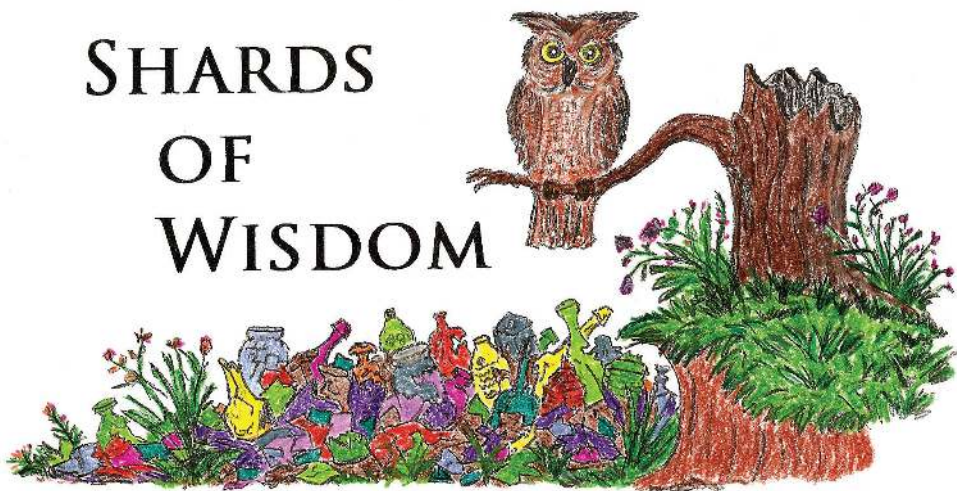


SHARDS OF WISDOM



Treasure hunters pry to an outhouse's buried secrets

John Carlisle, *Detroit Free Press*

HICKORY CORNERS, Mich. — Scott Hendrichsen kept sticking a steel rod in the ground until he found what he was looking for. It was 150-year-old poop.

Hendrichsen's hobby is collecting antique glass bottles — the kind made by hand before machines were invented to crank them out by the dozens. He can look at an old bottle and tell you when and where it was made, what was once inside and whether it might be worth a fortune. And the best place to find them, he said, is inside the pit underneath an outhouse.

"They didn't have garbage removal in the 1800s, so typically they would take their household refuse — empty bottles and stuff like that — and they would pitch that in the outhouse," he explained.

Hendrichsen, 55, is among a handful of bottle collectors known as privy diggers, the polite name for those who dig for antique bottles buried in century-old feces. Whether motivated by a chance to add a unique find to their collection, or by opportunity — some of the old bottles can be worth thousands of dollars — these collectors go places few others would have the stomach to dive into.

He stood outside in a cold spring wind, pelted by the sideways rain, behind an old farmhouse in Barry County, just north of Kalamazoo. He's a UPS truck driver, and when he spots a house on a route whose architecture suggests it's old enough to have had an outhouse once, he'll go to the door and ask permission to come back and search the yard for the privy.

Rural history collector keeps outhouse memories alive

Most of the time, like on this rain-whipped day, the bewildered homeowner agrees. Almost all the old outhouses are long gone, and the pits of human waste they left behind have no smell anymore. So diggers have to find the long-buried pits by poking a steel rod deep into the ground, pulling it out and examining the color of the dirt on the rounded tip. Most soil comes in varying shades of brown. But the historical poop has a dark black color to it. And after poking innumerable holes in the yard, Hendrichsen had finally hit pay dirt.

He and Dan Hill, another digger from southwest Michigan, grabbed their shovels, shaved off the sod, dug a narrow hole and were once again knee deep in someone's old crap. And they were thrilled.

"When you open it up and start digging, that stuff has been in there for over 100 years, not touched," Hendrichsen said excitedly. "So it's like a

time capsule. It's super cool to dig up, and you never know what you're going to find. It's like Christmas."

Advertising and art

Collectors love antique bottles because they were hand-made, mouth-blown and crafted in beautiful shapes and vivid colors.

