

Chapter 3



Bob and Jenifer Marx

Spanish Galleons and Long Lost Treasure

For us, there is only the trying.
The rest is not our business.

— T. S. Eliot

In 1655 King Philip IV of Spain ordered an armada to sail from Cartagena to Spain by way of Havana. One of the armada's flagships was the *Nuestra Señora de la Maravilla*. The treasure aboard the ship included gold, silver, jewelry, pearls, emeralds and other precious stones. In addition to these valuables, the cache included a solid gold statue of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child. When the *Maravilla* set sail, her cargo was worth more than five million pesos.

On January 4, 1656, somewhere near the Bahama Channel, the *Maravilla* ran into shallow water and hit a reef. A second ship rammed the grounded *Maravilla* and, less than an hour after the collision, the galleon began to sink. There was a frantic attempt to rescue the 650 persons aboard the ship, as well as the treasure, but by the time the disaster was over there were only 45 survivors. All of the treasure sank with the ship.

In the years to follow there were repeated attempts by Spanish divers to salvage the lost treasure, but only about one-quarter of it saw the light of day. In time the wreck was covered by shifting sands, and most of the treasure belonged to the sea, hidden with the ship.

In 1972 we came along.

Dick and I were living on Catalina Island when Bob Marx and Willard Bascom invited us to join their expedition to find the *Maravilla*. Bob Marx is a marine archaeologist and treasure diver from Florida; Willard Bascom is an oceanographer from California. We knew both Bob and Willard well and had great respect

for them, but the amount of gold and treasure that promised to emerge from such an expedition made the idea seem even better. The search would begin by early summer, based out of Fort Pierce, Florida.

Dick was beside himself with the perfectness of the whole thing. He flew to Florida right away to join Bascom and Marx. I was to meet him later.

Since we would be gone indefinitely on this hunt, Dick found Igor the dog a new permanent home. This broke my heart, but I learned that one makes sacrifices in the name of adventure. Besides, Igor was promised an adventure of his own. The poodle-terrier chicken of the woods would soon be chasing rabbits in the desert of Hesperia, California, sleeping in haystacks and getting pelted with buckshot from suspicious gun-toting neighbors.

It is important to know who you are sailing with on expeditions such as this, because once you are at sea, that's it. If a feud starts, there is no way to take a walk. Knowing what I did about Bob Marx and Willard Bascom, I figured we were all in fairly smooth waters.

Bob Marx is a salty character who had helped the governments of a number of countries (including Spain, Lebanon, Panama and Colombia) locate and salvage ancient shipwrecks. He spent four years excavating the sunken city of Port Royal, Jamaica, which disappeared beneath the sea in 1692, but had to quit when one of the underwater buildings collapsed on him and injured his back.

Marx is a prolific writer and raconteur of tales so adventurous that his hearers sometimes find it hard to believe anyone could lead such a life. In 1962 he sailed an authentic replica of Columbus' ship *Niña* from Spain to San Salvador. For this voyage he was dubbed Knight Commander in the order of Isabel the Catholic, which means he is an official "Sir". What bothered Marx the most about the *Niña II* expedition was that since they were making every last detail of the voyage authentic, he had worn bloomers along with his sword and tights when the *Niña II* arrived in port. If there is anything Marx can't tolerate, it's being mistaken for a sissy.

After the *Niña II* voyage, he tried two Viking expeditions, both of which failed when their authentic ships sank. Ever since then, he had been hankering to build an authentic replica of a Phoenician ship and sail it from Lebanon to Mexico.

In 1960, while digging around in the archives of Seville, Marx learned about the *Maravilla*. He figured roughly where the wreck would be from old nautical charts and the written reports of one survivor of the 1656 disaster. With this information in hand, Marx set about the business of getting financial backing and the divers to go after the ship.

Willard Bascom became Marx's partner in the deal. With Marx, Bascom formed the Seafinders Corporation and together the two men raised \$200,000 to

finance the hunt. Bascom always had a fascination for ancient wrecks, and looking for them seemed to be about the only thing he hadn't yet done in the ocean.

