

Port Royal Treasure History

The True Story of the Cow & Calf Treasure

Rumors and mystery abound when we all start speaking of pirate treasure – especially around Port Royal, Roatan.

During the 17th century, Port Royal was home to over 2000 pirates, with some 500 houses, even a church. Today, very little remains save for some rubble and ruins of cannon foundations on Fort Morgan Cay.

But, back around the early 1900's Port Royal saw some interesting activity for a while when some treasure hunters arrived.

Frederick A Mitchell-Hedges (Mike Hedges) was born in England in 1882 with an insatiable thirst for travel. He rejected a respectable life as the son of a successful stock broker in England, to roam the planet – starting at the age of 16.

After many adventures and misadventures in Norway, Montreal, New York he became successful in the stock market, earning his way in by professional gambling.

Finally, in 1912, after bad decisions and losing it all, he hitchhiked penniless to Mexico, and claims to have been forced at gunpoint to join the famous Pancho Villa's band of renegades. He was with this gang for several years.

Returning to England at the start of WWI with the intention of joining the army, with a sizeable bag of loot (his share of the bandits' spoils), he was summarily rejected by the military, due to some old gunshot wounds.

So, he used up that loot wandering all over Central America – it had been on his wish list of destinations for a long time.

Gambling, carousing and spending nights in jail all over Honduras, Panama, Guatemala, Nicaragua and San Salvador, he friended presidents, generals, revolutionaries and gunslingers.

He was fascinated by the legend of an ancient city in Belize. But sadly, he was fresh out of money.

In 1921 he returned to London where he schmoozed his way into some funds in the form of a particular Lady Richmond Brown. She agreed to fund him if she could come along. So away they went to Panama where they had great fun 'discovering' the primitive savages up rivers and on islands 'becoming gods'



in his words – belittling and inspiring religious awe in everyone from witch doctors to chiefs to little children.

But in 1924 he found himself drawn to the deepest jungles of Honduras. He claimed to have discovered the ancient Mayan city Lubaantum – 6 square miles, buried under dense jungle, taking 4 years to excavate with the help of hundreds of Maya Indians. This was an outright lie. In fact, the site had been discovered in 1903 by Dr. Thomas Gann, and it was he who in fact led Mike to the site.

Having thus developed an interest in archaeology, Mike became kind of famous in England, and kept coming up with grants and donations to fund further junkets. He says he generously donated thousands of artifacts to various museums. (Presumably he sold the rest to fund his lifestyle.)

Lady Richmond Brown finally returned to England where she wrote several pompous and patronizing books about the primitive naked savages she encountered in Central America.

Mike returned to Central America, and with his grants and donations, roamed the Bay Islands from 1929-1936 in style, aboard a 25 ton motor yacht Amigo looking for artifacts.

His crew were:

The one-legged Captain Frank Boynton

A toothless islander first mate Jim (no last name)

Charlie the one-eyed Mexican mechanic and professional killer

Gilly who spoke hardly at all

Joe from Barbarat, another killer wanted by 4 Central American countries, but knowledgeable of every inch of the Bay Islands.

One might ask - where does a respected archaeologist fresh from the European lecture circuit acquire such quality friends? He doesn't say.

Joined by a fellow explorer and secretary Jane Houlston and an adopted daughter Sammy from Canada, who Mike had acquired several years before, they took over Comfort Cay (aka Careening Cay) and built some little huts to use as a home base.

Traveling to Bonacca (Guanaja Island), the group made reluctant friends in Savannah Bight and were shown an ancient circle of monolithic stones and mounds similar to Druid formations, where they excavated over a thousand artifacts.

On Helene they befriended a local named Frenchy, who showed them all around the caves. Again they found many hundreds of fabulous carved artifacts.

Climbing to the top of Barbarat they unearthed a wealth of pottery. He doesn't say where all these artifacts ended up.

After some extensive trips up the Patuca River and the Caratasca Lagoon along Honduras' North Coast, observing orgies, and all kinds of titillating and weird rituals, Mike had to return to England when his father took sick and died.

He never returned to Honduras, what with WWII taking place, although he did traipse happily all over Africa, the Maldives and the Seychelles with Sammy the adopted daughter. He finally retired with Sammy to a castle in England and died in 1959 a hateful, miserable old man, detesting mankind and his civilization, wishing he was on Helene.

But wait! How does one get the money to buy a castle in England? And afford to do all that traipsing around? Especially since he had been disinherited from daddy's will? Something is missing in the story.

A Belize newspaper reported this story in 2004.

One morning while prospecting on Bailey Cay in Old Port Royal, Mike's 'expedition' found two wooden chests loaded with gold doubloons. Continuing with the dig, another 2 chests were found, containing jewelry and emeralds. All this shoveling and messing around eventually attracted the attention of the locals, and then the police (oops) in Coxen Hole, who take a dim view of treasure being pillaged from their country – even back then.

Hearing that the cops were coming at first light, Mike and his crew decided to get out of there. With the Amigo loaded, they set sail for Belize City. Anchoring 150miles offshore, they dumped the old chests overboard and reloaded the loot into fresh crates, labeled "Mayan Artifacts". Booking a quickie passage on a steamer to New York, the loot was sold for 6 million bucks. That was in 1928, remember.

It was determined by the dates on the coins and the type of jewelry that it was probably treasure buried by the particularly bloodthirsty Edward 'Ned' Lowe.

