

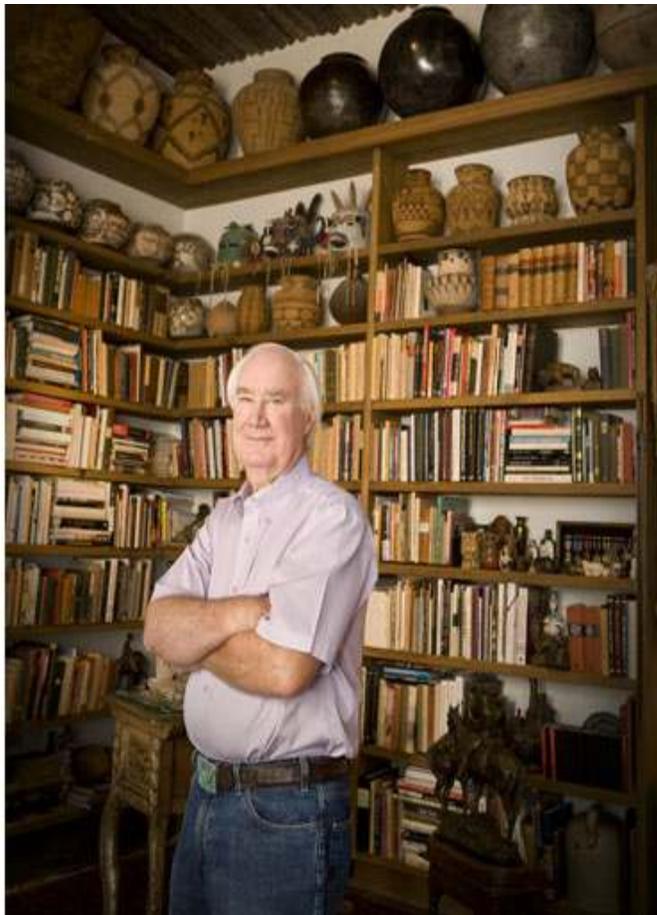
UNITED 

Hemispheres

The Thrill of the Chase

Arguing that "anyone who dies with over \$50 is a failure," a cancer-stricken art collector in Santa Fe filled a chest with millions in gold and jewels, hid it in the wilderness and published a single short poem full of clues for treasure hunters. It started as a lark. Little did anyone know just how big it would get.

Author Margie Goldsmith



Forrest Fenn in his Santa Fe home (Photo: Norah Levine)

BLAME RALPH LAUREN. In 1996 the designer paid a visit to his friend Forrest Fenn, who lived in Santa Fe, N.M. Fenn had recently undergone chemo and radiation for kidney cancer, and was told there was only a 20 percent chance for his survival. He sold his successful Santa Fe art gallery and settled in to await the inevitable. While he did, many friends stopped by to visit him and his wife at home.

The place was filled with more than 5,000 pieces of museum-quality Southwestern art and artifacts, from Sitting Bull's pipe and an 18th-century painted buffalo skin to early Indian pottery and rare Plains Indian medicine bonnets. Lauren immediately fell in love with a Crow Indian hat covered in white ermine skins and carved antelope horns, and offered to buy it. Fenn refused, saying it was one of his favorites. Lauren said, "Well, you can't take it with you." To which Fenn replied, "*Then I'm not going.*"

Though the hat remained safely ensconced in Fenn's collection, Lauren's visit gave the ailing art collector an idea. Inspired by the adventure stories he had devoured as a child, Fenn sat down to write a memoir, jotting down scenes and remembrances as they came to him. As an Air Force pilot during the Vietnam War, he flew 328 missions and was shot down twice. After the war he turned to art, settling in Santa Fe with his wife, Peggy, and opening Fenn Gallery, which became the most successful art gallery in New Mexico. Fenn's holdings included Remingtons and Russells and O'Keeffes— every big name in Western art—and many of those works are now in museums ranging from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyo., to the Art Institute of Chicago. Buying and selling art was how Fenn came to know Lauren, yes, but also Robert Redford, Jacqueline Onassis, Sam Shepard, Jessica Lange, Steven Spielberg and Donna Karan.

And that's when things got interesting. As he wrote, Fenn was reminded of how much fun he'd had hunting down fine art pieces and building his collection over the decades. He felt it would be a shame if all that ended with his death. The memoir would help preserve his legacy, of course—but as he saw it, there was only one way to pass along that sense of delight, that thrill of the hunt.

So Fenn bought an antique bronze chest and started to fill it with treasures. The booty included a jar full of gold dust panned in Alaska, gold coins, large and small gold nuggets, pre-Columbian gold animal figures, two ancient Chinese jade carvings, a 17th-century Spanish gold and emerald ring and a beloved bracelet of turquoise beads, excavated from a Mesa Verde ruin in 1903, that Fenn had won in a game of pool. The total value amounted to about \$3 million.

Fenn decided he would hide the chest with a copy of his book in the desert, maybe even as he walked out into the wilderness to die. That could trigger a hunt of its own, spark some excitement; one day an intrepid searcher would find his bones and his treasure and learn who he was, think kindly of him. His memory would live on.

It seemed like a perfect plan. Except for one hitch.

Fenn didn't die.

FORREST FENN'S CANCER went into remission—and it stayed that way. As a result, he didn't quite get around to burying that treasure. More than a dozen years passed.

