

A Timely Find

By Mike Magee

On May 13, 2012 Jim Hamiel, Mike Magee and Mark Wiseman were digging for antique bottles in a old outhouse pit behind what once was the Brice mansion in Tama, Iowa. Among what was found were five old photographic glass plates. The photo album that contained them was considerably decayed.

Only one of them had a visible image. It appeared to be that of two Civil War soldiers. I took them to my Cedar Valley Civil War Roundtable meeting where one of the members, Bill Witt, who is a expert on old photographs, observed them. Bill took them home and carefully looked them over. Here is his report:

“At least two are ferrotypes, and the iron sheeting, oxidizing more quickly than the brass matte and frame, has been almost totally rusted away. Interestingly however, gold choride that was applied to uniform buttons, belt buckels, etc, was deposited on the cover glass when the photo emulsion was dissolved. I’m doing some tests to see if the dirt and iron oxide staining can be removed by soaking in a weak solution of distilled water and ammonia, without disturbing the residual gold. A third image looks like it was a pannotype-where the emulsion was flowed onto smooth, black leather. Pannotypes are extremely rare; even the Smithsonian and George Eastman House have only a small handful in their respective collections.

“A fourth appears to be an ambrotype that was coated on the back with black shellac. I can see what may be faint traces of a painted backdrop-a peak of a tent and flagpole-used by the photographer.

“The last image may have been a daguerreotype, there are traces of gilding and what looks to be mercuric-silver choride on the glass, but the silver-plated copper sheet and brass matte are gone.



Jim Hamiel [left] and Mike Magee [right] checking out the finds.



Jim Hamiel, digging in outhouse pit

The plate, heavily corroded with copper oxide and copper sulphate, may still be down in the pit and likely would have rotted away.”

Bill was able to recover the image of the two Civil War soldiers. Bill said that the photo was taken in 1862 because in 1863 a different process was used to frame the photo. I have done a considerable amount of genealogical and historical research on the Brice family and home. James Jr. and Thomas Brice were brothers who served in the 92nd Illinois Volunteer Mounted Infantry. After the war, the brothers came to Tama, Iowa and had businesses there. It is suspected that two soldiers in the photograph are the brothers.

Bottles and pottery, etc, are the rewards after a successful outhouse pit digging day. Finding a Civil War era photo was the highlight of this bottle digging day.



“The house”

Here are some of the finds

