



ERNIE RICHARDS: Born and raised in New London, Connecticut, Ernie Richards naturally spent his early life in, on, and around the Atlantic Ocean. Famous as a colonial seaport, a whaling center, and now the “Submarine Capital of the World,” his hometown fairly seethes with ship and shipwreck history. Revolutionary War battles were fought there, both on land and sea, and a colonial warship, the *Defence*, was sunk nearby.

Ernie’s interest in ancient and historical archaeology knew no bounds as he was growing up alongside the ocean. It was natural that two or more interests would collide and merge under those conditions. At age ten, he saw a Richard Widmark movie entitled *Frogmen* and, before the movie ended, Ernie knew what he wanted to do in life.

In 1955, a local sports figure and school teacher, John Minevich, was one of the first civilian SCUBA divers in the New London area, and he gave instructions on the subject in the pool at the YMCA there. Ernie was in that first class, at age fifteen. Breathing from a SCUBA tank seemed as natural as breathing from the atmosphere, and an avocation was born.

Ernie was soon in the salvage business, as he began stripping brass and lead (including batteries) from the rotting, sunken fishing and pleasure boats in the Thames River. Most of the time salvage was performed by free-diving—as SCUBA gear was priced out of sight for a street urchin—and often with home-made equipment. He and his diving buddy would hustle the salvaged metals off to the local junkyard, where outrageous scrap prices were paid for the brass (15¢ a pound) and lead (5¢ a pound)!

It was to be an early lesson in business acumen when he discovered, almost too late in his river salvage career, that the local boatyards were paying twenty times those amounts for portholes, propellers, and other boat furnishings which could be re-used!

While serving a four-year hitch in the Navy, during which he learned some electronics theory and submarine technology, Ernie was

sent—not around the world—but back to New London to service the submarines in the conventional and nuclear fleets based there.

For a couple of years before, a couple of years after, and during his stint with Uncle Sam, Ernie eked out a living as a rock ‘n’ roll singer/guitar player, entertaining first his schoolmates, and then his shipmates, in local clubs and gin mills. A girl singer, fresh out of college, joined his band, adding some class to his act. They took a shine to each other, and “made good music together.”

Once married, the band-work income was no longer sufficient to survive, and he went to work at Electric Boat Company across the river in Groton. “EB” is the nation’s first and largest builder of military submarines, and Ernie was part of this effort for three years.

This brings us to 1965, a real turning point in Ernie’s life. The January issue of *Argosy* magazine had an article in it about a Florida diver, Bruce Ward, who, with not much more than Ernie’s home-made dive equipment, was gleaming a small fortune in gold and silver coins from the bones of an ancient Spanish galleon. The article captured Ernie’s imagination. *National Geographic Magazine*, the same month, featured a story about a Florida beachcomber, Kip Wagner, who had begun finding old Spanish coins on the deserted beaches, just north of Ward’s “fishing hole,” and had created a business out of recovering ancient treasures from sub-tropical waters and reefs.

This was too much for Ernie to bear! In March, he packed his wife, Ellie, and their two baby daughters onto an airplane bound for Florida and followed a few days later, driving their tired “Olds 88” and pulling their belongings behind in a rented trailer.

Settling first in Fort Lauderdale, where Ernie’s mother and younger sister and brothers had moved when he joined the Navy, he found that Florida companies paid far less for the services of an electronics technician than did their northern counterparts. What’s more, there had been a recent cut-back in personnel at Cape Canaveral, and for every technical job in Florida there were three people in line, two of whom would take it at any price!

While searching the West Palm Beach area for employment, Ellie’s step-father (her mother had moved south in 1958 as a Pratt & Whitney Aircraft wife) told Ernie that there was a local company which manufactured submarines. Ernie raised his right eyebrow and looked at his in-law incredulously. “No, seriously! It’s right here in the ‘phone book: Perry Submarine Builders.” (They probably build Italian sandwiches! thought Ernie.)

One Friday, Ernie went by the submarine factory...and discovered heaven. This little five-man outfit actually did build submarines. Small ones for two people. He told them of his background in electronics, the Navy, and Electric Boat Company, and the plant manager showed him the submersible vehicles, inside and out. Ernie told them that he wanted a job there and asked for \$125.00 per week; they offered \$70.00. He asked for \$100.00 per week; they offered \$70.00. He agreed. (Whatever they’re paying, I want a job here!)

The plant manager had to talk to the vice-president first; he would contact Ernie. Ernie had no telephone yet but, on Monday morning, the supervisor went to Ernie’s house and picked up a very happy technician, raring to go to work. Work? Ha! “He hated weekends because he couldn’t tinker with ‘his submarines,’” Ellie would soon say.

For the next twenty years Ernie was privileged to dive the seas and oceans of the world, as his work took him to many remote and exotic places. Hawaii, Kwajalein Lagoon, the Bahama Islands, and the Persian Gulf are familiar diving (and submarining) areas for him. While working in the various foreign lands he was driven to learn of their languages, history, and archaeology, always bringing home pictures, artifacts, and fascinating tales of adventure. Ellie, in the meantime, was busy raising two girls—and a third was on the way! What is it about divers having mostly female children?

At every available opportunity while living in Florida, Ernie, sometimes accompanied by Ellie, would swim and dive the reefs along the eastern shore, seeking signs of ancient shipwrecks. Following leads from other divers and from his growing library of shipwreck information, he soon began finding remnants of sailing vessels whose wooden parts had long since been lunch for generations of borer worms. Within six months of moving to Florida he found his first iron cannon. It was from the 1700s and was probably British.

