

## OFFBEAT OREGON HISTORY

# Forgotten gold still likely buried in forest

BY FINN J.D. JOHN

Offbeat Oregon

Imagine you're a gold prospector from the Willamette Valley, on your way to the California gold fields in the first year of the 1848 gold rush.

You're a little late to the party, and you've chosen to try to reach the gold fields in a somewhat unusual way: By going over the Coast Range to the beach, and traveling south along the coast.

As you make your way southward by the great ocean, you reach a broad expanse of black sand. And when the sun hits it just right, you can see it's actually glittering . . . with tiny flakes and grains of gold.

You're all alone on the beach. There aren't even any other footprints. Apparently nobody else was crazy enough to try to travel to the gold fields via Coos Bay. Everyone else in the area, such as there are, has decamped inland to the gold fields.

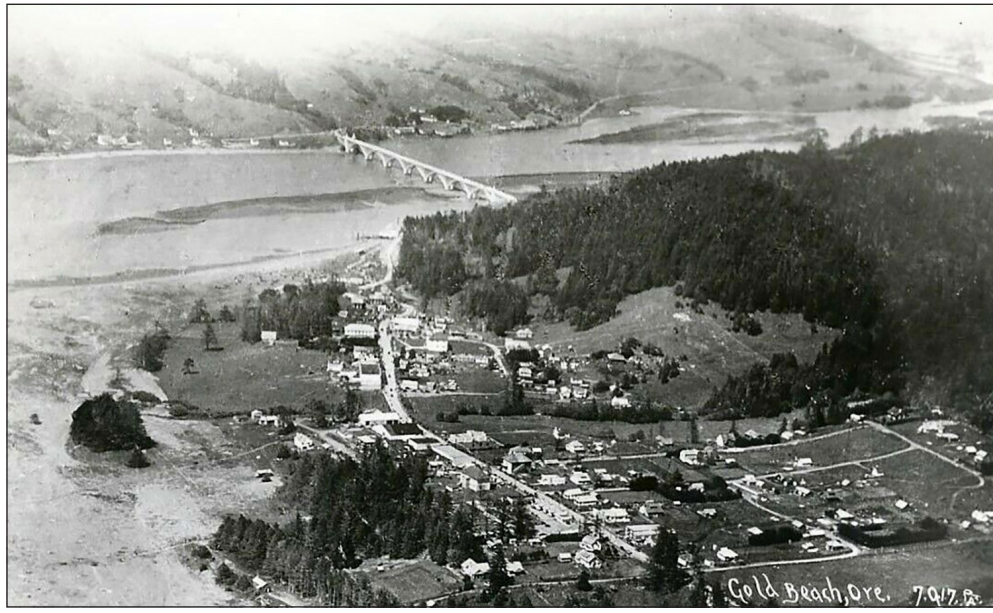
It's just you, on the uninhabited edge of a continent, crunching a trillion dollars' worth of gold under your feet.

Such was the situation in which the Grouleaux brothers, Charles and Peter, found themselves in the spring of 1849, near the mouth of the Coquille River in what today is Douglas County.

(By the way, the Grouleaux brothers are called "John and Peter Groslius" in some sources.)

Naturally, the brothers abandoned all ideas of going to California now. They settled in and got busy separating the yellow gold from the black sand — pounds and pounds of it.

They had brought plenty of provisions with them for the journey, and the hunting was good; so they were able to live all summer without leaving their diggings. As their flour sacks were emptied of food, they were promptly filled with "flour gold" from the beach. And at the end of the summer, they returned home to the Willamette Valley,



An aerial photo of the town of Gold Beach, at the mouth of the Rogue River, probably made sometime before the Second World War. The Rogue is the source of the gold-bearing black sands on the nearby beaches, after which the town was named.

their pack animals creaking under the weight of hundreds of pounds of pure gold. They were now both rich men.

Lots of miners had come back from California with gold, so the brothers' sudden wealth didn't attract much attention. Nor did their calculated vagueness when telling friends and neighbors where they'd spent their summer arouse any suspicions. All miners were like that. Nobody wanted to tell a bunch of potential claim jumpers where they had their stakes planted. Possession was nine tenths of the law, and anyway plenty of people in 1849 were perfectly willing to commit a secret murder on a lonely stretch of trail to seize control of a lucrative claim.

So when the next spring came, the brothers were easily able to slip away from any prying eyes and hurry back to the beach to spend another season making themselves richer.

And the same thing happened again the next year. In fact, it wasn't until 1853 that someone got wise and figured

out where the brothers were going.

Whoever it was that figured that out was much less discreet than the Grouleaux brothers had been. The word was out almost at once, and a colossal gold rush ensued as miners flocked to the beaches.

