

A Mystery in the Library

• Library Lessons •

by | Dr. Phyllis J. Perry

The Secret in the Old Desk

Fribble Mouse woke, yawned and snuggled deeper into his pillow. Then he suddenly snapped open his eyes and leapt out of bed. It was Saturday. Today Mom and Dad were taking Fribble and his little brother, Scamper, to garage sales.

As soon as he was dressed, Fribble opened the chest that sat at the foot of his bed. He took out a little leather drawstring bag and checked to see how much money he had.

“Drat!” he muttered aloud. One dollar and twenty-five cents. Not much to work with. He stuffed it into the pocket of his overalls.

After he washed his face and paws and smoothed his whiskers, Fribble dashed downstairs to breakfast. Scamper was already at the table eating. Dad was reading the paper and marking red circles around garage sale ads.

“Good morning, Fribble,” his mother said. “Have some breakfast. We’ll want to be on our way soon.”

In no time at all, they piled into their minivan and were off. Fribble found nothing to buy with his \$1.25 at the first three stops, but Scamper snapped up a small teddy bear wearing a red turtleneck sweater for twenty-five cents.

“You already have about fifteen bears,” Fribble reminded him.

“Not like this one,” Scamper insisted.

Fribble found a great computer game at the next stop, but it cost \$5.00. He was losing hope when his parents said they were making only one more stop.

At the next place, Fribble looked around and his whiskers drooped when he saw nothing but clothes out front. He went into the garage. There was some old furniture and a table holding colorful glass dishes.

Mother wandered into the garage, too. She called, “Fribble, look at this.”

Fribble walked over to an old oak desk. He watched as his mother opened it. The front folded down to make a writing surface.

“Cool,” Fribble said. There were lots of little drawers and cubbyholes.

Dad came over to look, and Mom said, “This is a nice old desk. I’ve been wishing that Fribble had a place to sit and do his school work.”

When Fribble realized his mother and father might buy it for him, he studied the desk with new interest. His nose twitched and his tail lashed through the air.



Fribble watched and listened as his father bargained. Finally Dad handed over some money and carried the desk out to the van.

As they drove home, Scamper happily played with his teddy bear, and Fribble kept glancing over his shoulder at the desk. He was feeling very proud and grown-up.

Fribble helped his parents carry the desk to his bedroom. They placed it in a corner near a window for good light. Dad also brought up an old wooden chair that had been stored in the garage.

While his mom prepared lunch, Fribble studied his desk. There was a thin drawer in the middle near the top that was a perfect place for pencils and pens. Little slotted spaces on either side could hold pads and envelopes. Notebooks and books could fit in the big, bottom drawer that ran clear across the front.

Fribble gathered his school supplies that were scattered all over the house. He put them in his desk, and then pulled open the pencil drawer to take out a pencil and start his math homework. As he reached in, he saw a small knob on the side. Curious, he pushed it, and to his surprise, a secret drawer popped out just below the pencil drawer.

Fribble looked inside. There was something in the secret drawer! His nose twitched and his whiskers quivered. What could it be?

Carefully Fribble pulled out a yellowed sheet of paper. It was rolled up and tied with a ribbon. With shaking paws, Fribble untied the ribbon and unrolled the paper. It was a certificate printed in black and green with fancy borders. At the top was an eagle and a gold seal was in the bottom left corner. Gently Fribble touched the shiny seal with its pointy edges.

Fribble began to read. "This certificate issued on May 31, 1896, to Mr. Dither Weatherby for stock in the Broken Boot Gold Mine of the Deadwood Gold Mining Company, South Dakota, in the amount of \$10.00."

Fribble read the certificate twice. He had lots of questions. At first he thought he should run and share his discovery with his parents. But then he decided to do a little investigating on his own first. Fribble shut the certificate away in the secret drawer and went downstairs to lunch.

"I've got my desk all organized," he said. "Thanks. I really like it."

"You're welcome," his dad said.

As soon as they finished eating, Fribble asked, "Is it all right if I go to the library?"

"Of course," said his mother.

"Me too?" Scamper asked.

