

Fisherman makes a rare find

Timbers from the Beeswax shipwreck

By **KATIE FRANKOWICZ**
KMUN

No one believed Craig Andes when he said he found pieces of a shipwreck that resisted discovery for centuries in sea caves north of Manzanita.

But Andes, a commercial fisherman based in Tillamook County and an avid beachcomber, persisted. Samples of the timbers he found sticking out of the sand in the caves were eventually tested and dated. The timbers are now believed to belong to the wreck of Santo Cristo de Burgos, a Spanish galleon also known as the Beeswax for the valuable wax that formed part of its cargo.

Under the watchful eyes of state and marine archaeologists, a crew of sheriff's deputies, state parks employees and others scrambled over barnacle-crusting rocks at low tide to haul out the pieces Andes found.

In the late morning, a jet ski shot toward shore, towing precious cargo.

To untrained eyes, the water-logged beam they hauled out of the surf looked like any other piece of driftwood on the beach: smoothed by time and ocean waves. But in the hands of experts, the beam has the potential to provide important information about one of the region's earliest shipwrecks and one of the North Coast's most enduring legends.

James Delgado, a leading marine archaeologist who helped spearhead retrieval efforts, will be involved in further documenting and studying the timbers at the Columbia River Maritime Museum in Astoria.

He said larger pieces retrieved from the sea caves could suggest how the ship came apart — how the wreck happened — and might provide valuable clues to where the rest of the wreck is located.

"Will this answer big questions? Probably not," Delgado said. "But it's another step in a process that could potentially lead to further discovery."

Built in the Philippines, the Santo Cristo de Burgos left Manila in 1693 loaded with fine Asian trade goods and likely wrecked on Nehalem Spit after a journey across the Pacific. Almost nothing is known about the fate of the people aboard. Oral traditions among tribes suggest there was some contact with survivors. A tsunami that struck in 1700 further scattered the wreckage.

For centuries, artifacts associated with the wreck have washed ashore on local beaches — porcelain and pottery, chunks of beeswax —



Lydia Ely

Craig Andes is a commercial fisherman and avid beachcomber.

but the final resting place of the wreck remains unknown. The timbers Andes found will finally give marine archaeologists a chance to study pieces of the galleon itself.

For local groups that have searched for evidence for decades, the discovery is an exciting leap "because it's actual physical remains of the ship," said Scott Williams, vice president and principal investigator of the Astoria-based Maritime Archaeological Society.

"It also fits into 19th century written accounts that there was wreckage along the cliffs," he added.

He and others had long assumed the claims were hyperbole or flat-out lies. Shipwrecks don't typically preserve in shallow water.

But on the North Coast the water is cold and — near the Columbia River outflow — not as salty. There are not as many of the organisms around that eat up wood. Then there are Oregon's shifting sands. Once the timbers were buried, they would have been pretty protected.

Williams was one of the experts who initially doubted Andes' claims. When carbon dating came back showing the timbers were most likely from the Beeswax, Williams told Andes he could say, "I told you so."

The Maritime Archaeological Society suspects the lower hull of the galleon is still out there somewhere offshore. The discovery of the timbers gives them another point to swing out from and the society plans to keep looking.

"We haven't found what we would call 'The Wreck,'" Williams said. "We don't know if something like 'The Wreck' exists."

In the meantime, Williams hopes the timbers taken from the cave can reveal more specifics about how the Manila galleons were constructed, a

process about which very little is known.

A strange moment

For Andes, it's a strange moment.

It turns out officially finding bits of a shipwreck is complicated, especially when those pieces are found in a protected area controlled by the state and still claimed by the Spanish government, which takes a protective stance over the wrecks of its old galleons.

Though groups had been hunting for the Beeswax for decades and pieces of the wreck's cargo had been washing up since the ship ran aground, it seems no one was prepared for a discovery quite this big.

