

Every hobby has its golden days and this book captures the pastime of metal detecting in Ontario, Canada at its best in the explosive years of changes in detector technology and development. It's a firsthand account of magical moments then.

## **Earth Ghosts: The Search Begins**

By Steve Selman

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# Earth Ghosts

Finding Lost Treasures

Steve Selman

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# Earth Ghosts: The Search Begins

*"But the earth holds ghosts, even of entire nations."*

*- Alan Weisman: The World Without Us*

**THAT'S WHERE IT** all started. I was a kid. Ten years old, and carelessly bouncing from the house, I had dropped it. My allowance. All of it. A single silver quarter that flashed momentarily in the air and then was gone. Somewhere in the thick grass beyond our porch. I thought it would be easy. I never found it.

Years later at Clark's Corner Store in Campbellford, Ontario it all came together. Instantly. A copy of *Treasure* lay on the crowded magazine shelf. The monthly was full of amazing tales of amateur treasure hunters, equipped with metal detectors, finding wonderful things. I was hooked. It was a simple but boggling revelation: All the things we'd lost or misplaced in our lives hadn't vanished. They'd only disappeared. And here lay the ultimate solution. A handheld time machine.

The past is a place and it is a wonderful one. Always there with its remarkable geography. Its clusters of temporal neighbourhoods—weeks, months, years, centuries. All occupying the same ground we walk across today. Its streets teeming with people just like us and separated only by the arguments of... time. Shadows. Ghosts.

We seldom acknowledge the latter anymore but I've been lucky. I've met them, sat with them, studied them. And in common areas across Ontario I've come to recognize history's single truth: we are daily creating it. It's not a study, it's a public occupation. It's something we do.

How many of us wake up some morning and suddenly the only thing we feel is promise? It slaps you on the head. Overwhelmingly, a feeling's there that it will never be as good as what it is today.

In 1976, that's exactly how I felt. I entered a remarkable world. With the aid of a machine most had scoffed at prior to this, and with good reason, I was seeing the past as no other had previously in my community. The metal detector was in the midst of revolutionary change in that decade and I had stumbled on its awakening in a critical year.

I looked out across the city of Peterborough and its public places and parks and recognized instantly, that whatever the stories were these places could tell, they hadn't been told. Just beneath the soil of the city lay all the shadows of all the yesterdays the city had experienced. They were still all there. It was like visiting a century home and finding



the parlour choked with ghosts.

Many companies had tried but Compass Electronics of Oregon was the first to make the quantum leap to discrimination. Only in the hobby of metal detecting would that word possess such a positive connotation. The company had successfully put together circuitry that could identify metal by type. Revolutionary. It could bypass the endless junk deposited by daily activity in our midst: the foil, the nails, the bottle caps, the wire, iron fittings, steel cans and endless minor metallic debris that are deposited wherever we gather. It could discriminate. It was a huge breakthrough.

On a spring day of that year I walked out on the fields of Nicholls Oval, a long time popular Peterborough park and city jewel purchased for its citizens in 1894, that had staged so many public events over the years. I wasn't alone. In my right hand I carried a Judge 1, the Compass prototype for all its metal detectors to come. Sleek, green and enhanced with a white, ground sweeping, electronic loop, the detector was the smartest thing in the park that day. It could hear all the stories the meeting place had ever shared, it could interpret all the words it had ever heard.

I was amazed. Those tales were everywhere. This site had been selected for its proximity to the public, its flat open spaces and ability to host a number of recreational events. Charlotte Nicholls had been both kind and generous, the advisors to her estate wise. She'd died a widow and childless in 1890 and her million dollar estate had endowed a special fund of \$60 000 to purchase parkland for Peterborough's citizens. The Oval was just one of the sites acquired. Subsequently, it had seen cricket matches, tennis, bicycle races, golf, baseball and numerous company fairs and picnics before it had settled down to become a major host for soccer in the city. The machine couldn't move but something blitzed through its circuitry. It signalled targets beneath at every step. The park was littered with metallic debris. Nulls and broken signals overlapped constantly. Solid, sharp readings sang out too. And I was here to exploit the difference in the two. I had come to discriminate.

I wanted to see coins of all the eras I had learned about as a child. I wanted to see reminders of all the great events and periods this still young country had witnessed. I wanted it all.

I had written down a number of goals I had hoped to accomplish that summer and I knew Nicholls Oval was to be a major partner in accomplishing them.

The very first coin I found there was merely an inch under a large tree abutting the soccer field there. It threw me back instantly to my paper route days, a kid constantly scratching for something different in his change. An old king looked up from the earth. George V. It was a well worn quarter. Dateless just as so many were in the early sixties but it represented so much more. Someone years ago, sitting here or passing through had dropped this. Maybe just another kid like me. The moment was frozen. It was still here.

It was to be a summer of frequent visits there and the task was enormous. I would soon

find out how tough some of those goals I'd decided on would be. The park was littered but it was also layered. The surface debris was so abundant it masked what lay below. I was determined to uncover and separate all the years that so ruthlessly competed with each other.



