

# RICH DIGGING

By Digger Odell



Found in the 'poor man's privy' #2. (From left to right) pottery mustard barrel; double eagle flask; Butler's Ink Cin.; Dr. Denig's Cough Balsam (iron pontled); Macedonian Oil; and unembossed umbrella ink.

Each time we passed the shabby shingle-sided house in which the old lady lived, we thought we'd like the opportunity to dig the privies we knew must be there. Often she could be seen sitting in the front window. We recently noticed that the house was empty. Shortly thereafter workers began renovating the property. They were gutting the place the afternoon we stopped to ask permission. The house and yard were littered with debris from the remodeling and the owners said we could go ahead since the yard was a mess.

## PRIVY #1

The backyard was built up with a low retaining wall at the rear property line. Our 1887 Sanborn map showed an outhouse-like structure in the southwest corner. It was there we concentrated our search. Probing was complicated by layers of fill and rock which had been hauled in to bring the yard up to the level grade, but we located a promising spot.

The following weekend opened up a test hole finding fill, shards, and a nice cone ink within the first three feet; below that nothing but clay. Our hole was small,

which is our usual habit until we are certain of what we are digging into. As the initial hole was widened, large amounts of rock slowed our progress. It became quickly apparent the rocks were stacked on top of one another forming a wall. #@\*%\$#@!!! Anyone who has done a fair



Double Eagle historical flask in half pint size.

amount of privy digging has done this at one time or another. We had mistakenly dug down the outside of the privy wall. Not only did this waste a lot of time and energy, but now the only reasonable option was to take out the wall, which might compromise the structural integrity of the remaining walls. If the privy was deep it would be undiggable for safety reasons.

Backfill (the dirt thrown behind the brick or stone wall when the privy was first constructed) probes very much like the fill inside the walls since both are disturbed earth. The cone ink was most likely thrown into the backfill when the privy was first built.

Luckily the hole was shallow, not even 6 feet. We pulled away the side wall and tunneled forward into the privy. The shards were scarce and the bottles even scarcer. We burrowed in as far as possible before knocking in the overhanging dirt. The dimensions of the pit were about 3 x 5 x 5 feet deep. All told, half a dozen unembossed bottles and a common stove polish bottle were found. Not much reward for two weekends work. The house was much older than the artifacts in this privy, so we decide to return another day to find

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*Within the first two feet of fill we found encouraging signs: redware shards, pontil age glass and early pottery.*

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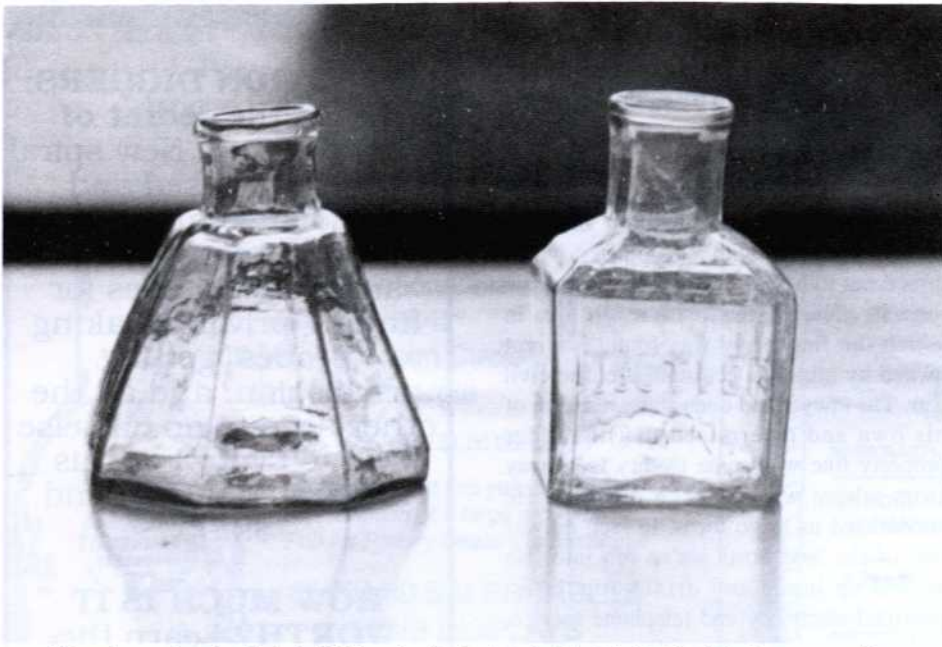
the other privies. Most of the bottles were given to a gentleman living on the neighboring property who had shown great interest in our activities. A few others were left to the owners. The neighbor suggested looking around on his place. On the property was a handsome brick home which he indicated had been built in 1846.

## PRIVY #2

Once you are able to locate the first privy on a lot, finding the others becomes easier. There is always a logical pattern to where they are located. Within a short time of returning the third weekend, we had found privy #2.

Spirits were high with anticipation. This hole was either newer or older than the last and the location in the middle of the back of the lot seemed like the perfect place for the oldest hole.

The nest of shards was at the back edge of the hole no more than eighteen inches down. Beneath the shards was only hard clay which indicated that the actual hole was in front of us. We had dug down the



Unembossed umbrella ink (left) and a Butler's Ink, Cin (right). Both had open pontils.