Bascom already had a significant reputation and had written several books about the sea. His *Waves and Beaches* had involved extensive mapping and surveying of the entire U.S. coastline for defense and strategic purposes. It is now an often used textbook in college oceanography courses. *A Hole in the Bottom of the Sea* chronicled his incredible plan to drill into the Mohorovicic discontinuity—that layer of rock between the earth's crust and mantle. The Moho, as it is called, has some peculiar properties which were discovered and defined by the Croatian scientist Andrija Mohorovicic. Bascom wanted to know what sort of material this Moho contained.

He developed the idea of drilling what he called the "Mohole" at sea in an area where the earth's crust is thinnest. He devised the revolutionary concept of dynamic positioning, wherein the unanchored drill ship could be kept stationary during drilling by firing up four propellers (called "steering screws"). This would keep the ship centered over the drill pipe. While John F. Kennedy was president, the Mohole project proceeded full force, but when Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, the new administration discontinued funding for Mohole, and the project was scrapped. Still, the scientific achievements were enormous. Bascom considered it a mixed glory.

So, in May of 1972, Dick had completed all the preparations for the *Maravilla* expedition with Bascom and Marx. He phoned me from Florida and said that all was ready and I should come as soon as possible. I met Rhoda Bascom, Willard's spirited Norwegian wife, in Long Beach and we began our three-and-a-half-day drive from California to Florida. The drive itself was an adventure. Every state contained unique people and varied landscapes.

Summer in Florida was something else. I thought I could adjust to any weather in the world, but by the time I'd been in Satellite Beach for a week and hadn't slept one night because of the heat and humidity, I knew I was in trouble. We were living with Marx, and so were the Bascoms. Marx's wife, Jenifer, was enormously congenial about it all. A red-headed, vibrant, intelligent and fascinating woman, Jenifer was in the midst of a pregnancy and was not going with us on the expedition. Later I regretted that, because with her wits, Jenifer might have been able to smooth the troubled waters that were to erupt around us.

Our ship, the *Grifon*, was an old, converted trawler outfitted with prop blasters, which are giant metal tubes that fit over the ship's propellers to deflect water downward. They also scatter sand to uncover such things as shipwrecks.



Diver Hillary Hauser spots a resting anchor (right).

Hillary swims along the full length of a huge anchor (opposite page).

Photo by Dick Anderson

The *Grifon* was no yacht, but it was perfect for what we were doing. After several days of hunting around for last-minute supplies and groceries, we left Fort Pierce and headed out for the Little Bahama Bank.

The way to find sunken Spanish galleons is easy, if you know how. Marx leased a proton magnetometer, an expensive piece of equipment, and we had a speedboat. Marx and Bascom had obtained a salvage lease from the Bahamian government for a 25-square-mile chunk of ocean that lay 25 miles from Memory Rock and 45 miles north of West End, Grand Bahama Island.

Treasure hunting goes like this: day in and day out you cruise up and down imaginary aisles of ocean with a speedboat and the magnetometer, watching the instrument for any signs of unusual activity. Usually there are none. Marx mentioned it might be difficult because the sunken *Maravilla* had 58 bronze cannons aboard and bronze does not register on magnetometers. There was also a lot of difficulty with the magnetometer itself. Marx jokingly—yet not entirely jokingly—blamed its erratic behavior on the fact we were working in the Bermuda Triangle, that notorious area where electronic equipment goes haywire and where sailors, like ourselves, disappear.

On the days we didn't use the magnetometer, we towed each other behind the boat, alternating among Dick, Bob and me. In this manner we were like shark



Photo by Dick Anderson

bait being trolled. It didn't make me feel any better to see that that Dick always carried a speargun when he was on the line, whereas I was never offered any means of defense. In any case, we could scan the bottom visually this way, looking for the telltale sign of shipwrecks—any abnormal-looking pile of too-regular stones. Round ballast stones were used in galleons for weight distribution and ballast. Such stones did not corrode or erode.

Mainly the whole thing was tedious. Treasure hunting does not get good until you actually find the treasure. Until that point you travel up and down, up and down, back and forth, back and forth, day in and day out, over rectangular chunks of ocean. Whenever we picked up a reading on the magnetometer, we stopped to investigate, free diving first to see what the area looked like. If the preliminary searching resulted in anything at all interesting, the *Grifon* was brought over and stationed above the area with three anchors—one off the bow, two off the stern—then the prop blaster was lowered. When the engines were put into forward gear the boat wouldn't move, but the enormous thrust of water jetted straight down and blew away mountains of sand underneath the boat.

