

Dead Man's Island Mystery

By Moe Zilla

Families can be strange. Grandpa hated the sunshine, and waited eagerly for dusk. "It's too hot," he complained bitterly.

And then he told them about the treasure.

"When I was 5 years old, my grandfather told me a secret," he said, "and then insisted I make him a promise. 'If you live past 80 years old, you can tell it to your grandchildren,' he'd said." Grandpa fanned himself with a magazine. "This secret has traveled 150 years. It's the story of Dead Man's Island."

Poison was rumored, or perhaps natural causes. No one knew exactly how that famous dead man came to be dead, or even who he the dead man was exactly. "It was a tiny, 120-foot island," Grandpa said, "and with everyone knowing he'd been buried there, it was the only name they could think of!" Grandpa studied everyone carefully, like he was hoping they could unravel the mystery.

"What became California belonged to Spain then," he told his two grandchildren, "and later to Mexico, though not until 1821." Grandpa glared at the sun. "Lonely souls came here on ships and traded barrels of food for cowhides from the local Mexican ranchers, which they sold for huge profits when they returned to the East Coast. Enormous herds of cattle roamed the flat lands. It wasn't until later that the city became Los Angeles."

But 150 years ago, a trading ship's sailor shared a secret with Grandpa's grandfather. The captain of the S.S. Charleston had buried a valuable treasure exactly 17 miles due north from the center of Dead Man's Island — and then 17 paces east.

"That night they had to set sail around South America and back to Boston; but it was a stormy night, and their ship was lost at sea. When my grandfather heard the news, he realized he was the only person alive who knew where their treasure was buried."

“Are you making this up?” Bobby challenged. “Why didn't you look for the treasure yourself?”

“Because the island disappeared. I thought my grandfather might've made it up, and he never gave me a good explanation. But he did tell me the island had disappeared in 1928. And he swore the treasure was nearby, less than 300 miles.”

“Maybe it's in Los Angeles,” volunteered Ann, Bobby's sister.

“Could be,” Grandpa replied confidently. “Up until about 80 years ago, there were maybe 900,000 people here. Nowhere near the 12 million people that are here today. Then irrigation came, and highways, and big airplane manufacturers. It'd be funny if underneath it all was a forgotten sea captain's buried treasure.”

Ann wanted to find the treasure, but only to please Grandpa. Bobby was thinking of everything he could buy with a stake in a 150-year-old treasure. Soon they were asking the local librarian for her newest atlas of maps, and then studying California's coast. There were several islands near San Francisco's coast, and even one that they called Treasure Island. But San Francisco was 400 miles north, and Grandpa's grandfather had insisted that Dead Man's Island was within 300 miles.

25 miles south of San Pedro, California, they found Santa Catalina Island — but it was over 20 miles long (and 22 miles from the coast)! They wondered if Lisa, the librarian, had given them a defective atlas.

Lisa was a young college student, and she seemed eager to help them find any island within 300 miles; especially since Ann told her that if they could find Dead Man's Island, there was treasure just 17 miles north of it — and then 17 paces east!

“I've spent five years at college studying the history of California,” Lisa announced, seeming anxious to prove how knowledgeable and helpful she could be. She pulled down several books about Sacramento. But, still, they never found Dead Man's Island.

When they returned to Grandpa's house, a mysterious stranger was talking to him. Grandpa did most of the talking, and the stranger looked like he'd rather keep quiet. "This is my friend Mike, and he gives boat tours to tourists," Grandpa explained. "He's been sailing our coast for the last 15 years. So I asked him if he'd ever heard of Dead Man's Island."

Mike stared back, silently.

"And he said yes!" Grandpa said. "He has a newspaper article that proves it." They looked hopefully at Mike, who stood still and unsmiling, before walking toward his jeep.

Mike returned silently with a book about the history of Los Angeles. He opened the book in front of everyone, turning to a page about the community of San Pedro. Silently, he pointed to a picture on page 128, which displayed a lonely fence traveling down a steep hill; and in the background was the ocean. No more than 120 feet long, close to the shore, was a rocky island.

"Dead Man's Island, 1873," read the picture's caption.

Even though it was an hour's away, Ann insisted they go there right away.

"It's gone," Mike muttered. They dredged the harbor in 1928. They wanted to make it easier for ships to enter the port, and they dug away the entire island!"

They consulted a map and identified the right location, which was just 17 miles north. "Now let's get going," shouted Grandpa, "before this afternoon gets any hotter!"

They bought four shovels, and Grandpa drove them north, following the driving instructions he'd printed out from the internet. Soon they'd found the location: a big field in back of an abandoned factory. Its high windows were dark, and it was apparent that no one worked there any more. They hoped no one would see them digging.

"I'll go scope out the geography," Mike said quickly, "while the three of you park the car." He hopped out before anyone said anything, and Grandpa looked for a hidden parking spot. Bobby stared after

Mike, wondering if he was going to steal their treasure. As soon as the car stopped, they ran to the field.

It was nothing but a giant patch of dirt, at least an acre-wide, and they saw Mike bending over a deep hole towards the center. "Someone's been digging!" Mike shouted.

Grandpa arrived last, carrying the four shovels, and became furious when he came upon the emptiness of the hole. "Did they beat us to the treasure?" Ann asked. Grandpa studied the hole intently. But then he began laughing and dancing.

"This hole isn't deep enough!" he said. "My grandfather said the treasure was buried six feet down, and this hole is only four feet deep. The treasure's still down there, waiting for us!" Everyone stared thoughtfully for a moment before they grabbed shovels and started digging.

The kids dug with an unearthed adrenaline for the rest of the afternoon. Grandpa's arthritis made it nearly impossible for him to break the surface of the hardened dirt, but his excitement matched the others, and maybe even exceeded it. He continued to cheer and chant until Bobby struck something.

It was a pouch with the faded letters, "S.S. Charleston," branded into the leather. Below the pouch were several layers of something brittle and crumbly, like buried rubber. Grandpa, Mike, and Ann found more in every direction — for several feet. But there was nothing else but dirt.

Had someone gotten here before them and stolen the treasure? As the sun set on the four treasure hunters, Bobby suddenly announced that, not only did he know where the treasure was, he knew who'd been lying.