

Diary of the Des Moines Privy Digger

By Mark Wiseman

Privy Seeds and broken dreams, tell-tell signs of a fun dig

Sunday, August 4th, 2019

The summer heat let up a little, and Jimmy and I drove around Des Moines to see what opportunities might have opened up, in actuality they had likely been missed. In an area along SW 7th Street storm sewers had been dug for a development of more downtown housing. This area had been a dump south of downtown, and I remembered when this area had a large number of buried tanks removed, and even a petroleum remediation system had been employed here. The only find was a crown top soda with a paneled base, slug plate embossed "F. Harbach, Des Moines, Ia." with a damaged lip. I'll bet the backhoe operator had seen better bottles as they dug the trenches for the storm sewers.

Saturday, August 10th, 2019

After another drive around downtown, Jimmy and I headed up to Don's Farm by Woodward to see Reggie and the big dog Winston. Then we headed up to Moingona for a little dump digging in the north end of the "south" flats, it was too warm to do any deep digging in the sun today, and the forest covered shady digging at Moingona seemed like the best option. There is a layer to dig through full of "wads", basically rocks and kiln furniture, with some broken pottery shards about a foot deep in these flats. It is very slow digging with a spade, sitting on the ground. Not a bad hot weather pursuit if you can find enough cobalt decorated



Reggie and the big dog Winston, sitting in the shade



Two images of pottery shards with cobalt stenciling

shards to keep you interested. I found some nice shards, a hand drawn "3", and stopped on the way back and saw Reggie and the big dog again. I took photos of what I had found and of Reggie and the dog in the shade.

Saturday, August 17th, 2019

I had gotten a lead at work about a house in Altoona that had a large barn or garage removed, and I knew the house, a very early one for that town on old main street. In the late morning Jimmy and I drove over there hoping to find a pit and possibly some Altoona drug store bottles. I knocked on the back door and easily obtained permission to try. However probing did not turn out so easy. You could probe ok, the ground was very hard in places, the pits were not cooperating. I did try a test hole into some fill about two and a half feet deep. All I found were rocks, that I had hoped were bottles. After thanking the lady I raked up the area and headed back to Moingona as the afternoon heated up. Digging in the same area produced some more interesting shards including a stenciled "5". On the way back I stopped at Reggie's and took a picture of my finds.

Sunday, August 18th, 2019

In the afternoon I headed back to Altoona with Jimmy. I knocked on the back door of another old house this one on the north side

of Main Street. I obtained permission to probe and dig in the rather open back yard. The ground again was hard in places, and I spent a long time probing all parts of the yard. Only one place felt much like a pit, and it did align out the back door almost to the alley. So after spreading out tarps all around the spot I started a test hole. The pit was four feet deep, four foot long and only two feet wide. It really was an ash pit with clinkers, not terribly old. I did find a nice milk glass piece not seen often embossed "Grace Medical Co. Des Moines, Iowa" some Detroit milk glass, and broken "Ball" shards, a horse shoe, and other glass shards. Finished, I put it all back the way it had been, The owner said I could come back any time and try again, however more probing following this digging did not reveal any promising pits.



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Saturday, August 25th, 2019

I dug in Moingona again with Jimmy the pup, found some more interesting shards digging in the heat. I took a photograph when I got home with what I had found the week before in Altoona.

Sunday, September 1st, 2019

I had a mission today to haul some display cases, that were formerly Jim Springer's, from Marshalltown to Nashua, Iowa, and put them in Marv Juel's house there. My timing was flexible. Jimmy and I had left Des Moines in the black truck in the morning and I thought I'd drive through Newton on the way. I had looked at an old house by the community college (formerly Maytag) over the years, and never found anyone to get permission from. Today when I got to this block I could see a carpenter working on the porch for this house. So I parked and walked up to the house and it turned out the owner was helping the man work on the porch. However, the owner absolutely refused my attempt to obtain permission, saying this yard had already been dug which I doubted. As an afterthought I drove over to a house in Newton, where I had previously dug one very productive pit, some years ago. The house had been in limbo owned by a bank back then, but now it was obviously occupied by a family with an above ground swimming pool in the backyard. I knocked on the back door and explained to the lady and then her husband about my search for bottles, and he gave me permission to try. The one



