



## Holey! Holey! Holey! Privy dig comes up empty!

By Bill Baab

I got this brainy friend, see, and he's put together a gizmo that's got a lot of wires and circuit boards and other stuff I don't understand, and he claims it will find the holes, the only things left from those backyard bathrooms he calls privies.

"OK, so once you find one, what will you do with it?" I asked politely. "Dig it," he says. "Why?" I wondered. Then he explains: "Just think of your grandpa and he wants a shot of something alcoholic while he's sitting on a board with a hole in it over that privy hole. So what does he do with that fifth after he empties it? He throws it down the hole."

I protest. "Grandpa didn't drink. He was a tea totaler. The only thing he'd drink besides water was tea."

"Just pretend he did," said my friend, "or maybe it was your uncle. The point is privies were used for trash pits and that's good for us since we collect those antique whiskey and the other bottles and stuff that wound up down there."

He further explained that the privies he looked for weren't yesterday's because "they'd be too new, too unsanitary" and "too smelly," I chimed in. He agreed. "The ones we're looking for were in use 100, 150 or more years ago."

So he's got this gizmo which sits on something that looks like a lawnmower and a metal box containing all that wiring and circuitry is pushed over the backyard in an old section of town. When a privy or trash pit is reached, the electronics send a signal to the screen of a laptop computer attached to the four-wheeled cart.

"There's one!" my friend exclaimed. "I didn't hear nothin'," I said. "It didn't say privy. In fact, it didn't say anything." My friend looked exasperated. "We haven't reached the point where it talks, but look-a-here, see what's on the screen?"

I looked at a bunch of colored squiggly lines. "Did worms make

those trails?" I asked. "Worms?" he asked. "Sure, or maybe moles." He shook his head. "Those 'trails,' as you call them, indicate electronically there's a disturbance in the ground, what we call an anomaly because it's different from the rest of the yard."

"Anonymously?" "No, anomaly, in this case a pit and probably a privy hole." "Probably?" "Sure, there's no written guarantee so the only way to be sure is to dig it,"

Well, I'm not as smart as my friend, but I wanted to know if his gizmo identified what might be in the hole. "Does it say Bottle or Jug?"

"Of course not and that's why we dig it," he said. "Besides it's great exercise. This one looks to be eight feet deep." "That's a lot of exercise," I said. "Why don't you grab that spade and I'll just look on and supervise."

Turns out that privy hole was lined with bricks and not all of them had stayed put as a wall, as my friend learned, the tip of his spade clunking against the loose ones, forcing him to make a few comments.

"Be nice," I said.

Well, he eventually dug his way to the bottom and the first treasure he unearthed was an aluminum soft drink can.

"Is that an antique?" I asked. "I didn't think they had aluminum cans back then."

Cursing, he explained this particular privy had been dug by someone else. "That so-and-so didn't have permission, but I have it in writing from the landowner, little good it did me."

"But you got a lot of exercise!" I reminded him, running away quickly as he came after me swinging the spade.

