

SHIP OF GOLD

ESSAY

It had been a terrifying three days for the nearly 600 passengers of the SS *Central America*. It was September 12, 1857, and the elegant steamship was heading from Havana, Cuba, to New York City.

At first, the voyage had been peaceful, with calm seas and bright blue skies.

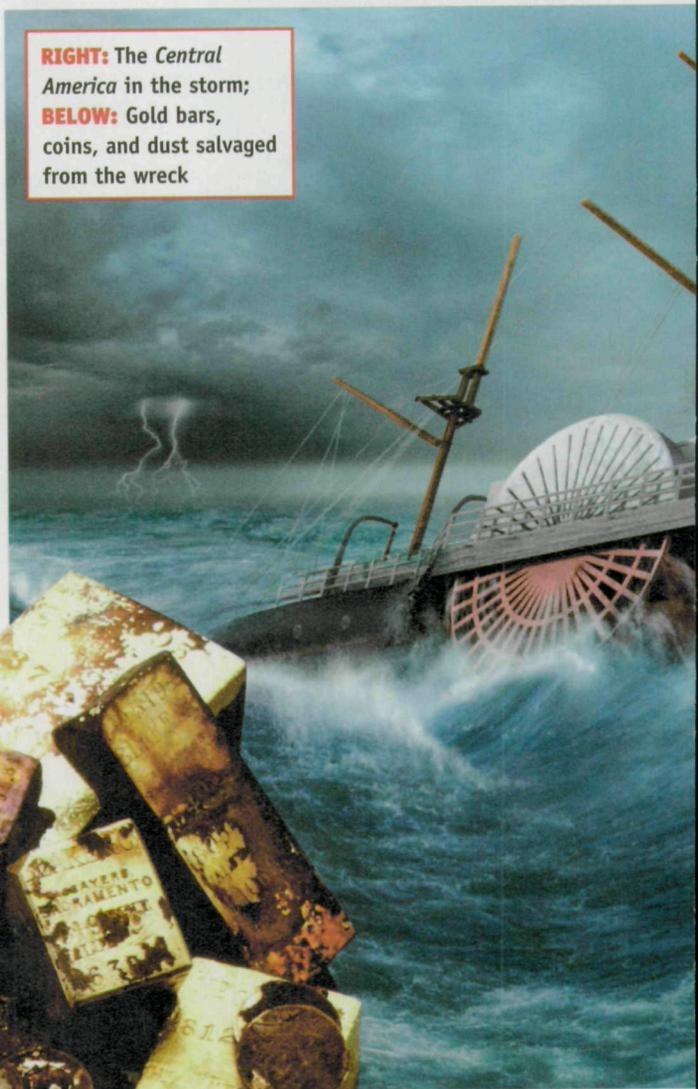
Then disaster struck.

The *Central America* sailed into the path of a furious hurricane. For three days, enormous waves pummeled the ship. Screaming winds shattered its windows and shredded its sails. Water flooded the lower levels, crippling the ship's engine. A passing vessel, the *Marine*, managed to take on 109 people, mostly women and children, but the *Central America*—and the rest of her passengers—was doomed.

Just before 8:00 p.m., the *Central America* sank, killing 425 people. It came to rest in mile-deep waters somewhere off the coast of South Carolina. Shipwrecks were common in the days of the *Central America*—and in the centuries before. The stormy seas up and down the East Coast were especially treacherous. Today the remains of sunken ships are scattered across the ocean floor like bones in an enormous graveyard.

The stories of most of these ships have been forgotten.

