

# North Dakota Bottles Are Really Booming

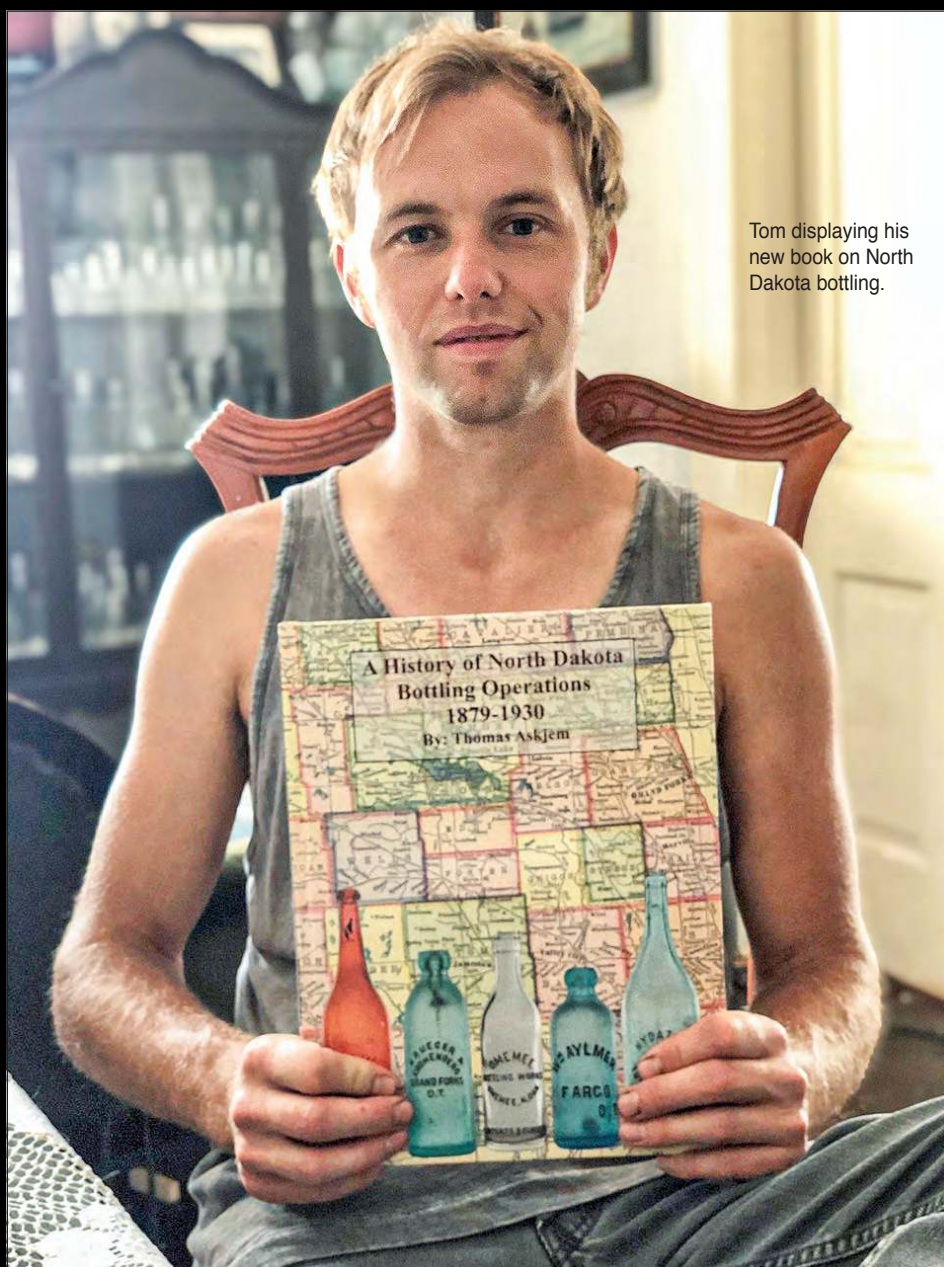
*Thanks to researcher/digger/author Tom Askjem*

## The Ralph Finch interview

Remember in 2019 when we printed a story that started: “I’ve been digging 100-150 privies per year. I figure I’ve dug roughly 1,100 since I was about 14. I still live on the family farm where I dug my first privy.” That was the beginning of an interesting interview with Tom when he published his extensive — and interesting — book titled *Nebraska Soda Bottles, 1865-1930*.

