

“Winter Privy Digging for Old Glass”

By Rick Weiner



Digging in the Winter

When the weather gets cold and nasty, some people curl up by the fire with a good book, others watch TV while wrapped in a toasty blanket, but not the “Privy Diggers.” We dig out old outhouse pits in search for old bottles. It may sound a little crazy, but when you love the hobby as much as we do, weather is not an issue.

Sometimes the ground is frozen solid, it takes a little more effort to get into the privy, but once we get through the frozen layers, the fill inside a privy is soft and easy to remove, as if we were digging in the Dog Days of summer.

When digging in very cold temperatures the best place to be is “in the hole.” It stays warm from body heat and is well insulated. Many times we have shed our heavy clothing down to our T-shirts in below freezing temperatures.

I remember we did a dig when the temperatures bottomed out at 12 degrees above zero. The ground was frozen solid. We had no idea how frozen it really was until I tried to stick a shovel into it. The after shock was similar to a tuning fork being hit on the side of a piano bench. If you plan to dig privies in the dead of winter when the

ground is frozen, it is a must to probe out (locate) the privies before hand when the ground is soft. The fall is an ideal time for this. That way there is no guess work involved, you will know 100% there is an outhouse hole ready to be dug out even if the ground is “almost” impenetrable. Remember to mark the privy location just in case it snows and covers the spot.

Tools needed for this type of dig are similar to what you need for masonry construction: sledge hammer, pick ax, pry bar and some wood chisels. A bowl of Wheaties wouldn’t hurt, either.

I have known people to use blow torches to soften up the earth, but we like the old fashioned method better.

We have been digging privies for many years in a small town in the Lehigh Valley. In this one particular neighborhood, we might have dug 10 homes in a row. Some yards had up to four privies in them. The rule of thumb is if the house was built in 1850 there “should” be three to four privies used on the property since it was built. Every 15 to 20 years or so the property owner would have a new hole dug because the old one out lived its usefulness and became unsanitary.

If they got plumbing late, that changes the whole thing. Then there will probably be newer privies in the yard and they might have re-used the old ones. Just another obstacle a digger has to deal with.

There is one more rule of privy digging I forgot to mention and that rule is, “There are no rules.” People did what they felt like doing back then concerning privy construction. They dug the privies in different areas, re-used them and never dug new ones, and sometimes never tossed any trash down the outhouse hole. We will never know “for sure” what people did when it comes to privy construction and use. The best thing for the 21st century privy digger to remember is “dig them all” and weed out the new privies so you can dig the old ones and get the oldest bottles in the yard. That is our main concern.

In the hobby of privy digging you have to make your own destiny. Some years are good, some great and some duds. But no matter what the outcome, privy digging for old bottles from the past is a just plain awesome! It involves a lot of hard work and sometimes it could be back-breaking. There are times when



Hutches, Blobs and Flask



Indian Sagwa Cure



A Cobalt Blue Soda



Cone Ink With Swirls



**Amber Carter's
Master Ink**



**Elep Zone – a Certain Cure
for Fits & Epilepsy
New York**



Cobalt Soda



Green Seitz & Bro Beers



Gin Bottle



we get nothing or maybe a marble or two after digging out a 10-foot or even a 20-foot privy, but that is all part of the game. Sooner or later a good hole will reveal itself and the non productive ones would have been forgotten.

The privy digging cycle goes on and on, but only if you have permissions to search for all the old untouched glass buried in people's backyards. Talking to homeowners is a must to stay "productive" in this hobby.

In February of 2009, we were getting a touch of cabin fever, We had just gotten five inches of snow and the ground was as hard as a rock, but we felt like "digging something." We knew it would feel uncomfortable to knock on a stranger's door and ask if we could dig in their yard in the dead of winter. It is strange enough to ask when the weather is nice. So we came up with a brainstorm. "Let's go back to a yard we had already dug." That way the home owner wouldn't be a stranger.

We knew just the place. We dug two privies in this yard, but at the time we had so much going on we left in kind of a hurry. There were a few sunken spots I spotted closer to the back door in the yard. We never physically

Lots of Cryers

checked or probed this area.

One weekend at the spur of the moment we got our winter digging tools ready, packed them on my Chevy S-10 and started to drive over to Mr. Radman's house. It had been at least four years since we were at this location. At the time; we dug some great bottles from the two privies we opened up. So if we did miss a privy, the chances are we would be coming home with some bottles, if we get permission again.

