

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

Treasure Trove in The Grove

By
Holly Tsur

A mystery began to unfold when Jon Ireland and his friend, Wayne Cook, showed up in my front yard one afternoon last September to hunt for buried treasure. The garden surrounding my ca. 1865 Second French Empire Victorian home seemed a likely bet for finding historical relics. After all, while gardening, I had unearthed numerous old treasures over the years. My growing collection included several broken china shards decorated with blue Oregon state seals, a tiny antique apothecary jar used for dosing syrupy medicines, a miniature antique glass beer mug, and even a rusty old wrench for a Model A Ford. What's more, my home's previous owners had told me about several rare antique snake oil bottles they had unearthed while living there.

Ireland and Cook immediately set to work, walking behind their high-tech metal detectors, and scouring my lawn and flower beds for telltale beeps and squeals signaling long lost metal objects. Occasionally, one of them would reach for a shorter microphone-sized probe to pinpoint just how far below the surface a metal object rested. When they detected something of interest, they made a small horseshoe-shaped cut in my lawn, folding the sod back over itself like the top of a tin can. Then, with a long, narrow trowel, they

delicately removed scoops of dirt from the ground, piling it onto a piece of thick canvas laid out to catch every speck. Their work was meticulous and precise. After they finished digging each hole and examining any metal objects found, they carefully refilled the hole with dirt and flipped the sod back over, revealing no evidence that anyone had ever dug there.

After about an hour of finding nothing but a handful of fairly recent coins and rusty bottle caps, Ireland suddenly dropped to his knees. With a flurry, he unearthed what looked like a nameplate that had been lodged about six inches below the sod. The badly corroded copper oval was about three inches across by one inch high. Each end of the oval was embossed with swirls of scrollwork and punched with a tiny hole. We wondered if these holes allowed the nameplate to be affixed with brass tacks

to the front of a wooden desk. Embossed letters ran horizontally along the center of the nameplate, revealing WALLACE C. BUTLER JR. – SECRETARY. Who was this man? When did he live? And what organization was he secretary of? With a grin, Ireland slipped the mysterious nameplate into my hand and assured me that he and Cook had detected “a lot of activity”



*Metal detectorists Wayne Cook and
Jon Ireland in Holly Tsur's garden*

in my garden. But, he explained, they needed to wait for softer ground before continuing their search. For once, I couldn't wait for Oregon's heavy rains to begin!

Jon Irelan is on a mission. He describes a "sense of urgency" to unearth as many metal relics from Forest Grove's historic neighborhoods as he can before they are lost forever. Unlike dryer climates, our rainy weather dramatically speeds decomposition of buried metal artifacts. If these artifacts are not recovered by a skilled metal detectorist such as Irelan, they will eventually rust and deteriorate in ways that render them unrecognizable. In addition, rapid changes within our growing community bring another threat to buried metal treasures.

Construction backfilling pushes metal objects out of reach. New buildings, additions, and driveways cover soil that can no longer be dug up, making metal objects that are buried below irretrievable. What's more, "pirate" detectorists pose another threat when they unearth and steal metal artifacts without asking permission from property owners. On the open market, such unethical opportunists often sell the valuable artifacts they find. This eliminates the possibility that local residents will ever lay eyes on stolen historical treasures that could reveal valuable information about Forest Grove's history.

Because our town's rich history dates back to the early 1840s, Irelan believes there is literally a treasure trove of historical relics to be found in The Grove – just below the surface. He has found numerous 100-year old card room poker tokens around town. And, in his own backyard, he once found a lady's silver shoe button that likely dates back to the Victorian Era. In his neighbor's yard, Irelan once dug up several antique toy cars dating back to the 1920s. You might imagine the excited look on his neighbor's face when the man recognized that these were toy cars that he had played with and later lost as a child.

"When you're detecting," Irelan explains, "you are so focused on what you're doing and what might've happened in the past in the location where you're working that

time just gets away from you." Currently, he's focused on unearthing a very exciting cache of blacksmithing tools from a property located in Forest Grove's Clark Historic District where he believes a livery stable once stood. His eyes light up when he speaks about it.

When metal detecting, Irelan uses a process that he describes as "very similar to peeling an onion." First, he does a quick survey of the area by scanning the ground with his metal detector to locate old structures, such as privies (outhouses), sheds, and barns. He also checks old Sanborn maps to determine where

such old structures might have existed in the past. If any such structures did exist, there is a good chance

that historic artifacts lie buried below. Next, Irelan does a series of preliminary shallow digs in spots where he encounters the most electrical activity with his metal detector. As a result of these findings, he formulates a plan that determines where and how to focus his efforts. Following this plan, he then begins to search in greater earnest in the most promising areas. All along the way, Irelan keeps property owners closely informed about his efforts. Every night, before leaving the property, he restores the ground and grass back to the way he found them before he began digging. Even if it takes him a month to complete his entire search of someone's property, Irelan continues to close up any holes he digs before he leaves for home each evening.

