

South Dakota collecting history:

Clemente Zambon: Pioneer

By Clemente D. Zambon III
Hot Springs, South Dakota

*It is a tale
I wish to tell
Of my Pa and I
And a friend who's my pal.
For such is my passion for bottles unearthed
It's a crazy hobby
And at times I feel cursed.*

It's Rapid City, South Dakota in the summer of 1965 and I'm only a boy, a small boy. It is time when the country is in inner turmoil with a war in Vietnam and racial tension is at its peak in certain parts of the country. (It's) a time when my father is turned on, again, to the driving lust of old bottles. He, too, had started as a small boy in the 1930s by sneaking into old abandoned saloons in Deadwood and Lead (pronounced LEED), South Dakota.

It's what small boys do when parents are off earning a living. He and his friend back then took only back bar bottles and miniature whiskies, these being the only bottles that appealed to them. They had gathered up to 60 mint whiskies and a score of back bar bottles.

The United States became engaged in the war to end all wars, and called upon my father's allegiance to help. In 1943, he was off to help make the world peaceable at the young age of 17.

*Now tweak your memory
Of adventures gone
Tell of your good times
And the ones that went wrong.*

*Speak of the glory
On hot summer days
The heartbreak and heartache
Of a digger's ways.*

Boy, this was going to be a hard season for digging. You could read the near future by the hard concrete freshly laid. It wasn't going to be easy pulling intact glass outa them thar hills!

The year before it came easy for us, digging partner Steve Ellis and I. Homestake Mining Co., was working on its new venture for gold the previous year. The mass expansion of the "Open Cut" open pit mining, which took out a third of all Lead, opened a torrent of digging opportunities for us. We treated their zest for gold by our own aggressiveness



Clemente D. Zambon II with a part of his collection 1997.
(photo courtesy of Clem Zambon III)

for glass. It paid off handsomely. But now a year later, fresh concrete and progress covered all our old digging prospects. Our trials would be rougher and our efforts painstaking, although we had only to try a little harder and be a lot more aggressive.

My grandfather on my father's side had cleaned out the root cellar by the time my father returned from the war. His meager bottle collection, which had been stored in the root cellar, had been taken to the town dump with nothing ever mentioned.

Dad was becoming a family man now. He took a wonderful bride and together they have given life to five little ones. Suddenly their world was very busy and Dad took on the manly hobbies of hunting and fishing. Chasing crazy bottles never entered his mind 'til one day back in 1958. He was squirrel hunting up in the Rochford and Mystic country, a rugged part of the Black Hills, when he came upon a gold miner's cabin site. A root cellar behind the cabin was still intact.

Dad walked in to find two Wild Cherry Pepsin Bitters, a Sanford's Radical Cure and a score of other rare bottles. The bottle bug had bitten again and this time had bitten good.

*Those glistening vessels
We pull from the earth
We admire their defects,
Their flaws and their curves.
Whatever their course*

*That brings them to us,
We thank Heaven above
They came to us first!*

We knew of a dance hall that had burned in the early 1890s. The next spring we set out to find the site midway between Sturgis and Deadwood. We searched the area for a good two hours and began to think it a waste of time when the “bottle gods” smiled. The ground was covered by pine duff and debris when we found an amber unembossed beer and a black glass ale along side. Both dated to the mid-1880s and looked crude.

Steve and I dropped our tools into what appeared to have been an old mining pit turned trash pit by the dance hall management. Some of what we found included a Sioux City, Iowa blobtop beer, a Milwaukee amber blobtop beer, 11 unembossed amber beers, seven black glass ales, one a miniature, a David Wise mini whiskey, a Wedding Bouquet Rye mini whiskey, uncommon drug store bottles from Deadwood and Sturgis, three Red Top Rye amber cylinder whiskeys, one being green, three coffin flasks and one picnic flask.

*Hear me, hear I
This container of glass
As I can hear
Your footsteps pass
You see, so long ago
I once was trash
But I've been here
To find at last.*



Clem Zambon III with a couple of pickles from the Dance Hall Dig in Deadwood, S.D. (photo courtesy of Clem Zambon III)

Dad rambled from ghost town to ghost town, all untouched since no one had begun to dig in the Black Hills. People in those days looked at someone who was chasing bottles as having a few bricks short of a full load. When Dad was caught digging somewhere, no one objected, because it wasn't hurting anything, as it still doesn't.

I was my father's shadow, following him wherever he went. Those memories I will forever treasure. The moments of spending time with him, chasing relics of the past, will forever remain my most precious moments I carry through life. As a child, I believed those moments would never end.

