

# Digging Germany

by Boyd Beccue

One of the best things to happen to our hobby over the past four decades has been the rise of bottle collecting in Europe. Today we can correspond with collectors in many countries, tour bottle shows across the pond, welcome foreign collectors to our major shows and enjoy the research and expertise of collectors from The Netherlands, Germany, The U.K. and elsewhere. It wasn't always so.

I was bitten by the bottle bug in the Sixties, and by 1970 had a chronic case of bottle-itis. My only problem was the looming military obligation which so many of us faced back in the day. By the time I went on active duty in early 1971 I thought my collecting would be on hold for the duration, but events, and a little luck, proved otherwise.

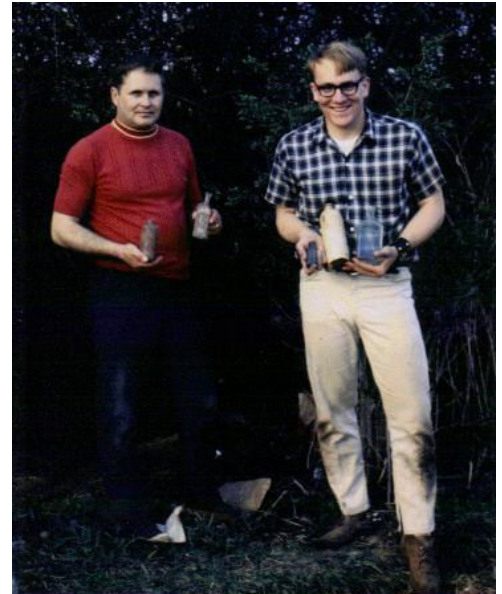
My first stroke of luck (in many ways) was an assignment to the famous Third Infantry Division with its heritage of Audie Murphy and its area of deployment... in West Germany. Arriving in Germany in August, 1971, my priority was to acclimate to an active duty Army unit, brush up on my high school German and locate some places to dig. That last piece proved to be a bit more difficult than I had first imagined.

Even though the city I was stationed in, Schweinfurt, dated back nearly a thousand years digging opportunities were not to be found. Construction sites were closed and posted and urban property owners looked at you as if you were "verrueckt" (crazy) if you asked permission to dig. With such obstacles, my search quickly switched to antique shops. That, too, was a disappointment. While I did find a few bottles, the bottle bug had not yet infected German antique collectors. The bottles I found in the shops tended to be very old or uninteresting freeblown bottles, painted decanters and such. Embossed medicines, beers and the other bottles I liked were not to be seen.

That is, not until one October day in a shop in Frankfurt. Lady Luck again played a part and I found a WARNER'S "SAFE" CURE / FRANKFURT. That bottle, perhaps the first Safe Cure from Frankfurt found by an American collector, not only gave my morale a boost, it indirectly led to months of productive digging of a kind I had not anticipated.

Being rather pleased with my find, I wrote a short story about it for the Old Bottle Magazine, telling about the Frankfurt Safe Cure and how difficult it was to find bottles in Germany. The story languished on the editor's desk for months, but finally appeared in the May 1973 issue. I had just finished reading the May "OBX" one evening when the phone rang. Answering "Lieutenant Beccue" in proper Army fashion, I heard a voice ask "are you the dumb-ass L-T that can't find old bottles in Germany?" That was the start of a great friendship and months of good digging. The caller was Staff Sergeant John McLean, an ordnance repair specialist stationed at our Division HQ in Wuerzburg, just 30 miles away.

A career soldier who was on his third assignment in Germany, John was married to a German girl and had used his connections in the community to solve the puzzle of how to dig German bottles. Except, to a great extent, we didn't really dig; we picked. The secret was "down in the dumps" for want of a better term. Throughout that part of Germany the small towns each maintained a "schuttplatz" or town dump. Often located in a ravine, abandoned gravel pit or marshy area, the dumps were open to the local people to dispose of



S/Sgt. John McLean and Lt. Beccue at the Geldersheim dump – in the author's left hand is the Anchor Sarsaparillian. The thick, tangled and spiny buckthorn which choked the ravine made digging a real challenge. We were picking thorns out of our hides for a couple weeks after that dig.



