

# NORTH SIDE MONSTER

[dipped but worth  
the effort]

by Jeff Mihalik

Way before I ever dug my first city privy in Pittsburgh, I visited a relative living on the North Side of Pittsburgh. Their home was right on one of the main roads and was a huge brick structure built sometime in the early 1800s. Of course, the conversation that day included how I was a privy digger and how I was curious about what the backyard looked like (i.e., if there was room for a privy) as many of the properties were developed all the way to the back alley. We then went out back to take a look. Although most of the backyard was covered with concrete, has a gazebo, and large gravel filled parking area, there was however, a strip of natural ground

Not sure  
why I look  
so serious - Jeff



cover separating the parking area from the gazebo and concrete. Hmm, I need to probe this some time.

Well, turn the clock ahead about 6 years and several Pitt Panther tail gates later, and I once again started to think about this property and the potential to dig. Having now dug many Pittsburgh city privies, I knew that this area of town had produced several very memorable digs in the past. For the past 5-7 years, this neighborhood has been going through revitalization and many of these former stately homes have either been completely remodeled or have undergone extensive restoration. Being so large and on the main street, these homes were typically owned by wealthy families when originally built.

I had sent John (the property owner along with his wife Stacy) one of the recent articles I wrote (Digging 60) that was about a dig just up the street from their property. That really sparked their interest. While visiting after a Pitt Panther game (Pitt plays football games at Heinz Field where the Steelers play and this is within walking distance of John and Stacy's home), I went out to the back yard again. There were some changes, such as a fish pond, but on the other side of the yard along the fence line, there was a suspicious hole. John told me how he started to dig out some bushes and how the roots kept going down and he could never get to the bottom. Wow! I had a strong feeling this was a privy! It was agreed we could probe and go from there.

Once I told Tim that we had a

tentative permission (John still had to clear everything with Stacy), it didn't take long for him to stop by while he was in town working and probe the spot. I got a phone call that day from Tim and it's Wham! bam and thank you, ma'am, it's a wood-lined privy and it feels crunchy. I call John and we have the OK to dig, but have to wait after a party they are having. We set up the dig for the following week and we can't wait.

The typical wood-lined privies in this area of town are usually about 10 to 12 feet deep and 4 to 5 feet in length and width. When we finally started to dig we had a heck of a time getting through all the roots from the bushes that used to grow in this area but down we went. It wasn't long until we got our first bottle, an unembossed flask. It was at least blown in mold so that was good for starters. Another foot down and Tim pulled out a small medicine, but it's embossed with the name of the proprietor and it's pontiled! It was found up along the wall so this indicated that the privy was most likely dipped. We're stoked now and our minds spin with thoughts of a loaded pontil pit.

As Tim proceeds to dig, maybe 15 to 20 other bottles are found, but none pontiled. Before long Tim sees another bottle along the opposite wall. He slows down his digging and we carefully extract this bottle. The next thing I knew Tim was holding up a complete quart scroll flask! Wow again!

Things are looking good even though not much was coming out of the middle parts of the pit except newer bottles; it looked like the dippers left some good stuff along the walls. Tim had three walls



Tim just starting the dig out



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John the owner on his back porch



Fish Pond on other side of Priy

exposed now but where was the fourth? He probed in that direction but hit fill dirt, so we concentrated on trying to get as deep as possible on one side of the pit before opening it completely up. Tim built a ledge and down he went. At this point, everything coming out of the hole was pontiled, but mostly shards of sodas, medicines, flasks, you name it. As Tim is busy digging, I'm pulling up the buckets and then dumping them in our trash cans. Because of the layout of the backyard, we had to put our dumpings up hill just a little off from the privy in the back of the lots parking area. All of sudden Tim is quiet and that is usually a good sign something has his attention in the pit. I go over and see a big smile on his face. It's a soda, embossed, iron pontil and it's cobalt! Tim

