

A Bottle Digger's Dream Dig

By Warren Borton

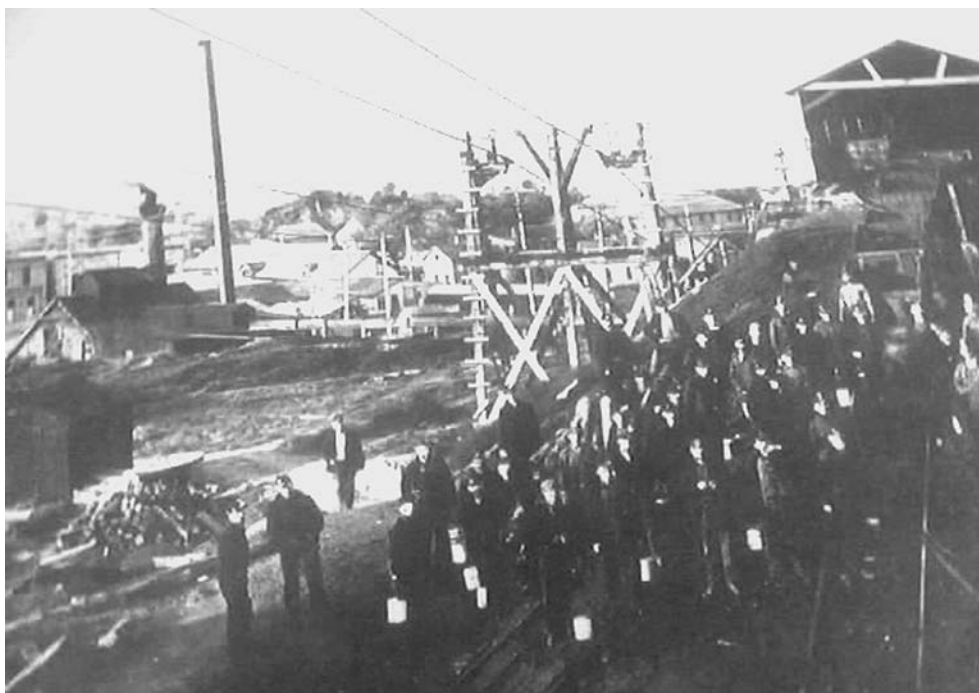
How do you describe a bottle digger's dream? Digging that one great bottle that's long eluded him; finding the super rare, high-dollar piece, or the essential bottle missing from the collection? It took me years to dig a Lash's Bitters and then I got five from one hole. My digging partner, Darrell Meyer, wanted to dig a common Warner's, but many years passed before he dug his first Safe Cure. I'd think being able to dig in a virgin dump would top every digger's dream list, but what about an entirely untouched ghost town?

More than a decade ago, Johnnie Fletcher of Mustang, Okla., joined me in a Sheridan, Wyo., dig. During our trip, we toured the area and located the site of the old coal town of Dietz. It had flourished as a mining town from its birth in the late 1890s to its demise in the early 1900s.

We parked along the old highway and gazed longingly at the empty field across the river. We wondered out loud about how many old bottles were buried beneath the waving green grass. But our enthusiasm was stifled by numerous no trespassing signs which seemed to be everywhere. Boldly printed signs said No Hunting, No Fishing, Survivors Will Be Prosecuted!

It seemed hopeless to even inquire about digging and maybe just a little dangerous. Rumors of gun-slinging Wyoming ranchers are no rumors. So we beat a hasty retreat and headed back to Sheridan to do a little door-knocking and permission-seeking, hoping to dig some rare Sheridan bottles. We did make some great finds over the next few years.

More than a decade later, I met a soda pop bottle collector from Sheridan at a Nevada bottle show. He was a collector of ACL sodas and had never dug for bottles in dumps or old privies. Our conversation eventually turned to the ghost towns in his area and the Dietz mines. When he told me he knew the lady owner of the Dietz property, I hastily inquired as to whether or not she



Early 1900s vintage photo shows Dietz, Wyo., miners, lunch pails in hand, getting ready to go to work. (Courtesy of Warren Borton)

might allow me to dig there. He said that, to his knowledge, she had never allowed anyone on the site or any of her vast holdings. But he promised to contact and ask her at his first opportunity. I knew it was unlikely to happen, but I was hopeful.

The phone rang on a cold February afternoon as I sat staring out a window at the winter snow. My friend had spoken to the landowner and she requested that I call her. After a brief conversation, she granted permission and asked when I could start. Just as soon as possible was my reply.

For the next couple of months, I did some research on the old town and gathered many bits of information that I relayed to my Wyoming digging partner on a near nightly basis. It was enough to drive his wife crazy, not to mention mine!

Finally, spring arrived, but as Darrell Meyer and I reached the summit of the Big Horn Mountains of northern Wyoming, we surveyed a vast glittering expanse of snow. It was deep, nearly up to my truck's windows. But when we reached the Dietz townsite, we were

amazed to find it devoid of snow. Oh, the wind was blowing hard and the air temperature was bitterly cold, but we could still dig. After a 500-mile drive, that was good news.

