

The day pirates came to Sunset Park

A young boy in 1928 befriends a stranger camping on a beach near the boy's home. He leaves the boy much more than buried treasure.

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My grandfather remembers that it was somewhere around the spring of 1928 when the two men pulled into Sunset Park, driving a black Model-A Ford.

Watching with a 12-year-old's wide eyes, he saw the strangers stop at the beach near his family's house on Homer Avenue and make camp on the ribbon of sand and pines that bordered the bay.

The water was a clear green, teeming with fish and birds, and the shoreline had not yet been filled in with dredge to build Culbreath Bayou.

In those balmy days, the halls of Gorrie Elementary School could hardly contain Warrick Lee Ward, a boy with a taste for adventure and the ocean. He was already building his first sailboat out of found lumber and hardware, so it was a thrill when the strangers took an interest in the boat's progress, and asked about the local tides and weather.

For several days, the men camped on the beach and made sketches. In the evenings, young Warrick Lee would trade salt and pepper from his parents' kitchen for stories of the strangers' travels, which had taken them from Alaska to Greenland and points much farther south. One of the men gave my grandfather a travel book illustrated with heroic pen-and-ink drawings, which he signed with a personal inscription.

Then one morning, the strangers were gone.

Looking around, my grandfather found a knife sticking into the deck of his fledgling sailboat. It pierced a folded piece of parchment through the corner.

Opening it, he saw:

"Ye Blackbeard Treasure Charte, Being A Secrete Record of Valuable Treasure Buried in Sun-Sett Parke in Florida."

The pirate had left an account of his misfortunes after "Having putt in to Florida Water in ye Merrie Countrie of ye Hand Made Ciggar," being bombarded by cannon fire, watching his ship sink and having all hands captured by marines, "except for ye Cabin Boy & one Longe John & ye Deponent, namely Blackbeard . . .

"And now, me Blackbeard, Soore Wounded and in despaire from 15 Days & Nites of hard persute without a change of Sox and Further Harassed by ye dreadful Sand Flyes, Mosquittos & Agents of Ye Real Estate, and now Surrounded & Near to My Death, Do in my laste hour of life Make in my own Failing Blood & Conceal this Charte Whereby He to Whom it may be Fate be Discovered Shall with his heirs be assigned and forever Become Sole Posessor of ye said Treasure, which lieth buried till Such Day of Discovery in ye Suburb of Sun Sett Park"

At the margins were richly illustrated drawings of spilled treasure, fish and sea life, an exploding ship, and a hanged pirate with his ghastly tongue dragged out. Keeping watch over the top right corner, near the Sunset Park neighborhood sign, were Blackbeard, a peg-legged Long John Silver, and a cabin boy who bore a strong likeness to 12-year old Warrick Lee.

Heart pounding, my grandfather followed the dotted line from "Ye Warrick Boat Landing" past the scorched pines and the "Waters of ye Creaks." At the end, where X marked the spot, he began digging. In the sandy soil he quickly found the prize that had been buried there: a set of iron cleats, parts for his sailboat he needed but couldn't afford.

The real treasure, of course, was the map. Not only was it the coolest thing imaginable for a 12-year-old boy, but it turns out that the man who drew it was Rockwell Kent, now celebrated as one of the most important American illustrators of the 20th century. His dramatic, black-and-white illustrations for limited editions of classic literature, including *Moby Dick*, as well as bookplates and Christmas cards, made him a commercial success. Kent's works are collected at the National Gallery in Washington D.C., the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and the Rockwell Kent Gallery at the Plattsburgh State Museum in New York, among others. He published several books, including *North by East*, *Voyaging Southward from the Strait of Magellan*, two autobiographies, and *Wilderness*, an account of his winter in Alaska with his young son Rockwell Jr.

My grandfather, who shed Warrick in favor of plain old Lee Ward, grew up to be a designer of bigger boats and beautiful rooms. He worked for the family interior design firm, Paul T. Ward, leaving during World War II to serve in Pearl Harbor. After the war, he designed and built a series of power boats that are still considered classics, and after he retired from the family business, worked for Stamas Yachts as a design consultant.

Always, he has loved the ocean, especially the gulf from Cedar Key south to Key West, where he went boating, diving and fishing almost every weekend until a few years ago.

Now 85, he lives with his wife, Nancy, in a glass-fronted house of his own design on the Anclote River in Tarpon Springs. The house is filled with shells, bottles, Spanish coins and driftwood he found in the gulf, as well as model boats and beautiful furniture he made from the same teak he used for boat decks. The treasure map has a proud place on the wall in his dining room.

Toppalee, as my sister and I call him because we couldn't pronounce Poppa Lee as toothless little kids, has told us many wonderful stories over the years, some as amazing as the tale of the pirate map. He has taken us on voyages in small boats and on big ones, and taught us how to take scallops from the grass under the green gulf water and fry them in sherry and butter. We are forever spoiled for restaurant seafood.

But the best thing ever given to us by an adventurous boy who grew up to be an adventurous man is this: a sense that exciting things could happen right in our own Tampa back yard, if only we were out there digging around for them.

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