*The prized Jack Armstrong ring of 1939.*

“It’s junk,” I thought. It was one of the many moments that stands out in the years I haunted the Oval. “It’s junk.” I took the dented, discoloured circle from the small hole I’d dug and glancing at it placed the ring in my pocket to examine later. It had been in the ground a long time. Not silver. Not gold. Just some ignoble metal that hadn’t yet fully surrendered to the soil. The once rich gilt had weathered and almost disappeared. Whatever it was, it was a shadow of what it once had been. At home, the earth-choked inscription soon became clear: Centennial of Baseball 1939. Quite a year for the world and Canada too. A war in its infancy, a depression still gnawing at the lives of people then. The ring’s face was centred with a baseball and on its arches it bore two players about to bat. The ring was an all-sizer, a circle with soft metal arms that could be shaped to any finger. And this finger had been small. Some boy had been here in the early war years and lost something he clearly prized. It couldn’t be purchased at any local store. It had to be ordered.

This was the golden age of radio and cereal premiums. Cereal companies offered prizes on mail-in coupons and box tops to encourage sales. Radio shows and serials offered nightly entertainment and mail-in offers too. It was the age of action heroes and

a growing number of children's entertainment figures. But this was no ordinary prize. I was totally unaware of what it represented. It would take me twenty years to find out.

In my research of Little Orphan Annie memorabilia in the late 1990's I stumbled upon a field of collecting I hadn't heard of before. Toy rings. Gazing at the photos, I remembered something. Somewhere in the large box of what- nots and junk I had saved was this ring I had found at the Oval years before. It wasn't an easy search.

I'd never heard of Jack Armstrong. But this ring and he were inextricably linked. Armstrong, a fictional action hero, began a great run as the All American boy in 1933. His radio adventures riveted a generation of young students then. Wheaties, the Breakfast of Champions, represented Jack and premiums soon appeared to champion his amazing exploits.

The year 1939 was a banner year for baseball and several cereals competed to offer rings to children. They had become a staple of mail-in offers. This ring hadn't gained the popularity others had. But this was Jack Armstrong's ring. And in the world of toy sports ring collectibles, it was a king. How it had ended up in Peterborough and who had brought it here will never be known and I've never found its like since. In new condition the toy prize commands over a thousand dollars. The great surprise was that even in dug condition it would easily bring several hundred.

Kids today are overwhelmed with give-aways and the latter have become far more attuned to technology and fads. The ground holds a record of a different time and heroes we seldom hear of now. I'm glad I've met some of them.



*Some of the many reminders of the amazing Age of Premiums and children's societies.*



Nicholls Oval was an ideal park to detect. It had offered the citizens of Peterborough a near perfect combination of events and settings to attract their attention. Clockwise from the top left: Yes, I still go there occasionally to see if changes in ground conditions will offer a few surprises and here I am to the south of the soccer field that dominates the park's main area; company picnics and their small midways have been a feature of the Oval for years and this scene from 2003 captures a glimpse of the activity at the park's immediate west end; the Oval is popular amongst walkers and joggers who delight in its tree-lined road; the bandstand so popular in the sixties is still used at the far west end of the park and lies below a wide bank that once was crowded with listeners.



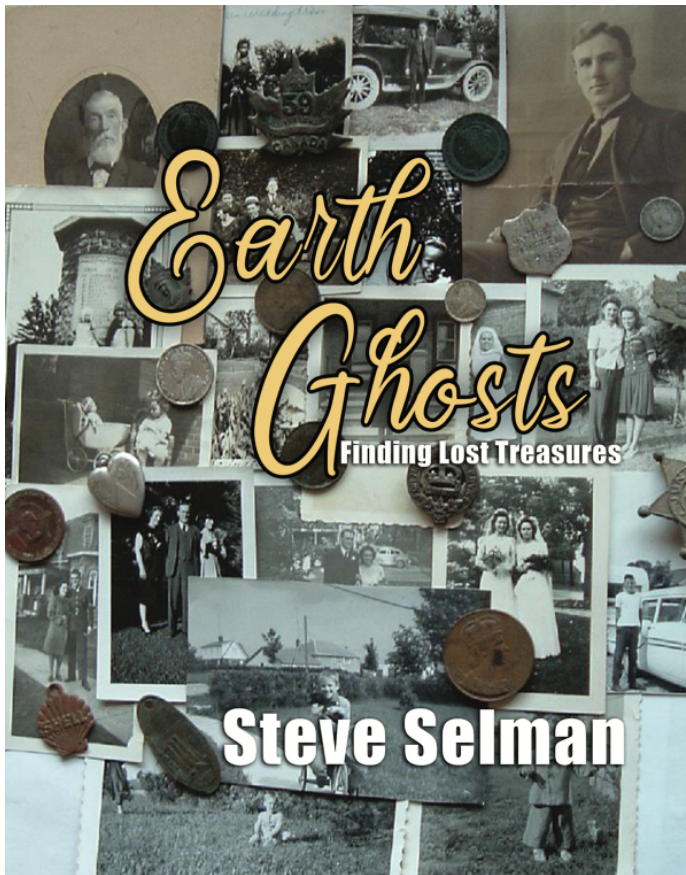
# About the Author

**A NATIVE OF** Peterborough, Ontario, the author, now retired from his profession, has combined a love of history and the metal detecting hobby for over forty years.

The ground has stories and herein are just a few he shares. Wherever people have been, they've left reminders of their passing or time there. A coin or keepsake, something personal or much less memorable. Most of their owners have likely no recollection of where they were, why they were there or what occurred the day an item was lost. The soil remembers.

From that collective memory just below our feet arose a pastime that still thrives and is now practised across the world today. Its golden age in one small part of that global community is recalled by the author here.





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