



EDMUNDS ESSAYS

FIRST PRIZE

THE MONEY DIGGINGS OF POCOCK

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Perhaps one of the most romantic aspects of Vermont history is the early mining attempts made in the heart of her Green Mountains. Many of these were the endeavors of the early settlers of Vermont. The mountains directly south of the little village of Pocock, now called Bristol, were the scene of one of these mining attempts. Looking at these mountains today, one would hardly imagine that through the 1800's this area was the scene of

A veritable *monomania* of hectic seeking after 'treasure trove' which honey-combed the ledgy hillside, woodland and pasture a few miles southeast of Bristol village with holes, caves, tunnels, (some of them dug laboriously out of solid rock) and which was left this day a romantic halo about the wild, weird and picturesque niche in the mountains wherein human gullibility and human folly mounted to so preposterous and tragic a height.¹

It all began in the year 1800 with the arrival of a mysterious looking old man in the village of Pocock.² He spoke to no one, but merely purchased food supplies, and then headed straight for South Mountain. He set up camp at the base of this mountain, and began laboriously digging and picking away at the rocks of what is now the property of the Tubbs family. He kept to himself and bothered no one. One day, a group of boys from the village were exploring the area where De Grau was digging. When they came across the old man and asked him what he was doing, he became very cantankerous; so much so that the boys ran home to their parents, thoroughly frightened. As a result of this little to-do, the fathers decided to make a visit to this cantankerous old grouch to find out just what he was up to. They told De Grau that he must either account for himself or leave Pocock. The eccentric hesitated at first, but finally he revealed the following:

As a Spanish youth, he had accompanied his father and other Spaniards in their search for precious metals throughout the Green

Mountains of Vermont. They had been successful and had discovered a rich vein of silver on South Mountain. They left to procure mining equipment and supplies, returning to this mountain the next summer. By fall, their minings from this vein were so great that they had no means available for transporting the silver out of the hills and to their homeland. Since winter was drawing near, they decided to leave the silver behind and to return, with proper transportation equipment, to claim it the following year. They melted the silver and formed it into bars. These, along with their tools, they placed in a cave, which was shaped like an old fashioned brick oven. They walled up its entrance with flat stones and mud, and covered this with the natural vegetation of the area. When they left, they made an agreement that they would all meet the following year at a given time and place. Together, they would return to South Mountain. Their agreement had one stipulation—no one would return to claim the treasure unless they all could return. One thing after another kept them from returning during the ensuing years; there were deaths, sicknesses and poor weather. Now DeGrau was the only survivor of the party, and he had come to claim the buried silver.

DeGrau also told them how he had often walked down to the river, which was about one and one-half miles from their mining site, while the others labored to liberate the silver from its place in the mountain. He told them many details of their mining operations; even how they had burned alder and used it as charcoal for their smelting process. DeGrau explained that there were only two or three women who had accompanied this party due to the fact that the area was so wild and uncivilized. When one of these women died, DeGrau had said, they had carried her lifeless body to the pond, which was approximately one-hundred yards west of the camp, and there they had sunk her body. This does not seem like a very pleasant system of burial, but this was, truly, the only way they had of disposing of her body. If she had been buried in an orthodox manner, the wolves would have unearthed her.³

The details of the old eccentric's stories satiated the curiosity of the townspeople, and they allowed him to continue his work amongst the rocks. He dug in various sections of this area, always focusing his attention on one main region.⁴ Finally, he told the people that he was getting discouraged. He said that the face of the mountain had changed since he was there as a boy, and that he might be mistaken about the correct area in which to search.⁵ Soon he picked up camp, turned his back on Pocock, and was never seen or heard from again.

A short time after DeGrau left Pocock, a strange looking, odd shaped vessel was found in the area he had deserted.⁶ The aura of mystery that DeGrau had created in this region grew with this finding. Many believed it to be the crucible in which DeGrau's party had melted the silver. (They made this assumption since the vessel suggested Spanish origin and showed age, as if it had been in that position, under a rock, for some time.⁷) The thought of a buried treasure intrigued many, and they came from Pocock, Lincoln, New Haven, and even as far off as Lake Memphremagog and sections of Canada. These primary miners lived like "veritable *Troglo-dytes*."⁸ The entrance to their cave-dwelling was almost completely blocked with stones. They left a small opening in which they fixed an *attempt* at a door. The interior of their abode was complete with a natural chimney flue and fireplace. Firebrands were scattered around the floor; at these places, they cooked their humble meals. In back of this section of their home was the area in which they slept. "The bed they slept in was comparable to a meal bin, a rabbit box, or a rat box."⁹ You can see that the first miners lived very crudely and uncomfortably. Finally, they abandoned their cave for a log hut which they themselves had constructed. They worked

