



Holding a half-ounce nugget just recovered from a hard-hit spot, author Bob Van Camp is one happy gold hunter!



Not far from where he found the nugget, Bob suddenly struck silver... an 1842 Mexican reale.

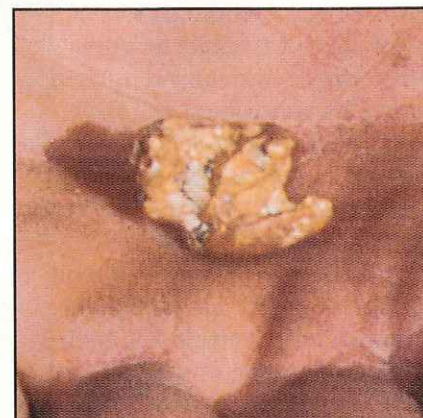
two little trees. Next to the hole was a big chunk of rusty iron someone had dug out. Since I always check such spots, I picked up the iron and moved the wood out of the way. Just behind the wood and between the two trees, I got a large signal.

"More of the same iron" I thought, "Might as well get rid of it."

I scraped off about an inch of loose dirt and checked it again. Hmm... louder and stronger and not breaking up yet. I'd dug down another inch or so and ran my magnet through the loose dirt. Nothing came up. As I moved the detector over the hole again, the signal was loud and strong with no crackling.

"Probably another stupid bullet," I muttered.

This time I put my pick about 6" into the hard-packed clay. Spreading the dirt confirmed that



"Probably another bullet," thought Bob as he uncovered the heavy chunk. but this time luck turned "lead" into gold!

## Braggin' Rights

By Bob Van Camp

Ah, the 4th of July! Fireworks, picnics, swimming, and BBQ's... fine for most people, but not me! This year made for a four-day weekend, and I was going nugget hunting!

It was over 100° in California's central valleys but much more tolerable at 5,000' in the Sierra Nevadas. My partner Jim and I were to meet Larry Salleé and his fiancé Sue later that day and show them some new sites to hunt. However, by mid-day we were doing little better than getting skunked—just two small pieces between us.

So, after lunch and a short nap, I was trying to decide where to try next. The words, "There's no such thing as a hunted-out site" and "Go where the gold has been found before" kept coming to mind. An old-timer with a knack for finding gold had told me how once, years

ago, he had driven in here, pulled over at a first wide spot, climbed the embankment next to the road, turned on his detector, immediately got a signal, and dug up a 7 dwt. nugget.

"As good a place as any to start" I decided. So, I walked down the road to what looked like the first wide spot, and sure enough, there was an embankment next to the road. I climbed it and turned on my machine.

I should mention here that I and many others had hunted this area for years, and there was very little, if any, ground left undetected. Just small pieces of gold mixed with the birdshot was about all that was left. So, I was not expecting anything to jump out of the ground screaming, "Dig Me!"

As I slowly worked away from the road, I noticed an old dig hole next to a piece of dead wood and

I'd gotten the target out, but now there were several smaller signals besides the big one.

"The bullet must've shattered on impact," I thought.

'Way in the back of my mind I was hoping against hope that it just might be the real thing. But after hundreds of similar signals over the years, I'd stopped hoping out loud. So, I decided to dig one of the smaller signals first. That way it would be only a small disappointment instead of a big one.

As I blew away the dirt in my palm and saw that golden gleam, my heart started pounding. Uh-oh. I stared at the dirt pile. Now what? Do I call my partner over to witness this? Should I wait for Larry and Sue to show up so I can share this moment with all of them? But what if it really is just a bullet? It could be my moment of greatest pride or my biggest embarrassment. I wanted to savor the moment by prolonging it as much as possible. But thousands of other moments that turned out to be just junk overcame me.

"Nah, it's just a bullet." I decided. "Let's get it over with."

I grabbed a handful of dirt and could feel the weight and the clunk as the bullet dropped into the cup. The detector squealed as I passed it in front of the cup. I quickly shook out most of the dirt until I was down to the moment of truth. As I emptied the rest of the dirt into my hand and felt the heavy weight drop, I closed my eyes and said that little prayer we all say as they are drawing the lottery numbers: "Oh please, oh please, oh please!" I shook out the dirt, opened my eyes, and looked down.

Rats! Nothing but a dirt clod! Not a bullet, but probably a chunk of lead. I rubbed off some of the dirt, looking for that tell-tale gray color of lead. I turned it over and saw one place with no dirt. It was a rusty-red color.

