

# DIGGING IN THE NEW YEAR

## Or the best dig of the Old Year.

By Jeff Mihalik

2011 was mostly an uneventful digging year for me and the digging crews I hang with. That's not to say we did not dig any good bottles but for the amount of digging and the amount of effort put into these digs, the rewards were generally not what we hoped for and not what previous year digs produced. Many bottles were dug but not that many really good to great ones. When we did uncover a "good one," it was just that, one good bottle with three to four diggers involved.

For the last 10 plus years, I've been digging in western Pennsylvania in the counties west of Pittsburgh and into eastern Ohio. This year I was fortunate to have been asked to be the third or fourth person in some of the weekly Pittsburgh digging that's been going strong for many a year. Being a member of the Pittsburgh Bottle Club, I've become friends with the primary diggers in Pittsburgh, but between living in Ohio for several years (before moving back to Pennsylvania recently), digging with my regular partner Rick in other areas, and competing with all the other people who have come and gone as the 3rd and 4th person, I have never dug in the Pittsburgh area.

Fortunately, that all changed a few months ago. I've always wanted to dig in "Da Burg." However, unless you are part of those who know what has and has not been dug; you could easily end up wasting your time digging something that was dug sometime in the past. I mean, if you read the recent letter by Luke Yoas in the December issue of *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector*, he speaks of the extreme nature of the digging that has been going on in Pittsburgh for many years. For example, since I have been digging with the Pittsburgh crew these last few months, we have dug several 30-plus footers in one day, dug a humongous 20-plus



footer, then dug another privy the same day. Most recently, I dug a 40 footer in a day and a half and before splitting up the finds, dug another 14-footer the next day. These diggers have also dug many more privies where I was not involved; one recently reaching over 55 feet!. Digging two, three, maybe six privies a week is not uncommon. You have to be in shape, focused, and ready to give your all no matter how the dig is going or what you are or are not finding.

It was the last week of 2011 and Tim Tokosh had a privy lined up for digging in the north side of Pittsburgh. This was an area where the privies usually produce many interesting finds. Tim owns a business, sets his own schedule and previously worked on the property next door. Luke and I had taken the week off from work and Jim Ignatz was working the midnight shift (don't ask me how he was able to dig from 8 till 7 each day) so we first planned to dig Tuesday the 27th of December. However, it rained heavily that day so we pushed the dig back a day.

On Wednesday, we met at our regular local diner for breakfast and jokes then headed off to the site. The temperature never reached above freezing that first day, but we were all excited, dressed warmly, and were in a decent location where most of the wind was blocked. We knew it was going to be at least a 30-40-footer. All of the other bricklined privies in this area reached that depth or greater. The tenant was very gracious and interested in what we were doing so we felt welcome and in a very relaxed mode.

Fortunately, the digging went fairly easy the first day as this privy was filled in with mostly soil, sand and clay with a lot of bricks, large rocks, or big pieces of wood that can greatly slow down the dig. The first five feet was all mulch as over the years this privy keep sinking while the tenants kept trying to fill in the hole. Then we hit the top of an octopus flusher at 13 feet, including cast iron pipes, traps, etc. Near the base of the flusher was our first true find, a 1940 silver quarter and a broken Tom Tucker soda!





*Continued from page 17*



After removing the octopus and drainage soil, we hit the clay plug at 15 feet. Then we hit the “use layer” after going through 7 feet of clay. This layer yielded a few barely blown bottles, and some machine-made Vaseline jars. Not exactly exciting as getting to the middle layer of an ice cream cake. The use layer gave us two green castor oil bottles, a quart Allegheny Cow milk and a few local druggists’ bottles.

At this point, Jim had to leave to go to work. It was already dark and the only lights were from the outside patio lighting of the house and Tim’s headlight on his hardhat was now 20 plus feet down the hole. The wind was starting to pick up and the temperature was dropping, but Tim was still sweating down the hole and the vapor and steam off his back was misting up and obscuring our view of his efforts.

