



THE BOTTLE MINE

By Jack Klotz

I swear it seems the more I plan, research and study any potential dig sites, the worse the results are! Conversely, the digs that occur by chance or happenstance usually turns out to be the most productive. Fortunately, this story is one of the latter and probably the most extreme in both directions. In terms of happenstance, it was so “by chance” I nearly missed my opportunity. In terms of productiveness it was second to none, at least in recent memory.

I’ve known the property owners Jim and Nancy for a decade,

and had yet to visit their grand pre-civil war home in Palmyra, Mo. It started with an innocent enough phone call from mutual friends inviting me to a BBQ luncheon. Jim had already been invited and accepted, and the four of us would be riding together, should I accept. I jumped at the opportunity and a few days later we were well fed and returning to our friends home where we had earlier met. As we stood around chatting on the sidewalk, I learned Jim had a large carpet and a few other large items for

our friends that required some extra muscle, or at least someone with a strong back and a weak mind, to which I mindlessly volunteered. This required a trip to his home 12 miles away and as I already volunteered I figured it would offer an opportunity to tour his home. Following in caravan style, I pulled in behind everyone and was impressed by the sheer size of the mansion. At 2 full stories with 12’ ceilings, it was imposing, if not impressive!

After we were able to load the carpet and other items in short order, the two women went inside to talk, while Jim and I went to investigate more important areas of the property- the backyard. We had briefly spoken about hunting for the privy at the BBQ and Jim was excited at the prospect. He rather quickly pointed

out with pride the 2 story brick smokehouse that stood ominously some 20 feet to the side of the house. The yard itself was at first glance obviously well landscaped, yet at this point was, like me, in need of a good trim and haircut! Jim announced, “I think the privy should be somewhere in the garden. Nothing is growing back here and it’s a total mess anyway. You’re free to do whatever you need to do. Only thing is Nancy buried one of her cats back here under this stone, so it would be best to avoid that spot.” The total area was fairly small, as hunting areas go at about 25’ square. The east wall of the smokehouse took up most

of the area on that side and I had already noticed a couple of sunken areas that looked like possible starting points. Unfortunately I happened to be without any probes that day and as it was getting late I would have to wait for another day. We went inside where I was treated to a most grand tour and history lesson.

The important factor was the home was built before the Civil War in 1855. This should offer some good years of pontil period glass and then the

entire civil war period glass. Those thoughts always excite me, like a kid a week before Christmas! While heading to my truck to head home, Jim called out, “Just stop in anytime and help yourself back there.” Five days later I did just that.

On Thursday, Oct 17th I was in Hannibal and before heading home I thought I should have enough time to probe Jim’s yard. After all, it should only take about 25 minutes to probe the entire garden area. The night before I had checked out the Sanborn maps and copied off the earliest one available from 1909 for Jim. The map clearly showed the barn and a shed that were part of the original property but now had been long sold and part of his neighbor’s backyard. The shed was gone but the bottom part



The back of the 1855 mansion owned by my friends Jim and Nancy

of the two story barn still remained. I rang Jim's doorbell and knocked on the door with no response, so I left a note explaining I had been by, along with the copy of the map. Heading to the garden with my 5' probe, I immediately went to work in the most likely places. I first probed the two depressions I had noted earlier until I realized I was probing in the alley, according to the map. It had become part of the yard over the years and the north side of the smokehouse was the old property line. Using this wall as my guide, I began a tight grid pattern of every foot, starting nearest to the smokehouse. About 8' away I had to avoid the pet cemetery and continued on, around a pile of stacked lime stones, through serious 3' tall sticker bushes, a few rotted wood pallets, and then along a picket fence that delineated his neighbor's property line to the east. I probed under the picket fence as far as I could but so far everything was clean, virgin clay. I now began probing down the center which had one major obstacle- a brick lined 2' tall planter box! It was about 3' wide by 10' long. Like the fence, I probed underneath it as I went down one side and up the other. The results were the same, except the ground seemed to be getting harder! That's about the last thing one needs after 100 probe holes!