Then, in 2010, Fenn turned 80, and the milestone spurred him back into action. "I had this treasure chest full of gold and jewels just burning a hole in my vault," he says. "So I decided to go ahead and hide it somewhere in the mountains north of Santa Fe, leaving clues on how to find it for any searcher willing to try."

The clues are encoded in the memoir he self-published that year, *The Thrill of the Chase*. There are nine of them, all contained in a single poem Fenn wrote.

*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 canyons 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 answer 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.*

As word spread about what Fenn had done, treasure hunters rushed to Santa Fe. Based on the 5,000-plus emails he has received about the treasure, he estimates that more than 1,000 people have searched for it, though he assumes there must be others out there that he doesn't know about.

Many who contact Fenn are looking for a little extra help; others simply want to share their stories. "Dear Mr. Fenn," wrote one, "we don't think we will find the treasure chest but I just want to thank you for getting me and my family off of the couch and out into the mountains." Another man told of how he went out to look with his grown son. The two slept in a van and talked about their hopes for the future. They gave up the search after two days, but it wasn't a wasted effort, the father wrote. "If it hadn't been for the book, my son and I would never have had this time with each other."

Which isn't to say the quest should be undertaken lightly. "There are dangers involved," Fenn says. "Things can complicate the search— earthquakes, mudslides, forest fires, floods, trees, falling rocks. There are those who have been at risk in water when they attempted to search someplace where it was not really safe to go. Some have not been prepared to face the elements after they parked their car and started walking. Some have lacked the proper clothing, food and water."

One eager individual donned scuba gear and swam along the bottom of a murky lake until he almost ran out of air. Another "rode 28 miles on a bicycle in the snow and almost froze after getting wet," Fenn says.

Still, the treasure hunters keep coming. One Chicago couple, for instance, has traveled to New Mexico 14 times to look for Fenn's prize. (In an email, the wife told Fenn, "We are experts on where the treasure isnot.")

"What serious adventurers should remember," Fenn says, "is to not believe anything that is not in my poem or otherwise in my book. There's some misinformation out there. For instance, I never said I *buried* the chest, I said only that I *hid* it. That is not to say it is *not* buried, so maybe we need to define

the terms. Does 'hidden' mean in plain sight? What is the difference between 'buried,' 'entombed' and 'sepultured'? What does the word 'blaze' in the poem mean? A horse can have a blaze on its forehead, a blaze can be scraped on a tree to mark one's way, a blaze can mean a flame or a scar on a rock. And what about 'water high'? Does it mean deep, or higher than normal?"

Fenn generally refuses to give additional clues, but he'll make the rare exception — of sorts. When one woman emailed him to complain that the clues were too difficult, he told her the treasure chest is located more than 300 miles west of Toledo.

Beyond queries from treasure seekers, Fenn has also received a number of letters from people simply wondering why on earth he would do this. "I wanted to create some intrigue and adventure and maybe a little mystery," Fenn explains.

Plus, he says, "anyone who dies with over \$50 is a failure."

FINDING FENN'S TREASURE has proved so difficult that some are left questioning whether the whole thing is an elaborate hoax. But doubters need only ask Fenn's friend Douglas Preston, a bestselling author whose novel *The Codex* is based on Fenn's story.

"That gold is out there—I held it with my own hands," says Preston, one of the few to have seen the chest before Fenn hid it. "Some of the most wonderful things in the treasure are enormous gold nuggets the size of hen's eggs, weighing more than a pound each, and worth several times their bullion value. He included things that would survive a long time, and that would be interesting and unusual. And the chest itself is quite rare; it's a Romanesque lockbox from the 12th century, and with the gold and jewels inside, it weighs 42 pounds."

Surprisingly, there have been only a few items about the treasure in the local newspaper or on the news. But there are certainly other signs of it around Santa Fe. The Inn and Spa at Loretto offers guests a "Thrill of the Chase" package, which includes two nights' accommodations, a scavenger hunt and an autographed copy of Fenn's book. There's also a "Thrill of the Chase" signature cocktail, a blend of light rum, sweet vermouth and Amaretto di Saronno sprinkled with gold flakes, and a Forrest Fenn sandwich, consisting of pastrami with apple sauerkraut on marble rye (Fenn's favorite).

When Fenn himself walks down the street these days, locals constantly stop him; they want to know if anyone has found the treasure. Others shake his hand and call him a hero. Local jeweler Marc Howard hails Fenn as a cross between Will Rogers and Mark Twain. "He's a story-weaver, and has created a legacy that will reach out into the future."

Fenn is modest about the whole thing, though. "I was hoping the treasure chase would cause some excitement and get a few guys out into the mountains," he says. "I did not expect it to get so big so fast."

He hasn't gone back to his hiding place to see if the treasure is still there. He assumes it hasn't been found (though he knows of "more than a few people" who have searched within 500 feet of the site), and that suits him fine. "I think that I'll be a little disappointed when it is found, because the mystery will be gone."

One clue follower, Dal Neitzel, has been looking for the treasure for more than two years. He's already made five trips down from his home in Washington state, and plans to keep looking. Not that the booty is Neitzel's primary motivation: Fenn's treasure hunt has turned into something bigger, something more meaningful.

“Forrest Fenn is the hider of undiscovered dreams for thousands of folks who go looking for that treasure,” he says, “and discover not the place where the treasure is hidden, but the place in their heart where adventure sleeps, and trails begin.”

Travel journalist MARGIE GOLDSMITH lives in New York City, where high rents preclude burying treasures worth more than a few dollars.