There was never a shortage of glass in the privies in this town. A lot of these

homes were built to house workers from the local iron works. The people who occupied these dwellings

lived rent-free as long as they worked in the local iron mill. That meant more money to spend on booze, medicines (quack cures) and other luxuries, the stuff the modern day privy diggers love to find in outhouse holes.

When we arrived at the house we were a bit nervous to knock despite our talk on how it would be easier to ask a person whose yard we had already dug up. There was five inches of snow on the ground and it was a bone-chilling 12 degrees that made the whole situation a lot more uncomfortable. As I pushed the door bell, I remembered one of my sayings, "take the noes with the yesses and move on" and that calmed my mind some. Suddenly the door swung open and the owner greeted us with "Hey, it's the outhouse guys!" In any other situation that would be insult, but to the privy digger, that is a warm welcome!

I started to explain our dilemma to Mr. Rad, but before I could finish my long, drawn-out attempt to gain access to his yard, he cut me off with "you guys are crazy, do what you gotta do" I remember him saying that same line four years ago. I guess that



Author with Ovoid Jug



Author having a cup



**J.W. Keister, Druggist,
New York, Circa 1880**



Large Salad Bowl Circa 1880



Paul in the Privy



Old Fancy Pitcher



Author handing up Amber Master Ink



Lots of broken Red Ware pots



Loaded 1870s privy pit

was his way of saying, "You guys are OK you have permission." We thanked him and made our way through the white clapboard-covered breezeway that led to the snowy back yard.

Since this privy dig wasn't planned, we did not mark the spot where the pit was, but it wasn't a problem. All we had to do was walk six paces from the last privy we dug and use a snow shovel to clear the snow from the property line. We have found that in row home yards the privy holes are dug within six feet of each other, not always but 90% of the time. The reason for that is so the existing outhouse building could be moved a short distance to the newly dug hole. They also wanted to keep the privies kind of close together so they wouldn't contaminate the whole yard.

The slight dip in the ground was located and now it was time to hack into the frozen earth. We were 99 % sure this was a privy, but to be 100 % sure we use a large 12-inch spike. It is hammered into the center of the depression until it clears the frozen ground. Then the probe is inserted in to the hole. A nice crunchy feel told us this was with out a doubt an outhouse pit from the past.

I went to the truck to get the tools we needed. The wood chisel and the mini sledge hammer were then put in to action. We started out with a one-foot by one-foot square in the middle of the depression and pounded away until the frozen earth was flying like wood chips from an ax. While digging winter privies you don't stay cold long as long as you keep moving. It is a workout and a half.



Pipe, Lamp and Bottles

Once we got the frozen square cut a few inches deep, it was time for the pick ax to do its job. The object is to break enough of the frozen ground away so there is something to grab onto and pry up. Soon signs of white and gray ash appeared under the frozen chunk and we knew the fun was about to begin. We removed all of the frozen earth and finely had a hole to get it. It was a tight fit; it reminded me of a hole cut through the ice of a frozen lake.

Paul was down about two feet in the packed ash and fill layer when he spotted the bottom of something. "It looks like a jar," he said. He scratched around a bit and popped out a ground top 1858 Mason jar. That is always a good sign to start out a privy. With a few more signs of older glass coming out, we knew this pit had not been dug by another digger.

It was

probably filled in around the mid 1870s -1880 and untouched, until we showed up.

Soon it was tough to dig with a full sized shovel; the glass was over whelming at times. We had to switch over to our hand tools at three feet into the privy. Most of the time, bottles show up near the bottom at the use layer. With this much glass early in the dig, it told us that this privy had been used heavily and dipped poorly, the "Perfect Storm" for the 21st century outhouse digger.

It was my turn to start filling up buckets in the hole. Digging with that much glass popping out is such a slow process. We need to be careful not to break a good bottle. That said, slow movement in very cold temps makes it extra tough for the bucket man up to p to stay warm. I started the truck and turned the heater on so Paul could have a place to retreat from the bite of old man winter.