We uncovered a number of old anchors that way, one of them with an ancient wood stock still intact, protected over the years by the sand that had buried it. It was a shame, in a way, not to keep these anchors, but if we'd salvaged every



Mel Fisher displays gold and silver Spanish treasure (right).

Bob Marx aboard the *Grifon* with Maravilla treasure on the deck (opposite page).

Courtesy of Mel Fisher

artifact we found, the *Grifon* would have looked like an overloaded trash barge. We were out there, after all, for gold doubloons.

Cabin fever is one of those things you hear about, but I had no idea how far it would go. We were all respectable people, or at least we thought so in the beginning. Bob Marx began to dispel his anxieties by telling wild tales, and the rest of us either got into or escaped from one another by jumping overboard for a swim.

The heat was oppressive. Even at sea there was no respite from the overwhelming humidity. I soon discovered that I could get temporary relief by sticking my head into the freezer, but that made it worse when I had to return to normal atmosphere. Night after night I didn't sleep, and neither did Dick. Marx was tough, seasoned to Florida, and nothing seemed to bother him. My bunk lay just below a porthole, but we were not allowed to open portholes when the boat was under way at night. I found out why one night when I opened the porthole above my head and seconds later was drenched with seawater. Since the staterooms were below deck next to the engine room, the sleeping quarters of the *Grifon* were impossibly stuffy when the boat was moving. I finally took to the stern deck and slept inside the speedboat, which wasn't too bad once I wedged myself down between the seats.

One morning, at about 5 a.m., I was sleeping fitfully when I was awakened by the sound of sails flapping. I sat up and saw that a sailboat had pulled alongside



Courtesy of Bob Marx

the *Grifon*. Our captain heard them, too, and came out to give them audience. Unbelievably, it was a couple in their early sixties out on a pleasure sail.

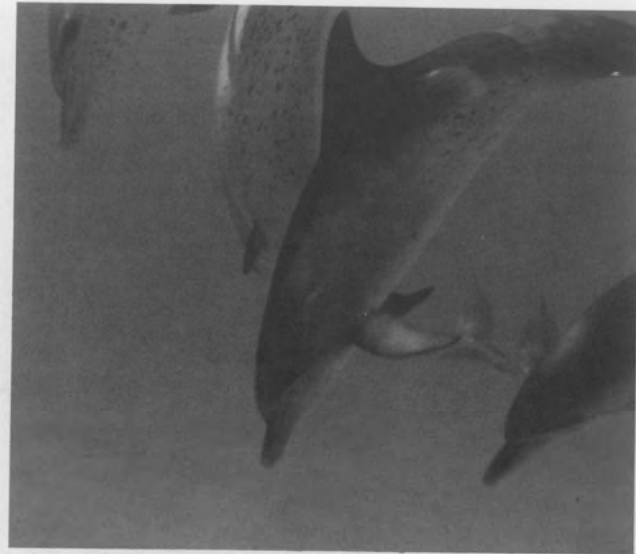
"Where're we at?" the man yelled.

They were in the middle of the Little Bahama Bank, out in the Gulf Stream, 40 miles from the nearest land, with no idea of where they were. I began to understand about the Bermuda Triangle. People didn't disappear in extraterrestrial fashion, they simply got lost. Pleasure sailors from Florida head out to sea toward the Bahamas and other Caribbean islands with little idea of navigation, believing that it's just a "short hop" between here and there. Indeed, it is a wide expanse of ocean that has to be reckoned with. Boats do not always come by so regularly to help you if you lose your way. When I first boarded the *Grifon* I was given the serious instruction that if I ever walked outside while the boat was under way I had to always, *always*, tell someone I was doing so. One slip over the low rails of the boat without anyone being aware of it meant that you might just swim in circles until the sharks found you. I took that advice very seriously, and when I went out on deck at night I crawled on all fours.

About mid-July we had to run from Hurricane Agnes.

