



At the Badger's Dump

Here's how to watch out for 'pit pirates'

By Rick Weiner

This story goes back at least fifteen years to the day. It all started on a bottle website called "Antique Bottles.net," a.k.a. ABN, the blue pages. At that time I had just begun my career in privy digging, but I have been a dump digger since I was fourteen years old.

I was working for the city of Allentown, Pennsylvania, parks department in 2005. My friend and co-worker, Paul, was my partner in crime at the time. We always had our hands full of permissions and we started digging privies nonstop around that time.

When things started to kick into gear and the bottles were flowing, I began to post our better finds on ABN. Soon after, I decided to write a story on a killer pit we did. I called it "The Cobalt Hole." We hit an 1850s privy with 35 cobalt sodas! It was only our second dig. I sent it to *AB&GC*, the *Antique Bottles & Glass Collector* magazine. It was published and set to arrive in a month. I enjoyed writing about our adventures almost as much as actually participating in them. I could always reread a story at the dinner table and get that feeling the excitement was happening all over again. Memories are one thing, but a good story with pictures takes you right back to the past.

ABN was a no-frills bottle site. It wasn't like FaceBook with the quick messages and the easy picture posting. It was crude, slow, and old fashioned. But we liked it

that way. The people on ABN were honest and fun to be with. Well, most of them were anyway. Every group has its designated troublemakers. But they were dealt with swiftly by spending a week in the ABN hole for their crimes.

There were many long hours spent on the blue pages. After dinner each night, we would have great conversations about every aspect of collecting bottles and bottle digging. One night I got a message in the room from a member named "Badger." He began asking me questions about my location. My first thought was, "This guy wants to muscle in on our digging spots," as there were people like that all over the net. I called them "lurking pit pirates." It could be a dump, a privy, or a metal detecting area that they were after. There was no discrimination when it came to ripping off your local digging sites!

As I talked a little more to this Badger fellow I could see he wasn't a pirate after all. He gave me the impression he was just starting in the digging world and was looking for some honest advice. I was fairly new to privy digging back then but I knew enough about dumps to keep the conversation going. As the texting continued we began to talk about our geographical locations again. The folks from ABN were stationed at all points of the compass, from Hawaii to Alaska. When Badger asked me where I lived, I told him I was from Allentown. He paused and came back with, "You are kidding me. I am in Bethlehem, dude!" That was only fifteen minutes away from me.

The conversation got friendlier and soon we were planning on setting up a time to dig together. I wanted to invite him to a privy dig but my buddy, Paul, was the type of guy who only wanted the two of us involved in the digs. He didn't want any outsiders taking part in our digging jaunts. I always thought it was a little weird and antisocial, but I never questioned it because we had such a good thing going, and the good bottles were always flowing.

One weekend Paul and I were supposed to do a privy on South Strawberry St. in the village but some issues came up with the homeowners and we had to reschedule for next weekend. I remember Badger inviting me to his dump during the time we talked on ABN. Weeks have gone by since we talked and I decided to text him to make sure he remembered me so I could take him up on his offer. I was upset about the cancellation of the Strawberry St. dig, but sometimes a change is a good thing. Like I said, I grew up digging dumps but this privy thing had me hooked!

I finally got a hold of Badger and made plans to meet him at his house on the upcoming Saturday morning. When I arrived he wasn't quite ready. I took a seat on an old wicker chair in his enclosed porch and he began to tell me a little bit about the Badger dump history.

It was a large city dump that was started back in the late 1880s and ended operation in the 1930s. I have never really dug

PREVIOUS PAGE: Digging down deep with Badger.



any large city dumps before. I have always dug the single, smaller, old house dumps. He went on to tell me that this dumping ground was dug into by other diggers for over 35 years. But he began to explain that there were many spots left that past bottle excavators have missed.

Badger paused for a second and took a sip of his Monster energy drink. He said, "In the beginning, cobalt sodas came from that dump." It almost sounded like he was quoting from the Bible. His buddy, "Crazy Larry," and his small crew started that dump. They were probably the first ones to scratch the surface and break sacred ground. Badger went on to tell me the story about how this dump came to be.

One day while driving over South Mountain, Crazy Larry, Dio, and The Slacker pulled over to pick through this massive trash pile someone had dumped off along the side of the road. It just happened that some garden tools were sticking out of the heap. Dio picked up a spade digging shovel. "I could use this, my shovel just broke," he said.

They gathered up a few items and started to head back to the truck. Before Dio joined the crew he decided to stick the shovel in the ground to test it out. After he did that he let out a loud holler to the guys. "You're not going to believe this!" When that shovel came out of the ground so did an aqua squat. It was a Bethlehem soda with a blob top!

As they looked beyond the brush, trees, and modern trash piles they saw white ash, as far as the eye could see! This was without a doubt an old, untouched city dump. A gold mine just waiting to be dug into. The stories I have heard about these guys digging this dump are amazing. It almost sounds like a bottle digging fairy tale. But it has truly happened. I have seen the pictures as proof. But the time

they dug ten cobalt blue iron pontil sodas in four hours has to be the topper.