About 6:30, the three of us agreed to pull 10 more buckets. The first nine were uneventful. As Tim started to fill the 10th bucket, his shovel slid across something. He yelled excitedly,





“I hit the side of a crock!” As he continued to uncover it, Luke yelled to him “Wouldn’t it be nice to get a Weyman’s snuff crock with a tobacco leaf on it?” All we heard from Tim as he freed it was “Oh my gosh, dudes! It’s got blue, it’s beautiful, and it’s a Weyman’s with double embossed tobacco leaves on the reverse.”

As I was putting the crock away, we agreed to fill one last bucket. Within one shovelful, out popped an extremely rare A.K. Clark, 41 Craig St, Allegheny, Pa. soda. Many other medicines, common slicks (unembossed), food bottles, and doll heads were also unearthed. It was now about 7 at night and we covered the hole with a large iron sheet Jim had cut specially for covering this privy. This not only covers the privy when we were finished, but also stops the yearly sinking, as we promised the owner of the property.

The next day Tim had some personal issues to attend to and also received several emergency calls that needed his attention, so we did not get back together until 11:30 on Thursday. When we finally all arrived, Tim quickly climbed back down into the hole and we started removing more debris. Now at the 30-foot level Tim noticed a slight tapering of the hole which usually indicates the end is near. However, at about 31 feet, Tim again yells out GET THE CAMERA! He made some other noises that sounded like some farm animals, then said IT’S A BLOOD SEARCHER AND PONTIL! This is a great find for us Pittsburghers. About two minutes later, Tim’s yelling and laughing again, we get the camera out and video as TIM uncovered another rare bottle. It’s an olive amber bottle embossed W.H.H and PORTER. It has never been seen before (at least by us or anyone we know).

The W.H.H Pittsburgh in cobalt and the W.H.H. Chicago have been





dug in Pittsburgh before but not even a shard of an amber example. A few minutes later, another amber W.H.H (William H. Hutchinson) is brought to light. These are real killer bottles to dig and what we all have been wishing for, something unique, nice color, and very collectable. Not done yet, Tim finds an early BLF Druggist / Pittsburgh pontil (only one known), an undamaged cathedral pickle from New York, a yellow amber JIEM ink, an internal thread whiskey flask from Philadelphia, and others.

After reaching the bottom of the privy, Tim still had to get out of the hole. We had to put two chain ladders together and barely reached him (estimated 40 feet to the bottom). Somehow, Tim mustered up the energy (and courage) to ascend the chain ladder while it's twisting, creaking and rocking (this is a feat of strength in itself). Once up, we quickly begin to "fill her in." We had filled all our garbage cans (about 45 or so) and had to put a lot of dirt on tarps so we had to shovel this into a wheel barrow and then dump into the pit. Once that was completed (it took almost two hours), we emptied the cans using a dolly to wheel them close to the hole to dump out, then remove several rounds of the brick layer to insert the metal sheet cover, put the mulch and some dirt on top, then raked and swept the yard. This was all done in the dark. It was late and Jim was already gone (still working the night shift), so we decided to meet the next day to split up the finds.

We met at the local diner again, then headed out to another site to dig an "easy" pit. Tim and Jim had test-pitted this site and determined it was a wood liner probably 12 to 14 feet deep, given the size of the other pits dug on this lot. So before we did the split, we would dig one more pit in hopes of adding to our split and since the old pit (1840s-50s) was not found yet, it was hoped this pit would yield some early artifacts.

To make a long story short,





there was some very early glass in this pit, but all the earliest bottles were broken including a nice beaded edge eagle/cornucopia flask with its top missing, a rare Pittsburgh bitters completely broken up, and shards of a cobalt Buffums sarsaparilla. The best whole bottle was a nice Doyle's Hop bitters in an olive yellow amber. Also found were rare squat sodas including a Brown & Vandivort and Saftic & Jordan, a Bauman's Ink plus other miscellaneous bottles.

We finally got out all the bottles (some where around 200 plus) and placed them on a circular picnic table on the lot we had just dug. The pictures tell the story. It was a great three days of digging. I'm not sure if these digs were bringing in the New Year or just the best and last dig of the Old Year but regardless, it was a dig we will always remember. Plus, we have more to dig about two yards up!