This hurricane demolished a lot of the eastern coast of the United States. Out at sea the wind was nasty business. We beat a hasty retreat to West End Bahamas and for three days we waited it out. The storm didn't ease the tempers that had been brewing during the previous weeks. By the end of Agnes, it was Dick vs.

CALL TO ADVENTURE



Clear water and strong sunlight accentuate the graceful features of the dolphin (also on opposite page).

Photo by Dick Anderson

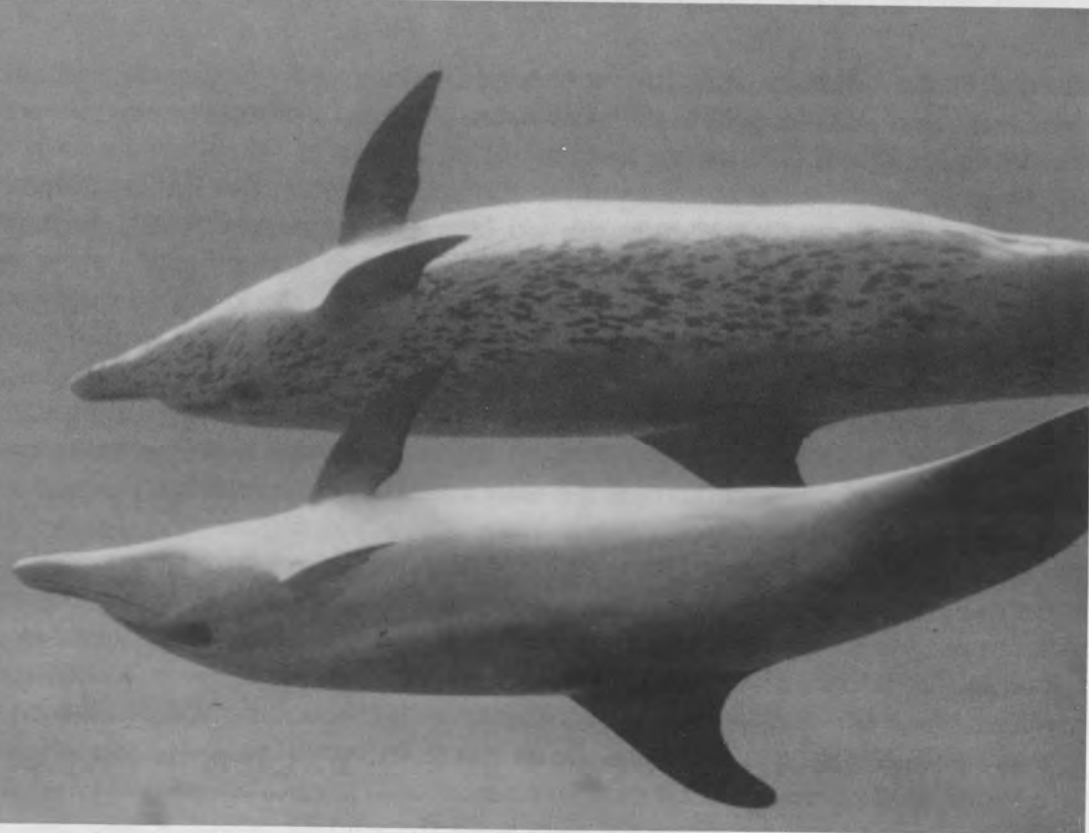


Photo by Dick Anderson

SPANISH GALLEONS AND LONG LOST TREASURE

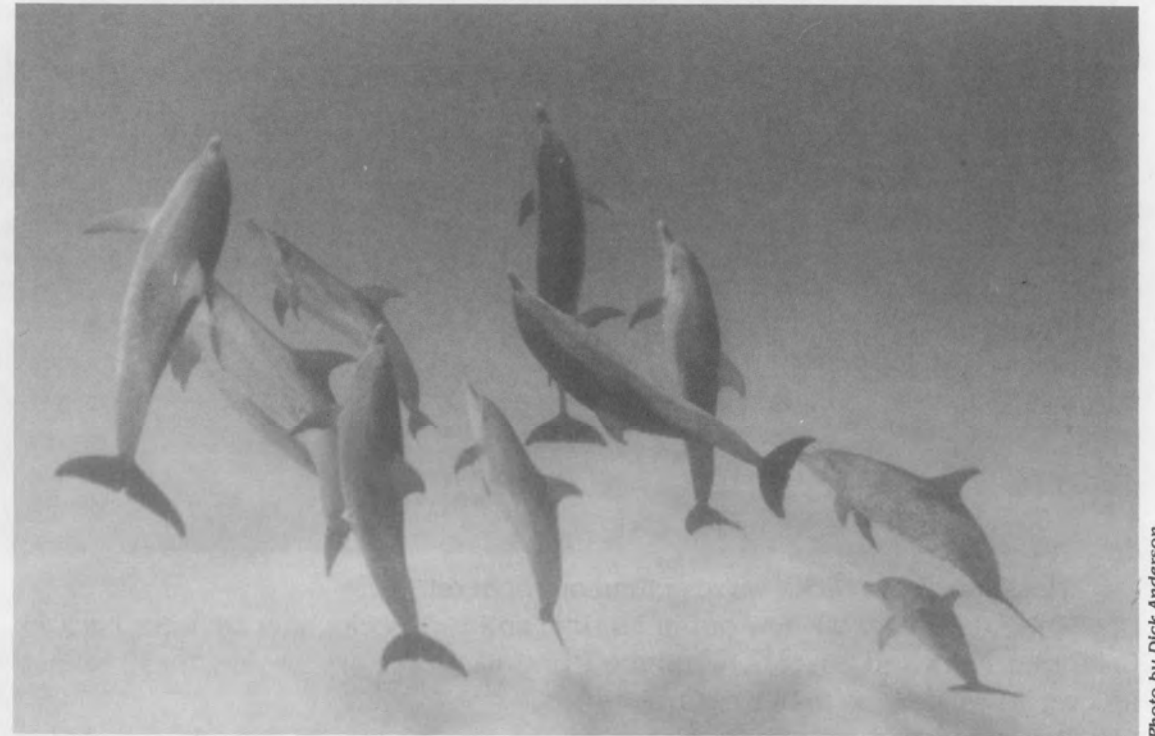


Photo by Dick Anderson

Bascom, Bascom vs. Marx, Marx vs. Dick, Dick vs. me, and Marx vs. himself. We dived almost daily, and I loved that. When you're underwater you don't hear people talking.

One day an incredible thing happened. We were moving the *Grifon* from one place to another when a group of porpoises appeared at our bow. They swooped around the old trawler with a happy vitality—rolling, diving, gleefully crisscrossing each other in the waves.

I really wanted to get into the ocean with the porpoises and asked the captain to stop the boat. Bascom and Marx put up an immediate protest. I told Marx I wanted to get in with them and take some pictures. He reluctantly agreed—mainly, I think, because he thought it would be an exciting story when the porpoises killed me. They didn't. Then everyone jumped in—including Bascom.

We dived to the bottom, 30-40 feet, and the porpoises came to us, circling around and surfacing when we did. The big males, the mothers and babies, all played the game of swimming fearlessly close, but staying just inches from our reach. The dolphins lifted my spirits immeasurably. Every time they came around I wanted to jump in with them, and most of the time I did. Some years later I did

CALL TO ADVENTURE

a fair amount of research on porpoises and wrote several articles about them. It was only then that I became convinced that the porpoises on this trip were the real treasure.

Finally, Dick decided to leave the expedition.

When we got back to Fort Pierce, we gathered our things, drove down to Key West and visited Mel Fisher, a successful treasure hunter who had founded the Treasure Salvors museum. We met him in his office, and he confided that he was on the trail of the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, which had gone down in 1622, 40 miles southwest of Key West in the Marquesas Islands. The *Atocha* was the ultimate gem of Spanish galleons, Fisher said, having 40 tons of treasure aboard. He described to us a 63-pound bar of silver among the items reported missing in the ship's manifesto, or cargo list. Mel told us all this and then popped the question to Dick: did he want to head another salvage Fisher had going—the 1715 fleet that had gone down off Florida, for \$125 per month and 1/600th of his empire?

"Heck, no," said Dick, "we're getting out of here!"

