

# TENNESSEE SALOON DIGGIN'

By Mike Barbara

A warm day in late May, 2005, saw my good friend and fellow digger Steve Hicks and I cruising around the old part of Knoxville, Tennessee, in search of a place to dig. Uh, oh, blue lights... this can't be good! Knoxville's finest on our tail. Off the road and out of the car with an explanation of what we were doing and that we're not casing the neighborhood! It seems that our search was not a discreet one to the neighbors!

What a start to a day of digging — little did we know that the aftermath of this day was to be memorable for more than the blue light greeting!

Towards the end of the morning, just when we were about to give up... *fresh dirt behind an old building in the oldest section of town!!!* A quick examination of the dirt and we knew we were into an old dump—broken glass all around and I don't mean new glass! Broken Hutches, medicines, amber Cokes... Oh, how we wanted to start digging, but permission first! We would have to wait until Monday.

It was a long Monday at work! Work over, I called Steve, who had already spoken with the foreman overseeing the job. Steve had secured permission to dig from him with the stipulation that we not disturb their footers. No problem!

By the time that I arrived, Steve was there waiting on me. We started our digging in two different areas, with Steve

in the middle of the lot and me up near the back wall of the building. Within five minutes I was pulling out bottles. A T.C. Fox Hutch from Knoxville, a plain strap-sided whiskey flask, some unembossed druggists and a couple of early marbles rolled out. Finally... a drug store bottle with a name on it. It figured to be a Knoxville druggist, but it turned out to be a drug store bottle from Tracy, Tennessee. Things were looking pretty good! A couple of minutes later, yet another pharmacy bottle, this one from Rockwood, Tennessee.

Sharing my success with Steve, I found that his hole had been productive as well. At the side of the hole was a Howell and Fox, Knoxville Hutch, a few generic medicines and some unembossed whiskeys. I chatted with him for a time and then got back to my dig.

The closer I got to the back of the building, the older the bottles seemed to be getting. I got into a nice layer of coffin flasks, strap-sided whiskey flasks and aqua medicines right up next to the building and then... *What can this be??!* Heavy as lead... A set of lead knuckles!

Alas, the day got late and the digging

fizzled out all too soon. We had covered this shallow dump of 30 feet by 30 feet, digging a nice variety of bottles, including:

- Two amber Knoxville Cokes
- Two Knoxville Hutchinson sodas
- Several Knoxville drug store bottles
- Two small-town Tennessee drug store bottles
- Several local crown-top sodas
- A handful of early marbles
- 100+ miscellaneous and unembossed bottles
- A set of lead knuckles

End of story...well, not quite! This was just the beginning of an *extended* memorable day!

As we were finishing up, one of the construction crew came over and told us that in the process of digging for pipes they had uncovered even more bottles than we had in our pile. Oh, boy, here we go!!! Another conversation with the foreman and it's fine with him, but we'll have to wait the several weeks it takes them to finish up inside and then we'll have only a limited time before the new floor is poured.



Street view of 135 Central Ave., Knoxville, Tenn. during renovation and digging.



Above and below, digging the hole to get to the bottles.



Digging alone made slower going, but the treasure found was worth it.



Lead knuckles found in the hole.



Just some of the bottles as they came out of the hole.

Several weeks passed before we were given the go-ahead. In the meantime, we had researched the building, finding that it had been constructed in the 1880s with the initial business a barbershop. Thereafter, it became the Leggerwood Bros. Saloon, with a possible cathouse upstairs. By the 1890s, it was the Lay & DeArmond Saloon. This sounded too good to be true — digging underneath a saloon. Wow!!!

The digging was not straight-forward. First we had to break through a 2-3 inch cap of old concrete and then we had to dig through up to six feet of soft fine ash. The bottles lay at the base of this ashy layer, not within it. The time frame pressed us

— It was the first week of June and we had only until the second week of July to cover the 150-foot by 50-foot interior.

I started the dig by myself, as Steve had other obligations. This first day, I broke through the concrete in the middle of the space. In less than ten minutes I had a four-foot square area broken out and an hour and a half later was through the soft fill and finding my first bottle. A block letter Pepsi from Knoxville! Okay, that's good! A couple of minutes later a second follows, along with some broken plates, cups, and bowls (I must be in the kitchen!) Up comes an unembossed strap-sided flask, and another, and another ... A couple more hours go by and by now I have about

40 unembossed whiskeys. Time to call it a day. Fill the hole, lock the door and look forward to tomorrow.

