

6/22/2008

Beachcombers clean up: Armed with high-tech metal detectors, they capitalize on high gold prices

With high-tech detectors, high gold prices, there's money to be found down at the shore

By Emily Zeugner
The Associated Press

Last summer Roy Evans, history buff, outdoorsman and amateur treasure hunter, set off in search of buried riches.

Five hours a day, he scoured the fine, white sands of Georgia's Tybee Island, and within a week he'd struck gold: 23 separate pieces including two crosses, 12 rings, a handful of medallions and brooches and one chain necklace - a bounty worth several thousand dollars.

"It was amazing, what I found that week," said Evans, of Greer, S.C. "It might have been a new record for me."

But the loot wasn't buried by pirates. The jewelry was lost by distracted and forgetful sunbathers, tucked into a shoe or under a corner of a beach blanket before a swim only to be misplaced in the confusion at the end of the day. To cash in, Evans needed only luck, a little patience and his trusty MineLab metal detector.

This summer, amateur treasure hunters predict the beaches will be filled with people just like Evans. Lured by the skyrocketing price of gold and the thrill of serendipity, new would-be treasure diggers are joining the ranks of experienced beach metal detectionists, as they call themselves, in what might be a modern-day gold rush.

'Pays for itself'

Gone are the days when most of the beep-beep-beeps meant digging a big pit only to pull out a penny or crushed soda pop can, said Stu Copperwheat, president of the Electronic Archaeological Recovery Treasure Hunters club of central New York state. Metal detection technology has improved considerably over the past decade, and today's machines are sensitive enough to tell the difference between gold and platinum, nickel and quarter, necklace and kabob skewer.

The detectors run from \$800 to several thousand dollars, but unlike other specialized hobby equipment, metal detectors almost always pay for themselves, Copperwheat said.

"You find one or two valuable things and there's the price of your machine," he said.

Historical relics

While most serious detectionists aren't primarily gold seekers - the most prized finds are historical relics like 18th century coins or Civil War uniform buttons buried in the

woods and fields of former battlegrounds - beaches do hold a particular appeal, Copperwheat said. A detectionist might search and dig all day on a buggy, hot field and find nothing but rocks, but rarely do beach hunters come away empty-handed. Plus it's fun and easy to shovel light, loosely packed sand amid volleyball games and barbecuing families.

Evans himself switched entirely to beaches for his treasure hunting about 15 years ago, when he "just got too old to fool around with picks and mosquitoes and snakes" on Revolutionary War battlefields. The change has proved to be a lucrative one: All told he's found 150 diamond rings on beaches, including two that were appraised for nearly \$4,000 each.

And those are just the engagement rings; unfortunate beachgoers lose all kinds of jewelry. If it's made of precious metal, Evans has found it in the sand: class rings, confirmation rings, earrings, necklaces ... even a few solid gold false teeth.

Returning items

Evans said he's motivated in part by the adventure of the hunt and the money, but also by sympathy for what others have lost.

"It must be a real heartache, losing something that means so much," he said.

Sometimes initialed or inscribed memorabilia provide enough clues to track down an owner - most metal detector enthusiasts tell stories of triumphantly reuniting former high school football stars or Vietnam veterans with their class rings and dog tags - but most baubles found on beaches are plain and unmarked.

"The goal is always to try to return something," said Ross Soderberg, of the Great Lakes Metal Detector Group. "But stuff with no name on it, well, that's just too tough to find the owner."

Spare change

Instead, Evans divides the nicest jewelry between his wife and two daughters and displays the prettiest rings with precious stones in a glass case in his living room. The rest he sells by the ounce, money that's served to fund vacations and supplement his salaries from General Motors and Lowe's Co.

And when the wedding band pickings are slim, there's still money to be made in clad, a detectionist term for coins minted after 1964. They may not be collectibles, but pailfuls of nickels and dimes still add up to serious cash.

Matt Smechler, president of the Cascade Treasure Club in Seattle, said the extra change he finds while out hunting covers the price of batteries for his metal detector and gas for his car.

"Or at least, I used to pay for gas with it," Smechler said.

Go late

But before you get started, experienced detectionists have a little advice: It's best to head out both late in the beach season and late in the day, to give the swimsuited

crowds time to drop their valuables. Join a group of amateurs to compare tips, learn new skills and "brag about what you find," said Donnie Bagwell, a member of the South Carolina Treasure Club. Invest in a quality detector that's able to discern the sterling silver among the twists of tinfoil.

And cultivate a sense of wonder, **because "you never ever know what you might find," Soderberg said.**

"Last week I found a bunch of pop tops, a shoe buckle and platinum wedding band," he said.

And any advice for the beach-going public?

"If you don't want to lose it, never, ever wear your jewelry to the beach," Soderberg said. "You think it's not going to happen to you, but it can and it will. In fact, it's happened to me."