Till eyes grew dim and visions waned

And spines were bent in their backs.¹⁰

All were hopeful of sudden wealth and were willing to work hard for it. None of these men knew the exact region in which they should dig. The miners believed that Sears Pond was the pond of which DeGrau had spoken. This was their only guide. Among these men were Carl Curry, who stayed for several years, and Richard Brown, who was experienced at 'money-digging.' Richard Brown lived in the northern part of Pocock. He only worked at the diggings during the spring and fall.¹¹ He was among the many whose faith in the authenticity of the buried silver could not be shaken.

As soon as one party became discouraged and left, another would begin with determination.¹² In 1840, Simeon Coreser and his group came from Canada. This group was composed of about twelve middle aged and elderly men.¹³ How they had learned of the buried treasure of a little, obscure Vermont village, no one knows. This group is said to have been the most systematic and elaborate in their searching procedures,¹⁴ and to me the most romantic. The original twelve men were soon joined by many others who had also been beckoned by the mysterious mountain. A stock system was formed by which one dollar contributed to the support of the company en-

titled the donor to one hundred dollars when the treasure was found. Meat, butter, and other foodstuffs were also considered as a means of joining the stock system.¹⁵ Everyone—men, women and children—had an interest in the diggings. Pocock had developed into a veritable ‘boom-town.’

The most outstanding of the miners was Simeon Coreser. Although sixty years old, he was muscular and very powerful looking. He could be recognized by his rough features, curly, blond hair, leather breeches, old seal-skin cap, and jovial manner. Since he had ruptured himself lifting rocks after a slide, he could not do any of the hard work; and because of his gift of persuasion, he was made leader of the company. His duties were to disburse the funds, to make converts to the cause, and to consult the conjurers.¹⁶ The two main conjurers consulted were a woman from Pawlet, Vermont, whom “Uncle Sim” visited once every two months, and an old Frenchman who lived on the eastern side of the mountain.¹⁷ These conjurers got most of their ideas from the stories of DeGrau. The most important aspect of DeGrau’s stories was the cave, and on this point, the conjurers focused their attention. These people claimed that they could perceive the interior of the cave and could tell the exact amount of the buried silver, \$3,001,000. They also claimed that the treasure was “enchanted,” and had “ghostly sentinels” watching over it by day and by night. The conjurers said that there were two such “sentinels.” The first ghoul was a dog which had been knocked out, its body thrown into the cave and “his blood burned on a rock by moonlight and its ashes scattered over the treasure.”¹⁸ It was a mad dog, and it ran tirelessly around the cave howling at every crack or fissure in the rocks. He was ready to attack anyone or anything which might chance to enter the cave. The second ghoul was a Spanish boy with a gashed throat. He continually paced the area around the treasure with a red hot iron in his hand. He would strike, with this iron, anyone who might try to touch the treasure. Anyone who touched or entered the cave would, therefore, be in great danger. As soon as the cave was opened, there was to be great chaos along the hillside. There would be massive, destructive rock slides, and a tempest which would uproot the trees. The anger of the “sentinels” would be uncontrollable, and the air would ring with their shrieks, laughter, groans, and howls. “Uncle Sim” was the only one to whom the conjurers gave the power of exorcising the ghosts; therefore, he was at hand at all times. By uttering some magic words, he could enter the cave and remove the treasure. As soon as these words were

uttered, the dog would run howling into the woods; the boy would lose the wild look from his eyes, smile at "Uncle Sim", and would find peace in the great sleep of death. It was probably at this time that this area was nicknamed "Hell's Half Acres." These stories had their effect on the miners, for they imagined all sorts of shrieks, sighs and groans as they blasted or made great noises while they worked away at the rock.

Because of this superstitious belief, many people scoffed at the miners. A story was started that the mining operations were merely a front for a counterfeiting gang with Simeon Coreser as their leader.¹⁹ This story I cannot believe; and neither could many who lived at this time. If these mining attempts were merely a front, why would the miners be working themselves to near exhaustion? Why would they endure such great hardships?

