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The history

Two mysteries on and near Neah-Kah-Nie continue to plague modern day historians and archeologists.

The first is the uncertainty surrounding a 17th-century shipwreck. Evidence of the wreck was unearthed through the discovery of artifacts in the sand near Nehalem Bay in the 18th and 19th centuries.

“For years people were finding chunks of beeswax and shards of porcelain on the beach,” Campbell said.

Modern researchers concluded a Spanish galleon must have wrecked in the area sometime in the late-1600s. The ship itself has never officially been located, though archeologists believe it was the Santo Cristo de Burgos, a 17th-century Manila galleon owned by the kingdom of Spain.

Is it possible the ship also carried a treasure trove of riches? No one can be quite sure.

Another tangible mystery surrounding Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain is etched in stone. The first European settlers in the area discovered a set of rocks on Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain inscribed with petroglyphs. More than a dozen of the stones were discovered, and two of them are on display at the Nehalem Valley Historical Society today.

“It’s really odd if you look at those rocks, some of the inscriptions in them look like regular letters in our English language, but there are no words that are formed,” Campbell said. “There’s arrows, but you don’t know that they actually are pointing in any particular direction. Since no one has a clear understanding of how these rocks got inscribed or how they got placed, there are so many competing theories about what they are.”

Some believe the stones were measuring devices, others believe they are the key to a secret map. Their existence has fueled speculation that Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain is truly the location of hidden treasure.

The search

Treasure hunters flocked to Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain before Oregon changed the law to make digging for gold illegal.

Stories of digs date back to the 19th century, with several high-profile names rumored to be in the mix.

According to “The Mountain of a Thousand Holes,” a 2018 research publication from Portland State University written by Cameron La Follette, Dennis Griffin and Douglas Deur, early residents believed prominent Oregon Coast citizens may have played a role in the search. Local legend claimed the Astors from Astoria and employees of the Hudson Bay Co. had ties to digs on the mountain.



The searches continued into modern times, with dozens of individuals filing for digging permits in the area in the 20th century. According to the research publication, one man who applied for a permit from the Oregon Department of State Lands in 1983 believed the Ark of the Covenant was hidden in the mountain.

The rumors and the mystery continue today. According to Campbell, visitors still stop into the historical society with off-the-wall stories about the treasure. One man claimed he was hired as a teenager to dig on the mountain and dug up a golden crucifix.

“Supposedly, his boss took that item and put it in a safety deposit box, and it’s never been seen or heard of again,” Campbell said.

Despite centuries of searches, there are no documented accounts of treasure found. Not all of the hunters made it off the mountain alive. According to “The Mountain of a Thousand Holes,” three people died in accidents while searching for riches.

Digging for treasure is now prohibited by the Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department. Be warned that it’s dangerous to leave the trail on Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain due to the many deep holes created in the mountainside by past treasure hunters.

The hike

A windstorm in 2020 severely damaged the North Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain Trail, and it remains closed. However, the impressive viewpoint can still be reached from the South Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain Trailhead.

The south trailhead can easily be located off U.S. Highway 101, about 16 miles past the exit for Cannon Beach. You’ll turn left up Road 38555 and drive about 0.5 mile up a gravel road. A parking area is open 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.

The hike is an out and back distance of about 3 miles with 840 feet of elevation gain.

On the path, rays of sunshine burst through the moss-covered branches of Sitka spruce. There’s little chance to get a warm-up on this trail as the elevation gain

kicks in immediately with densely forested switchbacks.

The switchbacks open up to brief views of Nehalem Bay. You’ll want to continue up the path to get a glimpse of the trail’s natural treasure.

A bench sits about 1.2 miles up the trail to rest tired legs. Once you pass that spot, keep your eyes open for a heavily-rooted, rocky upward scramble to your left. It is easy to miss. The rocky incline will take you up a narrow (and potentially dangerous) stone pile to the viewpoint.

If you’re not comfortable making the scramble to the top, you can simply continue on the path. It will give you another



Photos by Nikki Davidson

ABOVE: Thimbleberries, a sweet fruit similar to crunchy raspberry candy, grows on the Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain Trail. **LEFT:** A narrow path below the highest viewpoint on Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain offers another view from above.

view of the bay directly below the highest viewpoint. If you continue on the path eventually you’ll run into a “trail closed” sign that would have connected the lookout to north trailhead of the hike.

The only way to get back to where you started and down to the parking lot is back the way you came.

Chances are, you’ll end the hike empty-handed. But you won’t be disappointed. There might not actually be treasure today on Neah-Kah-Nie, but the view from one of the highest peaks on the West Coast will leave you feeling like you’ve just won the lottery.

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