

# A Digger's Pipe Dreams

## *The sidewalk that led to bottle history*

By Rick Weiner

**T**he summer of 2021 was coming to a close, and I was ready for the cooler fall weather, but to jump ahead, I was not ready for the bone-chilling winter days approaching.

As I look back on the early years of privy digging I remember excavating yards in January and February and not being fazed one bit by the bitter temperatures. My younger blood was flowing much richer and faster then but I also had my trusty Carhartt jumpsuit and a set of lucky red long johns underneath.

To dig privies at that time of the year we had to find the pits in the warmer months, mark them, and return in the winter to dig. There was no way we were getting a probe through that rock-hard ground. It was hard enough to bust open a pit with a metal pry bar! Back then we had an overabundance of privies to dig so it was easy to set a few aside for the arctic months.

Too bad that was not the case these days. I have to work hard and talk fast to get permission or we would not be enjoying the hobby of "crap-hole digging" at all.

My personal life was also changing a bit. I recently got out of a backbreaking part-time job as a landscaper of six years. I am retired from Allentown's parks department after 24 years of service. I just turned 62 and the physical work was taking its toll. I did physical work most of my life. I often prayed for a part-time job that was less taxing on the body. Soon my prayers would be answered! I got a driving job delivering auto parts.

Now I can dig with more energy and vigor. I knew there was a reason why my prayers were answered. My wife likes to believe it was for the extra money, and I let her think that.

The good part about the part-time gig was I worked the same days as I did landscaping, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Also, my Social Security was coming in October, so that was another plus. That gave me plenty of time to go out and try and get permissions and not worry about life too much because, after all, privy digging was very important.

I often think ahead and try to envision what it will be like when I reach that ripe old age when it is no longer feasible to tackle a privy. Mostly everyone I know who digs for bottles is younger than me.

I often joke about how I would still be in on the action at 80 years old. My wheelchair would be equipped with a battery-powered cable winch that was attached so I could haul buckets from the privy with the push of a button. I would also assume this old guy would still be the "permission getter" because no one else does it now.

Or if I get lucky, I could win the lottery and buy a few large collections of colored historical flasks and sodas. Then I could start setting up and selling at bottle shows all over the world. Who knows what the future will bring. For now, I just want to continue to be an outhouse digger.

My luck in the permission game has been pretty good lately. I decided to try a little



1857 half cent

closer to home this time. I only live a few blocks away from this strip of 1870s houses. Once a week I cut the grass for an elderly lady on this row. We had dug her privy the year before. There was nothing whole at the bottom of this pit but it had the age. I knew there had to be a few privies with something other than pretty colored shards.

One day while cutting grass I took a break and began walking up the alley checking the yards out from the back to see if I had any potential targets. I was "yard shopping" basically. There were the typical ornament overload yards that had everything but the kitchen sink and a few pink flamingos covering ninety percent of the grass. I usually don't ask these people because I already know what the answer will be.

As I walked to the next property I felt a sharp stabbing pain in my foot. I sat down on a concrete divider and proceeded to take my boot off. As I looked up I saw the perfect yard! My eyes scanned the grass and, low and behold, there was

a nice sunken spot next to the property line, as plain as the nose on my face.

I did not even think about the uneasiness of asking for permission, and as I turned the corner, there sitting in an old beat-up cane rocking chair was a man in his late seventies just rocking away, drinking coffee and reading the paper. What happened next was a little shocking. I explained to the man about what I do in the bottle digging hobby, and after a few minutes, his answer was "Sure, when do you want to do it?" When the permissions happen that easy and with that strange of circumstances I know I am getting help from above.

The one person I could always count on to help me tackle a privy was the Badger. He would skip a funeral to dig an old outhouse! I gave him a call and the date was set for the upcoming weekend. In the meantime, I did some more probing in the yard and found another pit on the opposite side of the property. I usually go with which one feels better on the probe first. If it feels good and crunchy then that's enough to convince me.