The author today with the green carboy dug in the Rannungen dump. I am still amazed that such a large bottle was found intact. It is by far the largest bottle I have dug, and the great color and pontil make it one of my favorites, even after all these years.

anything and everything. Modern solid waste management it most certainly was not. Being from a small town in Minnesota myself, the schuttplatz concept was quite familiar, but I would never have thought to go to a new dump to look for old bottles.

As John patiently explained, however, the locals were throwing old and collectible items in the dumps all the time. While the large cities had been heavily bombed during World War 2, the small villages in our part of Germany had suffered no significant damage. Schweinfurt was the scene of the largest U.S. bombing raid of the war because of the presence of several factories which produced most of the ball bearings needed for German military equipment. Following the war Schweinfurt had to be almost entirely rebuilt. But by the time ground troops reached that area the war was almost over and most Wehrmacht units were just looking for a place to surrender. While the large cities had to be rebuilt after the war the small towns in our area were filled with untouched homes and other buildings that were two or three hundred years old.

That was the key. The good German citizen is very tidy and keeps his home and grounds in immaculate condition. It was not unusual to find a heap of bottles, old clothing and antique household goods of every description in the town schuttplatz, just where a homeowner who had decided to clean the attic, cellar or shed had recently dumped it. To a German in 1973, 19th Century things that we thought were

great antiques were nothing more than rubbish. Their idea of an antique was something from perhaps the 17th Century... or earlier.

My first dump trip with McLean was on June 24, 1973, and it set the tone for the next year. Visiting three small dumps that day I found 21 bottles worth keeping, the best being a one liter green beer, heavily embossed with an anchor logo, which sits on one of my shelves today. While we did not find as many bottles on every trip, we never went home empty-handed.

We went dumping at every opportunity over the next year, whenever our combined schedules allowed. Over time we discovered many more dumps all over Northern Bavaria and we marked them all on a set of Army maps. I quickly learned to keep local map sheets with me at all times, and on one occasion located two new dumps while catching a ride back to Schweinfurt in a Huey, courtesy of the Third Division Transportation Company. Spotting likely locations from 1,500 feet in an Army 'chopper may be an odd way to locate bottles, but it did cause Mac and me to consider how we could arrange other dump-spotting flights. Sadly, such opportunities were rare for ground troops like us.

Bottles were not our only dump finds. Many other antiques were found lying amidst the modern trash, including pieces of pewter and copper ware, Nazi-era items and John's favorite - colorful Bavarian peasant costumes. On one



**Three green beauties from Germany, a pen rest ink, Apostle Brau beer and Renner Magen Bitters. Shades of green are common in German bottles, and German glass is also often heavily “whittled”. The author believes that German glass blowers did not think it worthwhile to go to the trouble to vent the molds of common bottles – to the delight of modern collectors.**



**German Father Christmas – Der Weihnachtsmann. A German friend told me he is holding a small evergreen in his left hand, for the good boys and girls, and switches in his right -- for the not so good. This is not the “Jolly Old Elf” of the poem by Clement Moore.**



memorable day John found a box containing nearly forty silver 5 Mark pieces, apparently tossed because they were from the mid-thirties and bore the swastika, which was illegal in post-war Germany.

Digging did enter into the picture as time went on. Exploring around some of the dumps we located sections which had been used many years before and then abandoned. In one such dump near the village of Rannungen the following May I located an area overgrown with trees and weeds, obviously unused for decades. I only had my Army entrenching tool, but the digging was shallow and in less than 15 minutes I had dug a beautiful green H. RENNER / HOF / MAGEN BITTER, a figural Santa Claus schnapps bottle and an olive green carboy holding nearly 4 gallons, with a nice pontil.