As the years rolled on more and more people have found this place and dug here. I was never one of them because I didn't know about it until later on. I also was digging privies like a madman with Paul at the time. Like Badger said, there are many pockets of bottles that these guys had missed or just got scared to dig any deeper. To get to the decent stuff nowadays you have to dig at least fifteen feet or more.

As I gazed around his porch while Badger was finishing up the story, I noticed a lot of bottles sitting on shelves in boxes and on the floor. Some were dirty and some clean. It was definitely a dump diggers domain. He picked up a Hutch off of a bottle-crammed table and said, "We dig a lot of these."

Hutches were always fun to dig. Charlie Cook, an old digging friend and fellow story writer from New Orleans who recently passed over into that big privy dig in the sky, used to say, "After a while, they all look like a line of soldiers standing at attention," meaning Hutches all look the same, except for the names on the front. I'm guessing Mr. C had dug thousands of them in all of his years digging. Some people get spoiled when they dig really good bottles regularly, like Charlie. Then they can make comments like about the Hutches. It is just a progression we go through. That being said, it was time to go and do some digging at the Badger's dump.

I remember my first time at Badger's dump. When we rolled around the corner approaching the spot we were going to be digging, all I could see were mountains of household trash. There were TVs, rugs, tires, even a kitchen sink! My first thought was, is this a modern landfill or was this actually an old bottle dump?

While walking on the road I saw a sign on a telephone pole that read, "No



TOP: Part of the haul from a good digging day

BOTTOM: A freshly dug Bethlehem Hutch.

dumping; you are on camera.” I did see a camera but I was pretty sure it was a dummy model to try and scare people off. It definitely wasn’t working. How ironic was that, an 1800s dump that had a “No dumping” sign.

Badger made a statement. “It doesn’t matter what’s on top.” As I thought about those words of wisdom I began to realize he was right. It wasn’t like we were standing along a beautiful babbling stream with a strip of lovely hardwood trees behind us, and at our feet lay piles of disgusting trash. But today it was a dump. It was a dump in the past and it is a dump now.

It was time for digging. Before we knew it, we were down about five feet into the white and gray ash. As I dug down and enjoyed the conversation with Badger I was wondering what my first bottle would be. In about ten minutes I would find out, as my three-prong dig tool finally hit some glass. The dang thing took a while before I got it to wiggle free. Then, with the use of my rusty snake tongue tool, it rolled out sideways *right* into my hand.

“Hey, would you look at this; it’s a soldier!” I was joking because I had just told the story at Badger’s house about Mr. C. But this soldier was different. It was a mug-based Hellertown Hurch. It was a cool looking bottle, one I had never dug. It looked like the first day at Badger’s dump was starting with a high salute.

As the day progressed we had nine Hurches and two local blobs laying on the ground. The Hurches were all the same “F Mcfadden’s,” a local Bethlehem brewery. And yes, I did line them up on the ash pile like soldiers lined up for the attack! It was not a bad day, considering it was a dump that had been dug for 35 years. I put this place on the list to revisit; after all, it was a very big dump and they couldn’t have dug everything.

I had a privy dig coming up with Jack (Jacko). He was a guy that took care of business. What I mean by that is he prac-

tically dug the privies himself. He was on some sort of medication that mimicked a cup of coffee times ten; it was legal so I wasn’t worried. I told him you can dig as long as you like, just make sure you let me know when the glass starts popping. I can say that in jest because I am the guy who always gets the permissions so I get to pick first anyway.

I tried to get him out of the hole so I could share the workload but he would not have any of it. Soon Jacko was down in the pit just over his head. I was getting bored waiting for bottles and drifted off on my old beach chair. I was unaware he had gotten that far; he was shoveling the fill onto the tarp the whole time.

Now I had to do a little work because it was getting hard for Jacko to throw the fill out. It was time to pull some buckets and get to the bottom of this privy. But I wouldn’t be pulling too long. It turned out to be only a seven-foot privy. By the time I pulled three buckets up Jacko hit the use layer and bottles were starting to appear. I didn’t have the heart to tell him to get out of the hole after he did all the work by himself. So I said, “Keep on digging, man, I got your back.”

I did pull a few more buckets up but they were full of bottles with no dirt! The first batch had two Warner’s Safe Cures, a bunch of embossed local medicines and some blown slicks.

The second bucket had a lot of food jars and a lone soldier, but the rest of the stuff was all broken. A Warner’s Safe Cure wasn’t too bad for me doing the amount of work I did. Wait. I spoke too soon. We had to fill the pit in. After an hour of filling in and cleaning up this privy, the dig was over. Another one for the books and the memories.

TOP: Down in the hole.

BOTTOM: Another Bethlehem medicine from Badger’s dump.

CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE!

