

# Fortune Hunter

Following a lifelong passion spells adventure for this underwater Indiana Jones

by Glenn Ostle

Shawn Cowles is a fortune hunter. No question about it. At the age of thirty-six, Shawn has seen more of the world and has had more adventures than most people experience in a lifetime.

He has dived for sunken treasure with Mel Fisher, searched for lost ships in exotic parts of the world as part of an elite deep-diving team, and held more treasure in his hands than many kings.

"I guess I have been a treasure hunter all my life," laughs Shawn. "When I was seven, we lived in a huge, 200-year-old house. I used to search it from top to bottom. One day I found a coin from 1770, and from then on I was hooked."

In particular, Shawn is fascinated with sunken treasure; the type that lies deep—beyond the reach of all but an adventurous few.

Shawn began scuba diving at the age of eleven, while living in Massachusetts, and was certified at twelve. He was captivated by stories of Mel Fisher and his search for Spanish treasure ships off the coast of Florida. But he never guessed that he would some day work for his hero and even help continue his search.

In 1992, Shawn came to Key West on vacation and met Mel as well as Andy Matroci, who was one of the first divers to see the main treasure "pile" of the *Nuestra Senora de Atocha* in 1985. He immediately went home, quit his band, and drove back to Key West to join the crew.

Today the story of the *Atocha* is legend.

Part of a fleet of twenty-eight ships carrying treasure from the New World back to Spain, the *Atocha*, along with seven other ships including her sister ship the *Santa Margarita*, sank in a storm off the coast of Florida in 1622. She was found and claimed by Mel Fisher after a sixteen-year search and a successful legal battle over ownership with the State of Florida and the federal government. To date, the ship



Shawn Cowles, now a vital part of the Mel Fisher's Treasures Corporation, carries on the work of his legendary mentor.

has yielded between \$400 million and \$500 million in gold, silver, and jewels.

Between the *Atocha* dives, Shawn earned a degree in diving business and technology and gained a spot on the U.S. Deep Wreck Diving Team, headed by Billy Deans.

Says Shawn, "We did a lot of mixed-gas and closed-circuit diving and traveled the world looking for historical wrecks sunk

in deep water, between 150 and 500 feet. As our diving style was cutting edge, we also worked with a number of equipment manufacturers on research and development."

In Guam the group found artifacts from the *Nuestra Senora de Pilar*, and in Venezuela they searched for a fleet of French ships before a change of government forced them to leave the country

prematurely.

Off the coast of Louisiana the dive team sought *El Cazador*, which sank in 300 feet of water. The ship was full of money being sent to Louisiana to pay Spanish workers. When the ship sank, the workers left, and Spain ultimately gave the land to Napoleon, who then sold it to Thomas Jefferson as the Louisiana Purchase. On one dive Shawn remembers the team feeling around on the muddy bottom in the dark and finding stacks of silver coins stuck together and black from years in saltwater.

In 2001, Shawn came out of the water and moved to the administrative side of Mel Fisher's Treasures Corporation, which has a staff of approximately fifty people. He soon learned all facets of the operation. Today he is responsible for the investor relations department and raising funds for ongoing search and salvage operations, the same job Mel Fisher did before he died in 1998.

"Many people think that when Mel found the *Atocha's* main pile, the job was over," says Shawn. "But we are still looking for the stern castle of the ship and the main ballast pile of her sister ship, the *Santa Margarita*. According to the ships' manifests, many items are still missing, including 128,000 silver coins, 420 silver ingots, 150 copper ingots, 108 gold bars, and twelve bronze cannons.

"In addition, we have only found a few jewels from a seventy-pound box of emeralds that was smuggled aboard the *Atocha* before she sailed. And thirty-eight members of Spanish royalty also were on board with their personal gold and jewels. So there is still an amazing amount of treasure buried in the Florida sand."

After its discovery in 1985, the *Atocha* treasure toured the country for ten years. In 2001, Shawn opened and managed a Mel Fisher Exhibit on Sanibel that has since closed. Today the treasure of the *Atocha* is displayed in, and sold from, Mel



**Although the *Atocha's* main pile proved fruitful, Cowles contends that there is still an amazing amount of gold and jewels to be found beneath the Florida waters.**

Fisher shops in Las Vegas as well as Florida shops in Orlando, Kissimmee, Sebastian, and two shops in Key West, including the main location on Greene Street.

For those who think that Shawn's life is one to be envied, they are not alone. The October 2005 issue of *Men's Journal* recently listed Shawn as having one of the "50 Best Jobs." But not everyone approves of what he does.

"Unfortunately there has been an ongoing battle with the academic world about our work,"

says Shawn. "Shipwrecks are a huge part of our history, and many are just rotting away. Salvaging them is the only way to bring these discoveries to the attention of the world.

"We also have an active education program that includes lectures and a popular children's program, all managed by the nonprofit part of our organization."

Ongoing expeditions are totally funded by individuals who purchase full or partial shares that range from \$9,000 for a one-eighth share, up to \$72,000 for a full share that entitles the investor to one percent of all treasure found that year.

Says Shawn, "In twenty years the worst return we have had is breakeven, and in the last five years it has averaged between 10 and 20 percent.

"We sell the shares as an adventure and a way for people to enrich their lives. Investors can dive with the salvage crews anytime, and at the end of the year they all share the treasure equally. It is like a 'club,' which is why most investors return year after year."

According to Shawn, "Once you find treasure and hold it in your hands, it is hard to do anything else."

And Shawn should know. ☞

*Glenn Ostle is a freelance writer and photographer and an avid traveler whose work has appeared in publications such as Sport Diver, Scuba Diving, and Caribbean Travel & Life.*