

Chasing a Good Bitters

by Jeff Mihalik

Mountain Herb Bitters in the Hole

Thaddeus and I have been digging many privies over the last couple of months. We have found several privies that have dated from the 1840s through the 1860s—however, it's been very slim pickings with only a few embossed pontil bottles from this time period. Therefore, I have had little to write about.

Recently, I focused on a new street where I was reasonably sure had not been dug. I was told by a property owner that they had not permitted a recent request to dig. Luckily, I was able to seal the deal on two lots and the dig was on.

JUNE DIGGING

I was able to probe out four probable privy sites. One of the sites was sinking and was in a location that would make it easy for a digger with less than full permission to dig, so I figured I would let that one go last. I opened one of the other pits on the first lot by myself since it seemed to be under 6 feet in depth. Long story short, I only found a couple of slick flasks (historical age without embossing) along the sidewalls, so I moved on. The other two pits on the next lot I knew had a lot of glass, so I opened one of them. The first bottles out were barely 'turn of the century' maybe even 1910ish, but bottles were coming out in the first couple feet, so the dig was on. After about 45 minutes, I was down about 3-4 feet and found a bright green bottle in a shape I was not familiar with. It turned out to be an Auguaer Bitters from Chicago. It was on the border between machine-made and blown-



Thad getting ready for the dig. I will say this, Thad is not a guy you want placing you in a headlock



Two different circa 1900s bitters bottles, a Tonco Bitters and a Augauer Bitters in 7up Green

in mold but a nice color, size, and hey - it's a bitters! About 20 minutes later, I dug out a Tonco Bitters. It's a nice size bottle and completely intact, so all good.

I dug what I could that day. The next day, Thaddeus came with me to help finish the hole. After it was all said and done, we had about 100 bottles, including two nice bitters, various medicines, four small gun whiskey nips and about eight local beers (taper blob tops) that are extremely rare, maybe one previously known. So all is good and we're digging bitters!

The next pit, which was just behind the last one, turned out to be 7 feet long but only 5 feet deep. Other than several broken blue-gray stenciled jugs, we only retrieved four whole bottles, all of which were hutch sodas. However, two of the four hutchers were very rare, but overall, this pit was a bust.

I did, however, probe out another pit on the next property. It took some time for me to run down the property owners and several more attempts to get permission,



Here are several rare blob beers from Wheeling, West Virginia. A nice surprise and find!



A really neat and local hard to find hutchinson bottle

but we were finally able to get the go-ahead! Over the last several weeks of digging, the weather has been averaging about 60-70 degrees and has been no problem. We never really thought much about digging the next day; just show up and bring all the equipment. I got to the site about an hour earlier than Thaddeus and opened up the pit on one side of a large cement stairway sitting over much of the hole. Thaddeus arrived and we started to get to work. The first bottle out was a large Cod Liver Oil from Philly with the large cartouche panel on the front (nice big bottle from about the late 1870s), so that was a good sign of age. The bottles started to come out 4 to 5 at a time: many slicks (smooth based) and many hinge mold medicines. As we dug deeper and time went on, the sun began to show overhead and it got a bit hotter. Okay, rookie mistake - we didn't bring the sunshade, didn't have our cooler with ice and water and were not prepared for a massive dig in the heat.

Nevertheless, Thaddeus kept pulling up buckets and I kept digging down. We hit the water at the 7-foot level and I know we bailed out at least 50 buckets of water making little headway. I had that feeling that this was a much bigger pit than we realized (usually, you will bail out maybe ten buckets of water and get down a couple of feet, but not here). I saw an amber square bottle and could see it had roof panels (man I was hoping for a local bitters). Once I had it uncov-



Several that came out of the massive 10 x 10 x 5 ft privy. Pikes Peak, couple stoneware crocks and a green master ink just to name a few

ered, I could see it was a Doyles Hop Bitters. It was a large bottle, completely intact and a bitters! So game on! We keep digging and bailing and digging and bailing.

I noticed that Thaddeus had his shirt off and could see how red his back looked as he was in the open sun. It was about 87 degrees and muggy. I was feeling sluggish and knew Thad was struggling. We then found another square bottle but didn't recognize it. It turned out to be a Mountain Herb Bitters from York, Pa. Never dug one of those before! The next item was a freehand decorated snuff crock complete and undamaged. So far, all the bottles came out of an ash layer (about 6 feet thick) above a 1-foot clay cap covering the bottom trash layer.

