

# Digging adventures in Savannah (Savannah Diggin's)

By Bobby Hinely

The History of Collecting  
Bottles in Georgia  
(One of a series)

In 1963, I was living in Savannah and decided to go fishing in the Savannah River between Forts Jackson and Pulaski. Nothing was biting so I idly began looking around and spotted a couple of bottle necks sticking out of the mud.

There was a railroad bridge (the tracks ran to Tybee Island) and people threw bottles off the train. I put my bottles into my Volkswagen and while riding down Oglethorpe Avenue, I spotted an antiques store with bottles on display in the window. It was operated by an old woman named Rosemary. I stopped and sold my bottles to her for \$2 or \$3 – my first sale! Later I sold her a case of old Cokes for \$12 and six crocks (ginger beers) for \$5.

When I got into serious collecting, I tended to prefer early, pre-1860 bottles. I once dug a black glass bottle (circa 1810-1820) and something just clicked within me.

One day, while driving into South Carolina to buy firecrackers, I saw houses along Highway 17 being demolished. Once construction started, workmen dug trenches where I found John Ryan and Thomas Maher Savannah sodas. Later, I dug at sites where the Thunderbird Inn and Howard Johnson Motel were being built. I found four or five sodas floating in rainwater in a ditch. When the new bus station was being built, I dug a hole and hit the sidewall of a brick-lined privy.

Then there was Indian Street. I discovered it in 1965. All the houses in this red light district had been cleared off and a new post office was being planned for the site. However, there was a three-year delay in construction for some reason. I met pioneer bottle collectors George and Nick Mastopoulos.

I became a digging fool.

"Buy Bobby a tuna fish sandwich and a soda and he could dig all day," someone once said of me.

I'd gotten to be good friends with



**Bobby Hinely with a case gin**  
(courtesy of Bobby Hinely)

Rosemary and one day I asked her where her bottles came from. That's when I learned of a dump site off Skidaway Island Road. This was the Brown Farm. I could walk along and find Atwood Bitters and Bitterquelles on the top of the ground. This was hog heaven to me. Later, I found a couple of Ryans in the 1870-1890 dump. It was 10 feet deep in places and I even found porcelain signs.

I met Harry Joyner and Carroll Spell at the Brown Farm. Harry owned bait and tackle store and Carroll worked for him. They were digging for earthworms! Later, Carroll and I dug on Indian Street. Things got a bit wild. I even dug beneath a building. Once, I dug all around a tall tree and it eventually fell. In its roots I found a black glass bottle.

I once dug an 1820s-30s privy and found a pontiled bottle. I also found the skull of a 20-year-old woman and a flintlock pistol. Apparently she'd been shot and the pistol was tossed into the hole with her. My own CSI! I also found a rare pint Charter Oak

historical flask (neck broken).

I learned a lot of the diggers were like rabbits – they tunneled. Not only was it dangerous, but they missed a lot of stuff.

Three or four old houses were demolished to make room for the city auditorium. I dug that site for a year with a pontiled eagle soda one of my best finds. Once, while digging into a privy, I found a BC Headache Powder wrapper. I knew Carroll Spell had been there before me.

I'd get off work (after dark) and go to Indian Street where I'd see the glow of lanterns in the holes. Sailors would come off ships tied up to the wharves in nearby Savannah River and we'd holler for them not to come our way because they couldn't see the holes. They'd come anyway and we'd hear a curse when one of them fell into one.

Another of my digging buddies, Charlie Schroder, was digging behind a house of ill repute and found three red light bulbs.

Charles Cowart found the Dooley Street dump and it was better than Indian Street. I dug my best bottle, a Gen. Scott's Artillery Bitters (in the shape of a cannon). It was wonderful. You could be digging in a hole, find a bottle and reach for it, but it would be snatched out of your hand by a digger on the other side



**Early Savannah diggers (L-R) Renfo Martiin, George Mastopoulos** (courtesy of Bobby Hinely)

In 1964, after seeing George Brewer in Plattsburgh, N.Y., advertising a bottle list in *Antique Trader*, I thought that would be a good way of getting rid of my duplicates and bottles I didn't want. So I started sending out lists and thus the network was started for me in buying and selling bottles through the mail.

My mail carrier was delivering a lot of mail and packages containing bottles I was buying or trading for. One day, he asked me what was going on. I told him and showed him some of my old bottles and told him about the Brown Farm dump. He said that his brother had cleared a large field on the Louisville Road by the old Meddins Meat Packing Co., and I should go look.

So when the weekend came, I drove out there and found the dump was about 150 yards by 75 yards. You'd never notice it just by riding down the road. After walking on it, you'd see broken pieces of bottles packed on the top, but once you started digging through the hard pan, you'd find a trash layer with bottles that had been in there for at least 125 years.

In 1968 about 1 a.m., we were digging a privy on Indian Street and two people saw our lights and came over to see what was going on. It was John Harrington, of Tampa, Fla., and a friend. After watching awhile, John said he would love to dig a colored soda. I asked him how much would he pay and he said \$20. So, I said, let's go (the privy was petering out) and so we drove to the Meddins site. He was wondering how he was going to dig a soda in this field with grass a couple of inches tall. In about 10 minutes, he dug a green 1885 Henry Lubs Savannah soda and we have been friends ever since.