Down in the hole, I started dragging the claw tool across the glass riddled surface, a top of an aqua cork top popped out, followed by the whole bottle. It was embossed with an Indian's face and read Indian Sagwa on the side. I was starting to feel warm inside from the excitement! And



that was just the start of it; soon aqua and colored blob top sodas were being pulled out of this time capsule, along with some local embossed medicines, yellow and redware pots and a lot of slicks.

As I went to retrieve my dig tool that fell, I spotted the top of a bottle. I slowly twisted it out of the mixed ash layer; no digging involved. A nice 1870s amber master ink made an appearance into the 21st century after having been buried for all these years!

I was braving old man winter, but my feet were a bit numb. It is that old age thing called bad circulation. I decided to head for the S-10 with the heater going while Paul took his turn in the hole. To make sure I knew when the bucket was full, I tied the long bucket rope to my leg in the truck, so when Paul needed the bucket dumped he gave the rope a tug. I only did this when I knew he was going to be down in the hole for a longer period of time. There was no sense in standing over a warm privy hole freezing my blob tops off when I could be in a nice toasty truck listening to the radio.

Privy digging is rough stuff.

This dig was moving right along, the shards of old bottles and pottery were flowing as were the whole bottles. It was a perfect day for a privy dig, despite the 12 degree heat wave.

As I started to scratch out a bottle I spotted in the wall of the privy, I felt something strange under my feet! It felt big and round. I knew right away it



Redware Spittoon

was not a bottle. I grabbed my “snake tongue” tool from the top and started to uncover it. When I got a portion of it uncovered my first thought was it’s a “bowling ball!” That’s what it looked like, a big black bowling ball.

As I uncovered it and pried it out of the gray wet layer, I realized what I was looking at was an old ovoid jug. The handle was gone, but other than that it was in good shape. Ovoid jugs were used as storage vassals. They could have been used for any types of liquids, but mostly beer, wine or whiskey.

This was a “late throw” Late throws are items that have been used over and over for many years and kept around

the house, then finally tossed down the privy hole when they have outlived their usefulness or got broken.

It is cool when an unexpected bottle or non bottle item appears on our digs. Like the ovoid jug. These are the kinds of things that make the dig even more exciting. It keeps the juices flowing and makes us look forward to the next privy dig. The “unknown” is what it is all about.

Nowadays when we find a milk bottle, that definitely does not scream excitement, but the milk bottle we found in this privy got our attention. The majority of the milks we find are from the 1920s and 1930s. This milk



**Whole Drinking Glass**

was dated to the 1880s -- one of the first local milks in the Lehigh Valley! Milk bottles, ovoid jugs and an Indian bottle -- what a strange assortment of glass.

The bottom of this privy was slowly approaching. That might mean more bottles. I learned to say "might" more often than not because there are no sure things in the hobby of privy digging. But it is always fun to dream what "might" lie ahead.

The pitch black use layer was just upon us when I heard Paul yell out "A sheered top!" That could have meant a number of things. I ran over to look in the hole and saw a broken sapphire blue Washington-Taylor historical flask in his hand! The bottom of this privy was looking like 1850s! We needed another sign to confirm this. It wouldn't be long until that happened.

Soon green and blue sodas were coming out; some were iron pontils and some smooth bases. We had so many we were running out of room on the top of the barrel. Some of the other neat things that we got were a broken Jenny Lind calabash flask and a "Celebrated Mineral Waters" torpedo from England. Sadly the top was broken off.

We also got another whole ovoid jug; this one was brown, it had the handle and it was in perfect condition. The ovoid jug would be the last item out of the privy. I am always a little sad when a dig is over, but all good things must come to an end. It was time to fill it in and keep the homeowner happy.

There is nothing like a sunny winter privy dig to get the spirits to soar. Just knowing that the bottles we are about to uncover haven't been touched for

**1880s Milk Bottle**

100 plus years. The excitement of what kind of cool bottle will appear next, and the thoughts about why. Why were there so many of one kind of bottle and none of another type? Why were there so many shoes in this pit? Did a cobbler live here? Did many sick children live here? Were they alcoholics in the household? I could go on and on.

These are the kinds of the conversations we have while digging privies. It is fun to try and put together "a life style" of the people from the past by the items we find buried in these pits. The talk of money is never part these conversations because it is never about money for us, it is all about digging up history, even in the dead of winter.

**1890s Bean Dish****Syrup of Hypo****Rebecca at the Well**