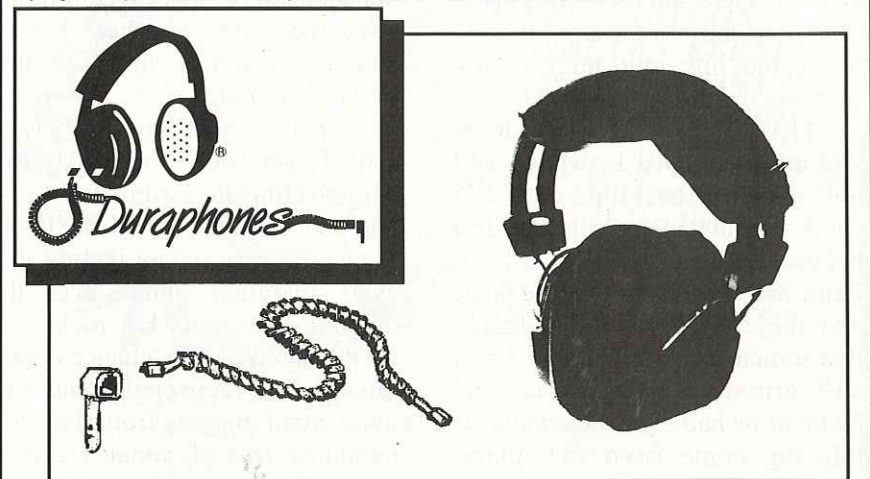
"Iron? How's that possible? It's too heavy and it didn't break up."

I licked my thumb and rubbed the spot harder. That's when I saw

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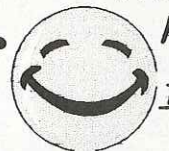
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it. A little yellow color showing through the red!

I couldn't believe it! It couldn't be one solid piece! It must be a couple of small pieces stuck to conglomerate. I rubbed it harder all over. Here and there little spots of yellow showed through. It was! It was one big, solid nugget—my first one over a pennyweight.

I let loose with my best Tarzan yell and continued to whoop and holler and do backflips until Jim came running over. He couldn't believe I'd actually found it here. Larry and Sue arrived a little later, and they could tell immediately that something was up, since I was still grinning from ear to ear! None of us had ever seen a nugget this big come from this place. This was big gold country once, but all the good ones had been found years ago.

I put it on the scale and watched as the numbers climbed and finally settled at 10.2 dwt.—a 1/2 oz. nugget! I took it down to the water and carefully dabbed at it with my crevicing brush until the dirt melted away, revealing its true beauty... rough, gnarly, pockety, with bits of quartz embedded here and there. I was still just stunned. I couldn't stop looking at it.

What a way to kick off the 4th of July! After cleaning, the weight came down to 9.5 dwt. Close enough to 1/2 oz. for me!

But wait... there's more.

Now that I'd earned my "braggin' rights," and after all the excitement of the big nugget find had died down somewhat, I was ready to go back and finish checking out the hole. But Jim's detector had broken a wire inside the pigtail, so we took it apart and tried unsuccessfully to resolder it using a nail and our campstove. By now it was getting late in the day, and he was bugging me to drive back to civilization to try to find someone to fix it. After all, we had three more days. So, I covered up my spot and drove back to town without detecting any more.

We weren't able to find any-one open that day, so he borrowed my truck the next day and drove out of the mountains to get his detector fixed. I rode around with Larry and Sue all day, checking out some other sites. We all found a few flakes here and there, but we weren't seriously hunting, just looking around.

Finally, the following day, I actually got back to seriously finish detecting the original hole. I dug and spread all the dirt, slowly scanning every square inch. I dug every marginal signal, even the obvious nails and "hot rocks." I wasn't taking any chances with this spot. I recovered about five more small nuggets from the spot, including two of about 1/2 dwt. each. The surrounding area produced no more good targets.

I stepped back and studied the lay of the land. The gold had come from a small seam in the old bedrock just below a small ridge. The ridge seemed to run at an angle from left to right, broken by eroded areas and rock piles. So, I concentrated my search above and below the seam, checking every increase in the threshold. I dug a lot of iron and lead during the next hour or so, but no more gold.

What else to do now, except expand the area? I moved up to the top of the ridge and started hunting the flat area on top. About 10' away from the original hole, I came upon a small tree. As I had been doing all day, I stuck my coil under the branches and detected all around it. Most people don't hunt under bushes and trees as it's more difficult and usually trashy. Sure enough, there was a small pile of rusty iron sitting on the surface of the ground. I stuck the magnet of my pick into the pile and pulled up all the iron I could. Running the detector over it showed that I'd missed a few. However, scraping the surface dirt moved them, and I quickly picked them out. The other side of the tree produced the same response. This time, though, moving the loose dirt didn't move the signal.