A good reading on the probe means the probe is going through ash and other foreign matter put in the ground by humans in the 19th century. When the probe has that smooth suction feel and sound, it does not scream outhouse, then I will hold off and maybe do a test hole later just to make sure. After doing this hobby for many years you just know what is good and what is a dud.

So on that note, I chose the spot by the wall and sidewalk. It was that magic time again, and we were finally back in the 1870 yard ready to rock and roll. There was no traveling time for me with this one, it was literally three minutes from my house. I had an eye on this row of homes since I moved here five years ago.

It would be the second privy that we dug on this strip. The first one had the age but everything was broken. I shot up a prayer

that this one would be different. We got the tarps into position and now this project was in motion. We started to cut out the grass like we do on all the yards, making sure we had a nice thick piece of sod so it was easy to replace.

Joe, the homeowner, came out and started making some small talk. "Hey, every time I look out I see Badger doing all the work?" My reply was, "I'm the foreman, I have seniority." Joe was a definite treat, we liked him right away. We needed more homeowners like him.

Soon, we were down about four feet and glass was starting to pop. The first signs were some clear bottle shards and stamped plate pieces from the 1880s-'90s. The house was dated 1870, so we were hoping the bottom would match my research. As we got deeper, my wishful thinking did not happen. A lot of late '80s and '90s bottles were pouring out, but nothing near the '70s, but at least there was glass showing up.

Then out of nowhere, Badger, a man of few words, let out a "Yo!" He reached down and picked up a nice light-green blob! That is the kind of stuff we are looking for. It was an "L &W Siegfried from Bethlehem Pa.," a beautiful example with lots of swirls and bubbles. I was expecting more of the same to come out but, alas, that would not happen today. We were a bit disappointed, but that's the way the privy game is played.

There was another chance at getting an older pit in this yard, the one by the wall on the other side of the property. That one seemed to probe pretty decently as well. This adventure would have to wait until the end of November.

We had a few months before we could go back and hit Joe's place. But I had other permissions to probe and explore in the meantime. Gotta have something to keep this retired guy busy and out of the house right? So that is how I would spend my Mondays and Tuesdays.

I love to be out probing yards and enjoying the day while most of the world was working; it gave me a sense of peace. Only a true privy digger knows this feeling. Some of the yards that I was visiting I had probed many times before. I have this thing where if I probed something and it felt halfway decent but I wasn't 100 percent sure it was a privy, I would go back over and over to reassure myself.

This one yard, in particular, had my privy indicator lights flashing every time I went there. I had exhausted every spot in the yard with the probe. There was not one square inch that I did not hit. It was almost impossible to get that rod in the ground more than four inches! It seemed like there was a layer of something hard throughout the whole yard.

One day I came back to the "Twilight Zone" property to see if I missed anything. My arms were getting tired so I decided to take a seat on the back steps to survey the area from a distance. Looking straight down the sidewalk, my eye caught



The start of the dig.





one of the huge sections of Victorian slate with an off look about it. The whole walkway was crooked and uneven, but this piece was sunken more than the others.

It would be a weird place for a privy but I had to try every idea that popped into my brain. I walked towards the big slab of slate and with one push of my five-foot probe, down it went, crunching all the way. It buried to the handle! Right away my first thought was “it felt like a privy but” when the spot is under a sidewalk that people walk on in the present time!? I was going to do some research to bring some light to this mystery.

The owner of this property was a landlord, the first person I talked to about the history of the house. It turns out the build date was 1870. As I ran some questions about the house by him, I had a quick thought about the property next door. The reason for the interest in the neighbor’s spread was: If his house was older than 1870 then there was a possibility that the sidewalk was put there in the later years and the “possible privy” under it would be older.

With a little more research I found the house next door to be from the 1850s. That would be close to twenty years before the sidewalk was laid out because the property was all one in the 1850s. This would mean when the 1870 house was built, the sidewalk was put in covering the old privy.

Now at this point, I was only speculating and going by my research. But I had to have some kind of plan before I tackled this project. My next step was to get permission next door because I would need to be on that property to efficiently dig the sidewalk pit.