As I approached the front edge of the smokehouse, I paused. I realized I was only a few feet away from my initial starting point. I looked at the old walkway from the house to the smokehouse and saw where it continued past and into the garden area for just a few feet. Between a narrow 2' path remaining to be probed was a cement slab with about 200 bricks piled on top of it. This extended 10' from the front of the smokehouse to about 5' back of the smokehouse to 5' from the wall. I shortened up my grid pattern knowing this would be my last chance area for finding a privy. As I got only 2' away from my starting point, I hit a fairly soft, suspicious spot! Checking the probe tip, it came up white and ashy, looking like it could

be lime. Typical of me to go in the opposite direction from the privy at my starting point. Had I started in the opposite direction I would have probed it out in under 5 minutes! So after all of 26 minutes, I hit something deserving of an exploratory hole, except



The start of privy, always exciting knowing or not knowing whats coming!

I still had brought no tools, just a probe! Borrowing a shovel from Jim's well stocked "smokehouse," I got to slingin' dirt. I found a few tiny bits of pottery and windowpane glass by 3'. At this point, my 5' probe went down to the handle with ease. I decided to head home and return the next day to open it up and get serious on it. My video comment was, "A few shards of pottery don't get me excited. It feels promising and that's as far out on a limb I'm willing to go."

FRIDAY, DAY 2

I arrived the next morning at 10:30 sharp. Decent time for having to drive an hour to get there. I was neither excited or dejected about the dig's potential as I needed more information for a determination, one way or another. With that in mind, I found 3 embossed whole bottles and 4 broken embossed bottles in the first 90 minutes all in the first 4' of fill or the cap.

Not one unembossed shard! This never happens! All were 1890's commoners, but it gave me an energizing lift to think there may be some nice 1850's glass near the bottom. After 3 hours of digging, I had a handful of keepers- 2 Barry's Tricopherous for



Closer to the top, newer the bottles usually, but this was just getting started

The Skin & Hair, 1 Harter's Wild Cherry Bitters, 1 local pharmacy, and 1 perfume flask from Chicago. Along with these were a dozen bottles earmarked for the homeowners. Of 18 bottles, only 4 were unembossed! By day's end I had added a third Barry's, and 2 more of the same local pharmacy, along with an amber "Spotine" which I am assuming was a spot remover. Also included in the pile was an unusual long neck perfume or cologne embossed "Lundborg New York" and a "J.C. McGuire" medicine from St. Louis, possibly from the late 70's.

At quitting time I had a fairly straight trench about 2' wide and 5' deep as I hugged the brick liner I exposed at the 3' level. I realized the wall was taking an inward curve ever so slightly towards the smokehouse. I suddenly had a panicky feeling this might be a monster cistern as opposed to a normal privy, normal as in about 6'X4'. The weak curve led me to figure an estimated 12' diameter, leading about 7' underneath the smokehouse! Now I was seriously concerned! I couldn't dig underneath the smokehouse wall because of the already weakened structural integrity of the building. Well, it was still too early to give it too much concern until I exposed more of the wall. I was hoping to hit the bottom that day and find the older and usually better finds of the pit, but I was to leave disappointed.

SATURDAY, DAY 3

The weather forecast was for rain beginning at noon and lasting all the rest of the day, so I arrived about 9:15 and wasted no time slingin' dirt. One thing I really hate and avoid is slingin' mud! Right off I dug a number of unembossed medicine and whisky flasks, nearly equal in number to the embossed bottles from the day before! Seemed I couldn't beg an embossed bottle from the bottle goddess who had been more than generous just 24 hours earlier! Like clockwork, right at noontime the weather forecast came true. The light rain was still manageable, so I persevered. I decided to follow around the edge of the wall to see if it squared off at all. It did not, but continued in its lazy curve. I figured since the day would likely be a short one, I might as well dig in some "easy digging" area, which was in the upper layers mixed with a heavy dose of lime and loose dirt. Considering I hadn't much luck digging deeper in search of the elusive bottom, I decided to try and reap some benefits by knocking into the back wall. As I did, I had a very unexpected bottle literally drop into my lap. The shape was unfamiliar, but the embossing wasn't. As I wiped the flat panel it revealed "Dr. L.E. Keeley's Double Chloride Of Gold Cure For Drunkenness." As I wiped the lip I discovered several small chips as well as a pour spout, common with the earlier bottles. The original cork was still in place, holding prisoner

a dark brown liquid I assumed was the cure juice. It was about $\frac{3}{8}$ full and when I carefully freed the cork from its chore and bondage of about 130 years, I nearly expected a drunken genie to appear! Immediately there was a strong odor of alcohol, about 80 proof if my memory serves me right, mixed with something I didn't want to know! It was so strong it nearly knocked me

back on my heels as I took a closer wiff, just to make sure. I later read of an analysis that revealed the contents were a concoction of "high doses of morphine, cocaine, alcohol and cannabis." As my energy level had been diminishing, this find was a great energy booster, without the help of the contents. Unfortunately it didn't aid in finding better quality bottles. Having been so distracted in digging in the softer soil, I had neglected my intended goal for the day to hit bottom.