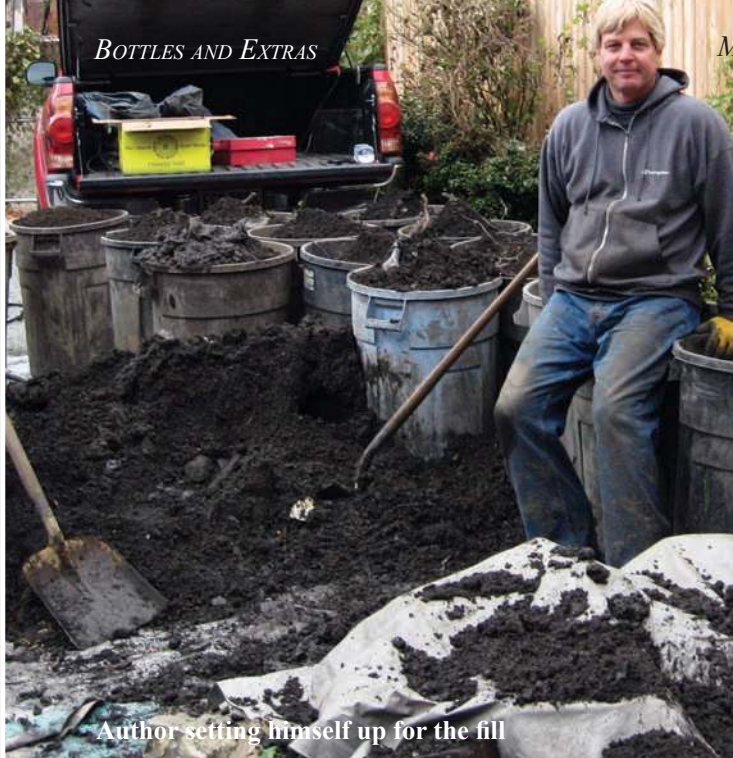
hands up a M.S. Johns, Pittsburg. Tim has dug several of these but this was my first. Not long after that, a green iron pontil block letter John Ogden soda is found followed by an aqua example, both complete and in excellent shape. Two colored iron pontil sodas, I'm ecstatic.

Oh yeah, forgot to mention by this time we were into some Pittsburgh pooppy soup. I never see this when digging outside of Pittsburgh but it is a very common sight here. Tim has to use a small bucket to bail out the "water" and then I have to transport to a good trash can without any holes. This is sloppy

The author checking out the pit







Author setting himself up for the fill

and messy and not for the faint of heart. But Tim knows what lurks beneath the muck. As we finally get towards bottom on this one side, Tim starts finding shoes and I mean like 20 or 30. He also finds a nice crude emerald green blacking bottle with a huge and crude open pontil. Then another grin and a yell, as Tim pulls out a beautiful green free-blown open pontil porter with a weird looking top. What can I say, it's just a killer.

We head over to the opposite side of the privy. By now all our cans are filled and I'm putting dirt on the ground. That just makes for more filling time later, but we got to keep at it. There were not a lot of bottles found going in this direction except a really nice iron pontil quart Buffums Porter Pittsburgh. It has that Pittsburgh porter top and very rare in the quart size and maybe unique with Pittsburgh embossed on it. Other finds include an early red ware pot, iron pontil sauce bottle and some other odds and ends. Tim is trying to find that last wall, but we are now about 7 feet from the opposite wall and can not go any further due to our heading towards the fish pond and we do not want to chance undercutting and draining that so Tim does the best he can but has to quit. He hates to do this as sometimes the best finds are deep along the walls of the privy but we have no choice. This privy pit turns out to be 4 feet wide, about 10 feet long, and 12 feet deep!

Time to fill 'er in. John is watching and suggests that we remove the rock wall that is separating the privy spot from his parking area. We do this and place a trap there trying to construct a chute for the dirt to dump into the privy without us having to carry the trash cans down the hill. This ended up working nicely. We know that we are going to



Tarps, just making it easier to fill



Just to show you what kind of room we had to find the privy



need some fill so John empties any trash lying around his basement and yard such as a couple old cement bags, bricks, anything he can find to help fill in the hole. John plans on putting another fish pond here so it was not necessary to level the spot, but we made sure to pack the dirt in as tight as possible.

Once we were completed and had the trucks loaded back up, Tim and I split up the finds and we put aside several nice bottles including one of the pontil Ogden sodas, the red ware pot, and several local druggist bottles for the owners. This was a great dig. We didn't hit it big but did get a couple beautiful shelf bottles and uncovered some of the early history of this property that will now be back on display in the home.

**If the Shoe fits**



**Treasures cleaned up**

**Some of the better finds**