The dump was in a low-lying field about the size of a football field. The trash layer was about 18 to 24 inches deep with about six inches of hard-packed dirt on top. The age of the dump was 1870s to late 1880s. A few Ryans and lots of bitters were dug. Bottles were not thick, but every once in a while, you might hit a pocket. In one, I dug an English Female Bitters and 10 sodas. Later, I sold the bitters to Judge Ed MacKenzie, who did

not have one in his collection.

After a couple of trips, I was run off by a railroad detective who said it was railroad property. So when we returned, it was at night and with a full moon, you didn't need a light, but the field was flat



**Figural pipe bowls dug by Bobby Hinely in Savannah, Georgia (photo by Bobby Hinely)**

and there was no room to hide. You could tell you found a bottle when the glass "squeaked" when you hit it with a hand scratcher.

About a year later, I told my newfound friend, Nick Mastopoulos, about Meddins and the problems of digging there and he said he knew the man who owned the property! Lo and behold, he got permission for us to dig the field for a fee and made a deal with the owner to turn over proceeds to him. He allowed Nick three or four



**1830s Prattware pitcher dug by Bobby Hinely from an Indian Street privy in Savannah (photo by Bobby Hinely)**

weekends to dig as he was planning to build on the property.

The owner expected to get \$1,500 or so, but after Nick got the word out, so many diggers came out that Nick had to place a limit on the number who could dig. He had a crowd of local diggers and others from many states. Many lady's leg types of Reed's Bitters, two cobalt Solomons Strengthening and Invigorating Bitters from Savannah, several Tippecanoes and all kinds of local sodas were excavated before it all came to an end.

Nick collected more than \$5,000 for the owner!

NOTES: Indian Street was located in a triangular parcel of land in 1813 and was known as the North Oglethorpe Ward. Indian Street was on the north, Joachim Street (Bay) on the south, West Broad Street on the west and Rice Fields (Talmadge Bridge, U.S. Highway 17) on the east. In 1813, it was divided into 16 lots east of Farm Street (now called Fahm Street) and 38 below east of Farm to the rice fields. From the 1850s-60s, it was known as the red light district. Located one block from the Savannah River, it offered easy access to sailors looking for a good time. An article in an 1853 issue of the Savannah newspaper quoted Officer O'Malley saying that neither he nor any of his officers went into the area because it was too rough. . .

I had never dug or looked for bottles on dry land, but since finding some bottles at the Thunderbird Inn construction site, I thought I'd check it out. . . I found some sodas in piles of bricks, rocks, roots, old iron and other debris at the Inn site during the clearing of the land. When the workers were digging for the foundations, they had cut ditches through some privies and trash pits Unbelievably, I found soda bottles mixed in with the rest of the debris. I noticed one black spot along a trench and pieces of plates and part of an 1866 John Ryan Porter & Ale was showing. So I got a stick, dug around it and pulled it out. I also found a J. Manke Mineral Water in aqua and other bottles. This was May 1, 1964. It was my first experience digging bottles, especially a Ryan. . .

So I bought a shovel and went back





**Bunch of John Ryan sodas, other bottles dug from privies along Indian Street, Savannah's red light district (Photo by Bobby Hinely)**

on Saturday and dug into the black trash area until I hit a wall. I was in the middle of my first privy. So now I was looking for other construction sites to dig. J.C. Lewis Ford was torn down and a Downtowner motel built on the site. The construction crew started digging in March 1964. A dragline dumped a pile of dirt onto a 15-foot-high pile and all of a sudden these bottles came rolling down the dirt hill. So I

jumped the fence and before I could pick one out of the dirt, the operator hollered: "Those are MINE!" We did some haggling and I bought four Ryans for \$20. I wanted to dig into that dirt pile, but the construction boss told me to leave as I was in the way. So I did what anybody would do – come back with my shovel and rake after they left at 4 p.m. I found some other sodas and bottles in the pile. .

The old Greyhound Bus Station on the corner of Oglethorpe and West Broad was demolished to make way for a Howard Johnson's Motel. I found an early 1830s pit that yielded some black glass, pontiled bottles and a nice jug. I dug my first Meinke & Ebberwein 1882 Mineral Water from a trash pit while workers were at lunch. I had their permission. . .

On August 4, 1964, the Union Station on West Broad was demolished to make way for Interstate 16. My first find was a privy that was so easy to spot. It was on virgin ground with a 5-foot-by-10-foot

black area outlined in brick. My first flask was embossed with Dancer & Chapman with Balt. Md., embossed on raised bars. My first 1859 Ryan came from there and several privies on the site yielded a small green Harrison Columbian Ink. Following the bulldozers, I picked up bottles, pipe bowls and a few coins, as well as a cobalt umbrella ink. One day, I was driving by and noticed holes for pilings had been dug, leaving a large mound of dirt covered with glass. I nearly drove off the road. Most of the bottles were eagle sodas and a few Ryans. The first bottle was a large cathedral pickle, several George Gemenden eagle sodas, two Planters Hotel sodas, some Ryans and a few pontiled medicines. . .

The next day, the pile of dirt was gone and about sundown, I heard a commotion from some boys who had found a box of coins. After they left, I went over and picked up three 1877 dimes in shiny mint condition. How did I miss seeing that box?

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