Offbeat Oregon: Archaeologists solve mystery of 'Beeswax Shipwreck'

By Finn J.D John
For The Sentinel

Since the beginning of European settlement along the Oregon Coast, people have wondered about the source of the mysterious chunks of beeswax that were continually turning up there.

It seemed there was an endless supply of the stuff, slowly being released from somewhere just offshore ... century after century.

The natives, when asked, shared their oral histories about the strange wax — a tale of a big ship wrecked on the shore near Nehalem Bay, from which it all came. But what kind of big ship?

From where, and whither bound?

And what had become of its crew?

Over the years, historians and archaeologists have closed in on the answers to these questions. By the mid-20th century they had figured out that it was a Spanish galleon out of Manila, on its way to New Spain (Mexico, basically) sometime in the 1600s or 1700s, and that what remained of it — including cannons and other heavy metal artifacts, as well as, possibly, treasure — lay on the seafloor just off the north Oregon coast.

But nobody really knew which galleon it was. Most likely, they figured, it was the San Francisco Xavier, which left Manila in 1705 and vanished from the face of the Earth.

By the end of the 20th century, though, the historical record on the beeswax shipwreck had become badly confused and polluted.

Over the years, writers and raconteurs — especially Native American storytellers hired by resort owners to entertain guests — had had some of their professional fabrications and exaggerations taken a little too seriously, and the whole subject had just about crossed over the line from archaeology to folklore studies.

In other words, as a topic of study for a serious academic historian or archaeologist, Beeswax Wreck Studies suffered from the same stigma as UFO Studies.

And so, as with UFOs, it went unstudied by serious academics, for a long time.

But in 2006, a group of archaeologists and historians and geologists came together and decided they were going to take the topic seriously, and drill down through all the myths and legends to solve the mystery for real.

And thus was the Beeswax Wreck Project born.

Last month, after more than a decade of research and exploration, the Beeswax Wreck Project — which has since expanded to become the Maritime Archaeological Society, a nonprofit organization based in Astoria dedicated to the study of shipwrecks — published its findings in the summer issue of the Oregon Historical Quarterly.

The editors dedicated the entire issue to this one topic.

The Beeswax Wreck Project scientists won't be able to say with 100 percent certainty unless the wreck itself is located; but there is, they have learned, really only one galleon that it could possibly be: The San Cristo de Burgos, which left Manila in 1693.

Of the 400-odd galleons the Spanish built and sailed, many sank or were captured by enemies, but only four vanished without a trace: two in the mid-1500s; the San Cristo de Burgos in 1693; and the San Francisco Xavier in 1705.

The early ones were ruled out because of the shards of Chinese pottery that have been found washed ashore from the wreck; they were of a design that didn't exist in the 1500s.

The San Francisco Xavier was ruled out because those pottery shards, along with lots of beeswax, were found inside Nehalem Bay — and the only way detritus from an offshore shipwreck could end up in Nehalem Bay would be if it was washed over Nehalem Spit by a tsunami — and the only tsunami that could do such a job happened in the year 1700.

By process of elimination, therefore, it had to be the San Cristo de Burgos.

Within that almost-certainty lies a fascinating story that we'll never fully know: The wreck of the ship may have been essentially caused by the Spanish officials in Manila.

When it left Manila in 1693, the San Cristo de Burgos was actually making its second try at crossing the Pacific. The previous year it had tried to make the crossing, but was dismasted in a sudden storm.

After limping back to Manila, the ship's officers found themselves in hot water with the local authorities, who promptly got busy trying to find someone to pin the blame on. The ship's builder was accused of messing up the mast steps; the rigger, of not connecting the ropes right.

Finally the authorities settled for charging the galleon's skipper, Don Bernardo Iñiguez del Bayo, with negligence, and demanding a large payment from him.

To avoid paying this, del Bayo cast off in the middle of the night (metaphorically speaking, although a literal midnight departure does seem likely) leaving a large amount of food and other supplies behind, along with 30 sailors (out of a full complement in the 110-120 range, including gunners but not including cabin boys).

It certainly can't be assumed that this short-staffing situation caused the wreck; but, given that those 30 sailors represented about 25 percent of the crew, it's certainly a strong possibility.

It's also very likely that, if the San Cristo de Burgos had gotten into serious trouble as it had the previous time, turning back would not even be considered as an option.

Nehalem Bay wasn't on the galleons' regular trade route; the San Cristo de Burgos would not have come to the north Oregon coast on purpose.

In their Oregon Historical Quarterly article on the wreck site, Beeswax Project investigators Scott Williams, Curt Peterson, Mitch Marken and Richard Rogers write that most likely the ship was disabled in a storm and drifted before the wind, wallowing in the trough of the sea, until it fetched up on Nehalem Spit.

So: what about treasure?

One of the more appealing parts of the San Francisco Xavier hypothesis was the large amount of personal wealth that was being transported on that ship.

But that doesn't seem to have been the case with the San Cristo de Burgos.

Although the Beeswax Wreck Project researchers were unable to find a complete manifest in the records of the old Spanish colonial empire, they were able to learn most of it; and it appears that, in addition to the beeswax, the vast majority of the cargo was textiles and fabrics: silks and cottons.

There was a fair amount of carved ivory, and quite a bit of elemental mercury that was to be used in the silver mines of New Spain; but, alas, no chests full of doubloons and pieces of eight.

The full report of the Beeswax Wreck Project, of course, includes lots more information than can be laid out here.

To learn more about the wreck, and the galleon traffic between Mexico and the Philippines that it was a part of, you should grab a copy of the Summer 2018 issue of Oregon Historical Quarterly.

But the bottom line on the whole thing is, the identity of the mysterious beeswax ship is now solved, with more than 99 percent certainty.

And the next time you stumble across a little chunk of wax on the beach after a winter storm, you'll know you're holding in your hand a piece of history nearly a century older than the United States of America itself.

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