Irelan will tell you that most of the holes he digs are only about eight inches below the surface or less. "This isn't Pompeii," he quips. "We detectorists generally don't dig down ten feet to find artifacts like archeologists tend to do." But, there are exceptions. Once, while detecting in Mt. Tabor Park, he recalls digging down 24 inches before he finally reached one of his most-prized finds – an old iron hewing ax head that dates back to the 1840s.

Besides unearthing historical relics, Irelan also takes pride in helping community residents recover more recently lost valuables. One of his favorite stories is about a newlywed



doctor living just outside of Forest Grove who telephoned one day after losing his shiny, new wedding band. When Irelan and a younger detectorist friend arrived with their trusty metal detectors in hand, the doctor confessed that he hadn't told his bride that he'd lost the ring. When Irelan asked how he had kept his wife from noticing that the ring was missing, the doctor shrugged, "Whenever she's around, I just keep my left hand in my pocket." But, after Irelan and his friend took a few passes around the yard with their metal detectors, the relieved doctor was soon able to free his left hand from its pocket prison, just before slipping his lost ring back over his finger. Ever since, Irelan has wondered if the good doctor's marriage was saved that day.

Especially during wet winter months when the ground is soggy, you might see Irelan and his state-of-the-art Minelab metal detector searching in city parks or along grassy strips that run between sidewalk and street. But, his Minelab is nothing like the early radio frequency detectors you might've seen packed around beaches by beer-bellied guys wearing plaid Bermuda shorts. This \$1700 baby comes equipped with a 32-bit computer, and bounces multiple frequency audio signals off of metal objects. These multiple frequencies reveal not only a metal object's size and how deeply it's buried, but whether it's made from ferrous material (containing iron) or from a non-ferrous material. These multiple frequencies are also sensitive enough to reveal whether a metal object is made from aluminum, tin, steel, iron, nickel, copper, silver, titanium, gold, or platinum.

Irelan lives by a strong code of "treasure hunter's ethics," not the least of which requires "always asking permission to search on private property" and "always leaving people's yards in as good or better condition than [he] found them." He also makes it a point to respect people's privacy, and refuses to divulge the location of properties where

he finds valuable treasures. (Remember that exciting cache of old blacksmithing tools that he is currently unearthing? Good luck getting him to tell you anything about where it's located other than, "somewhere in the Clark Historic District.")

Most impressive of all, Irelan seeks no payment or treasure booty for his efforts. He hands over the relics he finds to property owners, encouraging them to loan anything of historic significance to Friends of Historic Forest Grove for public display. He maintains that when relics are loaned rather than donated to such historic organizations, they're much more likely to be treated in a respectful and accountable manner. His dream is to someday fill the Friends museum located in the Old Train Station (and possibly even the A.T. Smith house as well) with the historical artifacts he unearths in and around Forest Grove. He envisions these artifacts displayed near a large map of Forest Grove, with lines and arrows pointing from the artifacts to the exact map locations where he found them.

As writer Emily Yoffe said in a 2003 issue of Slate Magazine, "What could be more universal than the desire to find and keep a valuable object



Jon Irelan begins digging after locating a metal object with his Minelab metal detector and probe

that doesn't belong to you?" Before I met Jon Irelan, I might have been more tempted to share Yoffe's sentiments. But, as I learned his story and watched him detecting in my garden, I became more and more impressed by his mission to unearth Forest Grove's buried treasures before it's too late. His unselfish efforts to reclaim lost relics so that others can benefit from their historic

significance made me realize just how historically important Irelan's mission is. I look forward to the day when he returns to my Victorian garden to see what other treasures he might unearth there. With a little luck, maybe he and his Minelab metal detector will find something truly historic to be shared with our community.

The Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board Grant Program

Is your house on our local register? If it is, did you know that your house is eligible for restoration / rehabilitation grant funding? The Historic Landmarks Board has funds to help you with your projects. If you are planning any exterior restoration work such as restoring architectural features or if you have structural work to do such a foundation repair, we'd love to help. We fund projects up to 50% of the cost of the job per grant. Come see us! We can also help you find historically appropriate solutions to any problems you may have.

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In this Issue:

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