*Deja vu?*

I dug a little deeper, fully expecting the signal to disappear onto the magnet. It didn't.

The same feeling of the previous day came flooding back. What to do? The same doubts also returned.

I dug deeper and, as before, found that the target was now out of the 6" hole. Could lightning strike twice? All the conditions looked right, and the detector said it was a good target.

With a literally shaking hand, I pinpointed, grabbed a handful of dirt, and dropped it into my cup. The detector screamed. I slowly emptied the dirt out. When I had about 1/4" of dirt left in the cup, I sneaked a peek, expecting to see a large, round lump of gold. But there was nothing. Just smooth, flat dirt. My spirits sank.

"Oh great, now what?"

As I slowly shook the dirt out into my palm, I saw a flat, round disk slide out. Hey, wait a minute. That looks... like a coin!

I shook off the dirt and looked closer. It was! It was a silver coin, smooth and flat, encrusted with dirt, and about the size of a quarter. Wow! Now that was the last thing I was expecting to find here. Figuring it must be old since it was so deep, I carefully rubbed the dirt off, and slowly features began to appear. I was looking for the familiar Liberty head or an eagle but there was none. I didn't recognize the design, but I could clearly read the date—1842! Turning it over and rubbing a little produced instant recognition... the eagle, snake, and cactus of a Mexican coin!

This time there was no whopping and hollering. I just sat there stunned, disbelieving my good fortune. I'd found my largest nugget and my oldest coin both on the same weekend!

Looking at the coin, I imagined the story it could tell. Minted seven years before the California gold rush, it traveled up into the promised land in the pocket of a poor man hoping to strike it rich.

It circulated freely during the height of the gold rush, changing hands at Faro tables, buying food or supplies, dropped into the passing hat at an impromptu Sunday service, stolen during a stagecoach holdup, and finally back in the pocket of a disillusioned 49'er now working for wages. It was probably lost in the 1870s, during his daily labor at the mine.

It seemed too much a coincidence that this Mexican coin was here at this place called Spanish Flat. I am always hit with a strange shiver when I find something old that I can link to a specific historical event or people. It is literally touching the past, and my detector is my time machine. It's what I love most about treasure hunting.

A quick scan of the immediate area produced no more good signals, so I calmly walked over the hill to where Jim was digging a target. By the look on my face, he could tell right away that something was up.

"Oh no, what'd you find now?" he asked.

I said, "You'd better dig that hole a lot deeper, 'cause you're gonna die when you see this."

When I dropped the coin into his hand, he just stood there shaking his head.

"I don't believe this," he said finally. "We're scratching for crumbs, and you're digging up chunks!"

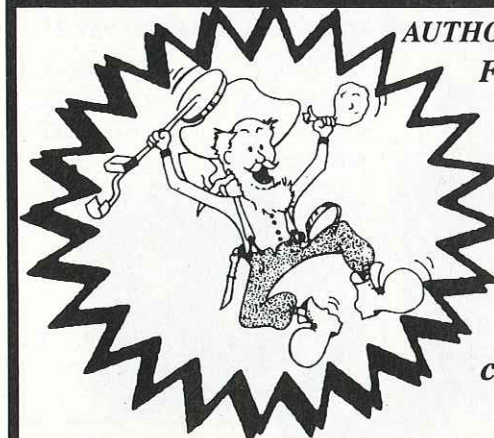
Larry and Sue were just as incredulous. They, too, had only been finding a few small pieces here and there. They had heard about people making back-to-back unusual finds like this, but never had they actually seen it.

Later, from a coin dealer, I would learn more about the coin. The inscription along the bottom read like this: 1R Z 1842 OM 10D 20G. Translated, it means this:

1R = one real, with 8 reales (or "bits") being the equivalent of \$1. This, then, was a "bit" worth 12-1/2¢ at the time.

Z = the mintmark - Zacatecas, Mexico

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1842 = the mint date

OM = the initials of the director of the mint

10 D = an unknown measure of weight

20 G = 20 grains or grams of silver

It is a common date coin and well worn, so the collector value is only about \$5. But I wouldn't part with it for ten times that much.

The rest of the weekend pro-

duced more small pieces of gold for everyone, and one more for me of almost 1 dwt. But everything else was anti-climactic, and it was hard to get excited about the "little" pieces that would normally make for a good hunt. This was the best hunt I'd ever had and not likely to be repeated soon.

So, move that trash and hunt where others don't, and you may earn your own "braggin' rights." □