Wishart's Pine Tree Tar Cordial, deep emerald green, large size.

back wall half in and half out of the privy (again). We dug forward and down, digging through alternate layers of clay and ash. Our expectations growing with each bucket full.

Usually about this time in a dig, our imaginations begin to run wild, inventing fantasies about finding a cobalt, pontiled, unlisted, pictured-embossed, 15" figural bitters that surely lies only inches below our spade, or maybe we'd find the mother of all privy holes, filled to the brim, a veritable cornucopia of rare bottles.

The privy had probed no more than six feet deep. Sure enough the trash layer appeared at four and a half feet. Digging slowed as bottles appeared. The top layer contained smooth based, hinge mold, circa 1860-70s bottles, below that all pontil age glass.

Now at the time this was going on, the gentleman from the neighboring house planted himself at the top edge of the hole and watched, disbelieving, as large quantities of shards and numerous bottles were brought out. Even the owner, who was supposed to be scraping the paint from the side of the gutted house, couldn't resist the intrigue and mystery of what was buried in his backyard. After a short period, he dropped all pretense of working and settled in to watch. At one point he was convinced to jump into the hole to unearth, for himself, a bottle. As the afternoon progressed, a sort of verbal combat began between the two spectators. It began quite innocently, as the owner remarked to the neighbor, a lawyer, that bottles coming out of his privy were certainly far better than what we would

probably find on the neighboring lot. The lawyer retorted that this couldn't be true as his house was built by and lived in by a gentleman whose daughter had married the lieutenant governor of the state and that rich people would have better bottles. Obviously one had only to look at the two properties to believe that this might be true. It became clear to us that we would have to dig the neighboring property to help settle this dispute.

### PRIVY #3

Privy #2 was a pleasant 4 x 6 x 5 feet deep, wood-lined with a brick wall cutting through the west side of the hole. The wall, one side of privy #3, was unmortared and

did not go as deep as the privy it bisected. It intruded into the wood-lined hole only about six to eight inches. The mouth of an undamaged **Wishart's Pine Tree Tar Cordial** was pressed up against the bricks and a pontiled umbrella ink was found behind the brick wall. Apparently the builders were not aware of privy #2 when they first dug the hole for privy #3. Sadly, it was new, shallow, and produced no bottles. The only fortunate aspect was we did not have to dig a new hole to discover this as we just broke through the brick wall. We vowed to return as soon as possible to help our friends settle their argument.



The Lawyer's house.



Extremely rare and unlisted in this size. 'Dr. Denig's / Cough Balsam', aqua, iron pontil. The best bottle found in both yards.

### THE NEIGHBORS PRIVY #1

Do rich folks really have better bottles than poor folks? You bet they do. The trouble is they also have the money to have holes cleaned out (a little foreshadowing here.) Now the backyard of the lawyer's property was a gravel parking lot. This was further complicated by the fact the previous owners had purchased several small additions to the original lot between 1846 and 1860. We did not know this at the time. We probed our arms off trying to discover the location of privy #1. When found, it was situated only four feet from the privy #1 on the first property.

The privy contained bottles primarily dating to the latter part of the 19th century. The best items were ten local drugstore bottles which up until that time had been rare. However, in the bottom of the hole we found the remnants of a richly colored green cathedral pickle bottle with a huge open pontil. Hmmm? Also of interest was a set of small vials containing red, blue and green pigments. These we guessed were drawing inks. The original owner of the house had been an architect and this privy seems to have been filled shortly after his death around 1892. The hole also contained numerous medicine bottles

including a Warner's Safe Kidney and Liver Cure. All very interesting but where was the old hole? We again decided to return at a later time to try again. So far the rich folks were losing.

### PRIVY #2

After much reconsideration and map study we returned with a hypothesis, which turned out to be correct, that an older privy must lie closer to the house as the area in which the first privy was found was not owned by our architect until after the civil war. The lawyer had done some research of his own and determined that the older property line was some twenty feet away from where we had been probing. He encouraged us to go for it. In fact, he was one of the best hosts we've run into. He served up lunch and drinks regularly, provided electricity and telephone service, and even gave us a tour of the house which had been beautifully preserved.

If you have never probed in a parking lot you have no idea of how troublesome packed gravel can be to getting a probe into the ground. We had to resort to using an industrial-sized electric drill with an 18" wood bit to get the probe holes started. It must have looked fairly amusing to

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*We returned one more weekend and probed extensively without finding another privy. Maybe rich folks do have better bottles. There again, maybe not.*

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passersby to see two fellows drilling holes in a parking lot. Ted looked like a man wrestling an alligator as he attempted to get the wood bit through the top layer.

Our efforts were rewarded after only a short time of probing where the map showed the earlier property line to be. The probe sank to handle and gave the tell-tail feel of privy fill. But alas, this hole was to produce very little. It appeared to date to the late 1850s and 1860s. Many pontiled shards were recovered, but only one bottle of interest, an embossed ink. We returned one more weekend and probed extensively without finding another privy. Maybe rich folks do have better bottles. There again, maybe not.

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