Bottles begging to be dug out of the wall

Returning my focus to that endeavor, I began digging in the opposite side where I had started. Within a short time I had dug several nice but unembossed whiskey cylinders with glopmy applied tops and 3 piece molds. In the mix was a busted Doyles Hops Bitters with a fist sized hole in the side. Though common, I had yet to dig my first undamaged example. I thought I had one, surrounded by a hostile tribe of bricks, but even though it beat all odds and came out undamaged, it was a damned Hostetters! To add insult to letdown, it really began to rain heavily. That was it for the day. I was still not at the elusive bottom and was now 8' deep. The payoff would have to wait for yet another day.

SUNDAY, DAY 4



Bottles glowing in the walls from the lights of my headlamp

This day would turn out to be the most frustrating day of the dig, mainly because as I sensed I was nearing the motherlode, I was simultaneously nearing my body's exhaustion point. I arrived at noon sharp, and as if gifted by ESP, Jim appeared minutes within my arrival to check on my progress and well being. He was skittish enough never to venture too close to the edge of the mine shaft and had been making jokes during the week about wondering if I had buried myself in my

work yet! It was funny at first, but now it began to take on a more sinister feel to it. I was now progressing further underneath what turned out to be two 5' square slabs of cement placed directly over the hole with all those bricks piled on top of that! To say I was beginning to get nervous was an understatement! This day Jim doubled down by saying, "I hope you won't mind after you're buried alive, I point out to folks on the home tour where the famous 'Jack the bottle digger' met his end," as he laughed hysterically. I laughed too, though much more weakly as the truth of his humor was poking a nerve.

Shrugging it off, I went to work cleaning out the mess I created the day before with my easy digging spell. It took well over an hour to get it cleaned to where I had been and I set my focus again on hitting the bottom. With renewed vigor, I made good progress and the bottle goddess rewarded me for my dogged persistence. I pulled out 2 embossed pumpkinseed flasks embossed "Hartt's Herbal Rock, Rye & Barley IXL H.K.&F.B.T. & Co." which was unfamiliar to me. Along with those was an undamaged Harter's Wild Cherry Bitters from Dayton, an unembossed green gin, a couple of unusual sheared lip perfumes, an amber colgate hair tonic, and a 5 gallon bucket of more common bottles. In the last hour of digging for the day, I dug my first undamaged Doyles Hops Bitters in a nice "old" amber color and nicely whittled. This was quickly followed with two more undamaged Doyles. I resisted the temptation to probe for the bottom to avoid any unnecessary damage to what was below. It waited this long, I can wait another day. Or two.

Monday, day zero
Monday was thankfully a washout with pouring rain and strong winds all day. This was a well needed day of rest so I did not count it in the total days spent on this pit. I was just grateful for having covered the hole with plywood and an 8'X12' new tarp. This break also gave me time to consider my options to deal with the ever present issue of the overhang. I called

Jim and asked if need be, would he object to my busting up the concrete slabs? I explained it would be safer to open the pit wider in order to remove the hazardous overhang, to which he readily agreed. The bricks would need to be relocated and saved for future repairs. All this would take a good half day at least by my

figuring, so I considered another possible option of using a house jack to support the offending cliff. Problem was, the jack I was to borrow was in use and come Tuesday morning when we tried to remove it, we discovered the threads had stripped and it was virtually stuck in place permanently. I had arranged for a helper for the day to pull a 5 gallon bucket for me since this was now approaching a full week dealing with this monster pit. Clearly, I needed some help.



Bottle pile up as the digging gets going

TUESDAY, DAY 5

I stopped in Hannibal to pick up my helper John and we were soon at the bottle mine. It now looked more like a bottle lake than a mine! The tarp was precariously stretched out to its limit.

I quickly grabbed a 2 gallon bucket and began bailing water from the sinking tarp as if it were about to capsize at any moment! I have no idea how many gallons I bailed out, but was glad none of it made it into the shaft. The "plan" for the day was like any other- to reach the bottom along the wall farthest from the smokehouse and away from the overhang. This was finally achieved in a couple of hours along with- you guessed it- more Doyles! Eight more were added to the previous count, along with 3 Sanford's Radical Cures, 4 Warner's Safe Cures, 1 McLean's Strengthening Cordial, and 4 more of the Hartt's pumpkinseeds! Oddly enough all the pumpkinseeds were found up against the brick wall liner, and all that came out whole had no damage at all! The pit finally bottomed out at 9' deep and 10 foot deep in the absolute center.



