



#### **Episode 4, Atocha Spanish Silver, Key West, Florida**

Tukufu Zuberi: Our first story examines the strange markings on a piece of sunken Spanish treasure. On a clear September morning in 1622, the Spanish galleon Nuestra Senora de Atocha sails from Havana Harbor, packed with over 30 tons of silver and gold. Spain eagerly awaits the arrival of the ship, but she never comes. Finally a message arrives. A massive hurricane has struck. The Atocha and her treasure lie at the bottom of the ocean. Now scuba diver, Chuck Sotzin of Cedar Town, Georgia has a piece of that treasure which has mystified him for years.

Chuck Sotzin: I was a diver recovering treasure from the Atocha. I received this silver bar. It's got some markings on it and I'd like to know what some of these markings mean.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. And I'm meeting Chuck to have a look at his treasure. So Chuck, what's your story? Chuck tells me that as a young man he joined his uncle, treasure hunter Mel Fisher, on his search for the Atocha.

Chuck: Seemed adventuresome. So I decided to go down to Key West and give it a try.

Tukufu: He shows me some photos of the victorious crew and their historic haul.

Chuck: Here's the silver bars on the back of the deck. That's what they look like when they're found.

Tukufu: Cool.

Chuck: All black and crusty.

Tukufu: Now this is a serious stack of them here.

Chuck: Yeah. Sitting on top of the world there.

Tukufu: Chuck tells me that in two years – 1985 and '86 – they brought up 986 silver bars. It was one of the largest discoveries of treasure in U.S. history. Now, you say you got a piece of this treasure.

Chuck: Yeah.

Tukufu: Let's check it out. That baby looks a little heavy there, huh?

Chuck: Yeah.



Tukufu: Whoa!

Chuck: I got this as payment. I worked there for five years, so I got just about half a percentage of treasure.

Tukufu: How much is this worth?

Chuck: \$20,000, up to \$50,000.

Tukufu: What do you want me to find out for you? Chuck's kept his treasure in a safe deposit box for 20 years. But these markings always fascinated him.

Chuck: Well, I'd like to know the history of this bar. What these markings mean on here.

Tukufu: You know, I'm really excited about this investigation. So, I want to do my own treasure hunt for you and see if I can find a mother load of answers. Alright? Now, do you mind if I take a closer look at the bar?

Chuck: That's fine. Yeah.

Tukufu: Alright. I'm not going too far. [Laughs]

Chuck: Nah, you won't run too far.

Tukufu: The markings are like historical fingerprints; a code waiting to be cracked. Most of these markings seem to have some symbolic meaning; some of it obvious, some not. I'll have to check them out. Let's see how much this weighs. Yeah. I know one thing, it's not light. It's 68 pounds. I need to take some pictures, because there's no way I'm carrying this big heavy piece of silver around. I'm hitting the library to see what I can find out about the Atocha and the markings on the bar. Certainly a lot has been written about the Atocha. Maybe I can find some answers here. The 1622 fleet was assembled in August in Havana, Cuba. And the heavily armed Atocha was packed with over 30 tons of silver and gold. And it says here, in anticipation of the 1622 fleet, "They knew only too well, though, that their prosperity, even their survival, might depend upon the successful passage of the coming year's fleets." So, this fleet of boats, was very, very important for the Spanish government. This is interesting. Many of the markings have already been deciphered. This is a private ownership mark. It seems a few wealthy and well connected merchants were able to get their personal silver onto these ships. They stood to make huge fortunes once the silver arrived in Spain. You can imagine, this boat was just brimming with silver. It was so full that it could barely float on the water. August was the beginning of hurricane season; not a good time to sail. But enemy Dutch warships had been spotted in the area. The decision was made to quickly prepare the ships and set sail. But just two days into their voyage, they



ran straight into the jaws of a hurricane. Bam! Down it goes. The Spanish must have been devastated by this. This is curious. Many of the bars, including our own, have this deep cut on one corner, but not all of them. These other bars don't appear to have this slash. I wonder if the salvage workers could have gouged the bar when they were cleaning it? I'm heading to the southernmost city, Key West, Florida, to see Mel Fisher's grandson Sean. Like Chuck, he's a Fisher family member. But Sean's still involved in the business and is familiar with how the Atocha silver was handled after the divers brought it up. I'm trying to get to the bottom of a story on a silver bar that came off of the Atocha. That supposedly your grandfather discovered.

Sean Fisher: He was the world's greatest treasure hunter and he got that label by finding the Atocha.