It was 29 years ago (1965 at the time of this writing) that Dad and I found the dump of dumps in these parts. That, too, I felt would never end.

Dad decided one lazy summer Sunday afternoon that he and I would try our luck bottle hunting near historic Deadwood. We drove up the canyon road and parked about a half-mile out of Deadwood. We climbed down a steep embankment to Whitewood Creek and followed the east side of the creek for some time. Getting late, we decided to cross the creek and head up to our starting point. We'd found some bottles while hiking, nothing special, champagne and a couple of embossed BIMAL (blown in mold, applied lip) sodas. We were getting close to our starting point when we came upon some unusual embankment and mounds of dirt. Dad found some old coins dating from the 1890s to the early 1900s.

I plucked some bottles out of the bank, one a cobalt octagonal Carter's master ink. Dad took the bottle, studied the seam, said it's too new and threw it back. Little did we know, but we had stumbled onto one of the greater old city dumps in the Black Hills, infamous Deadwood's! JACKPOT!

Summer had turned bleak for Steve and I. Oh sure, we were still scratching up bottles, but nothing in numbers and nothing to brag about. We needed a big ol' dump or a good privy to boost our spirits. Our dance hall dig made us feel we were experts in finding unlimited places to dig. We learned it wasn't that easy.

With a bit of detective work, we pinpointed an old Victorian house in Lead. With tools and courage at the ready, we walked up and banged at the door. No answer, and peering through the picture window we saw there wasn't a stick of furniture to be seen. We discovered a small sign in a side window that said the house was under renovation and unoccupied, so we took it as an open invitation to probe and dig. This was (and is) a huge NO-NO!

To the backyard we went fired up to find something. This story really does get better. In time, we probed out and opened up a 4-foot by 4-foot hole. Down about three feet we started pulling out large quantities of rusted tin and various debris. Pretty soon, a few old black glass ales surfaced and we knew we had something, we just didn't know how good. Alongside our small stack of bottles was a huge pile of dirt and privy trash.



Clem Zambon III, Lead, S.D. Dump, S.D. 1991. (photo courtesy of Clemente Zambin III)

What should happen but a couple in a car pulls up into the driveway. “Oh-oh,” I thought, “we’re finished!” We thought of jumping into the hole and hiding out, we could lie and tell ‘em we’re with the gas company trying to locate the gas line. Oh, boy, what do you do in a situation like this?

The man gets out of the car, walks up to us and says (maybe hollers), “what in the (expletive deleted) are you boys doing to my property?” With dirt on our faces and worry written on our expressions, the truth was all we could reply with. We told him that we thought the house had been abandoned and being torn down. It took a long time in talking to cool down the situation. He explained to us that the house was one of his rentals, this being the reason for no furniture and being unoccupied. In time, he turned out to be a nice man.

To our amazement, he took us to other places in the yard where he says glass keeps turning up while he was doing some odd digging. He told us we’d have to contact him first before we started any more excavations of his property. He let us return to our hole, asking only that we leave the yard as we found it. We offered some of the bottles, but he didn’t want any of that “trash” in his house!

WHEW! Back into the hole we went and what a hole it was. By day’s end, we had the following: two One-Minute Cough Cures, two Hood’s Sarsaparillas, two amber cone inks, two Ayers’ Sarsaparillas, one Sanford’s, one Carter’s (1898), four black glass ales, two Ferro China Bisleri bitters, one Bitterquelle, one Cuticura Cure for Constitutional Humors, one Piso’s Cure, one Paine’s Celery Compound, and the find of the year, one W.R. Dickinson / Homestake / Sarsaparilla. What a hole, what luck and wow, what nice people!

*We diggers are caretakers of the past
And collectors of what once was.*

*Our finds do speak a hardship
Of an era behind us.*

*Our bottles are a timepiece,
A window to what had been.*

*We seek the treasures long ago discarded
To know how it was back then.*

*The pioneers must have had it hard
As told by what we find.*

*To think their one true medicine
Was a whiskey that made you blind.*

*So when you’re diggin’ down
Through pages of the past,*

*Give some thought to those who left it,
Take your time and make it last.*

It was the late 1960s and bottle fever was affecting many people in the country as well as the Black Hills area. Dad and I found a super dump and our days of searching were over. The city dump of Deadwood kept us busy for years to come. We dug the dump for seven years before the city finally had it filled and sold the property. I shall one day tell stories of our digging adventures and the bottles (we found) there. We had taken four or five other diggers with us over the years, each winding up with classy collections.

