder about thirty miles west of Huntsville. At least, there is if you can believe an old local legend. The fascinating tale of lost treasure does have some verifiable facts to it. The story dates back to the War Between the States, a time of tragedy and turmoil in the Tennessee Valley, as indeed across the entire Southland. Just how much truth there is in the tale, we leave it up to you to decide.

The story takes place in Hog Hollow, a small valley not many miles below the town of Riverton, known in those days as Chickasaw. In October 1984, Mr. Cecil Hayes, who had grown up hearing the tale, recalled it for the Cherokee News of Cherokee, Alabama.

"This is all part of an old legend dating back to the Civil War," wrote Hayes, "and is kept alive in this region by an occasional repetition." The story tells of a keg of U.S. gold coins - \$5 half-eagles, \$10 eagles, and \$20 double eagles. Just one of the coins would be worth at least hundreds, if not thousands, to collectors today."

Local tradition tells that the Rosses settled there in the early 1840s. "They bought vast tracts of timberland in a beautiful pastoral valley," recalled Hayes, "surrounded by wooded hills and divided by a winding mountain brook, later known as 'Ross Branch.'

"They cleared the land, sold the valuable timber and built a large two story house, barns and other outbuildings," continued Mr. Hayes. "They planted their crops and orchards and vineyards. The Rosses were good farmers and hard-working people, and after a time their farm was one of the most productive in the county. The Rosses became wealthy in a region where many other people had failed to make a living.

Through careful and selective breeding, they produced the finest of livestock. Their sheep and cattle and horses were all thoroughbreds. And they raised such vast herds of hogs that their beautiful valley took on the rather odious name of Hog Hollow."

The Rosses were a quiet family, remembered Cecil Hayes, and kept pretty much to themselves. "When the family went to Riverton or Cherokee for supplies, they made their purchases in silence and silently departed."

It was this that probably caused people to speculate about the Ross family. In the absence of knowledge, people perhaps began to make up stories about their reclusive neighbors. Since the Rosses seemed to spend so little, some folks naturally must have imagined they had a lot put away somewhere.

"As the income of the Ross family increased (so the old story tells us), they began tossing money into a new nail keg kept in one corner of the large living room," wrote Hayes. "The money was all in gold; five, 10 and 20 dollar gold pieces.

This continued until one day it was discovered that the keg was nearly full. Then they took the golden treasure out and hid it, presumably somewhere about the farm. And where they put it, there it remains to this day. Why didn't the Rosses retrieve the treasure?

The simple reason appears to be that the Civil War caught up with them in the form of the invading Union Army.

The Rosses seem to have sat out the War Between the States, determined to take no part in the fierce struggle between North and South. However, the war eventually did come to the Muscle Shoals area, and no one was exempt from the death and destruction that came with it.

One bright spring day, Union foragers came into Hog Hollow seeking the Ross' fabled pigs and sheep. In rather un-Quakerlike fashion, the Ross men objected to this blatant thievery. A gun- fight broke out, with the outnumbered civilians naturally getting the worse of it.

"Some say two Union soldiers were killed," wrote Hayes, "but the Ross family were all killed. Then the house and all the other buildings were set on fire. The girl, by some unexplained miracle, escaped both the barrage and fire. Days later she was found in the woods."

That the gunfight did happen seems evident. Certain it is that John Ross no longer appears in the U. S. Census of 1870. Furthermore, while the tombstones on five of the six graves in the Ross family cemetery are now broken and illegible, the sixth is still intact. It reads: "James J. Ross, Son of John & M. A. Ross, Oct. 11, 1840 - May 29, 1864."

The latter date presumably records the day of the fatal encounter with the Yankee raiders. But what of the treasure? Was such a keg of gold possible?

Unfortunately, it seems highly unlikely that John Ross was ever wealthy enough to have accumulated so large a fortune. His real estate - 80 percent of it in untouched woodlands was valued at only \$200 in the 1850 Census. It had risen in value to \$1500 by 1860. Ross' personal estate in 1860 was listed at a modest \$500. Ross was not a slave owner though he did raise enough cotton in 1860 to make seven 400-pound bales.

So, is the treasure tale only a harmless old legend? Well, maybe yes, and maybe no. Once the truth is sifted out, what remains is a half-forgotten story of an American tragedy.

Quite likely, they did hide away their money perhaps not in the gold coins of legend, but probably in the more common silver and copper.

"Some people today believe the old Ross story was just a kind of local fairy tale, a myth," recalled Cecil Hayes. "But my grandfather, John Carrithers, who was born in 1854, believed every word of it." "He spent most of his life searching for the hidden treasure. With our modern equipment, he might have been more successful."

Like John Carrithers, we all have our dreams. So why not get out your metal detector and head for Hog Hollow. Just be sure to get the landowner's permission first! (There are laws against trespassing.)

Who knows, you just might discover John Ross' legendary keg of gold. Most likely you won't. But then again... you never know!