Tukufu: Sean says that Mel Fisher wasn't the first to go looking for the Atocha. Within days of the hurricane, the Spanish had begun searching for the wreck.

Sean: They spent 20 years looking for this ship. They would actually take slaves and offer them their freedom if they could find one silver bar.

Tukufu: The Spanish found the wreck site, but it was too deep. And the slave divers were only able to bring up a few bars. For 300 years, the sunken Atocha treasure floated in the minds of treasure hunters the world over, eventually capturing the imagination of Mel Fisher.

Sean: My grandfather looked at grandma and said, well, we can sit here and we can pay all our bills, or we can pack the kids up and go treasure hunting. You know? And grandma said, well, let's go treasure hunting.

Tukufu: Alright. So then your grandfather just got lucky and he rolled up on the Atocha.

Sean: Well, no, it wasn't real lucky, man. I tell you what, why don't we go inside. I'll show you some charts and give you a good idea of where it's at.

Tukufu: Okay. Great. Sean tells me that Mel Fisher wasn't the only one looking for the Atocha.

Sean: Here's the charts I was telling you about.

Tukufu: A number of other treasure hunters had found a 17<sup>th</sup> Century reference to the Atocha's sinking off the Lower Matecumbe islands. The hunt was on, along an 80 mile stretch of the mid-Keys.

Sean: When my grandfather first started hunting for the Atocha, he was actually looking with a number of other treasure hunters right here, where it says Lower Matecumbe Key.



Tukufu: Fisher and his team needed a competitive edge. It came in the form of his friend Eugene Lyon, a young academic who helped Fisher locate 17<sup>th</sup> Century maps of the area.

Sean: Through some research from Gene Lyon, we found out that the Spaniards referred to all of the Florida Keys as the Matecumbe Keys. So the Lower Matecumbe's would have meant this area right here, the southernmost part of the keys.

Tukufu: Then Lyon made another important discovery in a worm eaten document in an archive in Seville, Spain.

Sean: Gene saw the words "Cayos del Marques". That's when we knew we had to focus our search efforts by the Marquesas Keys, about 35 miles to the west of Key West.

Tukufu: The Fishers moved their search to Key West and quietly zeroed in on the Marquesas Keys. In the summer of 1985, after 16 years of searching, Mel Fisher's divers saw something that had been lost for 350 years.

Sean: It was just a huge reef of silver bars. As far as you can see, all you can see is silver.

Tukufu: As the Atocha sank, it bounced along the ocean floor leaving a 10 mile trail of treasure.

Sean: You'll see a little piece of gold like that sticking out of the sand and you know, you'll start pulling and the chain will keep getting bigger and, you know, the smile on your face will keep getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And you'll come up with something like this, you know, an eight foot long, 18 carat gold money chain.

Tukufu: Ah. Wow. Yeah, that's serious business. Sean says that taxes could be avoided by turning treasure into jewelry. A passenger could bring about as much as they could wear. Merchants did anything they could to avoid royal taxes, and smuggling had become widespread. I have this bar.

Sean: Oh, beautiful bar, man. Great markings.

Tukufu: I tell Sean how Charles Sotzin has gotten curious about the markings on one of his silver bars. Could this mark have been put on the bar after you brought it up, in your cleaning process?

Sean: Oh, absolutely not. You're not in there doing anything that could possibly do that, no.

Tukufu: He says that they weighed and catalogued the bars when they came up, then cleaned them gently. But there's someone in town who might be able to help. The Maritime Heritage Museum in Key West is an



independent, nonprofit group that bears Mel Fisher's name. Mel Fisher sold much of the treasure to private buyers, but a portion remains at the museum. Staff archeologist, Corey Malcolm, has done some work on the Atocha silver.

Corey Malcolm: What's happening?

Tukufu: I have this silver bar that I'm investigating. And I know there is a story it wants to tell. He tells me that the term for a bar of precious metal like this is an ingot. And he immediately notices something on Chuck's.

Corey: This tells us for sure that this ingot was minted and mined in the town of Potosi. It's in Bolivia today. That was Peru back then.

Tukufu: The marking has contemporary significance too. The mines at Potosi tunnel into a mountain of silver so massive that they continue to be some of the world's richest.

Corey: What you're looking at in this one ingot is really the beginning of the globalizing of world economies. You know, you have South American silver being used to pay off debts and fund wars that were happening in Spain. Silver was flowing in the other direction, across the Pacific on another fleet of galleons, taken to the Philippines where the Chinese would then absorb it into their economy. So, really, you have from South American and Mexico a belt of silver encompassing the globe.