"Sure," Fribble agreed.

A few minutes later they were climbing the steps to the public library. Miss Scurry, the librarian, smiled as they entered. "How may I help you two today?"

Fribble furrowed his brow. He wasn't sure where to start. "I guess the first thing I need to do is find out where Deadwood, South Dakota is," he said.

Miss Scurry brought a big atlas to the table. Fribble used the index to find Deadwood. It was listed as 108, G 5. Fribble opened the book to page 108, ran his left paw over from the 5, and his right paw down from the G on the grid. Where the two met on the map he found Deadwood. "Here it is!" he cried.

"Good for you," Miss Scurry said. "Now you've got me curious. Why are you interested in Deadwood?"

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"I think there were gold mines there," Fribble said.

Miss Scurry smiled. "You're right. Let's see if we have a book about South Dakota that might tell you more about mining and Deadwood."

Miss Scurry, Fribble and Scamper went to the computer catalog. Fribble clicked on "word" and typed in "South Dakota."

"Look," Scamper said, staring at the computer screen. "There's a whole bunch of books."

Fribble pulled a little notebook and stubby pencil from his back pocket. "They're all in the nonfiction section, J 973."

While Miss Scurry helped someone else, Fribble and Scamper searched in the nonfiction books. Fribble chose several books about South Dakota and carried them to a table. He used the index to look up "Deadwood." While he read, Scamper looked at pictures.

After a while, Miss Scurry came back and asked, "How are you doing?"

Fribble said, "I've learned a lot. They discovered gold in Deadwood in 1876. Lots of interesting people lived there like Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok."

"Really?" Scamper's eyes grew wide.

"If you want to read more," Miss Scurry said, "you can look them up some day in the computer catalog. We have books about them in the Juvenile Biography section of the library."

As soon as they got home, Fribble showed his mom and dad the gold mining certificate and told them all he had learned about Deadwood, South Dakota.

"How do you suppose an old gold mining certificate got in Fribble's desk?" Mom asked.

Fribble looked at the kitchen clock. "I wonder if the garage sale is still going on? Could we go back and ask some questions?"

Dad drove Fribble and Scamper back to the house where they'd bought the desk. Fribble carried the mining certificate with him. The mouse holding the sale hurried up to ask, "Is there a problem with the desk?"

Dad explained about the gold certificate they'd found. "Do you know where that desk came from? We're awfully curious about it."

The mouse said, "Old Mrs. Weatherby, who lives down on the corner, owned the desk. She asked me to sell a few things for her at my garage sale. Maybe she can tell you more about it."

Dad drove Scamper and Fribble to the corner. He knocked on Mrs. Weatherby's door and explained about the desk and the certificate.

Mrs. Weatherby invited them into the parlor. "I'm afraid I haven't had money to buy any cookies lately, but I could offer you tea," Mrs. Weatherby said.

"Please don't bother," Dad said. "We'll only take a minute of your time."

Fancy little white lace doilies were scattered everywhere. Fribble and Scamper sat down very carefully. Some of the old furniture was so spindly it looked as if it might break. Fribble saw threadbare spots in the old carpet and wondered if Mrs. Weatherby didn't have the money to replace it.

Fribble told about the secret drawer and showed her the old certificate.

Mrs. Weatherby said, "That desk has been handed down in the family for many years. It belonged to my husband's great-great-great-grandfather, Dither Weatherby."

"That's the name on the certificate!" Fribble cried.

"Well, I've always heard that Dither prospected for gold. He settled in Deadwood and ran a store there. He must have bought a certificate in a mine and hid it away in that secret drawer." Mrs. Weatherby sighed. "I'm sure the certificate is worthless now, but it's a nice piece of history." She handed back the certificate and smiled at Fribble. "I'm glad that someone like you will be using that old desk."

On the drive home, Fribble asked, "Do we have time for one more stop?"

"Where?" Dad asked.

"I'd like to show this certificate to Dusty Squint at the coin and stamp shop," Fribble said. "When I bought stamps there, I saw lots of old letters and certificates framed on the walls. He'd be interested in this, I think."