"Back then it was the same thing as today — draw your attention to my bottle and not his," said Chuck Parker, the 76-year-old president of the Kalamazoo Antique Bottle Club. "So they would do something like — instead of a plain blue or aqua bottle — they'd make a cobalt blue bottle or they'd change the shape. I call them window bottles. You put them up there, you let the sun come in in the morning, and they look fantastic."

They're also fascinating artifacts from an era when snake-oil salesmen traveled the country, selling fraudulent concoctions they claimed would cure the maladies of the day, including rheumatism, catarrh, alcoholism or consumption.

Like Dr. Colwell's Magic Egyptian Oil, which claimed it would cure diphtheria. It didn't. And Dr. Keeley's Cure for Alcoholism, which prescribed a blend of alcohol and morphine to fix your drinking problem. Or Dr. James' Soothing Syrup, which was so soothing because it was loaded with heroin.

They were successful for a time because people who consumed them swore they felt better after, largely because they were high as they could be from the stuff. Hendrichsen once even found a bottle that still had a gram or so of dried cocaine at the bottom.

Scott Hendrichsen, 55, of Texas Township shows the difference between a bottle after it was dug out of the ground that has an iridescent look from chemicals in the ground leeching in the bottle and one that has been tumbled clean. (Photo: Ryan Garza, *Detroit Free Press*)

It's on display in his basement collection, along with a thousand other old bottles — thoroughly cleaned — that glint and shine under the overhead lights. They're lined up on shelves and arranged on countertops in arrays of colors — rich olives, twilight pinks, umbers and ochers, and blues that almost glow. The shapes are just as creative and varied — sleek and narrow, short and wide, ovals and triangles. Most of them are notched and bumped with the imperfections of their maker's efforts that day. And many of them are embossed with words making wild claims.

"Older bottles are like a work of art, 'cause they were handmade or hand-finished," Hendrichsen said, standing in a sea of colored glass in his basement. "They pulled it out of the mold and hand-tooled it, and put a glass lip on top. You didn't just make of bunch of them in a day. They were an art form, so to speak. And the stuff they say on them is really, really cool."

Archaeologists object

Their hobby isn't without controversy, though. Some archaeologists have complained that they're tearing up and plundering buried historical records.

"It's like any archaeological site — when you dig it, you destroy it," said John O'Shea, curator of Great Lakes archaeology in the U-M museum of anthropology. "And any potential scientific evidence or info that may be there, if it's uncovered in an unsystematic manner, is lost."

The contents of the pits reveal a lot about who used them. The kinds of bones dug up reveal what animals they raised and ate, while the pollen indicates the plants that grew nearby. The medicine bottles they bought and discarded show the diseases they caught and tried to cure. Glass inkwells in the pits indicate their owners could read and write. A large number of liquor

bottles strongly suggest they drank to excess, while a stash of certain medicine bottles hint that their owners developed an unhealthy taste for opiates.

And sometimes, people accidentally dropped something very valuable beneath them as they used the outhouse, and figured it wasn't worth trying to fish it out of the stinky muck.

"The privy is actually a pretty good source of data," O'Shea said. "There's potentially an amazing amount of information you can get out of there."

The diggers dispute the criticisms

"My goodness, there's hundreds of thousands of houses that have no historical significance other than the age that they are," Hendrichsen said. "If we were going to a fort and disrupting something I could see why they'd be concerned, but what we're digging is stuff that's already been discovered and logged a million times. They're never going to get to all these houses."

Most bottles they dig up are barely worth more than a dollar or two. The best ones, however — the pristine and the rare among their finds — can bring hundreds or even thousands of dollars online or at auction.

But most privy diggers just keep them for their collections. They say they're really in it for the thrill of the hunt, the fun of collecting and the excitement of finding something so fragile and valuable buried in something so foul and disgusting.

"It's a wonderful hobby," Parker said. "You don't realize how much fun it is until you're down in the hole and you say, 'I've got a Dr. Mixer's Cancer Syrup!' and everyone there knows what you're talking about."