One Sunday I was exploring for new dumps and found one just a few miles from Schweinfurt. As I followed the standard procedure, walking around the edge of the dump in knee-high rubber boots while turning items over with my lucky walking stick, I noticed an older German man, eyeing me suspiciously. I could tell that he was looking for copper, brass and other metals to recycle, so I assured him that I was not in competition for the metals, but was just looking for "alte flaschen". Once I had explained what I was collecting he became very friendly and gave me directions to a long-abandoned dump a few kilometers away. I told him that I had driven by the spot several times without seeing the dump, but he insisted that the small ravine, choked with buckthorn, held a dump... and lots of bottles.

What a dump it was! Abandoned for decades, the dump near tiny Geldersheim gave up many great bottles and other treasures. Among the most prized was an ANKER (embossed anchor) ANCHOR SARSAPARILLIAN//NEWYORK, ROTTERDAM, RUDOLSTADT, OLTEN // F. AD. RICHTER; from the same company which produced ANCHOR PAIN EXPELLER, which is found both here in the U.S. and in Germany. A squat debossed stoneware mineral water of early 19th century vintage and a bisque Christmas tree angel are two other items that jump off the pages of my digging diary for those days. Over five days of digging at that location I took home 87 bottles and McLean carried off as many more.



**"The author contemplating a German Schuttplatz – 1974; As we said back then: one German's trash is an American's treasure."**

Perhaps our most memorable dig was the last one. My orders had arrived, scheduling me to rotate back to "The World" in August, 1974. With the end of my German digging in sight, I hoped for one more good outing. On a Friday night, July 19th, John called with the news that he had located a dump on a steep hillside in Wuerzburg, near the University. He said that it would be tough work, being overgrown with trees and buckthorn, but that he thought it looked pretty good. We were there early the next morning and managed to squeeze in 4 days of digging before the end of the month. The place was loaded with bottles, seldom buried more than 2 feet. Not surprisingly, being adjacent to a University, ink and beer bottles were everywhere. I still have two inks from that dig, both of 1870s vintage, with a grooved "pen rest" on the shoulder of the bottle. One is "Bennington" salt glaze stoneware, the other a sparkling green. My favorite German beer also came from that dump, an emerald-green beauty, APOSTLE BRAU (embossed figure of man in robes) WORMS, which dates to about 1885.

Another item in that dump did not go home with us, and is probably there today. I was digging on a steep section of the hill when an unexploded anti-aircraft projectile, appearing to be about a 40mm, rolled out and landed against my foot. I say "about" 40mm because I didn't wait around to examine it closely. I could see that it was fused and had been fired, but was an apparent dud. Since finding unexploded ordnance was not unusual in Germany, I knew that an "apparent dud" remained potentially lethal, even after three decades. Since my buddy John was the ordnance expert I called him over for a



**“Anchor Saraparillian and Frankfurt “Safe” Cure - two great German patent medicines.”**

professional opinion. Walking gingerly to within about 10 feet of it, he announced that we should place some marking sticks around that area and dig... somewhere else. I will never know what treasures we missed in that part of the Wuerzburg dump, but I didn't want to dig badly enough to risk having the “dud” dig a crater with me next to it.

Less than a month later I was back in the States, visiting family and even getting in a couple of digs before heading on to my next duty assignment. My household goods eventually caught up with me at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, and I was able to sort through the 388 bottles I had “dug” in Germany and more than 100 purchased in Vienna, London, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and many Germany cities, setting some aside for trade or sale but keeping those special ones which are still on my shelves today. Despite trying to stay in touch with John McLean I eventually lost track of that great digging partner, probably due to the many moves each of us made during the next few years, him in the Army and me returning to Minnesota and college. Or, maybe he was just too busy finding great stuff in the German dumps to take time out to write.

By the time I left Germany we had noticed that some of the old-style dumps were starting to close, being replaced by modern fenced “land fills” just like in the States. I have to believe that even though they have now been closed for nearly 40 years, some of the old German schuttplatzen may still be fruitful spots for German diggers as the hobby continues to grow over there. I hope they enjoy them as much as we did.

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(The author now lives in western Minnesota “not too far from Lake Woebegone.” His story “Liniments and the Native American People in Frontier Minnesota” appeared in the January – February 2009 issue of Bottles and Extras. He may be reached at P.O. Box 3232, Willmar, MN 56201)

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