Jimmy guarding the finds while I take a break



Some local Des Moines pharmacy bottles



Lockport Gargling Oil



Some other local Des Moines pharmacy bottles



Broken Roback's Stomach Bitters bottle found at the bottom



The load of bottles from that hole, some broken some whole still a fun dig!

pit I had dug on this house's lot had been way at the back of the yard along the back fence line. I thought there might be another pit, there was a chance. I found the pit easily to the east of where I had dug before. I alerted the owner I was going to dig, and hauled tarps tools and led Jimmy into the far south end of the back yard. It probed like it had a lot of glass and it did. The pit turned out to be 4½ feet deep, and roughly 4' X 4' with no wall lining. I put tarps on three sides with the fence on the back side, and cut out the rough sod. I was finding glass in the first two feet.

I was finding a lot of glass, but few bottles at first, mostly lamp chimney's, broken iron stone dishes, broken flower pots, and clear broken goblets. The owner came back to see and was really not very impressed. As I got a little deeper there were broken fruit jars, Mason 1858's with ground tops, and some "Mason's Improved" quarts, base embossed "Pat'd Jan 19, 1869" four or five of them, but I did not find any of the glass lids for them. I found an ironstone pitcher with a cluster of forks and spoons in it, half a toothbrush, and two glass buttons. Then I started to get some embossed drug store bottles starting with a clear "O.N. Wagley, Druggist, Newton, Iowa". Deeper down as I began to approach the bottom I found two 5" tall clear "Kusel & Scribner, Druggists (Mortar & Pestle), Newton, Iowa", later I found two 4" tall clear "Kusel & Scribner (sideways on the bottle) Drug-gists, Newton, Iowa". I took a trip to the truck got some pop

and tucked these bottles in some gloves for protection. I had reached the bottom and on the bottom was a surprise, a barrel bitters, but when I turned it over it had an oval shaped hole on the bottom side, whole otherwise. I searched the dirt but could not find that missing piece. The amber barrel was 10 inches tall, seam based and embossed "Roback's Stomach Bitter's Cincinnati, O.". Next to this bottle I found the shards of an iron pontil blob soda in five pieces a gluer embossed "J.V. Dellicker, Richmond, Va." Another crier were pieces of a yellow amber "Dr. J. Hostetter's Stomach Bitters". Working my way across the bottom then up the wall I found two nice bottles, a teal green 7½" tall (a large size!) "Gargling Oil, Lockport, N.Y.", and a whole, there had been a couple broken ones, aqua "Dr. Hoofland's, German Bitters, Dyspepsia & Liver Complaint, C.M. Jackson, Philadelphia" with a seam base. Also on the bottom I found a strangely triangular shaped aqua ink

embossed "Alling's", a seam based "Wakefield's Blackberry Bal-sam", a clear round bottle embossed "ETS & Co. N.Y.", a "DR. A Boschee's German Syrup, L.M. Green, Proprietor, a square aqua "Saratoga Dressing" with a star on the base, and a square aqua "Jettine, Orvel Holden & Co., Chicago".

Some of the interesting shards included pieces of an early aqua flask, open pontil with an eagle on one side, and a walking man on the other, it just was not all there. There was another small pontiled bottle base, one embossed "L & W", and seam bases. With all the walls scraped down and the corners done I filled in carefully looking at all the shards. It did not take long, I hauled the finds, tools and tarps and led Jimmy back to the truck, then went back with the rake and tamper to do the final clean up. I had to stop and see Clyde Jones since I was in town and show him my finds. Clyde had some finds to show me also. Apparently he had been at a porch remodeling on an old house and had found some super condition labeled beer bottles from the 1960's.

Then Jimmy and I drove on to Marshalltown, where Chris and I managed to load the two display cases. I left some tools in the driveway in order to protect the display cases. On to Nashua, Jimmy and I went, backed up to the porch, slid out the display cases and put them into the house, then started back. I stopped



Clyde had apparently been under a porch remodeling on an old house and had found some super condition labeled beer bottles from the 1960's.