One item I remember in particular was a \$20 gold piece Dad had found and in the hustle to find more bottles it was later lost. Oh, well, there’s more where that came from. It’s well-remembered that we didn’t like a bottle unless it was a bitters, embossed whiskey, cure-all, fancy or colored. We dug many Deadwood drug store bottles we called “medicals,” but if we had one, there was no need to save more. I remember Dad holding up embossed Deadwood medicals, saying we had it so don’t save it. I remember lobbing ‘em to the other wide of the creeks to smash on the rocks.. You know boys – we love breaking glass! Dad would holler at me to stop making so much noise as it might attract unwanted attention.

During the summer of 1976, Dad had lost his glasses and wallet while digging, so he sent me back to hunt for them. So here I am, shoveling dirt out of our hole, and on one shovel full I spotted something unusual glittering in the sun. It’s a woman’s diamond ring and engraved on the inside was 7-7-98. Turns out it’s my mother’s birthday – the day and the month, but, of course, not the year.

Dad had dug the only known Deadwood Sarsaparilla

as listed in John DeGrafft's *American Sarsaparilla Bottles*. Another fondly remembered bottle was a quart cylinder Ben Franklin Rye I had dug as a boy. Now Dad had sold our Deadwood collection 25 years ago, but I was able to track down that bottle as belonging to Jim Bishop, one of Dad's old digging buddies.

The chat I had with Mr. Bishop was rich and gratifying. Then, during Christmas last year (1993), I received a package in the mail. Looking back now, I should have had a heart attack. As I unwrapped it, I couldn't believe my eyes. Before me was the old Ben Franklin Rye I had dug as a boy of 8. A sticker said, "Merry Christmas from Jim Bishop."

Our dump blessed us with 40 different Hutchinson sodas and more than a dozen different Deadwood medicals. We had at least two dozen different Deadwood mini jugs and at least 30 different bitters – golden amber Hi-Hi Bitters, olive green and triangular Sanitation Bitters, World Atlas Bitters (a pair of hands holding up the globe), and a multitude of colored and ornate perfumes and barber bottles. Embossed whiskies too numerous to remember, case gins with applied seals on the shoulder, ribbon seal whiskies, many in colors, all long gone now, as is the Deadwood dump.

*I took a stroll down memory lane
To recapture days I had taken in vain.*

*I dwell on the blessings that have since passed along
I took all for granted that now is all gone.*

*But I shall hold dear these digging adventures
Of my father and I digging for pleasure.*



Clem Zambon III descending into ravine - Lead Dump, S.D. 1996. (photo courtesy of Clemente Zambon III)

Steve and I were closing up the summer and entering the fall. Our season of digging had been OK, with a few good bottles and artifacts to add to our booty. We'd both taken on new jobs which were putting a pinch on our time off, but we still had Sundays open. We had spotted a house in Lead, but never got around to checking it out.

So we went there and found an old couple sitting out front in the yard. We showed them our tools and asked if we could locate and dig the old outhouse we felt sure was on their property. They remembered the old "outdoor toilet" being torn down sometime in the 1930s, but couldn't quite remember just where it had stood.

They told us to just have fun and not to make too much of a mess. In no little time we punched a spot with the probe that made music to our ears. It was a good 25 feet from the house and if this was it, I have to admire what peoples of eras gone by had to endure. Soon a small dust cloud hit the sky and in no time we were pulling out lots of "outy" trash. But wait, what's this screw top jars and modern bottles coming up! It was enough to make you sick to your stomach and what a good spot to be sick in. But wait, let's try a little deeper and hold our breaths, literally. Steve was in the hole now and punched through a soft yellow-orangish clay layer to find a coffin flask. Oh, boy, now we've got age! The hole was packed with glass that shot down a good six feet.

Though little of great rarity, here's what came out: two Lead Hutchinsons (one mug base, one round), six different Lead medicals, five unembossed coffin flasks, one large amber Detroit medical, one olive-green ribbed case gin, one clear stretch purse perfume and a clear fluted neck perfume, both from Detroit, three Liquezones, three Mother's Friends (Atlanta, Ga.), two Dr. Kilmer's, two KL&B Cures, one Paine's Celery Compound and an unusual violet-blue Bromo-Seltzer.