Some days later we flew out of Florida, and two weeks after we were back in California, Marx and Bascom found the *Maravilla*. In the first month, they brought up over \$5 million worth of treasure.

About ten months later, Fisher found the *Atocha*. Although a positive identification of the wreck wasn't made until some time later, his crew began to bring up treasure that eventually added up to \$400 million.

When Mel's salvage operation was in full gear, his wife Dolores and sons went to work with him. Dirk Fisher was in charge of the salvage barge *Northwind*, and Kim Fisher captained the second barge *Southwind*. In May, 1973 the divers picked up the anchor from the galleon and followed a trail of silver coins, muskets, swords and iron cannonballs until they reached a pocket of treasure that yielded an incredible 1,500 coins in one day. The divers called this spot "The Bank of Spain." Some time after, Dirk located the pilot's astrolabe, an ancient instrument used for charting celestial bodies and which predated the sextant. This valuable artifact had been made in Lisbon about 1560 and was perfectly preserved because it had remained buried in deep sand all those years.

The divers then found two gold bars, a four-and-a-half-pound gold disk and silver bars stamped with identifying numbers and initials. In the cargo lists of Spanish galleons the numbers of silver ingots are recorded, and treasure expert Eugene Lyon was able to make a positive identification of Fisher's wreck. It was definitely the *Atocha*.

Then trouble began. While a *National Geographic* film crew was on site documenting Fisher's operation, the son of one of the photographers was swept



Photo by Dick Anderson



Hillary Hauser encounters two dolphins from the school (below).

Photo by Dick Anderson



Dolphins can frequently appear to be standing upright, as they swim in the sea.

Photo by Dick Anderson

into the propeller of the *Southwind*. He was flown by helicopter to Key West, but died before he reached the hospital.

Soon after, the Securities and Exchange Commission received a complaint about Treasure Salvors, Fisher's company. While auditors investigated Fisher's records, he couldn't sell stock or shares of treasure, which all but closed down his operation as the stocks and shares were his main source of funds for the expedition. To give an idea of the expense involved in such an operation, by the time the *National Geographic* magazine article was published in June 1976, Fisher had found a reported \$6 million in treasure, but had spent \$2 million bringing it up.

When the complications with the SEC were finally unravelled, the State of Florida raised its hand for 25 percent of Fisher's find. Fisher maintained that the *Atocha* lay outside state jurisdiction, but during a first division of the treasure Florida acquired the precious astrolabe. The Supreme Court finally decreed that the *Atocha* did, indeed, lie outside state boundaries.

Now the federal government plunged into the fight, claiming it had jurisdiction over the wreck. Fisher filed suit in Federal Admiralty Court for ownership of the *Atocha* treasure. In 1976, three years after Fisher's discovery, the Federal Admiralty Court ruled that the U.S. government had no claim to the

treasure of the *Atocha*. This was a great victory for Fisher, but the victory was marred by another accident that proved to be Fisher's biggest heartbreak.

In July, 1975 Dirk Fisher, his wife Angel, and six other persons anchored the *Northwind* somewhere near the Marquesas atoll for the night. Early the next morning, while everyone aboard was asleep, the *Northwind* began taking on water and suddenly capsized. Three people were drowned: crewman Rick Gage, and Dirk and Angel Fisher.

Numerous legends speak of evil spirits that guard hidden treasure. Montezuma is said to have put a curse on the fabulous Aztec fortune to ruin the men who seek it. Those who search for sunken treasure know both the imaginative tales and the realistic risks. Still they search, because somehow they feel their fortunes and fates will differ from all those who have gone before. By the time they've lost friends, battled the courts, faced death and suffered tragedies as great as Mel Fisher's, they usually learn they are just as frail as anybody else.

Suggested Reading

- Robert Marx, *Shipwrecks of the Western Hemisphere*, (The World Publishing Company: New York, 1971).
 Willard Bascom, *Waves and Beaches* (Doubleday: New York, 1964).
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 Eugene Lyon, "The Trouble with Treasure" (*National Geographic Magazine*, June 1976).
 Duncan Mathewson III, *Treasure of the Atocha* (E. P. Dutton: New York, 1986).
 Peter Throckmorton, *Shipwrecks and Archaeology* (Little, Brown and Company: Boston, 1969).