A Pirate's Miracle

By Ron Kirkpatrick

"I hate to see you go, brother, but I know it's time for you to realize your destiny," said the leather-skinned buccaneer, Jean Laffite. His brother, Pierre, was leaving the island pirate stronghold off the Gulf Coast to strike out on his own. Jean had granted his brother a fast ship and 50 men to plunder Spanish ships patrolling the west coast of America, land then claimed by Spain.

The year was 1818 and Jean Laffite was already famous for pirating Spanish ships along the Gulf while being hunted by American authorities. After tricking the British during the War of 1812, the fearless fighter warned Americans and fought alongside Andrew Jackson to save New Orleans, gaining a pardon from President James Madison.

Now, Jean was going back to what he loved best, attacking Spanish galleons along the Gulf for fame and fortune. He wanted his brother to find his own fame in the new territories. Pierre readily agreed to strike out on his own for the six months voyage around South America and up the west coast of America.

Pierre and his privateers literally struck gold attacking Spanish ships in a deep harbor that was to become San Diego. They seized 20 chests of Spanish gold doubloons.

After the raids, Pierre sailed north along the rugged coast. A few days later, he anchored off the coast near a river inlet to give his men a rest and explore the nearby land.

At dawn, he and two men took a row boat up the river until they found a beautiful marsh with abundant wildlife and lush meadows dotted with beautiful trees. The men beached the boat and explored the meadows caressed with soft sunlight and light sea breezes.

The next day, he and the two men rowed the boat farther up the river and stopped near a picturesque meadow. Pierre picked out a near-perfect tree and had his men dig a hole to bury

two chests of doubloons. He then noted some key landmarks of the area, swore the men to secrecy under threat of death and headed back to his ship.

Sailing north again, he ran into a Spanish fleet that surrounded his ship, boarded it and recaptured the treasure. His Spanish captors killed his crew and hung Pierre from the masthead before burning his ship until it crumbled along with Pierre's destiny into the azure sea.

A century and a half later, someone else discovered the beautiful land near the river and it was better than ever. Concrete levies had been built to curb the river's flooding and the one-time marsh had become a flatland that supported sugar beet crops among others. A small township had cropped up nearby and the area was ripe for further development.

Then along came Ross Cortese, an innovative home developer/builder who formed the Rossmoor Corporation, deriving the name from his first name and "moor," the Scottish term for an uncultivated boggy area. In 1956, the corporation purchased 756 acres of land south of the township of Los Alamitos and west of the river.

Cortese created homes for successful professionals who were expanding their families. The lots and homes were larger and the tree-lined streets were wider to create a garden effect. The home models were designed by top architects, including one who had recently designed "Tomorrowland" at Disneyland.

One day during construction, Bill Simon, the project manager, wandered into Ross Cortese's office with a question. "We've found two dozen native trees on the site," he noted "They will end up in the backyards of some of the homes. Should we cut them down or leave 'em?"

"Leave them!" Cortese bellowed. "I'm creating a garden masterpiece. Those trees will be here long after we're gone."

The first families moved into Rossmoor in June 1957. Four years later, nearly 14,000 people called it home. Soon, parks, churches, shopping areas, youth sports leagues and new

schools opened and thrived as the enclave of 3,200+ homes became one of the most desirable places to live in Southern California.

Those positives attracted Jim and Kathy Hart to Rossmoor in 1998. During their first 20 years, the Harts took full advantage of the area's many attributes. Their daughter Samantha and son Tyler attended local schools and played in various youth sports leagues. The family rode bikes together and took advantage of the nearby beach, restaurants and community events. They thoroughly enjoyed the local lifestyle.

Then, quite suddenly, their idyllic life veered toward disaster.

Kathy, a beloved teacher, was diagnosed with breast cancer and started expensive chemotherapy. Then Jim, a long-time aerospace firm employee, was told his job was moving to Alabama. With no new job prospects, Jim worried deeply about the future.

With bills due soon for Samantha's last year at UCLA along with Tyler's freshman year at Stanford, Jim felt overwhelmed. After a long discussion with Kathy about their dilemma one night, he woke up to hear her quietly sobbing about the situation.

The next day, Jim resolved to do something useful by building a pond Kathy had wanted near a big tree in their backyard. The digging was therapeutic, and Jim was getting into a rhythm when suddenly his shovel struck something hard. Jim thought it was a tree root and bent down to investigate.

What he found made Jim's heart leap. It was the top of a crusty chest. He quickly dug out the chest and another beside it. Jim literally held his breath while opening the lid. Inside there was salvation: hundreds of glinting gold coins later identified as authentic 19th century Spanish doubloons.

The Harts had discovered $20 million in buried pirate treasure in their backyard. Even better, the lucky couple soon learned that Kathy's cancer was now in remission.

When asked during a TV interview if they planned to move to a big mansion or beach house, Jim and Kathy smiled at each other. "Not on your life," said Jim. "We love it right here in Rossmoor."