Sounds pretty complicated? I tried once eight years ago for permission but it was a

resounding no. While I was sitting there talking to the landlord that day I had a brainstorm. Maybe he knows the guy? You will never know if you don’t ask, and the next thing I knew he was looking up the owner’s number. With a quick call, the permission was in the bag!

Now that all of the formalities were out of the way, it was time to get down to the real business. I had to pick a day to start this sidewalk operation. But in the meantime, I decided to hit the yard on one of my days off and try to lift the slate section off by myself and maybe get an idea of what was going on under the slab. I planned to use the 10-foot metal pry bar to lift it and then stick a five-gallon bucket underneath. Then maybe take a few shovels out and examine the contents to see if we had a privy.

I had all good intentions, but I never made it past the pry bar idea. That section of the sidewalk was three inches thick and five feet long, and the beast weighed three tons! (Or so it seemed.)

In my youth I could have lifted that with no problem. At 62 with semi-bad limbs, it was not going to happen without a trip to the ER. To get this thing up to a point where it could be safely stood on its side, I would have to wait until Badger came and helped.

There are times when I probe the privy and do a test hole myself. That takes away a lot of the guesswork before we start the dig. I am “semi-retired” and I have the luxury to be able to do this, and I truly enjoy it. It is part of the hobby and gives me a sense of accomplishment.

With getting permissions, there is a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff that goes along with the digging. If I get permission from a landlord who owns many properties, I will do little projects for him like landscaping-type tasks. I call this “putting in the work.” It pays big dividends down the road when the next permission comes into play.

#### PHOTOS:

**TOP and MIDDLE:** Bottles magically appear as more fill is removed.

**BOTTOM:** Badger works around the pipe.



I often use references like you would use for a job interview. People like to see that you have some pride and have taken the time to make the yards look like they did before you started. Sometimes we even make them look better.

If you truly think about it, when you are knocking on a door, someone you have never met in your life will answer, and then you will find yourself repeating these words: "Excuse me, I am a bottle digger and collector, would you mind if I look in your yard for bottles?" That basically sounds like you just escaped from an asylum, but it has worked for me many times over.

I go into more detail when I have their attention, and they start asking me questions about privy digging. Some diggers are too petrified to try and get permission to do a privy. But in my opinion, without door-knocking you will never reap the great rewards of 19th-century privy digging. That's where the great old stuff sleeps. Getting permission is a numbers game, and it is also an art. To be successful you have to take the no's and keep on trucking. Sooner or later someone will say yes. Never give up.

The day of the "sidewalk dig" was soon approaching. This would not be a weekend dig. Badger and I had plans for Saturday and Sunday. Or should I say our better half's had plans. Our wives had us doing chores. I don't know who's job was worse, his or mine. Badger had to go grocery shopping because his wife was working a double shift. I had to clean out the basement because there were "too many boxes of bottles and junk" in the laundry room. Come on! Where is a guy supposed to keep his bottles?

We knew we had to hustle if we wanted to dig on Monday. I have every Monday and Tuesday off. Badger takes off whenever I have a privy to do.

The day had finally arrived, and we were about to find out what this sidewalk mystery was all about. It was early

Monday morning, the sun was shining and the temperature was just right. I texted Badger and told him I would be at his house at 8 a.m. and knew that the dig would be really bad or it could be crazy good. If we look at it that way we won't be too disappointed either way.

We arrived at the yard with a lot of tools; I even had a ladder. Today I was ready for anything. We piled the tools against the wood stockade fence, but we only needed one tool, and that was the 10-foot steel pry bar. As I started to dig the dirt away from the sides of the Victorian slab I noticed it was bigger than I originally thought. But now there were two people to move this thing up on its side.

When we got it to a certain point Badger stuck one of the shovels under it, gave it a hard push and we got it halfway up. Then in an instant, the shovel snapped! I should have never brought that wooden-handled piece of crap! We got it raised enough for both of us to grab it and secure it on its side. While Badger held it I went to the back of the yard and got some big rocks to secure it on the sides. We were now ready to take some shovels out and test the soil.