Shards of a salt glazed stoneware pitcher that had cobalt decoration on the handle and a stripe around the top



A clear glass fruit jar lid decorated with raspberries I knew went to a "Royal of 1876" fruit jar as I had dug them before

in Marshalltown retrieved my tools, and Jimmy and I got home about 10 p.m. The next morning I made a list and took some pictures of my finds.

Tuesday, September 10th, 2019

After work, I decided to check on a construction site that I'd heard of at work. They were putting in some basements on some now vacant lots down in Sherman Hill. The basements were being built ahead of three houses to be moved onto this site from over at Drake University. New construction along the south side of University Avenue had made these houses available. The houses lots on University were not that old but where they were being moved to was old. I had my map of the block and there had been dwellings on these lots on the 1901 map. The neighborhood went back to the 1880's however the 1884 and 1891 map sets did not have coverage of these lots. An office type business building had been removed a year or so ago, and the paved parking lot had been



Drug store bottle embossed "George Eyssell, Union Depot Drug Store" (with fleur-de-lis or bird tracks)

removed more recently. There were places to probe along the alley, only a plastic orange fence was present along the alley, and there was nobody on site now. Recent rains had made the site a little muddy, and I found some areas along the inside of the fence had packed gravel below the mud, former driveways I could not probe. The alley had been widened over the years and I found a pit right next to the paved alley edge in the small space between the alley edge and the plastic fence about a foot and a half to two feet of space available. I had left Jimmy at home so there were no distractions, and no room for a tarp. I went back to the truck and got a spade, a trowel, and my short shovel to start a test hole. The gravel at the surface was hard digging to start, I piled it farther down the alley along the plastic fence. I determined the pit was a brick liner about three feet long along the alley and was not more than two and a half feet wide, going partially back under the alley paving. My probe indicated there was some glass, and lime along the bottom about 4 ½ feet down. I started finding shards of a salt glazed stoneware pitcher that had cobalt decoration on the handle and a stripe around the top which I set off to the side. There were shards of lamp chimney's and broken fruit shards. I found a clear glass fruit jar lid decorated with raspberries I knew went to a "Royal of 1876" fruit jar as I had dug them before. Then I pulled out a nice whole drug store bottle embossed "George Eyssell, Union Depot Drug Store, (with fleur-de-lis or bird tracks) Kansas City, Mo." The base was embossed "W.T. & Co., Pat Jan. 18 81", a strap sided bottle. But now it was dark, really dark, I dug a little while longer finding some more pitcher shards, then I had to fill back in there was no light. With such a narrow area to work my flashlight would have been too clumsy. I put it all back easily with the gravel back on top again nothing was visible. I took some photos of my finds when I got home.

Friday, September 13th, 2019

After work I went back down to the basement construction site, and again no one was around. I opened up my hole again, and removed the gravel to back along the fence line. I had good light now and the brick lining was visible on three sides as I dug toward the south end of the pit where I had not dug yet. Along the bottom of the south end I found more stoneware pitcher shards, a toothbrush and two more embossed drug store bottles. The first was embossed "George Eyssel (in an arch) Union Depot Drug Store (fancy mortar and pestle) Kansas City (in an arch) Mo", and the base was embossed "W.T. & Co., Pat JAN 18 81", another strap sided bottle from the same drug store with a different embossing! The second drug store bottle was embossed "Evans & Judson (in an arch) Pioneer Druggists (mortar and pestle embossed Pure Drugs), Hastings, Nebraska" with a smooth base. In the bottom corner I found a rusted iron ice skate, and that was it



Embossed "George Eyssel (in an arch) Union Depot Drug Store (fancy mortar and pestle) Kansas City (in an arch) Mo"



Embossed "Evans & Judson (in an arch) Pioneer Druggists (mortar and pestle embossed Pure Drugs), Hastings, Nebraska"



Sunday's finds from digging surface piles

for this pit. I pushed all the dirt I had placed along the alley into the pit, put the gravel back on top, raked up a little and it was invisible again. Here I was digging in Des Moines and I had found three out of state drug store bottles. I called Johnnie Fletcher who determined the two George Eyssel bottles were new variants.