We compared a 1903 photo of the town to determine where rows of houses had stood. We donned our winter apparel, including warm stocking caps that covered our ears, grabbed our cold steel probes and gleefully scrambled over the fence.

We worked the field in a zig-zag pattern, searching for the row of privy pits buried for more than a century. Within minutes, I was rewarded with the soft crunch of probe against glass. I hollered to my friend, but the wind blew my words away. I moved toward him, probing and finding additional pits. He saw how excited I'd become. We retrieved our shovels from the truck and started a test hole. Almost immediately we pulled out a Jo Jo whiskey flask.

After putting the bottle into a box, I saw my friend yelling and waving a bottle in each hand. Once he quit dancing, I checked out his finds. One was a Fulmer & Suits / The Sheridan



Darrell Meyer showing off the Fulmer & Suits / The Sheridan Druggist / Sheridan, Wyo., bottle. (Photo by Warren Borton)

Druggist / Sheridan, Wyo., bottle, only the second known example. The other was a screw-top half-pint whiskey flask, embossed in a bold slug plate, A.H. Armstrong / Red Light / Saloon / Alliance, Neb. We later learned it was the only known example from that establishment.

The next pit yielded more than 60 bottles, including an amber Quaker Maid whiskey, a Kentucky mini jug, a 1900s flask and two automatic bottle machine-made Foys pop bottles from Sheridan. The next pit had little in bottles, but three perfect half-gallon jugs and an Anchor Pain Expeller for a miner's aches and pains.

Hole No. 4 yielded surprises in the forms of a Geo. Small drug store bottle from Sheridan and a rare Fauwkes drug from Newcastle, Wyo. Lucky pit No. 9 was a shocker.

I had pulled out a few bottles including a stained Atwood's Bitters, a miniature Riegers whiskey, two Union Tea extracts when suddenly what appeared to be a green nickel rolled out from beneath my scratcher. I handed it to Darrell, scratched the earth again and out tumbled a handful of nickels. I carefully rubbed the earth off the cleanest and discovered it wasn't a nickel, but a trade token. I told Darrell to check the dirt pile and he, too, found several tokens.

I sunk my shovel into the dirt where the first one appeared and was rewarded with more, many in different sizes.

Excitedly, we set up our screen and sifted the pit's dirt, finding more than 550 trade tokens from our ghost town as well as nearby Sheridan. Many were mavericks without town or state, but there was an unknown Dietz pool hall token. Many were good for a drink or a cigar and many others were pool tokens. They ranged in value from 5, 10 and 12-1/2 cents and most were brass.

A tiny pit contained a dozen crude Jo Jo flasks, a hair dye and an old glass car vase in perfect condition. Sleeper of the tip was an amber crown top beer embossed Silver Bow Brewing Co., with a bow and arrow logo in the slug plate's center. There was no city or state name. Later, it brought \$665 on eBay and turned out to be a rare bottle from Butte, Mont.



Dumps can be full of surprises, like the Paducah, Ky., mini jug, Alliance, Neb., whiskey flask and Sheridan, Wyo., Fulmer & Suits drug store bottle, all from one hole. (Photo by Warren Borton)

The last day of our dig came much too soon. Our first hole produced a Fremont, Neb., drug bottle and a couple of slicks. A dozen coffin flasks emerged from the next one. I probed out another pit and got excited as I could feel bottles everywhere. Turned out, this miner was a major drinker with most of the 144 bottles whiskeys.

Our benefactor chose this time to drop by and was amazed at the heap



Warren with the Pure Apple Juice Vinegar mini jug from Paducah, Ky. (Photo by Darrell Meyer)

of old whiskey bottles scattered around the hole. As we visited, I explained that it would take me a long time to dig out an entire town. "For as long as I own it, you can dig it," she said with a smile. As she drove off with her foreman, I happily danced a little jig.

We moved into where the town had stood and found three 10-footlong trenches. We felt glass in every one. As we had time for only one, we picked the hole where the bottles were closest to the surface. As we cut the sod and lifted the heavy stuff out, bottles jutted out.

More than 130 bottles, including 46 Jo Jos and 15 coffin flasks, were found. Best bottle was an amber cone ink.

As I drove the truck out of the field and waited for Darrell to close the gate, I wondered what was in those other saloon trenches. We had dug 20 privies in four days and found more than 650 bottles and 550 trade tokens. We had several rare Sheridan drugstore bottles and a rare Nebraska saloon flask. Our only disappointment as not finding any Sheridan Hutchinson sodas or an unknown Sheridan whiskey or jug.

However, we had several more trips planned and an entire town to dig, and it was only April!

EDITOR'S NOTE: A Bottle Digger's Dream Dig by Warren Borton, published in the May-June 2009 issue of *Bottles and Extras*, was incomplete. Here it is in its entirety.