There was immediate interest in retrieving the timbers, but considerations like securing a permit, the coronavirus pandemic and the logistics of doing a retrieval in caves that are difficult to reach, in an area popular with tourists, slowed the project's momentum. The retrieval date was moved multiple times and was finally put off until this spring.

Oregon State Parks remains deeply concerned about what the discovery will mean for the state park area near where the timbers were found, which already sees a high number of visitors throughout the year.

This week, the goal was to remove most, if not all, of the timbers from the cave so officials could say with confidence, "There's nothing else there," Delgado said.

The galleon has long captured people's imagination. At one point, the tragedy of the shipwreck was conflated with a story about men rowing ashore and burying a box — of gold, obviously — near Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain. Treasure seekers descended at various times on the mountain. Their activities once

gave the mountain the nickname "mountain of a thousand holes."

For the record, Delgado said the only gold he's seen on shipwrecks is in the movies. The beeswax, porcelain and textiles would have been just as valuable as gold to people at the time.

Still, interest in the "lost Spanish gold" surges from time to time and park rangers sometimes catch people with shovels, said Ben Cox, the park manager of the Nehalem Bay Management Unit that includes Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain.

Such activities can harm resources and also violate park and ocean shore rules, said Chris Havel, associate director for the state parks department.

"Even the chance of an important historical find can challenge a person's judgment," he added. "There's a thrill in knowing and a nearly irresistible urge to discover more as quickly as possible."

He said, "We don't want to miss the chance at answering some long-standing questions about contact between European and tribal communities. We also don't want to harm these possible artifacts, the ocean shore or see people get hurt trying to chase the mystery."

But Andes feels conflicted. A former treasure hunter himself, he is now more intrigued by the history of the items he finds.

Over the past two years, he has been the person keeping a regular eye on the Beeswax timbers, making the tricky journey across slippery rocks and into caves he has begun to think won't withstand the pounding of ocean waves and the sliding of the cliffs above much longer.

As the retrieval date kept getting pushed back, he tried to keep the timbers in place. He tied up one with rope — it got washed out to sea anyway last year — and partially reburied others, setting rocks on top of them.

At the same time, Andes said he has been asked by some people — including state parks officials — not to go out to the caves. And throughout the whole process, he has been told to keep quiet about his discovery.

It is a tricky balance, said state archaeologist John Pouley, who was on hand when the timbers were brought in this week. There is the need to keep archaeological sites and artifacts safe while at the same time educating the public about such discoveries.

Andes doesn't want hundreds of people rummaging around in cliffs and on the beaches, but he also thinks people should know about what was found.

'Just looking for agates'

Oregon's beaches are public and the story of the Beeswax has been a community interest for decades.



Lydia Ely

A piece of the Beeswax shipwreck.

It's how Andes found the pieces of the wreck that have everyone so excited and concerned now.

By trying to keep word of the timbers quiet, he worries that parks and other groups involved missed an opportunity to better protect the resources. He knows he is not the only one roaming the beaches and hillside, curious about what is there.

"People walk down here every day and walk off with stuff," Andes said.

He thinks about some of the familiar faces, that instantly recognizable posture of people searching for old stuff, and the pleasant codes they'll exchange: "Looking for agates?"

"Yep, just looking for agates."

Then there are people who may not realize that the bit of porcelain or wood they've found could be important, something different than the usual beach debris, something they should tell someone about.

Andes believes that discussing more openly what is down there earlier could have boosted funding for recovering the timbers, future interpretation work and efforts to protect the site. He thinks the state missed an opportunity to get ahead of the public.

To which Havel noted in a statement: "It would be great if just explaining a problem and asking for public help would work in a situation like this. Our experience has been, it doesn't."

The state parks department doesn't see a way to get ahead of interest without identifying the location and inadvertently increasing interest.

"We already constantly say: stay away from cliff edges and bases, know

the tides so you don't get trapped, stay away from logs in reach of the surf, and all the other beach safety messages," Havel said.