Sunday, September 15th, 2019

I went back to the basement site did some more probing without finding anything else to dig, I went up to Moingona and dug in the south flats pottery dump. Jimmy loves to run in the woods in Moingona.

Sunday, September 22nd, 2019

It had been very wet, and I again went probing in Des Moines including the basement site, no pits could I find so I headed back to Moingona and worked on my hole in the south flats, as Jimmy chased chipmunks.

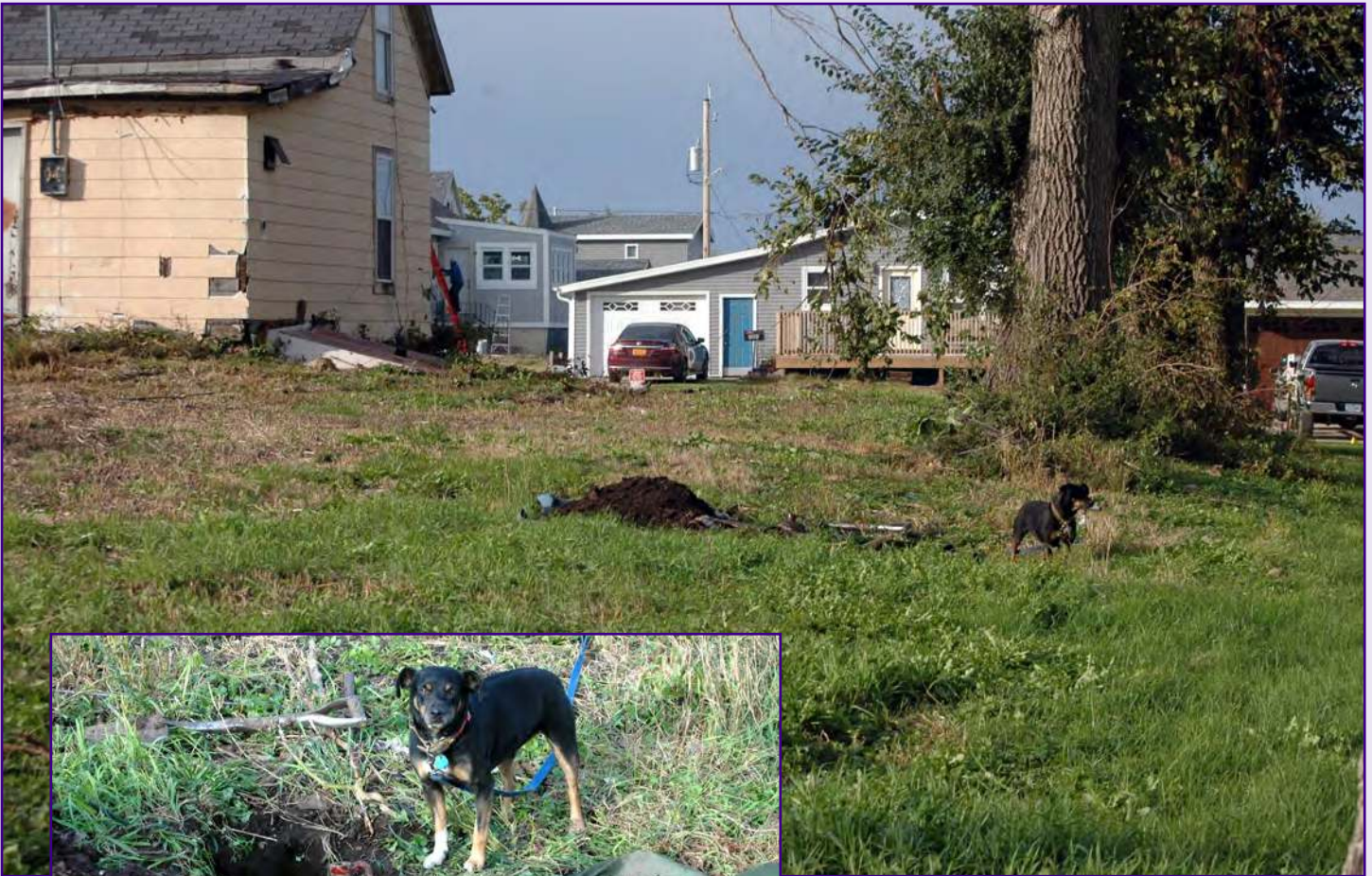
Friday, October 4th, 2019

After work I checked out another construction site in Des Moines, I had been told about, this one was new, down along the river in downtown Des Moines. They were still working, so I just walked through it with my hard hat on, our company was doing some inspection work on this site, but I was just checking out the possibilities. During my quick walk through I picked up an aqua miniature wine bottle, and left a broken crown top "F. Harbach, Des Moines, Iowa" soda where it lay. The site had sandstone bedrock exposed along the excavation wall up by 2nd Avenue, which sloped to the south and became a filled ravine formerly draining toward the river. The ravine had been filled in the past with coal ashes and of course that was where the bottles were coming from.

They were still digging with a backhoe along the sandstone wall for footings for a new retaining wall, so I had to exit up the hill to the southwest. I was busy tomorrow and they would likely be working again, Sunday would be the time to come back.

Sunday, October 6th, 2019

In the late morning Jimmy and I loaded up and drove downtown. I parked in the river and walking bridge small parking lot, and I had to leave Jimmy in the truck after a quick walk. I put on my hard hat and an orange vest and walked up the hill to the north with a bucket, a trowel and a spade. There was huge hole in the fence on the south side of the site which I walked right through, and there was nobody around. It was a rough walk across the site, but as I got closer I could see bottles in the piles of ash and dirt they had pushed down the hill. I walked each slope and steep pile slope, and put the bottles that were worth keeping in the bucket. A little digging in the very steep excavation face revealed some more. I did not take the slicks, there were plenty left behind. After covering all the available territory I headed back to the truck. I had brought back two crown top sodas embossed "American Bottling Works, Israly Bros. Prop. , Des Moines, Ia", a clear eight sided bottle embossed "Mennig & Slater, Des Moines, Ia.", a large aqua