

Author Bob Van Camp displays the boulder of gold which he left behind for another hunter to claim, a prize estimated to be worth up to \$20,000!

The One That Got Away

By Bob Van Camp

"A fortune in gold found and then lost again!" How many times have we read that line in old treasure stories? And how many of us have said to ourselves, "If I'd found that, I certainly wouldn't have lost it!"

What if you found a cache of gold and then walked away from it, not knowing what you found? "Wouldn't happen to me," you'd say. "I know gold when I see it. That only happened in the old days."

Well, friends, it still happens today — and it happened to me not long ago. Perhaps my mistake will help you from repeating it.

I've been a TH'er and a metal detector dealer for 15 years. My skills have steadily increased to the point where I consider myself a pretty good coin hunter. The high point of my career came about ten years ago when I found a cache of 44 gold coins worth about \$15,000.

Since then, however, good finds and places to hunt have slowly declined. As daily finds of silver coins became only a memory, I slowly found myself losing interest. Occasional forays to Nevada ghost towns

and the immigrant trails were fascinating fun, but again good finds were sparse.

All this changed in 1990 when I got a White's Goldmaster II. I had hunted for gold nuggets before on occasion, but had not found any with a metal detector. Because this unit is so sensitive to small targets and has a "language" that is unique, I had to learn metal detecting all over again. I read all the books, talked to other dealers, and picked the brains of the experts who were finding gold. Finally, one of the "pros" took pity on me and agreed to take me with him on one of his day hunts.

On this trip I learned several very valuable lessons. The first was this: gold nuggets sound different. "Hot rocks," iron, even lead can make good sounds, but gold is just a little different. Only with time and patience can you begin to tell the difference.

The second lesson was this: It makes all the difference in the world *where* you hunt. Just as all the books say, go where gold has been found before. The old-timers missed a lot. Old mines, tailings dumps, drywasher areas, dredger tailings, and streambeds are some of the best sites.

Third, if at all possible, go with others who know what they're doing. One hour of in-the-field, hands-on instruction can save you countless hours of frustration. This is



There's another one out there somewhere! The author slowly searches the rock piles surrounding the site of last season's phenomenal find.



Crystalline gold can clearly be seen in this specimen chipped off "the one that got away."

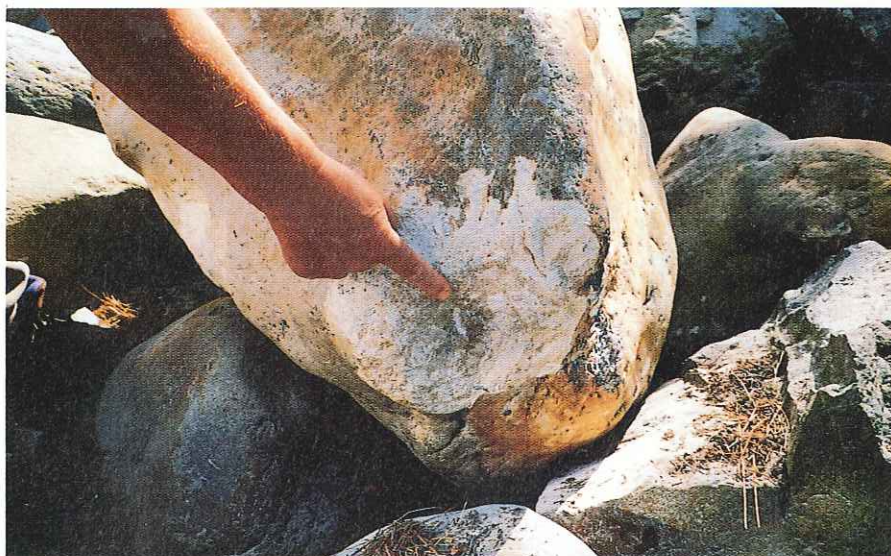
where your local dealer really earns his money and your support.

Well, within a few weeks of my "lesson" I was finding small gold nuggets every time I went out. One weekend I found 120 nuggets at one old mine site. They were adding up slowly, but they were still small. Soon it got to be like digging pennies at a schoolyard. I yearned for some "quarters" and "half dollars."

Here in northern California, there is a small, loosely-knit group of professional nugget hunters. They go out every weekend of the year, rain or shine. These guys are good! They measure their gold in pounds, not ounces! Yet, for all their success, they keep a low profile. They are not secretive, but they don't brag, talk openly, or write articles.

They hunt for the love of the hunt, not necessarily for the result. They have done their research, spent countless weeks in the field, and systematically eliminated all but the best places to find gold in California. At the core of this group are a few who literally started the electronic gold rush in California some ten years ago.

I had been trying to break into this elite group for some time with only moderate success. Finally, in early October 1994, an invitation was extended to join them on a trip to one of their claims in a remote area of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. This entire area had seen extensive mining activity in the mid-1800s. The site itself was in fact an old mine. There were acres



The dark spot in the center of the freshly broken area is the end of the exposed vein of gold in the massive quartz boulder.

of tailings, rock piles, and boulders, as well as exposed and weathered bedrock. They had found many ounces of gold there in the past. There were hundreds of small nuggets still trapped in the old bedrock, as well as a few large ones trapped under rocks and tree roots. Especially interesting was the fact that a few quartz boulders had been found containing veins and pockets of gold. The gold ranged in quantity from less than an ounce to over 3 lbs.!

Now, they had hunted this site extensively for the last five years, so there wasn't much easy gold left to be found. What was left was small or buried deep. You had to work hard to find anything, or else be very lucky.