Bottle pile up as the digging gets going



Several of the bottle finds, including several Sanfor's Radical Cure bottles in cobalt, several Warner's Safe Cure, a Keeley's Drunkenness Cure and a cylindrical bottle embossed Sure Cure for Catarrh

To my relief, I discovered the lazy curve at the ends of the wall came to a point, resembling the shape of a football! I was very happy to see the wall nearest the smokehouse ended just short of the building. The overhang was being well behaved with no evidence of movement, cracks, or falling pebbles. Regardless, I kept a constant vigilant eye on it with my escape route cleared and ready. By the end of this day there wasn't much left to dig except what was in the side closest to the smokehouse. I figured a return the next morning should take no more than 2-3 hours with John's help on the bucket. There was still too much left undug to sluff from one side to another. It was about this point in the dig it dawned on me that there wasn't anything from the first 20 years of the home's existence. No shards, pontiled bases, flared lips, yellow ware or other clues were found. No matter how thorough the dippers were, they always left something behind.

This left me convinced there was an older pit somewhere. You can't convince me otherwise.

WEDNESDAY, DAY 6

That morning I picked up John for our last visit to the bottle mine. John pulled a bucket for the first two hours, mostly to keep my escape route clear as I was now having to dig with my longest handled shovel in the farthest part under the overhang. The last hour I was finally able to sluff over the debris and dig in the highest part of the use layer. The lime layers in this area were some of the thickest and hardest I've ever encountered, and even though it was nerve wracking, I had to dig what I could. I was still finding decent bottles- another Hartt's seed, a small ½ pint

Duker's pumpkin seed from Quincy Ill., a "Dr. Sykes Sure Cure for Catarrh," and of course the ever present Doyles. In the end, it would have required the use of my pry bar to effectively bust through the remaining layer of lime, which was about 3' thick by 5' long. I'm sure I left another Doyles behind encased in the lime, but the risk at this point just outweighed the reward.

If I had hit a pontiled layer, that would have been a game changer. As it was, I counted over 300 whole bottles, half of which I



Bottles Bottles and more bottles



A table full of bottles to pick from, what a fun and filling Bottle mine

took home and about 100 of those embossed. The 3 piece mold whiskey cylinders were the most common numbering 30, with Doyles a close second place at 25. Embossed pumpkinseeds were 8, all Hartt's except for the Quincy flask, 4 Warner's safe cures, 3 Sanford's Radical Cures and a couple of dozen Hoytt's German Cologne in all sizes, along with a couple dozen miscellaneous other brands of colognes and perfumes. Jim and his wife turned down any offers and finally were convinced to accept a small handful of some smaller unembossed medicine bottles, claiming they had no room for anything more.

I made a study of the Sanborn maps and Jim had early on pointed out the carriage house still standing in his neighbors yard originally had been a two story. For some reason, the top half had been torn down but not the ground floor. This should offer a good starting point for a future search for the older pit. I am confident there is a pit for the missing 1855-1875 time period since it was so obviously missing from this latest dig. I have been planning my approach to the homeowner for this spring but due to the Covid-19 issues, I have had to delay my plans to try for a

search in the summertime. It is currently late May and a rainy, wet weather pattern is upon us, which means I may have to delay until it dries out for a few weeks. My hope is to try in late June before the heat and humidity make conditions rough. Since the completion of digging this newer privy, I took advantage of my friend's hospitality to conduct several searches of his existing property to make sure I didn't miss it still hiding in his yard somewhere. I managed to scare up a cistern on the opposite side of the smokehouse, but no glass to speak of except for one lonely 1890's olive oil bottle. So now, between current digs in a local dump and an occasional privy, my mind wanders and imagination takes over as to what could be in the older privy? If they threw away half as much pontil aged stuff as the last hole, look out! Did the older generation like Kelly's as much as Doyles was favored by the younger generation? Maybe a little E.G. Booz for a chaser? Hmmm. Makes me wonder. Toss in an Indian Queen, just for luck from the bottle goddess! Ha



A great dig with a bunch of Doyles Hop Bitters bottles , maybe enough to complete my color run