It is understandable that the conditions under which these men lived and worked were not very conducive to health. Bronchial infections and rheumatism were brought on by the cold, dank air of the slimy caverns in which they worked. They endured not only ill health, but also many discouragements in their mining attempts. How many times had they worked, for long hours, to sink a shaft seventy or eighty feet, only to detect foul air when they tested the tunnels with a torch of white birch bark which had been soaked in turpentine. These shafts had to be abandoned. In the winter, snow would fill their passages, and in the summer, rain.²⁰ At first, they removed the water from the tunnels with buckets, and then they rigged up a pump. The pump idea was unsuccessful because the sand and water pressure would soon wear out the valves. John Alcott, one of the Canadian miners, suggested using a syphon, but the other miners didn't think the idea would work. They didn't want to waste twenty to thirty dollars for lead pipes.²¹ Although the miners were gullible enough to believe the tales of the conjurers, they would not believe that water could be made to run uphill.

In spite of Coreser's pleadings and fast talking, many of this group tired of the hardships that they had to endure, lost interest and therefore left. In 1852, Sim returned to Canada to see his wife Mollie and to tend to personal matters. Unfortunately, he was attacked by his old enemy, rheumatism, while he was there, and it prevented him from crossing the line. Since they had no leader, the miners, one by one, lost interest and left. Finally, only one remained, John Alcott. He dug night and day for over two years, and then he too gave up all hope and left the diggings.

The mountains remained untouched until 1860, when Simeon Coreser, now an old man of 80 years, returned to South Mountain.²² He was not the same spry man that he had been before. He could no longer play practical jokes on the young boys of the town and the perturbable old miners. He was doubled over with rheumatism, blurry-eyed with age, and vibrating with palsy. His noted, jovial manner was completely lacking. Since the intrigue of the diggings had faded, no one who had once been his friend would give him aid. All gave him the proverbial 'cold shoulder.' He stayed in Pocock for two months feebly pecking away at the rocks. He was visited occasionally by Franklin Harvey, a man on whom, as a youth, Sim had played many of his tricks. Sim had told Franklin many jokes, ridiculed him for his bashfulness and told him many bloodcurdling tales. Too feeble to make any worthwhile attempts at mining, "Uncle Sim" bid a fond farewell to South Mountain and made his way back to Canada.²³

After Sim had left the 'diggings,' the mountain fell into an uninterrupted sleep, which lasted for 74 years. It was aroused in 1934, when a man from New Haven came to try his luck. He was sure that his 'divining-rod' was fool-proof, and that he would soon unearth the silver that had been desired by so many. He dug furiously and dynamited a great extent of the area, without the consent of the owners of the land. The only thing he succeeded in doing was destroying some of the original caves and excavations.²⁴ Once again a discouraged miner left the area of the diggings. Now South Mountain is again clothed in peace.

"Now, when the climber stalks through the glade,
Fear strikes his soul aghast,
For a ghost inhabits the sombre shades,
A memory of the past."²⁵

NOTES

¹ Walter John Coates, Introduction to *The Ballad of Old Pocock* by Leonard Twynham.

² Leonard Twynham, *The Ballad of Old Pocock*, entire Ballad consists of 11 pages.

³ Franklin S. Harvey, *History of the Money Diggings*, 6-10.

⁴ Twynham, *op. cit.*

⁵ Harvey, *op. cit.*, 6-10.

⁶ Charles Edward Crane, *Let Me Show You Vermont*, 332, 333.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 332, 333.

⁸ Harvey, *op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ Twynham, *op. cit.*, 5, last two lines.

- ¹¹ Harvey, *op. cit.*, 6-10.
¹² Outlook Club of Bristol, Vt., *History of Bristol, Vermont*, 59.
¹³ Harvey, *op. cit.*, 11-17.
¹⁴ W. Storrs Lee, *The Green Mountains of Vermont*, 164, 165.
¹⁵ Harvey, *op. cit.*, 11-17.
¹⁶ *Ibid.*
¹⁷ Information concerning conjurers found only in F. Harvey, *History of the Money Diggings*. Entire description here, contained in said source.
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.
¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-24.
²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-24; Twynam, *op. cit.*, 1-11.
²¹ Harvey, *op. cit.*, 18-24.
²² *Ibid.*
²³ *Ibid.*
²⁴ Outlook Club of Bristol, Vt., *op. cit.*, 59.
²⁵ Twynam, *op. cit.*, 10.

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