

UP FROM THE SEA: A freshly found part of the fabled galleon led to recovery of this gold bar and encrusted chain, according to the family of Mel Fisher.

New trove of Atocha located, team says

BY TED LUND

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KEY WEST — Almost 15 years to the day after the discovery of millions of dollars in treasure from the sunken Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, the family of famed treasure hunter Mel Fisher claims it has made another significant find that could point the way to millions more.

The latest discovery: the sterncastle of the ship that went down in a hurricane off Key West in 1622, laden with millions in gold and silver bullion bound for Spain from the New World.

Kim Fisher, son of the treasure salvor who died in December 1998 after a lengthy illness, said his dive teams located the sterncastle — a rear structure where royalty, aristocracy, the clergy and their belongings traveled — about 12 miles northwest of the original find.

Fisher estimates the items salvors have recovered so far — including gold bars, money chains, silver coins and jewelry — could be worth more than \$500,000. The find was made Sunday and will be exhibited at a press conference today when the artifacts are unloaded from the salvage vessel, the J.B. MacGruder.

In total, Fisher said, his crews uncovered three solid gold bars, 120 silver coins, several gold chains and assorted pieces of Indian jewelry believed to have come from South America.

Even more important, Fisher said, is that the find could be the key to locating millions in gold and jewels the salvors believe is still out there somewhere. To date, Fisher's company, Key West-based Treasure Sal-

Keys discovery might lead to new trove

► ATOCHA, FROM 1A

vors Inc., has recovered gold, silver, jewelry and other artifacts from the Atocha estimated to be worth anywhere between \$200 million and \$500 million, most of which has gone to investors who funded Mel Fisher's decades-long salvage efforts.

"Because of the other kinds of things we're finding, we're pretty confident this is the sterncastle," Fisher said. "In addition to the gold and silver, we're finding swords, cannon balls, rifles and other armaments. That is all stuff that would be associated with the most secure part of the ship. . . . That's where all of the wealthy people traveled and they generally had the best stuff."

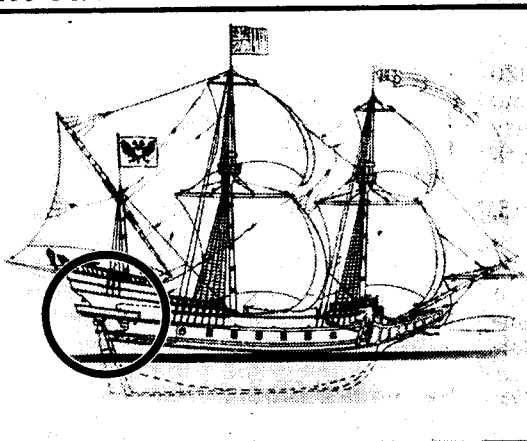
The new discovery comes at a particularly auspicious time for the Fishers, who operate the Mel Fisher Treasure Museum in Key West. The museum is hosting a Mel Fisher Days celebration this week, coinciding with the Hemingway Days Festival.

And though a spokesman says the salvage firm has no shortage of investors, the company's finances are not public, and any claims of a new find could arouse the interest of new investors.

Fisher said his crew has

A SIGNIFICANT FIND?

Treasure salvors say they have located the sterncastle of Nuestra Señora de Atocha. The rear structure is where royalty, aristocracy, the clergy and their belongings — including gold and jewelry — traveled.



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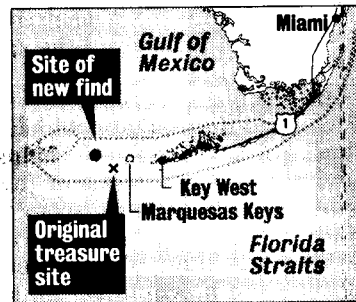
recovered three gold bars lacking traditional tax stamps — indicating they likely belonged to the Catholic Church — and several money chains, ornately designed gold necklaces that enabled the aristocracy to carry their wealth in portable form.

"One of the real ornate money chains we found is encrusted in a conglomerate of some iron pieces because of the reaction over the years with the salt water," Fisher said. "Normally those chains don't get encrusted, but because it was with the other pieces, we don't know what's in there with it."

The church was said to have 35 boxes of gold on board, Fisher said, which to this day have not been located.

In addition to the church wealth, the ship carried 38 members of Spanish royalty and aristocracy and their belongings, according to Spanish fleet records. The area in which the ship sank, called the Quicksands, is located approximately 30 miles west of Key West.

The contours of the white, shifting sand at the bottom change with each storm season, often scattering wreckage far from the original site and making it difficult to locate. As



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the Atocha deteriorated, it bumped and rolled along the bottom on a northwesterly course, leaving a swath of sunken treasure in its wake over a 60-square-mile area.

The Fisher crew discovered the "mother lode" on July 20, 1985. Since then, divers have continued to scour the sea floor west of Key West in search of the remaining millions the family believes is still to be found.

Mel Fisher and his family spent more than 16 years hunting for the Atocha, and Fisher became one of Key West's most famous residents — and a national celebrity — after the 1985 discovery. Prior to his death, Fisher was implicated in a scandal involving the sale of counterfeit coins — though not from the Atocha. That case was settled with a plea agreement.