

# Saunders Hotel Dig



by Phil Townsend

Saunders Hotel house as it looked on December 12, 2009

**O**n a lead from a historical society presentation from a neighboring community, I followed up with a nice lady (Peggy) who was interested in starting a museum in Spring Valley, Ohio. She is the owner of a historical home on Main Street. Its claim to fame is that of the oldest cement house in the state of Ohio. The house was completed in 1853 and is nicknamed the “cement house” by local residents, for obvious reasons. The George Barrett Cement House Renovation Project (ongoing) is an energetic endeavor to retain a piece of important history to the community. In 1993 the house, then a 3-unit apartment building, was purchased from a local resident. The home had been abandoned for three years and was in serious danger of being demolished as a result of extreme neglect.

For those of you who may not know, Spring Valley, Ohio (home of the potato festival for the last 33 years) hosts the Little Miami Scenic Bike Trail, which runs through the town upon the old railroad bed that provided rail service to the area in the 19th century. The now sleepy town of approximately 500 residents consists of a collection of abandoned buildings, reflecting its former role as a way station along a major route of commerce during the 19th century.

After walking the grounds of the cement house, exploring depressions for possible privy and cistern locations, I began probing possible dig targets. The ground, much like the home itself lived up to its name – CEMENT. Peggy had several old pictures of the property, which showed model-T Fords lining the

street. One of the pictures, circa 1930s, was taken of the back lot of the cement house and showed an existing privy (I quickly passed on this area to probe). After spending an hour or so investigating the lot, a couple of older gentlemen came up the street to see what was going on. One of the two owned a property located not far from the old railroad depot, which was located in the middle of town. The wooden structure he told me was built in the early to mid-1860s and was the first hotel (Saunders Hotel House) in town. For obvious reasons, my ears perked up at this statement. Digging hotel sites is top notch in my book, lots of folks traveling through the area, with a wide variety of ailments and vices would have disposed of their trash in what I hoped were the multiple privy pits behind the hotel. So, my new friend (Bill) and I walked down a block and a half to the back lot of the old hotel.



Back of Saunders Hotel house as it looked on December 12, 2009





The George Barrett Cement House in December of 2009

The hotel turned out to be a two-story structure that had originally included two wings, each of which was two stories tall. The wings had been torn off years ago, and the standing structure had four doors on the back as well as an open fountain close to the main structure. I “walked the yard”, fighting through brush, believing the privies could be on the back corner of the lot. After obtaining permission from Bill to dig, I headed out, and I called up my digging partner, Steve, who was eager to set a time for a dig. After rearranging my schedule for the following Saturday (my wife had that day planned for outlet mall shopping), we were ready to go digging.

Our dig group – comprised of six diggers, met at 8 a.m., and began probing for privies; within the hour we had located two – a rectangular brick liner and a rectangular stone liner. I took pit boss responsibility for the brick liner, with Manny and Brandon on my crew, while Steve led the stone liner squad. We laid out the tarps and went to work.

The dig couldn’t have been scripted better; the pits were close together, so each team could heckle the other as we dug down – and believe me we gave each other grief as the anticipation grew over which team would score the better finds. Privy fill trash began surfacing after only a couple of feet, but when the dig reached about seven feet, many old bottles and jars began to come to light amongst a layer of fluffy seeds. The first of the

better bottles found in the stone privy was a blob top stubby beer “Hollencamp and Weddle” and an extremely light-colored amber lightning jar. Multiple slicks, pumpkin seeds, BIM medicines, pattern and strap whiskies were uncovered along with loads of broken dinnerware, pipes, etc.



One of the digging members reaching for a bottle or shard





Bucket puller and guardian are the important parts of the group



Filling in the hole is never fun



Shards of the beautiful broken glass and bottles



Some of the whole bottles that were donated to the museum



Neat little shard of China



Examining one of the many shards of the dig





Look at the bottles in the wall and all the privy dirt, too bad its the bottom



Author holding the Wayne's Cobalt blue medicine



Shakers Cough Sryup



Warner's Safe Liver Cure





Four best bottles of the hole, some really neat and colorful medicines

After about a foot into the use layer, I noticed one corner of the brick wall had collapsed. While carefully removing bricks to get close to the walls and corner underneath, I pulled out a flat medicine bottle which was sandwiched between two bricks. Thinking this was another slick, and wondering how on earth this bottle wasn't in a hundred pieces, I carefully wiped the bottle off with the back of my glove to reveal – "Shaker Cough Syrup, P. Boyd, agt." and on reverse "Prepared at Union Village, Ohio" Being from Virginia, I had heard of Shaker medicine bottles before, but knew about them as well as I knew Ohio geography. I sent the bottle up on top of a bucket of dirt. I continued to work under the collapsed bricks, carefully sending them out of the hole and watching to ensure I didn't cause more bricks to collapse. Wanting to give others a chance to work a corner, I climbed out of the pit, and it was Manny's turn to dig. Meanwhile one of the other diggers group pulled a Warner's Safe Kidney and Liver Cure and small yellow ware bowl. Manny proceeded to pull a J.J. Butler, Cincinnati, Ohio. school ink and then excitedly called up. When I looked below, there was an exposed panel of a square shaped cobalt bottle. At this point, I am thinking: Man! That is about the size of a Bitters and was urging Manny to dig carefully around the bottle. The exposed bottle turned out to be a Wayne's Diuretic Elixir in a nice shade of cobalt. It had been gently nestled under

the partially collapsed wall adjacent to the corner I had dug out. Even though we were stoked at this point, we soon began to tire as more and more slick meds and whiskies appeared. As we had many new diggers on this excursion, we had spent additional time going through dig procedures and answering questions from Peggy about the ages of some of the bottles and fragments – it was getting dark (and cold) quickly, so we decided to rest and assist in pulling buckets for the other team, and quickly finished with the stone liner. We decided we would return and complete the remaining corners of the brick liner the next day. Sunday morning came bright and early (and cold), and a few of us returned to finish the privy. Although we expected some more colored medicines, blob beers and sodas, it was not to be, and we struck out on the remaining corners. I believe our better bottles were saved when the privy collapsed, sparing the finds from the honey dippers of the day.

All diggers got a choice from the haul of bottles, and we donated most of the finds to the museum, approximately 80 intact bottles and jars from the dig, plus many broken items and interesting fragments. All in all, a great way to spend a weekend (though my wife probably disagrees); far better than spending the day at the outlet mall.

