

# History reveals itself to treasure hunters

By Kristin Delaplane

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The Vacaville metal-detecting team of Buttari & Bruni learned of a location in downtown Vacaville where an old house was being razed. The two immediately set off in search of treasure.

At first, using the tools of their trade, the pair weren't hitting pay dirt.

Somewhat frustrated, Tom Bruni jumped into the hole where the foundation had been and almost immediately came up with a Standing Liberty quarter. In a matter of another minute or so he was holding a 1908 Barber quarter in the sunlight.

These finds indicated to the team that there was lots to be had in this location.

Pete Buttari, a contract painter, and Bruni, a dog show photographer, detailed their experience. "The next thing to show up were glass shards and old clay marbles; marbles that are turn of the century and prior to. Nothing we found was overly exciting, but the experience of finding what we did just gave me an overall feeling," said Buttari, who has been metal-detecting for a full seven years.

This was his initial experience in being the first at an old site. For the unearther of treasure, a virgin site is a special find and in this case about 50,000 items were discovered.

The dig was in an area where there were once lots of homes and was also near old Japan Town. It is known that two houses were on the site.

One was built in the early 1900s. When it burned down in the late 1930s, another house was built on the site. "So," Buttari explains, "the finds span the 1880s to the late 1930s.

"When dirt gets moved around and moved from one property to another, old stuff gets moved around." So an old Japanese sake bottle may not have originated from this exact spot. It may have come from a place nearby.

Other finds included a number of bottles: an old-time ink bottle, Chinese medicine bottles and a picnic flask for whiskey. The latter is a square bottle. The pair found lots of nails.

Also, old buttons and cut-to-pattern buttons covered with material to match one's clothing. A few old toothbrushes were dug up. These were the early toothbrushes that were carved out of bone with an ivory finish.

The few jewelry items are of no value, such as a lady's brass ring, but it undoubtedly was precious to the owner. There is an intriguing old lock, gnarled over time, old electrical insulators made out of clay and an old camper's fork.

When asked about his favorite find, Buttari displayed an old toothbrush that been hand-carved and is pre-1900s.

Buttari introduced Bruni to metal detecting 2 1/2 years ago. "When we first got into the area, we found a 1902 silver dime," said Bruni, "but we weren't finding much else."

After combing the perimeter of the foundation and not coming up with much, Bruni went down to what had been the area underneath the house. That is when he came up with the two quarters.

Within two to three minutes, he found detected more silver coins. And as he was digging in, he was also unearthing glass shards, marbles and toothbrushes - non-metallic objects that were collectibles.

It must be noted that being in a pit such as this is not without its hazards. "On the danger level, you're at old, abandoned sites. When people move out, nature moves in," Bruni points out. "Insects. Reptiles."

In the past, Bruni has twice met up with big rattlesnakes. In this dig, he was bitten by a black widow spider.

Down at San Andreas, he and Buttari were in the way of watering hole for some 400 cows and bulls, the sight of which sent the pair flying in different directions.

After all the coins had been detected, the machinery was picking up lots of iron objects such as nails. Bruni explained, "When there's a lot of iron at a site, it in essence shuts down the detector's ability to read other metals such as silver and gold."

By now, Buttari was in the pit with Bruni and they were methodically digging. The dirt was dry and soft, so their task of shoveling and using shifters was relatively easy.

They picked out all the coins they could get. And then came the bottles and toothbrushes. An old rubber ball and the marbles seemed to appear in pockets. There was a pipe stem and some steel ware and nickel pans. One still has the label on it.

Though the items are everyday items, "for me it was all exciting," Bruni said.

Bruni said his favorite item is a merchant's token, which is brass and in the shape of a coin.

"It's a Vacaville merchant's token that we date to between 1900 and 1920," Bruni said.

"A lot of merchants had these tokens. They were similar to coupons. This coin is good for 5 cents in trade or a 5-cent discount on a purchase. Some merchant tokens are highly collectible and valuable."

Burt Hughes, historian at the Vacaville Heritage Council, researched the token. The name of the merchant, S. Tsuchiya, appears on the coin. Burt discovered that S. Tsuchiya emigrated here in 1899 when he was 18 years old. It isn't known what type of business Tsuchiya operated.

Bruni also did some research for his marble collection and found that some go back to the turn of the century.

"Some are extremely prized from those days, but none of them is overly valuable," he said. "Nothing we found was overly valuable. Nothing that was unusual. But it's all a bit of history. The celluloid comb, for instance, is a forerunner of plastic "

Buttari and Bruni are members of the Mount Diablo Metal Detecting Club in Concord, and by the time this appears in the paper, they will have taken their collection to the next meeting and given a "show-and-tell" demonstration. They ended up putting in more than 100 hours on the dig. In total they came up with five coins ranging from 1895 to the late 1920s. They have in excess of 100 old marbles.

The collection is actually is broken into two private collections. Bruni and Buttari each have rights to their own finds, unless they ever unearth a box of gold coins. Then the deal is to share 50-50.

Neither party is anxious to take his finds to the next antique market. They want to enjoy the items.

If anything of value comes up as they travel to new sites, Buttari figures it could be a good hedge on retirement. "You can't be too attached to a piece," he said. However, if they ever do find that gold and it goes up to \$900 an ounce, "it's out of here," said Buttari.

A favorite metal-detecting area of the pair is Golden Gate Park. Of course, many of the finds go back to '60s and the Summer of Love.

Buttari said, "I'm intrigued with never really knowing what's coming out. You detect something and you get a silver ring or you come up with a gold ring. I often go out with my 10-year-old daughter, Tina. Now she has her own collection."

For Bruni, it can be more than items. "I've had some real spiritual experiences. Experiences where I've felt this is as close as you can get to reliving the past, times before I was born. When you recover an item that's been covered for a hundred years and then suddenly it's uncovered, you think, 'Who lost this? How did they lose it?' Even the more mundane items make you wonder.

"Items that you can tell were not intentionally discarded," Bruni said. "It makes you wonder about people and speculate. People living in a home in the middle of nowhere 150 years ago. Living off the land. There were times during this dig when I could feel their presence."

You can bet that when these two get a whiff of a foundation being opened up, the team of Buttari & Bruni will have their nose to the ground.

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