Dad drove them to the coin and stamp shop. Mr. Squint peered at the gold mining certificate with his magnifying glass.

"It's not worth \$10.00 any more, is it?" asked Scamper sadly.

"No, it's not," Mr. Squint said. "It's worthless as a gold certificate." Then he smiled. "But as a collectible, it's valuable. If you're willing to sell, I could offer you \$125.00 for it."

"Really?" said Fribble. His heart beat fast. "I'm rich!" he thought. Then he remembered Mrs. Weatherby who had no cookies to offer them. He looked at his dad. "I think Mrs. Weatherby could use that money, don't you?"

Fribble's dad agreed. Mr. Squint gave them cash in an envelope.

"We'll just have time to take this to Mrs. Weatherby before dinner," Dad said.

Fribble slid into the front seat next to his dad. He held the envelope of money tightly in his paws. Scamper sat in back with his teddy bear.

When Mrs. Weatherby open the door to her house, she looked surprised.

Fribble proudly handed over the envelope of money. "Turns out your gold certificate was worth \$125.00," he said.

Mrs. Weatherby gasped. Then she said, "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," Fribble said. He turned to go.

"Wait!" Mrs. Weatherby said. She took a five-dollar bill and handed it to Fribble. "Your reward," she said. "I insist." She smiled. "And you and your little brother come back and see me again. We'll have tea and cookies," she promised.

"Thanks. We will," said Fribble.

Back in the car, Fribble said, "Could we go back to that garage sale where they had the computer game? I've got enough money now to buy it."

Dad drove them back, and Fribble was thrilled that the game was still there. He bought it and they headed home for dinner.

"I'd call this a great garage sale day," Fribble said. "We found a desk, a bear, a computer game, uncovered a valuable secret and made a new friend."



Phyllis J. Perry is the author of over 45 books and has more than 38 years of experience as an elementary school teacher and administrator. She is the author of the Fribble Mouse series from Upstart Books.

Activity Suggestions

In *The Secret In the Old Desk*, Fribble learns a little about the discovery of gold in Deadwood, South Dakota. But gold was discovered in many other parts of the United States as well. Three of the most important sites of gold discovery were in Alaska, California and Colorado. Invite one team of students to research the 1849 gold rush in California, have another team research the 1859 gold rush in Colorado and the third team research the Klondike gold rush in Alaska in 1897. Have on hand a variety of nonfiction resources. Ask each team to write a summary report of what they learned through using print or Internet resources, and have them share these summaries with the class. As they present their reports, each team should show the location of these gold strikes on a map of the United States. They should also show the common overland routes used to get to these gold fields.

When most people think of the 1849 gold rush to California, they think of early gold seekers crossing the continent in covered wagons. In fact, many people came to the California gold fields by ship! Invite one group of students to research how gold seekers got to California by way of Panama. Have these students use a map to trace the route from some point in the East to San Francisco. The second group of students should show how some gold seekers came from the East coast by ship around Cape Horn. Ask this group to use a map and show the route “around the horn” to San Francisco.

In addition to gold, the western part of the United States was the site of many silver strikes. No silver mine is more famous than “The Matchless Mine” in Leadville, Colorado. And no two people associated with silver are more famous than the Silver King and Queen, Horace A.W. Tabor and Baby Doe Tabor. Ask a group of students to use print and Internet resources to research this piece of silver history and to write a report to share with the class.

Your library has many sources of information. Ask students to work in teams of three for 20 minutes. During that time, they should list on a sheet of paper specific resources in your library that would yield information about any aspect of gold or silver mining. They should write the name, word or phrase they looked up and the title of a specific source where they found information in your library. For example, one team might use a biographical dictionary to look up John Sutter. One team might find a magazine, pamphlet or newspaper article about mining. Students might locate a specific nonfiction or fiction book on mining or a biography of a famous mining figure. A team member might find an Internet site on the California gold rush. Another might use a dictionary to learn about hydraulic mining. At the end of 20 minutes, have the teams share their lists. Some will overlap. How many different kinds of library resources on gold and silver mining did you find?