That weekend, after a three-hour drive and a few wrong turns, we arrived at the mine. Pleasantries were exchanged and a brief layout of the land was given. It was then every man for himself. We all headed off in different directions and started hunting. Good signals were scarce, and by noon I had only one small nugget to show for my effort. I walked back to my truck for a noon break and found that about half the group were also there, eating lunch and talking about gold. Everyone else had similar luck, finding two or three small pieces each.

I always enjoy these informal bull sessions. I can pick up a pointer or two from the pros or just sit and listen in awe as they retell stories of fabulous finds.

As we finished up and were gathering our gear to head out again, one of the group casually remarked, "Joe got a signal from one of those boulders next to his car, earlier. He said it didn't sound very good, though."

"Which one was it?" I said, turning on my detector.

"Well, I think it was this one," he said.

I passed my searchcoil over and around the rock. No signal. "Well, maybe it was that one."

Still no signal. I checked a dozen rocks in the area indicated, with no signal.

"Now I'm not sure which one it

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was, but it's right around here somewhere," he said. I moved to the left a little and checked some more. Still no signals. I moved up the rock pile about 6' and checked the boulders around me, about halfway up the pile. Still nothing. I turned around to climb back down, and my coil swept along the side of the boulder I was standing on. The detector buzzed, and I thought "Oops, too close to my boot." I moved my foot and swept the side of the rock again. The signal was still there!

I said to the group, "Oh, this must be it." I climbed down and looked at it. It was an ordinary-looking quartz boulder just like the thousands of others around us. It was about 4' long and 2' thick, and probably weighed 1,000 lbs. I checked the signal again. It was a soft buzz toward one end, increased to a loud spot almost in the middle, and then decreased again toward the other end in a straight line. At the far end and around the edge, the signal got extremely loud.

Those of you who have been detecting long enough, especially in gold country, know that there are lots of rocks that make your detector sound off. Commonly called "hot rocks," they look like any other rock but contain a high concentration of mineralization, usually some form of iron. Because of the way they sound, or by changing some of the control settings on your machine, they can usually be identified. Sometimes, however, if they're small and give a strong signal, they must be dug to be sure. Quartz usually doesn't contain any odd mineralization, but a few samples had been found that morning that contained hematite crystals that gave a good response.

In any event, I was used to rocks making noise. Besides, one of the pros had found it first and had identified it as not a good signal. Nobody else in the group seemed excited or interested in it. There was nothing to be seen except quartz. It was right next to the road where they had been parking their cars for five years. Who was I to think any different, the novice among the pros? So I took the logical course of action: I walked away.

Yep, I walked away with the rest of the group without saying anything. After all, there was "real gold" out there waiting to be detected.

After about three hours and one more small nugget, I wandered back to the truck for a break. Several of the guys were standing around with big grins on their faces.

"I heard some hollering earlier. Someone must have made a good find," I said.

"I sure did," said Frank. "Take a look at this."

He pulled two quartz rocks out of his truck, each about the size of half a cantaloupe. One side was smooth and rounded, the other side was rough and jagged. He turned them over to show me the rough side. There, sparkling and gleaming in the sun, was the most beautiful yellow crystalline gold I had ever seen. The entire inside was speckled with gold. "Wow!" I said. "Where did you find that?"

"We broke it off the end of that boulder right there."

I knew what had happened even before I looked where he pointed. Sure enough, it was the same boulder I had detected earlier. He and his partner had rolled it down off the hill and broken off the end where the signal was the loudest. The end was studded with gold, and there now appeared to be a vein running along the entire length of it. Who knew how thick it might be or how far it extended into the rock?

My stomach was in a knot. But what could I do? I had walked away from it. I hadn't announced my interest or claim, or any intention to come back later and check it out. As it turned out, it wasn't the rock Joe had found earlier. He had come back, rechecked his, and found a tin can under it. But Frank had gotten tired of not finding any nuggets. He was curious enough and experienced enough to know that it just might be the real thing.

It wouldn't take long to check it out and make sure. So, after about an hour, he decided, since I wasn't going to do anything with it, he might as well. He determined that it wasn't Joe's rock, and with a little help he turned an ordinary quartz

rock into a museum-quality gold specimen.

As the others prepared to drive back to town and rent a trailer to haul it away, I was calm and philosophical. "That was easy. I'll just go out and find another for myself," I thought to myself. So, after taking a few pictures, I was off to the rock piles to pursue this new form of treasure hunting that I had stumbled on. To heck with those little nuggets!

As you probably have guessed, the rest of the afternoon didn't produce a thing. Neither did the following weekend or the weekend after that. Dozens of hours and thousands of rocks later, I've yet to get another good signal from a quartz rock.

The two pieces of rock that were chipped off have a specimen value of around \$2,000. The boulder is worth at least \$10,000 possibly as much as \$20,000.

\$20,000 in gold! And I walked away from it! You see, it does still happen. However, just as my first nugget was hard to find, I kept at it until I succeeded. So it will be with my boulder. I won't give up until I find one of my own.

For those of you who want to attempt this exciting form of treasure hunting, here are a few tips:

First, as I've already stated, go where gold has been found before — big gold, big nuggets, big boulders. Get as close to the source of the gold as possible, and get as close to bedrock as you can.

Work only the quartz rocks. In the Sierra Nevadas, 95% of the native gold originated in quartz.

Ground balance your machine to the quartz rocks, not the ground. You'll find very little mineralization in solid quartz, unlike the soil itself.

Use maximum sensitivity and turn off the iron ID. If you are using the White's Goldmaster, whenever feasible, hunt in the P.O. or pinpoint mode. It slows down the SAT recovery time if you happen to hit a piece of iron, but you'll gain about 15% in depth. Remember, your signal is only penetrating 8-10" into the rock, so any extra depth when checking a 3' thick boulder can