I have dug many privies in weird locations before and yes this one was strange, but if my calculations, research and probe work were correct, there should be an outhouse under this sidewalk. I wish I had the power to know what glass goodies were in the outhouse, but only God knows that. And trust me, I was praying!

We had half of a 55-gallon barrel full of top fill and what we were seeing made us happy. Small shards of blue rim plates, wood ash, glazed pottery and a blown top from a medicine bottle. Usually, when we find old shards at the top and the fill looks undisturbed that meant they tossed

#### PHOTOS:

**TOP:** Plenty of cool shards came out.

**MIDDLE:** Another blue bottle pops up.

**BOTTOM:** Rick makes peace with the pipe.





in the trash when they filled this pit in. I had faith we were in an old undug privy from the 19th century. We never truly know 100 percent until we hit that first layer and that first whole bottle appears.

I was in the middle of throwing up a shovelful when Badger chirped, "Hold up; I think I saw a coin!" Sometimes we find coins in privies but mostly they are down deep. This time some old chap most likely pulled his pants down too far before sitting on the seat, lost the contents of his pockets into the outhouse hole, and we had his near mint 1857 American half-cent! If that isn't a good sign I don't know what is. Now our spirits were soaring high and our motivation was over the top. It was time to dig.

We had to keep checking on the raised sidewalk and secure it so it would not fall when we were in the hole. If that thing fell, it would give you one heck of a headache! The fill was coming out with little resistance. We know that usually changes as we get deeper into the privy, and this one changed in a big way. I spotted a big piece of wood in the corner so now we knew it was a wood-lined privy.

After a half-hour of digging, a huge layer of river rocks came into view, and now it was time to bust our backs. Digging out a river rock cap can test your nerves. The rocks were very tight and fused with sand. This fill reminded me of the fill we had in the big stone-liner two blocks away. It seems like they hired the same crew to fill it in. That stone-lined privy was a tremendous amount of work.

We were only four feet down when I hit this hard object, and it wasn't a rock. With a little dirt removal, I saw the devil. It was a big cast-iron pipe!

My heart sank and the gloom set in. I truly hated pipes in privies. Everyone with a pipe that I dug around here sucked, to put it mildly. The scenario goes like this: When plumbing came in a lot of home-

owners ran a three-inch cast-iron pipe from the house into the existing privy. Every utility in the house that used water ran into the outhouse. This was before the sewers came into play.

When we hit a pipe it usually means the privy is cleaned out to the bottom and ready for a new phase of life. I have never dug a good privy with a pipe. We already had a lot of work into the pit so we kept going. I voiced my thoughts to Badger. "Hey, at least we got an 1857 coin." So we kept digging. After a few more buckets of fill out of the hole, there was an unexpected turn of events.



While uncovering the pipe a little more I discovered that it did not run into the privy at all, it went through the privy. This changed everything. It seemed that the pipe was laid out like a drain of sorts running to the back of the property, probably in the 1930s. This means it would have had nothing to do whatsoever with the outhouse. I talked to the landlord later and he confirmed it.

We continued on our path to the bottom and everything was looking great. Soon the pipe was up to chest level but it was becoming a bit of a hindrance to dig. I already hit my head on it three times.

I guess this old outhouse digger can never be happy, but with the next stroke of the digging tool, I would forget that pipe was even there (at least until I hit my head on it again). I spotted something peeking out of the sidewall: the top of a blue, double-collared squat soda! I slowly scratched around it, praying it was whole, taking my time and savoring the moment.

Most of the sodas that we dug were whole because of their thickness, but there is always that chance of a broken disaster. With a slow twist and a tug out it came, and what a beauty it was. Both of our mouths were jacked open when I turned it over. It was a nice, dark, iron-pontil soda! If the cards were in our favor today this would be an 1850s-60s privy. The tarps were starting to pile up with good-looking fill. With our latest find, we had no reason to think this pit was dug by another digger. The layers were thick and tight. I was working on the back corner when I tapped more glass. I loved that feel and sound. I could tell just by that if the bottle is whole, I proceeded with my instincts and began to uncover the green bottle.