medicine embossed "Sulphume Co. Chicago, Ill.", an extract bottle "Tone Brothers Flavoring Extracts, Des Moines, Iowa", an ironstone butter pat dish, and two small dreaded Bromo's. I figured they had a lot more digging to do in the future. I stopped at the basement construction site and went back to probing. The site was still pretty muddy. I found a possible spot partially in a puddle. It was a difficult start but I was already muddy. The hole was a disappointment though containing only cinders and slag, it was not really old and I found no glass. It was time to head to Moingona I decided. After stopping to see Reggie



Privy on the side of the lot, between the house and the alley

find a hole to dig. I drove around the tornado damaged downtown blocks, and stopped and probed at a construction site I had heard about. The lot had been dug out where a building had been removed and the other side had been re-compacted. All my probing was going nowhere on this site. I drove through the tornado damaged residential blocks and ended up at the lot where Johnnie Fletcher and I had dug some test holes last fall. The huge lot full of blown down trees I had seen here before was cleared off and the little house was hanging on but not long for this world. I saw a neighbor working on the house next door and explained to the Hispanic man my intentions to look for old bottles on the lot, and he said there was no problem, go ahead. I parked the truck along the alley, got Jimmy out and began to probe up the east property line. This area had been covered with downed trees when I was here last. Sure enough I found a pit about halfway up the lot. I probed Jimmy's leash down, and went back for a couple of tarps and some shovels. This pit was kind of irregular an ash pit, with some cinders, about 4' X 3' and four feet deep. There were some bottles, a machine made fancy pickle bottle, some green crown tops, and slick machine made medicines. I found a coldwater faucet handle, and on the bottom was a nice shoulder jug. I stopped and took a few photos after finishing the pit, then I filled in and raked up, it was time for Jimmy and I to head for home.



Jimmy protecting the nice shoulder jug



Mennig & Slater, Des Moines, IA. small sided bottle

and the big dog at Don's Farm we continued on to Moingona. Jimmy was ready to do some running, and I went back to my spot in the south flats. I found one nice cobalt drip on a shard before Jimmy and I headed for home.

Saturday, October 12th, 2019

I was in Marshalltown to attend the Iowa Red Wing Chapter Fall meeting, and so after the meeting was over It was time to try and