Seeds show the spot

John Rastoskey stood outside in the cold drizzle, watching quizzically as three men dug up his yard looking for a pit full of historic manure.

His house in Hickory Corners is 140 years old. It was once a meat market next to a machine shop and a blacksmith on a strip called Mechanics Alley — a commercial strip remembered only in old county maps. It must've had a dozen outhouses behind it over the years, they figured.

Once a house's pit got full, it'd be topped off with dirt and forgotten as the grass overtook it, and the outhouse itself would be moved over another hole somewhere else in the yard. Some pits lasted five or 10 years; others not so long, based on how quickly they filled up and how deep they were dug. "Depends if it was a two-seater or three-seater," Hendrichsen noted. Rastoskey looked on as a digger gradually disappeared into a quickly deepening hole. "It's all right," the 35-year-old homeowner said as his yard was being excavated. "It's kind of interesting." Like most homeowners they approach, he didn't want anything in return, other than maybe a cool bottle from the haul.

The diggers work efficiently and methodically. First the sod is sectioned into squares, removed and set aside. Then a plastic tarp is laid down, and the dirt from the hole they dig is piled on top of it. They cut through one layer after another. Topsoil. Sand or clay. Wood and coal ash thrown into the outhouse to keep down the smell of the pit.


Bottle collectors plunge into pits of 100-year-old poop

Dan Hill, finds a crockpot he found while taking his turn to dig for items left behind from a pit underneath where an outhouse once was located on the property of John Rastoskey (right), 35 as Bill Riley, 65 of Kalamazoo, looks on Monday April 20, 2015 in Hickory Corners, MI. Hill and group of other local men look for properties where homes once stood in the 1800's to dig for rare bottles and other items owners discarded into the outhouses before filling them with dirt to start new ones. Ryan Garza, *Detroit Free Press*

But then, if they're in the right spot, they hit a layer of small seeds, a dead giveaway they're in an outhouse pit since seeds pass right through people

HISTORY'S CORNER

In Memory of Dick Watson
longtime FOHBC Historian



With the election of 2016 behind us, I thought it would be nice to share two beautiful bottles we now can enjoy because of the presidential election of 1840. The two Tippecanoe cabin bottles shown above are from the William Henry Harrison campaign. Harrison was our 9th president and only served 32 days and died from pneumonia. These beautiful bottles were blown at Mt. Vernon Glassworks in New York.

Please join the FOHBC in help preserving the Mt Vernon site. Go to FOHBC.org to donate.

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who've eaten them and float intact atop the outhouse muck, forming a thin layer in the ground after they're filled in. If those seeds are there, chances are they're about to hit a thick layer of old poop. After years of doing this, the thought of plunging their hands into buried human waste doesn't faze them.

"I got gloves," the 51-year-old Hill said, laughing. "And I've been in enough privies that I don't even think twice about it. I'm just thankful to see it, 'cause that's usually where the bottles are at." They started finding things that show there was a human presence, like a pork bone, and chunks of red bricks and ceramic shards from an old crock-pot.

Over the years they've found all sorts of odd things in outhouse pits — clay pipes, coins, toothbrushes, jewelry, bedpans and, now and then, intimate objects people used on themselves. But then, deep in the hole, digger Bill Riley, 65, reached down and found what they came for: An antique bottle. Then another. And another still.

The guys passed them around, looking them over. They were old as could be, but they had no embossing, no color, no value other than perhaps in the eyes of a bottle nerd. The guys began to refill the hole. It was a discouraging day. The diggers looked frustrated. But they can't all be jackpots, they said. Besides, the thrill of their hobby isn't just what they find. It's also what they learn.

"There's valuable stuff, but it's also the secret history of people," Hill said. "People threw stuff in there that they never thought anybody would find. There's a huge treasure of historical connection, and to be able to start digging and find these things, it's exciting. It's like being a treasure hunter."

