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Area treasure hunter believes big find is in Gulf of Mexico

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SARASOTA -- Captain Carl "Fizz" Fismer was doing diving drills as a city of Sarasota firefighter in 1974 when his group accidentally found a sunken boat off Siesta Key.

It was not a historic, European vessel. And there were no gold coins worth millions. Fismer salvaged only copper pipes from the modern-looking shrimp boat and sold them at the junkyard for 40 cents a pound.

"It wasn't much," the 68-year-old Fismer admitted.

But the discovery sparked a fascination for searching for sunken pirate and slave ships from hundreds of years ago.

He has since heard that there are at least 4,000 wrecks scattered around the Gulf of Mexico, and not all have been recovered. Fismer, who lives in Key West, believes one of the wrecks lies about 18 or 19 miles off Longboat Key.

So next week, Fismer and 21 volunteers from the Sarasota Dive Club plan to scour the Gulf floor in search of what he thinks is a slave ship that went down in the 1800s.

According to Fismer, historical records and experts say that Spanish vessels and pirate ships brought slaves from Africa to the Spanish colony in Cuba and to the United States.

The captains and crews of those ships attacked each other or merchant ships when they crossed paths along shipping routes in the North Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico.

Fismer, a diver for about 40 years, does not know the name of the ship he is looking for off Longboat. And the only evidence he has of its existence is murky video footage of elephant tusks, pieces of an upper deck and at least one cannon in the background.

Fismer said the video was of a boneyard of prehistoric fish bones, but the diver who shot it did not spot what Fismer saw when he watched the tape.

"It tends to blend in," Fismer said of the sunken ship.

Fismer said he and a friend have gone diving about 25 or 30 times in the area where the vessel is believed to be, trying to spot remnants of the ship and its cargo.

He is not giving up.



STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER

Carl Fismer plans to explore a sunken ship he believes is in the Gulf of Mexico, 18 or 19 miles off Longboat Key.

"The problem is it's deep, and you don't get much time in the tank out that far," Fismer said. "I've seen a lot of bones out there. So far we've seen a piece of a shrimp boat, but that's not what I'm looking for."

Starting Tuesday, weather permitting, Fismer said he plans to launch five boats from the 10th Street boat ramp with two to three divers in each to "spread out where we think the wreck is." The entire group will be able to cover a 150-foot-wide radius.

"We will saturate the area with divers," he said. "If one sees the wreck, they will tie a buoy, and I'll go down and identify it, hopefully."

Fismer said his team will use a magnetometer, a device that senses various metals in the water that are not supposed to be there, and a side scan sonar that provides pictures of the bottom of the Gulf and anything that is on it.

"If you're lucky, you find a cannon or anchor from an old wreck," Fismer said.

If he does find treasure, it will be the culmination of all of Fismer's efforts since accidentally discovering the worthless shrimp boat 33 years ago.

It was an exciting experience that changed his life. The next day, Fismer went to the library and selected the book "Finders Losers."

"It was my first treasure book," said Fismer, who moved to Sarasota in 1970 from Ohio. "The more I read, the more intense it got."

He started trading shifts with fellow firefighters so he could get time to drive to the Florida Keys, knock on doors and meet some of the people already in the recovery and salvage business. Eventually, he met the top researchers.

One thing he learned is that there are plenty of junk piles of modern boats, like the one he found in 1974.

"It was not a million-to-one shot; there are literally thousands of junk boats out there," said Fismer, who got his diver's and captain's licenses while with the city. "But every now and then you get good hits."

He left Sarasota after nine years, moved to Key West and started Spanish Main Treasure Co. in 1980. The business has salvaged artifacts and sunken treasure from shipwrecks around the world.

He said he has worked with other noted treasure hunters, such as Mel Fisher, who found silver bars, coins, gold jewels and unique artifacts in 1985 from a Spanish galleon that sank in 1622.

Now, Fismer is looking forward to leading a Sarasota expedition. He plans to take up to three days mining the water, but said it may not take that long.

He hopes to have his 40-foot boat, the Time Ranger, back from a Bradenton repair shop.

The boat sank the day before Thanksgiving at a Sarasota boat slip. A full moon caused

extremely low tides that tilted and grounded the boat. When the high tide came in, it was unusually high, filling the boat with water and mud.

"It's been a struggle," Fismer said. "My only regret is I did not move to Florida sooner. I probably would have been somebody by now. I don't plan on changing careers at this late date in my life. I'm not retiring; I'll do this until the day I fall over."