For over a decade he scanned the southern beaches and coral gardens, collecting ship’s fittings and taking mental notes. Finally, in 1977, he began meeting the “right people” and soon started diving on the Spanish Treasure Fleet of 1715—the very same ships which had yielded some of their wealth to Bruce Ward, Kip Wagner, and Mel Fisher so many years before.

Diving first on the *Urca de Lima* for Frank Allen, Ernie “earned” his first piece-of-eight. His curiosity was aroused by the “hieroglyphics” stamped into the silver coin, and he asked Frank what they all meant. Frank was the leading expert on the coins being recovered from the Spanish wrecks of 1715, and Ernie was a willing student. Allen appreciated such eagerness to learn, as he was a former high school History teacher. A great friendship developed out of this liaison.

Frank Allen was also a super salesman and, as such, always remembered details and names. He also looked for interesting characteristics about people he met. For instance, did Ernie know another treasure diver named Bob Weller? No? But he lives only five miles from you in the same town, and you know so many people in common! Then came the kind of detail only Frank would notice. “Your number at

work ends with 5-2-6-1, Bob's is 5-2-4-1!! Your number at home ends with 2-9-3-0, Bob's is 2-9-0-3!!! An introduction was inevitable.

Ernie liked Bob and his wife, Margaret, right off. When the time came that the Palm Beach County Archaeological Society (of which Ernie was vice-president) was asked to provide an exhibit of Underwater Archaeology at the Science Museum in West Palm Beach, Ernie enlisted Bob's help. Together they went to Tallahassee and hand-picked each item that the state of Florida was to display. Bob and Ernie were the first "civilians" allowed into the state's vaults for such purposes—and they were divers, to boot!

The exhibit, which also comprised artifacts from the private collections of Richards, Weller, and others. was an undeniable success in the Palm Beaches. So much so, that these two adventurers orchestrated two other grand displays for the museum in subsequent years. These efforts took months out of their lives to assemble and to administer. Another strong bond developed.

In 1982, Bob invited Ernie to dive with him and Margaret the following season on the 1715 shipwreck known as *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*—"Our Lady of the Snows"—in Fort Pierce. Ernie accepted and spent two to four weeks each year, when possible, on site with the Wellers. His photographic and editing talents were enlisted by Bob when he wrote *Sunken Treasure on Florida Reefs*, the greatest guide to the wreck sites and the adjacent beaches of the Spanish treasure fleet of 1715 ever compiled to date.

With their combined knowledge of shipwrecks and the coins and artifacts retrieved from them, Ernie and Bob began, in 1983, to write and publish a quarterly newsletter called *PLUS ULTRA*, meaning "there's more beyond." Its purpose was to assist other divers in identifying their treasures and to help lay readers and clients to make educated decisions when buying shipwreck coins. Originally confined to distribution in South Florida, word eventually got out that there is someone in Florida explaining sunken ships and their treasures. Subscribers "came aboard" from every corner of the U.S. and, now, *PLUS ULTRA* is read in a dozen foreign countries.

In the mid 1980s, Ernie first encountered a coin dealer named Frank Sedwick, who seemed to be selling coins from the wrecks at *wholesale* prices. Not only that, but he knew how to "read" the coins and decipher their details. "That made just a few of us," said Ernie. Sedwick was a college professor who retired early in order to deal in Spanish colonial coins. This turned out to be a fascinating and profitable move for him. They remained in constant touch over the next couple of years, exchanging newsletters and price lists.

Sedwick grew to appreciate the style and accuracy of Ernie's work in *PLUS ULTRA* and asked to use some of the material in a book he was writing. As time went on, a new teacher-pupil relationship developed; the professor taught the student more about coin history, and the student enlightened the professor with details which he had yet to discover. The studies and work of one complimented the other, and a strong, professional friendship developed.

Frank Sedwick picked up the ball where Frank Allen had left it when he died...and ran all the way for a touchdown! He became the nation's expert on Spanish colonial coins from the shipwrecks, and he wrote a book on the subject. *The Practical Book of Cobs* had been needed for decades, a need that *PLUS ULTRA* was only beginning to fill. When it arrived, the book was an immediate sell-out and an award winner (1988, The Numismatic Literary Guild). Included in the pages of that edifying and entertaining reference are sketches and photos by our urchin from the streets of New London!

EPILOGUE: Ernie had graduated from New London High School in 1958, and he had intentions of going to Mitchell College there to advance his education and decide on a career. The draft, his marriage, and a move to Florida set that ambition aside for several years. He started attending what is now Palm Beach State College at night and on weekends during the 1970s. In the meantime, due to his grammatical abilities and schooling in languages, he became editor/photographer for Bob Weller, providing his talents to nine "Frogfoot" books, which included co-writing one with Bob. As a co-writer, Ernie also assisted Dr. Alan Craig in producing *SPANISH TREASURE BARS From New World Shipwrecks* (2003). Since then, Ernie has published, on his own, a series of educational handbooks tying Spanish colonial coin recoveries to specific shipwrecks and fleet losses. From 1997 through 1998, Bob and Ernie, drawing on their own experiences and those of other salvagers, co-produced one of the best treasure diving magazines ever: *TREASURE QUEST!* Their wives, Margaret Weller and Ellie Richards, understood this passion (at least we think so).