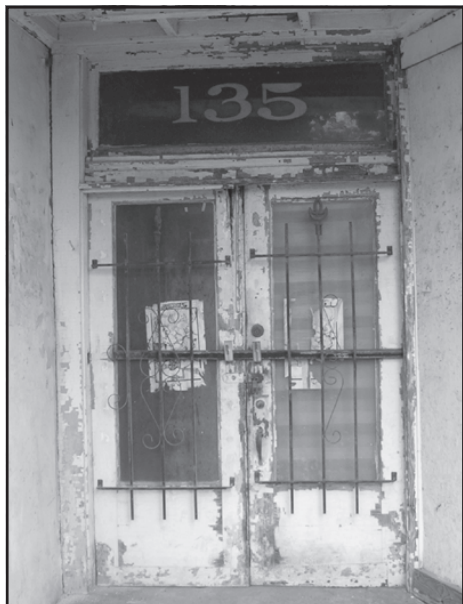
The next day I started up front where the workers had found their bottles. Concrete layer accessed, fill dug to five feet and I'm back into the bottles. Quart whiskey bottles, then a Duffy Malt Whiskey, a couple of E. R. Betterton whiskeys from Chattanooga and some kick-up wines. A blackglass ale and then more quart whiskeys. Very different items than on the prior day. The best bottle this day was a quart square whiskey embossed Kelley's Whiskeys with a Missouri address. Steve is not yet able to be there and help, so I decide to close it down and call it a day.

A week passes before I can get back and again Steve is tied up and cannot dig. This time I opt to try the back, just a few feet from where we left off when we dug outside. At about four feet I started getting into the bottles. The first bottle was another Knoxville Pepsi, then a T. C. Fox Knoxville Hutchinson soda. Then... "Strap-sided Heaven"! There are strap-sided flasks everywhere! Pints, half pints... surely one of them is embossed! I dig and wipe, wipe and dig and they are all "Plain Jane" unembossed. Then, I wipe one and there is embossing on it — *White Elephant Saloon / Knoxville Tenn.* WOW!!! For years I have hunted one of these and at long last it's found!

Wasting no time, I called Steve and told him what I had found. He wasted no time in getting down to the dig site, checked out my finds and started digging. Flasks and more flasks — but no additional embossed ones. Then a group of amber



With the dirt still on them, some of the treasure uncovered.



The doorway, showing the "135" above the door.

Knoxville Cokes. After a very few minutes into my turn back in the hole, I uncover a gallon stoneware jug. After a quick wipe, I see no stenciling so I hand it up to Steve. As it dries, though, Steve starts reading to me: *Lay & DeArmond / 135 Central Ave. / Knoxville Tenn.* Why, that's right where we are, the number (shown above) is still etched in the glass above the old door – 135 Central Avenue! A couple of two gallon jugs come out, but with no name stenciled or scratched.

Whiskeys, Cokes, Pepsis, medicines, beers and other bottles follow in the next couple of weeks. It is now the end of June



Knoxville Hutchinson soda bottles lined up on the tailgate of the truck await the ride home.



Digging inside in low lighting was slow going, and the extreme heat didn't help things much.



The digging trio: Mike Barbara, Steve Hicks and Bruce Pfler.

and we know our time is about up. We called in another digging buddy, Bruce Pfler, and industriously dig every day after work and on the weekends. The digging is hot (over 100 degrees) and even with fans running it is taxing. We've hit the second week of July and have dug about 80% of the under floor dump.

Then, one evening, we arrive to find tons of gravel being placed over our dump in preparation for the new concrete floor. I guess that the other 20% will have to await a future generation digger!

All in all, a great dig — we found a lot of neat bottles and other items, including:

- Pint clear strap-sided flask White Elephant Saloon, Knoxville Tennessee
- Eighteen amber Knoxville Cokes
- Eleven aqua Knoxville Pepsis
- Three stoneware jugs, one stenciled Lay & DeArmond
- Thirty-nine assorted Knoxville pharmacy bottles
- One Tracy City and one Rockwood, Tennessee drug store bottle
- Nine Knoxville Hutchinson sodas
- One Ohio Hutchinson beer
- One Ohio seltzer bottle
- Thirty-two Northeastern blob top beers and ales
- 300+ miscellaneous whiskeys, mostly unembossed
- 800 other miscellaneous and unembossed bottles
- Pair of lead knuckles
- Four wooden cue balls



Kelly & Kerr, Springfield, Missouri.



Back home, with just some of the spoils of the dig unloaded.



Soda bottles.

- 1888 and 1889 V nickels
- 1889 and 1901 indian head pennies

Many thanks to the foreman and to the owner of the building who allowed us to dig.

So concludes one of the best digs we've had in many years!

**Right:** Wickham's /  
White Elephant / Saloon /  
314 Union St / Knoxville, Tenn



More of the bottles found under the Knoxville saloon.