"Soon a thousand men milled about on the black sands, staking claims for miles up and down the beach," Ruby El Hult writes in her book. "Cabins, stores, saloons and gambling houses were hastily erected, becoming the boom town of Randolph. Whiskey flowed so freely that the stream along which the best diggings were located became known as Whiskey Run."

Very quickly after that, the Grouleaux brothers sold their claims to two of the newcomers, the McNamara brothers. They cheerfully remarked that they had made enough money off the beach in their first four undisturbed years to last a lifetime.

(They didn't mention any figures, but the McNamara brothers

pulled \$80,000 worth out the first year after they bought the claims, and that was after the Grouleaux boys had spent five years skimming the cream.)

The brothers packed their animals up and set out northward on the Randolph Trail, a beaten path along the Coast Range foothills to Coos Bay that followed roughly the same route as Seven Devils Road today.

But they had \$40,000 worth of gold in their saddlebags, and the two of them were almost celebrities in Randolph. Both of them were very nervous about the possibility that they might be robbed on the trail. Highway robbery was common there, since the bad guys knew that successful miners had to use the trail to carry their gold out.

So the boys scouted a good spot that they thought they could find again, and cached the gold in two gunpowder cans under a cedar stump.

Then they continued on their way.

Well, you probably have already guessed what happened next. In fine buried-treasure

style, they lost track of where they stashed the two cans. Neither of them returned for many years — they already had five years' worth on which to live, and it just didn't seem worth the trouble.

It wasn't until 20 years later, in 1873, that Peter, by then the only surviving brother (Charles had died in England), came back to the Coquille to "withdraw" his gold.

Peter found the entire landscape so utterly changed that he had no idea where to even start looking for the distinctive cedar-tree stump under which he'd stashed the cans. There were places where the Randolph Trail had changed completely, with old sections overgrown and barely discernible; there were other parts that had been burned over by a forest fire, which had destroyed all the snags, stumps, and other dry wood in its path.

Peter got some friends to help him, promising to split the gold with them, but their efforts were in vain. Other members of the Randolph community joined in as well. But, nobody found the gold, and after a decade or so, the whole thing simmered down into one of those little bits of local legend.

Fifty more years went by. Then, in 1922, Peter Grouleaux's granddaughter, Lillie Tully, came to town. She had a try for the gold as well, enlisting the help of a local timber cruiser. But after a year or so of hunting, they too were disappointed.

A few years later, in 1931, a rumor started circulating — a very credible one, later given added weight by an article in the *Portland Oregonian* newspaper — that the treasure had been found. According to the rumor, a young couple out prospecting had spotted a rusty gun barrel sticking out from under an old stump and investigated. They'd found two

old gunpowder cans containing 150 pounds of fine gold. After that, the two had left the area as quickly as possible, because the gold had been on private land and they were afraid if anyone knew where they'd gotten it, the landowner and possibly Lillie Tully would try to claim it.

So, was this rumor true? Maybe. The amount of gold found doesn't quite line up — 150 pounds of gold at 1853 prices was worth \$51,000, not \$40,000. But even if the rumor was true, it likely wasn't the same gold. Painted metal cans of the type gunpowder was sold in don't last 75 years in the Coast Range; the containers would have rusted to nothing in just a few decades.

In any case, it remains possible, if not particularly likely, that the contents of the original powder cans are still there, buried under the forest duff in a random spot in the middle of the forest — a cache of fine flour gold that would be worth \$3.7 million today.

But rather than tromping through the forest looking for this bonanza, modern-day gold miners would probably be better advised to head for the beach from which it originally came. The black sands of Oregon's beaches are still full of fine flour gold, especially in places that are far away from streams and creeks that supply the water needed to pan or sluice them. It's hard work, and not very remunerative; but you can still get gold out of black-sand layers all along the South Coast today, especially in the more southerly, out-of-the-way beaches near Ophir, Pistol River, Port Orford, and — of course — Gold Beach.

■ Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, *Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon*, was recently published by Ouragan House Publishers. To contact him or suggest a topic, [finn@offbeatoregon.com](mailto:finn@offbeatoregon.com) or 541-357-2222.

Something powerful and beautiful is rising from the ashes across our state. Our communal hardship has rekindled in us one of our greatest and most unifying strengths — **kindness**. So elemental, yet so brave. Awakened by an urgent need for connection and compassion. Kindness has inspired us to listen. To learn. To lend a hand. To take care of each other. Now we have the opportunity to keep it lit. Let's not let it smolder. Let's fan the embers in our hearts. Let's keep kindness at the forefront of our lives, and live as open examples of it. Kindness inspires kindness. And here, in our Oregon, that is what makes us —

# NeighbORly

[ INSPIRING KINDNESS ACROSS OREGON ]



LEARN | CONNECT | DONATE | GET INSPIRED  
[OREGONCF.ORG/NEIGHBORLY](http://OREGONCF.ORG/NEIGHBORLY)

Oregon  
 Community  
 Foundation