Tukufu: It was the promise of new world silver and gold, of course, that had driven Spanish explorers such as De Soto to North American too. And Corey says another marking tells how the Spaniards mastered a new technology to refine extremely pure metal.

Corey: The key to success in the Spanish colonial mining was the introduction of the mercury amalgamation process. And basically they would take silver ore, crush it into a powder and then mix that powder for two or three days with liquid mercury. This is 2,380 points out of 2,400. It's essentially pure silver.

Tukufu: Wow. But that purity came with a human price. Thousands of native workers died from mercury poisoning. So our bar reflects, really, the global connections of the world at this early date?

Corey: Absolutely. It's all tied together in this one silver ingot.

Tukufu: Corey says that because smuggling was common on board the treasure ships, a system of serial numbers was used to authenticate bars.

Corey: And this was a unique serial number. This particular one is 254.



Tukufu: He shows me copies of meticulous manifest records in period script, listing each bar loaded onto the Atocha, its weight and its shipper.

Corey: So we'll look and see if we can't find ingot number 254. And here you go! You see your mark right here.

Tukufu: Whoa! That's it!

Corey: That's your number. This particular ingot should weigh about 78 pounds troy. This was being shipped by a man named J. Delgado.

Tukufu: So, our guy, Delgado, put all his silver on this boat and sent it off to Spain.

Corey: Well he was onboard himself.

Tukufu: Delgado went down with the boat?

Corey: Yeah, he went down with the Atocha. And all we have is his treasure to speak for him.

Tukufu: So, lastly...the slash?

Corey: Well, I have to be honest with you, that I can't answer. We see no reflection of it in the manifest.

Tukufu: Corey told me that there was a researcher on the Atocha team who became interested in the markings. Jon Van Harpen realized that most of the slashed bars were owned or shipped by Juan Delgado. But something, quite literally, didn't add up.

Jon Van Harpen: I wrote down a manifest weight and then after that I wrote down the recovered and cleaned weight.

Tukufu: The divers had weighed the bars in pounds. As John converted those weights into the unit of measurement used on the official manifest, troy pounds, he made a bizarre discovery.

Jon: Right away I noticed something really odd. All the bars are overweight by approximately five pounds.

Tukufu: So you're telling me that the weights listed in the manifest records are different than those weights of the actual bars?



Jon: Yes, it's correct.

Tukufu: How do you explain that? John's come up with a unique theory for the cut marks.

Jon: The fact that these bars weigh more than the original manifest weight, tells me that Delgado was smuggling silver in the bars back to Spain. In order for it to work, people on the other side would have to recognize the bars and pass them through his scales without checking.

Tukufu: Delgado was not only a major businessman, he may also have been a major smuggler. There's reference here to another theory, that the slash marked a cut point for an additional "defense" tax on shippers. That makes sense. Although, it's curious not all the bars have the marking. I want to run a check. Jon never weighed any bars himself. Our bar weighed 68 pounds. Okay. So I need to do some calculating so I get my story right. According to the official manifest, Chuck's bar should weigh about 78 troy pounds. Is our bar really overweight? I measured the bar and it came out to 68 pounds. If I convert that to troy... got to do a little math. I want to show my results to Chuck. This has been an interesting and educational investigation for me. And I must say that your silver bar has gone through quite a bit in its 385 years.

Chuck: Okay.

Tukufu: I tell Chuck that the markings on his ingot are a window on the earliest days of the global economy. And that people died mining it, minting it and shipping it, including its original owner, Juan Delgado. Your bar of silver is not like other bars of silver. And what makes it special is Delgado and this line.

Chuck: And what's that line signify?

Tukufu: That's where the story starts to get interesting.

Tukufu: Okay. So our 68 pounds converts to 83 pounds troy. And, I subtract the 78 pounds from the manifest. I end up with five pounds over weight.

Chuck: Ohhh. Wow!

Tukufu: So what that means....I tell Chuck the slash mark could be evidence for a military tax on shippers. But smuggling was widespread on the treasure galleons, and it is possible he has a contraband silver ingot.

Chuck: Wow! Five illegal pounds. Well, the story just keeps getting better and better.

Tukufu: There you go.



Chuck: It's maybe even more unique, you know.

Tukufu: So, in the name of the history of the great Spanish people, I'm going have to confiscate this bar of silver.

Chuck: Yeah, yeah, right. Sure you are. [Both laugh]