*Diggin's more like Christmas
As you've not a clue to what's in store.*

*You hope for something good
Like a bitters or maybe more.*

*You're praying that your wishing
Of a certain find just once comes true.*

*You soon discover in the end
That you've been blessed many times two.*

*You have in your possession
Many items from the past.*

*They speak or mortals gone
And tell us time ticks way too fast*

*As you cling to precious glass
Thanking life for your good luck.*

*Give some thought to those before you
Who tossed it in the muck.*

*And may you have a friend along
Who relates with what you do.*

*For truly that's the best find,
A friend to tell it to.*

Dad had sold two top Deadwood collections and now the dump was buried so we had nowhere else to go. We began searching again. I was now in my mid-teens and Dad was a more knowledgeable and advanced collector-digger. We'd been spoiled by the big dump so a small dump dig wasn't going to quench our thirst. So one weekend, I joined Dad and one of his digging buddies. We'd found nothing so near the end of the day, we pulled into a hamburger joint midway between Lead and Deadwood to grab a bite to eat. Dad had a hunch about a rather large hill so up he went and his buddy and I remained in the car eating our burgers. We sat in the car a long time and dusk was soon turning into night. Soon I spotted Dad and he's holding something. He gets into the car and his buddy and I gazed in awe at what he's holding.

There in Dad's arms are four stenciled Lead jugs and his pockets are filled with bottles, old ones. Dad had just discovered the old Lead city dump. It was 1972 and once again it looked like our digging was going to last forever.

The dump dates to late Victorian times (1890s), although we found many things pre-dating that era. Ash layers went down 25 to 30 feet in some areas. We dug many a Sunday from sunup to sundown. At times, our holes were so deep you could hide a freight car in 'em. Our biggest mistake was never taking photographs. We played in this dump from 1972 to 1983 before its owners, the Homestake Mining Company, filled it and made it strictly off limits.

Dad liked the dump because of its incredible number of stenciled jugs. He amassed 27 different. I liked the dump's age and its classy bottles.

Here is the preceding story's cast of characters:

Dad: Clemente D. Zambon II, 69 years old, can dig like a 20-year-old. Still owns one of South Dakota's better bottle collections. Onto bigger and better collectibles now, including trade tokens, cowboy paraphernalia, but still likes to go digging.

Digging partner: Steve Ellis, 37 years of age. Recently joined the digging and collecting fraternity. I feel his collection is second only to Dad's and mine in this area. Not only is Steve my digging partner, he is also my brother-in-law and my good friend.

Me: Clemente D. Zambon III, 37 years old. Started chasing

glass with my father when I was 6. My love for glass really matured after being released from the Army in 1986 and digging my first Warner's Safe Cure in a ghost town. I'm forever in debt to my father for his unlimited help and knowledge in helping build my interest and collection in this crazy hobby. For dragging me along when I was a kid to share your experiences, Dad, I genuinely THANK YOU!

(EDITOR'S NOTE: A version of this story appeared more than 25 years ago in *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector* magazine. Clem D. Zambon credits his father, Clemente, for "getting me interested and turning me on to the wonderful world of glass. Not a day goes by that I don't miss him. . .the world of collecting lost a one of a kind when my dad died."

Two men played major role in early South Dakota collecting

By Kim Johnke

Bottle collecting and digging started in the western part of South Dakota during the mid-1960s with two men – Clemente Zambon and Otto Einsphar. They dug for many years before anyone else showed interest.

Examples and relics from old mining towns and ghost towns filled their shelves and were the basis for many a story. Jim Louks of Spearfish has carried on the tradition and has a fantastic collection.

Mr. Zambon died at age 82 in 2006, while Mr. Einsphar, whose last known address was in Oral, could not be found.

In the eastern part of the state, digging and collecting started during the 1970s and remains active. Among the early collectors are Dr. Tim Wolter, Ron Feldhaus, Robert Kolbe, John VanHeul and myself.

Robert Kolbe and I have been a digging team since 1984. Out of the thousands of bottles, some of the more notable finds are Dakota Territory sodas, numerous drug store bottles and an 1878 \$2-1/2 gold piece. The latter had been made into a love token with a monogram of the couple's initials on the reverse.

We have dug during thunderstorms, broiling heat and humidity and in snowy winter months. It's not much fun, but makes you appreciate nice weather.

Two of the more unusual experiences we have encountered over the years included the elderly lady who felt sorry for us during our laborious digging on a hot day. She brought us a pitcher of lemonade and ran an extension cord with electric fan to our hole. It stirred up too much dust so we had to decline her offer, but we enjoyed the lemonade.

We were digging a fairly deep hole during the late fall when we encountered a very angry shrew whose slumber we had interrupted. As he scampered along the bottom and around the sides of the hole, we were more concerned that he didn't mistake one of our pants' legs for an escape route. He did find another way out and we continued digging, albeit with a wary eye.

Digging exposes time capsules of the former households: crockery, dishes and bottles show their lifestyles, what their afflictions were and how they spent their money. It will always be a very unique way to look at our past.