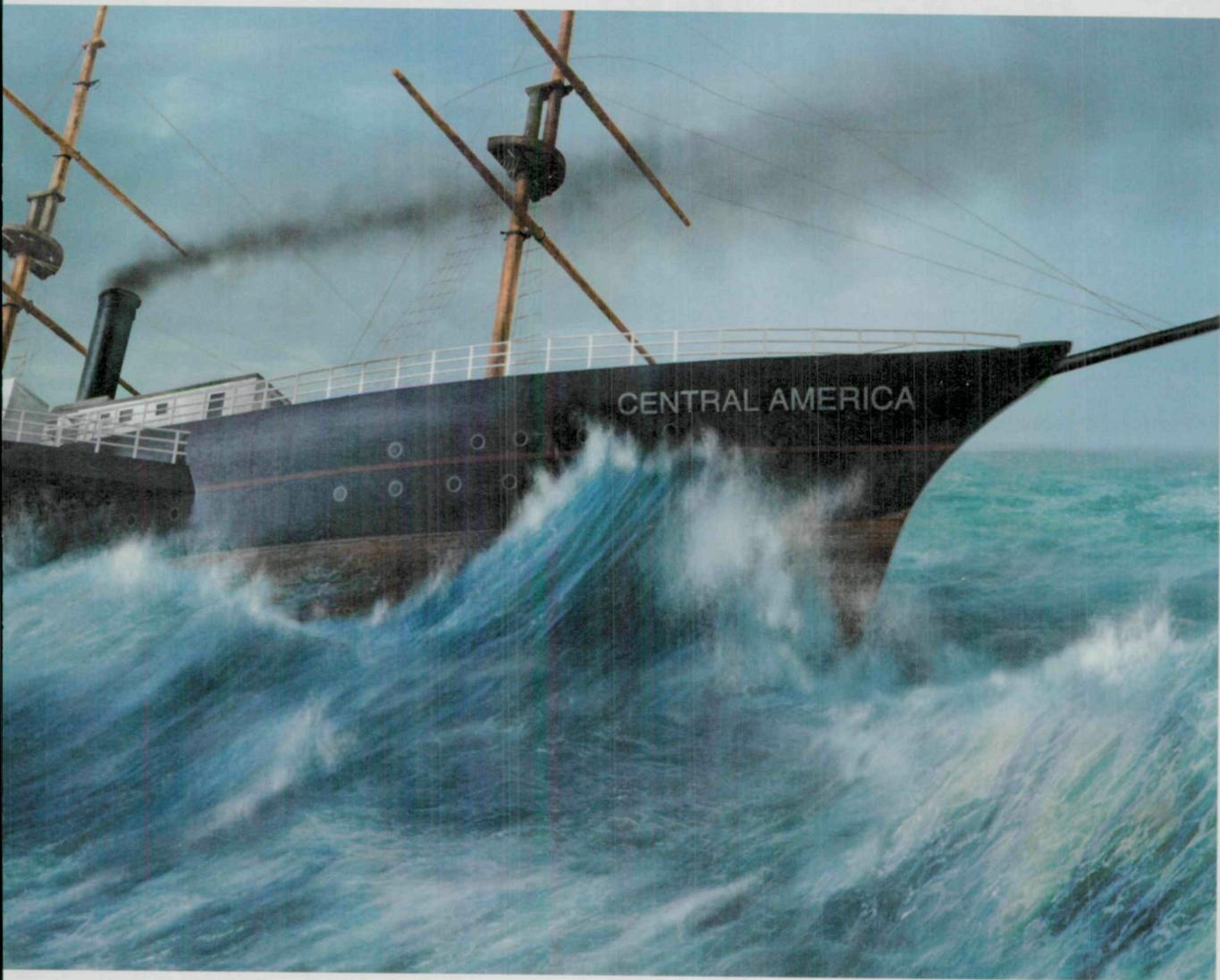
RIGHT: The *Central America* in the storm;
BELOW: Gold bars, coins, and dust salvaged from the wreck



But the *Central America* was not an ordinary ship. It was filled with treasure—21 tons of gold. Many of its passengers

PAIRED TEXTS
two texts that
share a theme
or topic

A BRILLIANT EXPLORER'S DARING MISSION TO FIND ONE OF THE GREATEST LOST TREASURES OF ALL TIME



were returning from the gold fields of California. (The ship made a stop in Cuba on the way from California to New York.) Thousands of people had flocked to California in hopes of getting rich during the Gold Rush that began in 1848. Some of the *Central America's* passengers were traveling with suitcases packed with gold nuggets, gold coins, and bags of gold dust. Crates

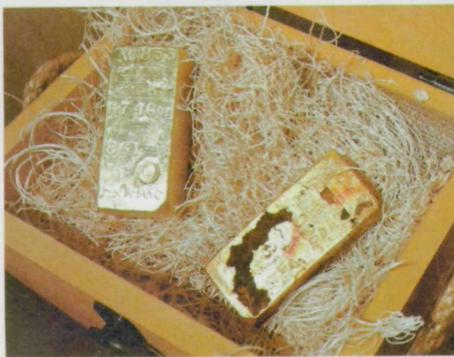
of gold bars were stacked in the ship's cargo hold.

Beyond Imagination

This treasure was worth hundreds of millions of dollars. As the decades passed, treasure hunters dreamed of finding the *Central America*.

But how?





One of the gold bars salvaged from the *Central America* sold to a private collector for 8 million dollars.

Nobody knew exactly where the ship sank. Very likely, it was resting thousands of feet deep. No human diver could survive those depths. And even if someone could, how would he or she bring the gold to the surface?

In the early 1980s, an engineer named Tommy Thompson began a determined search. He and his team spent years reading 123-year-old newspaper stories and ship logs about the sinking, then used this and other information they found to pinpoint the *Central America*'s exact location.

They spent millions of dollars on the most sophisticated undersea-exploration technology. They hired experts to build them a robot submarine, named *Nemo*, that could explore the ocean's depths and beam video images to the surface.