By this time (8 hours of digging), both Thad and I were getting wasted. We were about 9 feet down with maybe a foot of trash left (although we only had found one intact bottle in that lower layer to that point). We already had about 70+ bottles (mostly all from the 1870s) including 25 various medicines, two



A really neat looking with double neck rings, Tomato and Beefsteak bottle and several household bottles

bitters, two complete stoneware pieces (1 decorated) and multiple household bottles like a cool Beefsteak Tomato Sauce (Anderson and Campbell) highly decorated and with two big tomatoes and other design elements. I had three walls exposed, so I asked Thad for the probe to see how far the 4th wall was (which would be how long the privy was). I pushed the 5-foot probe into the wall and it took the whole probe!! Thad, looking down, said, "what just happened?" lol- I said "it took the entire probe dude!" Having already dug 4 or 5 feet in lateral width would make this privy about 10-foot-long by 10 feet deep by 5 feet wide. We decided to fill it in and come back another time to finish it up (I could not tunnel over as a 500 lb concrete stairway piece was over the pit!). We filled it in, cleaned up and talked about what to do next.

As we talked, I could see that Thaddeus was struggling. He only drank two small bottles of water and was in the direct sun the entire day. The humidity just got to him on this dig so we decided

he would sit out digging the rest of the privy (it's fun digging but a lot more fun living a healthy life). I called Luke and he was more than ready to help dig (our last dig together was in early March before all the pandemic craziness). All I could think about before the dig was finding a good bitters, maybe something rare we haven't seen before in some crazy color, or a good local bitters. It's been a couple of years since anything like that has come out of a pit for us. I again knew it was going to be a hot one on Saturday (when Luke was coming to help dig), so I went down to the site on Friday and got a head start. I was able to open up the other 5-foot-wide side of the privy and get down to the 6-foot layer when I started to get wet. Along the sidewall, a nice ½ pint Pikes Peak Old Rye Pittsburgh flask fell out. Other than that, only a couple of other medicines, including a local druggist, were dug that day. Probing the bottom, I could feel a good trash layer. Luke showed up on Saturday and this time we had the sunshade up and a cooler full of ice and drinks. We quickly got to it and went



Total finds on the tarp from the first pit in a new town, always fun finding bottles



Privy two in our new town yields many bottles and even a battery jar, enjoyed every last bottle.

down into the water. After bailing the water for what seemed like a long time, we finally got to the trash layer (although most of the bottles on the other side of the privy came out in the ash layer, we were still confident we would get some good finds in the lower layer). Long story short, other than a couple of nice local druggist, three large stoneware snuff jars - unembossed, a few smooth base slicks and another Doyles Hop Bitters (with a hole), we didn't get anything close to what the other side produced.

JULY DIGGING

I finally got together with Rick Ronczka, my original digging partner, after a gap of about ten years. Rick is back in good shape after some issues and has the bottle bug again! He had been researching a small town in Western PA and got hooked on the local history. We decided to go together and see if we could get permission to dig. The trip was successful and the dig was set for the following weekend. You never know in these small towns



Here is a really cool picture of the large battery jar coming out the pit.

when they had sewer lines available and if they used outhouses into the 1930s, 40s, or even later, so it's pretty exciting (trying not to be too skeptical) opening up the first privy in town. Once we got down about 3 feet, we hit bottles.

They were maybe turn of the century or thereabouts, with a mixture of blown-in-mold and machine-made items, which is not too bad age-wise. In addition, the bottles were stacked like firewood. I couldn't use a regular shovel to dig - I had to use the small shovel I typically use for unearthing individual bottles. Bottles just kept coming one atop the other. We found six complete canning jars, several beers (one was a blob top), and many different hair bottles, two of which were somewhat scarce. Also found were other household items such as mugs and stoneware, cures and medicines (mostly common but several better ones). The pit ended up being about 6 feet deep by 5 feet wide.

When we got back to Rick's place, we laid everything out on a tarp. It was a pretty impressive haul (picture doesn't include about 100 slicks that were old enough to purple).

The lady next door to the first dig asked us when we would dig her yard!! We went back the next week and found two pits in her yard. Both were similar in size to the first one we dug in this town and they both had a lot of good bottles (the late 1870s to 1890s - 1900), but not quite the quantity as the first pit. Maybe one of the stranger items was what we think was a gallon battery jar in perfect condition that had an old metallic cover on it peeling off. Of the five beers we dug, two were blob tops, 1 was a T-top and 2 were crown tops. We also dug a couple of amber druggists from Cincinnati, a pressed glass creamer and another couple better canning jars. We did find one bitters: a Burdock Blood Root Bitters. Once again, we laid everything out on the tarp.

No, we didn't find a great bitters YET. I'll keep chasing it as I still have that feeling that one is coming along soon!!

