

Tom Askjem Really Digs America

Tom continues looking for the Holy Grail — a Vallandigham

By Tom Askjem

PART 2

I got down to about the 9-foot level when I found bottom. At this point the site wasn't much more than an over-glorified test hole. It was just wide enough to scoop and bucket out dirt. When I was near bottom I discovered a machine-made cork top drug store bottle. The writing was on the wall: it was a bust. We decided to abandon the site.

I called Gary and he came over with the tractor and filled it in. I concluded that the pit was possibly dug for the hotel shortly before it burned down. It was then utilized by the pool hall. I concluded this because the pool hall site was missing a Prohibition-era pit and this one fit the timeframe. I was still determined to find the original hotel pit but it was getting late in the afternoon. I had probed out another spot behind the site we had just finished. I planned to go back soon but had plans of getting back to the pool hall lot in Nome, N.D.

As mentioned a while back, I got permission to dig behind where the pool hall once stood in Nome, N.D. The lot was actually owned by the mayor, who had his residence there. The only stipulation was that he and his wife wanted to be there when it was being dug. They had gone away on vacation and told me they would be gone for the first week of August. I had given it a few more days before returning to give them time to get settled in after their trip.

My friend Randy met me there to help dig. We knocked on the door and they answered, telling us to have at it. We then

walked to the back yard. I had called in to have the locates marked out and everything looked good. We started probing the obvious sunken areas first to no avail. We then set out flags to start gridding it out. After a couple hours we had two sites probed out.

The pool hall was built in about 1903 and had burned by about 1910, which was a perfect timeframe for finding North Dakota Hutchinson bottles (the Hutchinson stopper bottles were used in some N.D. bottling operations as late as 1912 when they were banned). We opened up the first pit, which was right next to where the power company had marked out a line. We dug carefully so that we would not damage the line and more importantly so that I wouldn't get fried.

After hitting the 4-foot level I was convinced that the line had missed the pit, though we still dug with caution. We started finding slick drug store bottles and liquor bottles. These were no doubt from the time of the pool hall. We then started finding seeds, indicating that it was a privy. We found a few good liquor, beer and drug store bottles. At about six feet I had found the bottom. I was a bit surprised because the pool hall was so big and the history books indicated it was a busy place. The pit wasn't unusually big, though. I finished cleaning out the sides and found a few more slick bottles. No sodas.

We filled it in and started the other one. This one seemed deep. I had sunk a 7.5-foot probe into it and hit a lot of ashes. We opened it up and sure enough found ashes at about the 3-foot level. At first

they seemed to be stove ashes, then we started finding burned debris. Though I was only finding burned remains of a building, based on the size of the pit I was convinced the hole had started out as a privy or a well.

I started finding some machine-made bottles. I widened the hole and continued. There were then some remnants of a wrought iron bed. I figured that was from the living quarters, which were located above the pool hall. It wouldn't come loose so we tied a rope to it and pulled part of it loose with a truck. It was then able to be pulled out by hand. At this point I was about seven feet down.

I continued digging and started seeing seeds. This was likely a privy. I decided to widen it out again. Many buckets were pulled up and soon I was able to move around. The bottom was at about nine feet, but the pit continued across. I then pulled up a Fargo Bottling Works tooled crown top soda. It was mint. Right next to it was an American Bottling Association tooled crown top, also mint!

I noticed the seeds were in the bottom foot or so of the pit, indicating it was a privy that had been dug shortly before the pool hall burned and was then filled in with rubble. Nothing remarkable was found after the crown tops. We filled it in and called it a day.

At that point it was August 11. Over a month had passed since I had started my search for the Vallandigham Hutches from Valley City. I had been driving about four hours almost every day plus digging. You'd think at this point I would



At left is a mint Fargo Bottling Works tooled crown top soda. Right next to it is an American Bottling Association tooled crown top, also mint.

be discouraged but I wasn't. I was finding just enough to keep me interested, plus I had sites lined up that had good potential. There was still another hotel lot and a depot site in Dazey that I had permission on, plus two more pits on the hotel lot there that I had been working.

The following day I decided to take off and rest. The day after that Randy and I met in Dazey. We opened up one of the pits and after a couple feet started finding plastic straws. Hundreds of them. I

remained hopeful that maybe an old privy had sunken and trash was thrown into it. Nope. We dug down a few more feet and started finding 1970s glass bottles and more plastic. It bottomed out at about 5 feet or so. We filled it in and opened the other up. Same result: plastic garbage.

I was convinced that we had found everything the lot had to offer. We then moved on to the other hotel site, which was located just down the block and across the street.