The Greatest Treasure Ever Found

Thompson's search took years. There were many failures and frustrations. Finally, in 1989, the team found the wreck 160 miles off the South Carolina coast. As *Nemo*'s bright light shone on the wreckage, those watching from above gasped. Gold was everywhere—coins blanketed the ocean floor, gold bars were stacked neatly, and gold dust floated in the water like glitter.

"It was beyond our imagination," Thompson said.



Unfortunately, the excitement of Thompson's discovery was dampened when 39 insurance companies claimed the treasure. These companies had insured the gold in 1857, and some had paid a lot of money when the ship was lost. A few even went bankrupt. Thompson argued that the gold had been abandoned and was therefore his. After a lengthy legal battle, he and his team were awarded 92 percent of the gold.

The treasure has made Thompson rich and famous. (According to some estimates, the total value of the gold he recovered was more than \$150 million!) One reporter said that he represented the best in "American initiative, ingenuity, and determination." *Life* magazine said it was "the greatest treasure ever found."

But the "ship of gold" is a treasure for us too. The *Central America* was full of incredible artifacts that give us clues about what life was like in the mid-1800s. It takes us back to a wild and hopeful time in America.

It reminds us of the power of nature. And it shows that dreams can be lost . . . and found. ●

EDITORIAL

Gold Grubber

Why has Tommy Thompson run off with all the treasure?

BY SEAN McCULLUM

Tommy Thompson may have found one of the greatest treasures of all time. But he's also a criminal who betrayed the very people who made his discovery possible.

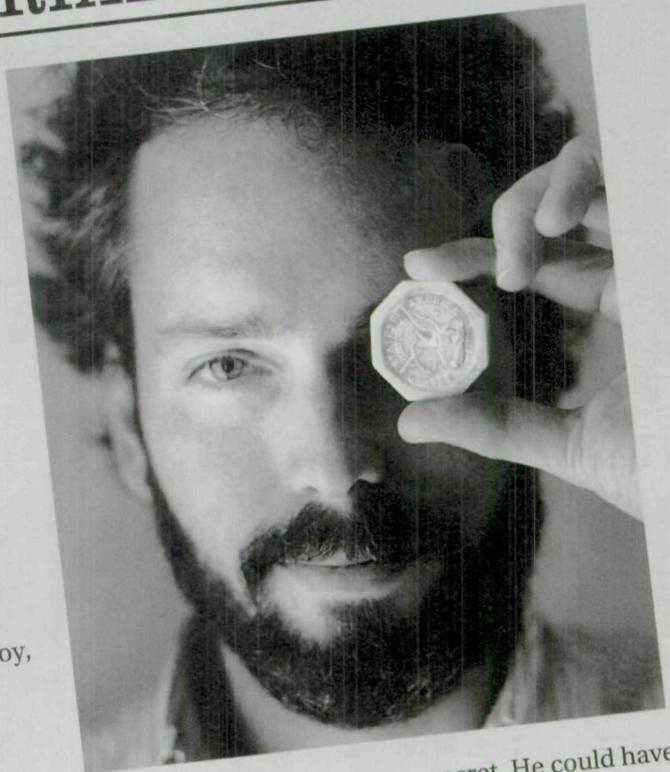
To fund his mission, Thompson convinced 161 investors to fork over more than \$12.7 million. They would make huge profits, Thompson said, if he managed to find the *Central America*. He struck a deal: His cut of the loot would be 40 percent after expenses. The rest would go to his investors and his crew.

It's been more than two decades since Thompson found the *Central America*, and his investors haven't seen one penny. Nor has his crew—not even in 2000, after Thompson sold \$52 million worth of the treasure.

Thompson claims that any money he's received

from the treasure has been used to cover expenses. But he has refused to disclose any details of his financial dealings. He hired a squad of lawyers, who block every effort to get the facts. "I think he was dishonest from the word go," John G. McCoy, who invested \$219,000 in the expedition, told Forbes.com.

Thompson has also been secretive about exactly what he salvaged from the seafloor. Shipwrecks are important pieces of history that many explorers think should be shared with the world. Explorers like Robert Ballard, who tracked down the *Titanic* and other shipwrecks, have been excited to share their discoveries. Barry Clifford, who found the pirate ship *Whydah*,



refused to cash in on what he found. Instead, he turned it into a museum exhibit.

Aside from one traveling coin exhibit, which he hoped would drive up the value of his treasure, Thompson has kept his discoveries a

secret. He could have shown integrity by paying back those who trusted him. He could have enriched the world with knowledge and wonder.

Instead, he seems to want to enrich only himself. ●

QUICK WRITE

How does the way Tommy Thompson is presented in "Ship of Gold" compare to the way he is presented in "Gold Grubber"? How do you think he will be remembered? Include details from both articles in your response.

GET THIS
ACTIVITY
ONLINE

Copyright of Scholastic Scope is the property of Scholastic Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.