"Our additional message when people pay attention to this story will be, 'If you find anything unusual, old, and human-made on the ocean shore, report it.' Our view is doing that now for this specific location, or even without any context, would either put an unwanted spotlight on this spot or simply be confusing."

Andes is convinced there's more to be found that could help solve the mystery of the Beeswax — a mystery that has intrigued him since he was a kid.

Over the years, he studied photos and other historic documents. He explored beaches and cliffides, expanding his own understanding of the landscape around the wreck, the places where evidence has washed up.

Andes discovered the first timber piece in the sea caves several years ago. It looked like nothing more than a bit of buried log, one end sticking out. At first, he wasn't sure what he was looking at. Then, in the spring of 2019, more of the wood was exposed and he began to suspect it wasn't just driftwood.

In fact, he said, he knew what it was the minute he saw more of it. The wood was exceptionally hard and dotted with small square holes. He was convinced it was from a shipwreck and one wreck in particular: the Beeswax.

"You can't tell all the treasure hunters in the world about it," he said, "but you kind of have to because they're going to find out about it anyway."

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False threats: Safety concerns after social media rumors

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carrying weapons to public meetings.

"In regard to the risk of violence, I was sent a screenshot of two handguns, a bottle of scotch, and a Bible with a caption that made me ill because of its content," Smith said. "I considered it hate-mongering in tone, and because it came from a person who frequents social media, I felt it showed a real lack of responsibility in the individual, which in turn, made me think safety and security needed beefing up at City Hall. Threats to people in our community will elicit a timely response by the city."

Smith asked for better security doors and a metal detector to prevent weapons from entering City Hall.

Sweet sent an email to city councilors and Smith asking to get all sources of the threats or perceived threats in the form of emails, texts or screenshots.

This message was trans-

mitted by word-of-mouth to a member of The Pacific Way Group, who referred to a potential for violence at the next City Council meeting.

On June 8, Beth Cameron, an opponent of the firehouse bond, reported social media posts to the sheriff's office after reading on Facebook that Sweet "was saying there would be guns at the next City Council meeting," the sheriff said in his incident report.

Cameron told the sheriff she was concerned that Sweet was "unstable," highlighting past troubles related to alcohol.

Jack Zimmerman, an administrator of The Pacific Way Group, also contacted the sheriff's office about the matter.

The sheriff's office determined the discussion had been distorted. Instead of Sweet being proactive in ensuring security at meetings, messaging led to a perception Sweet was either going to bring a firearm to a meeting or invite others to

bring them, the sheriff said in his incident report.

"Sweet was aware of the misinformation being spread and we discussed the email he sent," Phillips said. "Mr. Sweet has no inclination whatsoever to bring firearms of any type to a meeting."

Zimmerman, one of the leading opponents of the bond measure and a critic of Sweet, said his report to the sheriff's office wasn't motivated by politics.

"The question on my part — and I know on Beth Cameron's part — was if there were in fact, people coming to City Council with guns, why was this not reported?" he asked. "One, to the county sheriff; two, to the residents of Gearhart; and then three, what were the actions that would be taken to protect the residents?"

The rumored threat came just days after the mass shooting at a school in Uvalde, Texas, Cameron said. "I was understandably concerned for the safety of every single person attend-

ing City Council meetings," she said.

Chief Bowman wrote in his blog in early June that City Hall did receive an anonymous letter, she said.

"So what did I falsely report? ... I reported because I would never have been able to live with myself if someone had been hurt, or killed, and I had known about that potential from social media rumors beforehand," she said.

Along with the Zoom-only meeting on Wednesday, the City Council could consider additional measures regulating firearms on city property.

"Due to possible negative reactions by others from these social media posts and the members themselves, certain precautions should be taken," Bowman said. "Everyone should be able to feel a sense of safety at a public meeting or gatherings. By making a few adjustments and setting forth some security protocols, citizens will have just that."