The hotel that had once stood there was named the Waldorf. It was started in 1883 and later had an addition built beside it. The hotel burned in about 1910. It was then rebuilt on the lots beside the original site. That was all good news, being it bettered the odds that the original pits hadn't been disturbed. The only thing working against us was that a filling station later stood on that lot.

We were informed by locals that it stood further up on the lot near the street and that no one believed the area behind the hotel was disturbed by it.

We started out by probing the obvious spots first. There was one spot that seemed suspect. I put a flag in it and then started gridding the lot. A livery barn had stood behind the hotel. It had also burned in the fire. With the livery barn in the back of the lot, there wasn't a huge area that the privy could have been.

We started probing. It was rough. The ground was so hard that we again needed to use a hammer drill. The bit was three feet long and even at that depth the ground was often rock hard. We marked out a couple spots that seemed to have slight potential, and by that time it was getting late. We had planned to come back the following day but I ended up going to the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally that night.

It wasn't until four days later that I got back to Dazey. I was digging alone that day and decided to grid out as much of the hotel lot as I could. I spent all day out there, finding only a couple other spots that seemed to have minimal potential. The following day Jake agreed to help out. We were hoping to tackle the pits and move on to the depot site.

As mentioned, the spots probed out seemed to have minimal potential. There was only a bit of ash and glass at about 4-5 feet and then clay, but I had to know. We opened one of them up and dug it down, expecting another bust pit. We

opened it up small, roughly 2 by 2 feet. We started finding bits of tooled-top bottles and turn-of-the-century china. We then widened it out.

At five feet we found an intact tooled-top opium-type vial and the pit appeared to keep going. We widened it out again, this time to about 3 by 3 feet. During this time we found a few broken blob top beers. I continued digging and found a few slick tooled-top drugstore bottles and some whiskey flasks. At this point I started seeing layers of the clay and ash cap and the direction they were headed. I could tell this was going to be a big pit.

We again decided to widen it out, this time to about 3 by 5 feet. There were bottles everywhere. I also noticed some seeds and lime, indicating it was indeed an old outhouse pit. I pulled out bottle after bottle. Most were intact common beers and whiskeys. One clue was an 1898 patent flask. That helped determine the era we were in. I often find those in turn-of-the-century sites. That era is prime for North Dakota Hutchinson soda bottles so I was stoked.

I pulled some more slick whiskeys out and then all of a sudden saw a mug-based bottle. Although it was broken my eyes immediately went to the slug plate: "Sheyenne Bottling Works- E.R. Vallindigham Prop.- Valley City, N.D." I was nearly in disbelief. Even though it was broken, it was just the second example known to have been found. It was one of those pieces that I thought I would never own, a "Holy Grail" so to speak.

I was ecstatic, though I tried not to get my hopes up. I knew the soda bottles were often returned and that only the damaged ones were thrown. I did notice the pit kept going in all directions so that would definitely increase my chances of finding a whole example. I continued digging and pulling out more slick alcohol bottles. At this point I had concluded there was another "blind pig" being run out of the hotel.



The broken Sheyenne Bottling Works-
E.R. Vallindigham Prop.- Valley City,
N.D. bottle.

At about the day's 7-foot level I hit another clay cap. At this point I was certain we were in for a wild ride. Anything with this kind of depth will usually produce something good. I decided to tunnel down and see how deep the cap was. It appeared to be about 1 foot thick.

Once I was through the cap the soil below was very soft. I continued scratching away and noticed a Hutchinson soda top. Many thoughts went through my mind at this point, mainly "Where is it from?" and "Is it whole?" I carefully pulled the bottle out and first noticed that it was full of liquid. This was a good indication that it was whole. I then noticed the embossing: "Sheyenne Bottling Works- E.R. Vallindigham Prop. Valley City, N.D."



The whole Sheyenne Bottling Works-
E.R. Vallindigham Prop.- Valley City,
N.D. bottle.

The bottle was mint! I was feeling great. Not only did I just pull out one of North Dakota's most rare and sought-after bottles, but I had literally just busted through the clay cap and likely had a long way to go before reaching bottom. I climbed out of the pit, dumped out the ground water from the bottle and brought it to my vehicle. It was really hot out that day so we took a quick break. While doing so I examined the bottle and the broken fragment of another. I then noticed something: They were different shades.

The whole one was a green aqua and the other a blue aqua. Prior to that day the bottle was only known in a green aqua. This was profound. Not only did I dig a Holy Grail bottle but I discovered that



Three perfect Vallandigham Hutches side by side.

it is also known in another shade. We then went back to work. Bucket after bucket the clay cap was hauled out. I had no idea how deep the pit would be and didn't want to probe it and risk damaging something.