As I chipped away at the hard fill I started to see some of the embossing. I noticed the word "Wise" in a square slug plate. When I see the word Wise on a bottle it is usually on a blue squat soda. These are great bottles but they are common in our neck of the woods. Don't get me wrong, they are still a desirable bottle because they are cobalt and they were made in the 1870s. But there were many manufactured in that period.

I was about ready to pull the bottle out when Badger yells down, "Oh, my God, I know what that is. I have a broken one." I was starting to sweat now as I began to pull it slowly from its resting spot. Inch by inch I worked it out, then BANG! The top was broken off. I reckon the "feel and the sound" method for detecting whole bottles needed some work.



I wiped off the slug plate and read it out loud. "Wise of Allentown." A bottle I have never seen. It turned out to be one of the rarest iron pontil local sodas there was. I can't put up enough exclamation points to express how mad I was when I saw it was broken! I began to research on the phone and found out there are only three whole known examples.

I was much madder than sad. After I calmed down I realized even though it was headless, I still had dug a very rare specimen and maybe in the future, I would repair it. And the cool thing about this hobby, you just never know what will turn up in the next hole.

The one thing we could look forward to was that the privy had at least five more feet to go. The two bottles we found were basically at the bottom of the clay cap and the start of the use layer. It also verified that this pit was very old. I hoped and prayed that we would pull more whole bottles than broken ones from this pit. I had a few more minutes in the hole, but I was starting to get sciatic cramps. I dug a little faster because I needed the bathroom more than a bottle at the moment.

Just as I was ready to forget the bottles and yell up "I'm out," I saw the bottoms of two bottles. They were both green and what are the chances of another "Wise of Allentown?" I put both hands over the bottoms like one of those claw games in the restaurants where you pull stuffed animals out of the pile. With steady pressure, I pulled them both straight up. Bingo! They were both whole.

With a little wiping I discovered they were both dark green double-collared squats. The embossing read "Khol & Beans Easton Pa," another great local iron-pontiled bottle. I have dug many of these in the past. The crudeness always makes these bottles a pleasure to dig and add to your collection. I made my way out of the hole, which was just deep enough for this old guy to climb out; any deeper, I would have needed a ladder.



Sadness



Some of the day's haul.





The icing on the cake

By the time I got back, Badger was already in the hole. Badgers do love those holes. But in this one, he wasn't there to hibernate. The bucket pulling had kicked into overdrive, we were at the halfway mark and the old trash was really starting to flow. Bucket after bucket was dumped revealing busted plates, cups, and lots of oyster halves.

We were seeing the signs of an old, well-used privy that we dream of. The 1850s and '60s were the numbers all day long.

A half-hour went by and there was no excited talk down in the privy. Badger was quiet, he was just filling buckets at a steady clip. I was getting worried, I shouted down, "Anything?" Badger just chimed out, "The usual." That meant shards and a lot of broken stuff.

The action was very slow so I decided to make a run to the alley and get some more water from the truck. As I stood up top and looked down into the yard I did a little reminiscing. I went back to the first time I probed this property, and recalled

how hard the ground was and how I could not find a decent spot in the whole yard that felt like it might be a privy. I also remember how frustrated I was. That yard was visited at least seven times while not finding anything. I knew there had to be a privy there somewhere!

I finally gave up on the yard and started to probe under the sidewalk. This was a long shot but it was all I had left. When I probed it for the first time and the rod sank to the handle my mind said, "Oh, it must be from the rain running down over the years," because, after all, this is a weird spot for a privy, dead center under the sidewalk in the middle of the yard. But usually, the probe does not lie.

There was a void under there, and I thought I heard Badger saying something. As I made my way down the crooked slate steps to the yard I started to make out what he was saying. "Oh, man! Rick, Rick! Check this out!" As I began getting closer to the privy Badger was out of view, but when I was about ten feet away he

popped up like a badger. In his hands was a box with three blue iron-pontiled sodas!

What a way to end the day. Those cobalt bottles were going to put the blue icing on the privy cake. A yard that started out as a "Pipe Dream" ended up being a treasure trove of lost history hidden under the sidewalk.