But what was never really determined is this: Did the Amigo sail off with 4 chests, 3 or 2? One story says they reburied 2 chests on Bailey Cay. Another says they took 3 and re-buried the last on Comfort Cay.

After Mitchell-Hedges left, Port Royal went back to sleep. But it was visited in 1963 by the notorious bon-vivant womanizer Howard Jennings. This shameless self-proclaimed treasure hunter was aided by his buddy, writer Robin Moore – author of The French Connection, the Happy Hooker and The Fifth Estate.

Howard had heard all the treasure stories about Port Royal, and looked up Frederick (Mike) Mitchell-Hedges adopted daughter Sammy, who was living quietly in a small house in England. All Mike's money was gone from the traipsing her and her father had done, and the government had taken the rest in death taxes. No more castle for Sammy.

Getting himself invited to Sammy's place, Howard found out over high tea that two treasure chests had indeed been loaded onto the Amigo that night in 1935, but the job was so onerous that as dawn broke, they had to leave the third chest behind. (No mention of a 4th chest, so maybe it never existed). The third chest was smaller than the rest, of rusted iron, but Sammy, who after all was getting on in years, was not sure where exactly they had reburied it. She was afraid to return to Roatan for fear of arrest because of the theft of the treasure years before.

Undaunted, Howard went to the British Museum and procured some maps. Returning with copies to Sammy's place, he showed the maps to her. Finally, Sammy pointed to a spot in Port Royal – at the east end of Fort Key on a spit of land (Comfort Cay maybe). She said "It's there, Howard, right there".

Howard got pretty excited then, and promised to launch an expedition, and share the proceeds with Sammy.

And so, Howard jumped on a plane to Roatan, armed with several metal detectors and lots of camping gear. Not one road had been built on Roatan yet. So he made his way from Coxen Hole to Oakridge by boat, where he rented a room at Merle Cooper's guest house. Over a few beers, he convinced the locals that he was a businessman on vacation, and that his hobby was the history of piracy. He wanted to spend a couple of weeks looking around. Did they know of anyone who could take him to Port Royal.

That's when Howard met Jeff Tree and began to take him into his confidence.

Howard's buddy Robin Moore arrived the next day, and they went out to Port Royal, where they anchored at the Cow & Calf. They decided that they had to take Jeff into their confidence if they were ever to be able to get a chest of gold out of the country. Jeff would get 20% of the loot.

Looking for a flat spot of land, the threesome went searching for the site of Augusta – the pirate settlement where they figured would be the obvious place to hide pirate treasure. The only flat spot Jeff knew of was at Fort Frederick just to the east of the Cow & Calf (12 acres which Howard bought for \$1000 from Billy Greenwood, and later became known as Jennings Point).

Not wanting to get too hot and sweaty, the three hired a bunch of guys from Helene and spent two days clearing the area with machetes, uncovering a disappointing site of only 8 or so house foundations, not the Augusta town they were looking for.

Eventually they did find the site, though, and again hired a bunch of guys from Helene to clear. They found a fort with the remains of 19 cannon emplacements, and many foundations of houses and buildings.



A few days later, on a Sunday when, conveniently Jeff was not there (attending church) using the metal detector, they found a treasure chest – at Augusta - which they smashed open. Inside was a gold necklace and much silver, all black and fused together.

Packing the booty into a knapsack they returned to Merle's guesthouse. Jeff joined them sometime later and they say they opened the knapsack after Jeff arrived. Carefully they separated from the mass 142 pieces of eight. Hiding the loot in the attic in their room at Merle's, they decided that they should leave the island soon before the heat got too hot.

The last thing they really wanted to do would be to go for Mitchell-Hedges chest on Comfort Cay. To do this they would really have to take Jeff into their confidence. So the next day at dawn they headed for Comfort Cay (which Sammy had identified as the location of the missing chest). Since the Cay is covered in thick mangroves, waterlogged and only 3 feet above water level, the metal detectors could not find a signal. They gave up (they say).

The final thing they did was check the Cow with metal detectors, as a last resort. Never mind that it was private property and it looked too small and rocky to hide anything. But it was worth a shot. So as it began raining, they discovered a small landing place cut out of the rock, and some old stone steps. Climbing up to the tip of the natural rock wall, they could see the interior of the island, about 100 ft square, where they uncovered an old 20 x 35 foot foundation, and another level place about 12 feet up to serve as a lookout.

They went over the area with the metal detector, and just as they were about to give up, Howard got a signal from a area near the rock wall! Digging down in the mud and the rain, they uncovered a man-made crack in the rock. With a pick they pulled off a flat rock slab covering a 2 ft square wooden box.

Bashing it open, they discovered inside a moldy old pair of pirate boots, a silver brocade dress and a pouch of gold nuggets. Inside a false bottom of the box was 65 pounds of pure silver bars. Wow. Hastily packing it all into their knapsacks they decided it really was time to get off the island.

Arriving back at Merle's, she told them there had been two soldiers and a cop looking for them that morning. They had tried to get to Port Royal but the rain had stopped them.

Quickly, with Jeff's help, they found a sports fishing boat quick to whisk them off to La Ceiba where they headed to the airport. Back in those days there was no baggage inspection, so off they went, and were celebrating in Jamaica over two tall drinks by one in the morning.

The lost treasure at Comfort Cay has never been reported found. How about it? Care to dig up an island?