Once we were completely through the clay cap there were bottles everywhere. Mostly slick whiskies and beers, though also some amber Hostetter's Stomach Bitters. We were finding so many bottles that I had stopped handing them up one by one and just piling them up in a corner of the pit and then handing them up bucket by bucket. Again, most of the bottles were fairly generic but the mission was already somewhat complete and everything else was just extra at that point.

The pit was wide and I tunneled under a bit, something that I don't like doing, though the ground was very hard and dry and seemed to be stable. I had

tunneled under a couple feet and it was getting dark in there. I then saw the mug base to another Hutch bottle. Could it be another Valley City Hutch? It was a bit lodged and I didn't want to risk even damaging it, so I had Jake throw down a head lamp.

Once things were lit up I scratched some dirt out of the way and pulled a few bottles loose. The bottle came out: another Vallandigham Hutch. Mint. This one was the blue aqua example. This was as good as it gets for N.D. bottle digging. This was one of those moments that makes all the research and bust pits worthwhile. I handed it up to Jake and climbed out of the pit. I again placed the bottle carefully in my vehicle and took another break. It was seriously heatstroke type of weather out there and we wanted to be careful.

We cooled off in my vehicle and I made some calls to collectors. All of them were

blown away at the news. As mentioned, one of North Dakota's most serious collectors had been in search of a Vallandigham bottle for decades and it was the only one he was missing to complete his collection.

After our break we went back to work. The hole was now about 10 feet deep. I climbed down in it and started feeling a bit uneasy. It's usually at about the 9-foot level that I start thinking about bracing the sides up. I'm there to enjoy myself and I can't do that if I'm worried about being buried alive.

I decided to carefully probe it and see how much further we had to go. I concluded that we had just about reached the bottom. If it had gone much deeper I would have called off the dig for the day and came back with some lumber to brace the sides up. Knowing the pit was nearly finished I decided to keep going.

The soil around North Dakota is hard-packed clay, plus we were in a drought so the possibility of a collapse seemed minimal. Note that I've dug roughly 1,300 privies, most of which were in North Dakota. Only twice have I had pits seriously collapse and that was from leaving them open overnight with heavy rains.

I continued digging, pulling up more liquor bottles, and then noticed another mug-based bottle. In no time I had the bottle pulled out and wiped off: A THIRD VALLANDIGHAM HUTCH. ICE BLUE. MINT.

This was incredible. Not only did I have one of each to add to my collection but now I could sell one and recoup some costs from the trip. I handed the bottle up this time so that I could keep digging. It would be getting dark soon and Gary could fill the pit in with the tractor if it didn't get too late. I didn't want to leave a deep hole open overnight and didn't have anything available to cover it, so finishing it seemed to be our best option.

Once I had reached bottom all the way across, I started caving in the sides. I found a few more bottles and another broken Vallandigham. I made sure that we didn't miss anything and then called Gary over to fill it in. In no time, the pit was filled back in. We were very appreciative. That saved us hours of extensive labor. We fine tuned the cleanup after it was filled back in and threw down some grass seed. Mission complete.

We were wrecked and the two-hour drive home was rough though it was all well worth it. There were a couple of other sites on that lot we had dug the following days though none produced anything like that. Only one other broken Vallandigham Hutch was dug in the other spots and no other sodas. We dug a few other lots in that town the following week or so with nothing more to report.



A 100-plus-year-old "spider phaeton" carriage that I recently acquired. These were more or less the sports cars of the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were lighter than a standard carriage of the time, plus the big wheels made them roll easier, making them faster.

Hey, thought I would inform you of my recent acquisition: a "Spider Phaeton" carriage. To me this is as good as it gets.

The "spider" part of the name was due to the carriages looking like spiders; the long spoked wheels resembled the spider's legs and the hood formed what would look like the spiders abdomen.

The "phaeton" part of the name was due to these types of carriages being dangerous. The name is Greek in origin and came from the mythological Phaethon, son of Helios. In Greek mythology Phaethon had nearly set the Earth on fire while attempting to drive a chariot to the sun.

This is the first one I had seen in person. These weren't as common as a typical carriage or buggy, plus I'm guessing not a lot of these survived because of how fragile they are; the spokes on this one are loose. I read that when these were new they were lacquered and polished until the desired gloss was obtained. I'm contemplating on having it professionally restored.

I made contact with a professional carriage restorer in Montana. I think he'll be able to take on the job. I'll let you know what I decide to do. Thanks again, Tom.