Tom is back. Remember him? He’s from Buxton, North Dakota. (Buxton, FYI, still has a population of 323 people, including Tom.) For his book he said: “I started digging and collecting bottles behind my parents’ 1898 farmhouse outside of Buxton.” Tom is now 29, and collects “early soda bottles from the Dakotas and surrounding states. I also collect wagons, buggies and sleighs from the homestead era.”

And despite a world shutting down, with most people distancing, Tom has been busy. Very busy, and sent us this interesting email in September 2020: “Hey, thought I would inform you of my new book, *A History of North Dakota Bottling Operations 1879-1930*. P.S. Earlier this summer (2020) I got permission to dig at a fort site here in the Dakotas. I’ve been extensively documenting every-



Tom displaying his new book on North Dakota bottling.





thing. The findings from each pit have been kept separate in totes marked with GPS coordinates. I've found a lot of stuff.

"Often when someone thinks about an old pop bottle, they think of the painted label, pry-off cap examples. It seems most have never thought about the fact that bottling took place many years before those types of bottles were even invented. Bottling in North Dakota dates back to pioneer times.

Before statehood, on Nov. 2, 1889, North Dakota was part of the Dakota Territory. The earliest bottlers in the area were bottling during that time. The earliest confirmed bottles that they used were Hutchinson-style bottles. Due to sanitation concerns, those types of bottles started declining in popularity around 1906, and by 1912 they were banned in North Dakota. Bottlers then replaced those bottles with the pry-off cap examples, though the painted label versions weren't manufactured until many years later."

And about his digging, Tom explains: "A lot of the privies were twelve feet deep and six or seven feet below the water table, which kept everything fairly well preserved. I've got four soldier hats and some clothing.

"I also pulled out nearly thirty USA Hospital Department bottles. Four of them are cobalt blue quarts. I'd like to keep it under wraps until finished, though I should be able to finish this year.

And what is ahead for Tom? "I plan to do a history book on the fort and the finds. I feel it would make a great article for the magazine and would gladly give some info when the time comes."



**LEFT:** "I've attached pictures of what I consider to be the best soda in North Dakota. It's from the bottling works of Krueger & Kronenberg. They only bottled together for about a year in Grand Forks, Dakota Territory, from 1882-83. There are five or six known. The one I sent a picture of is one that I dug from a privy behind where a saloon once stood in Larimore, N.D."



Amazing! Do you think this old newsman could say no to an offer like that? Tom, bring it on.

In his first book, he revealed: "I've dug bottles in eight different states, literally from coast to coast. I've dug privies from Cape-style houses of Eastport, Maine, to an abandoned California gold rush camp. I spent part of a winter digging Galveston, Texas. My main focus, though, is the Dakotas.

"While on digging trips, I've camped in downpouring rain, I've camped with near in-line winds, where the pop-up tent was literally blown down flat on top of me. I've also camped without being able to shower for days, waking up with dirt clods on my pillow from my hair.

"The deepest I've dug is about thirty feet. The pit turned out to be an old homestead well. The deepest privy I've dug is about twelve feet."

And, the bottom line: I liked his first book, well done. And his recent one? Again, well done.

From the new book's introduction: "I consider the information in this book to be as accurate as it was originally recorded. Most of the information on bottler's origins were found through U.S. census records and whenever possible, cross-referenced with historic newspaper articles. The date range on the bottling companies was found first through examination of the bottle's style and, if any, the glass company's marks. Then all of that information was cross-referenced with historic newspaper articles and advertisements."

"Various North Dakota history books were also used for reference, including centennial books. The Andreas' *Historical Atlas of Dakota*, published in 1884, was

**TOP:** A peek inside Tom's exciting new book.

**BOTTOM:** "The Indiana Jones-style hat was found in an ash dump behind the company quarters. The pit seemed to date back to the 1880s. I also dug a poncho in the fort hospital privy. We had fun with a photo shoot."





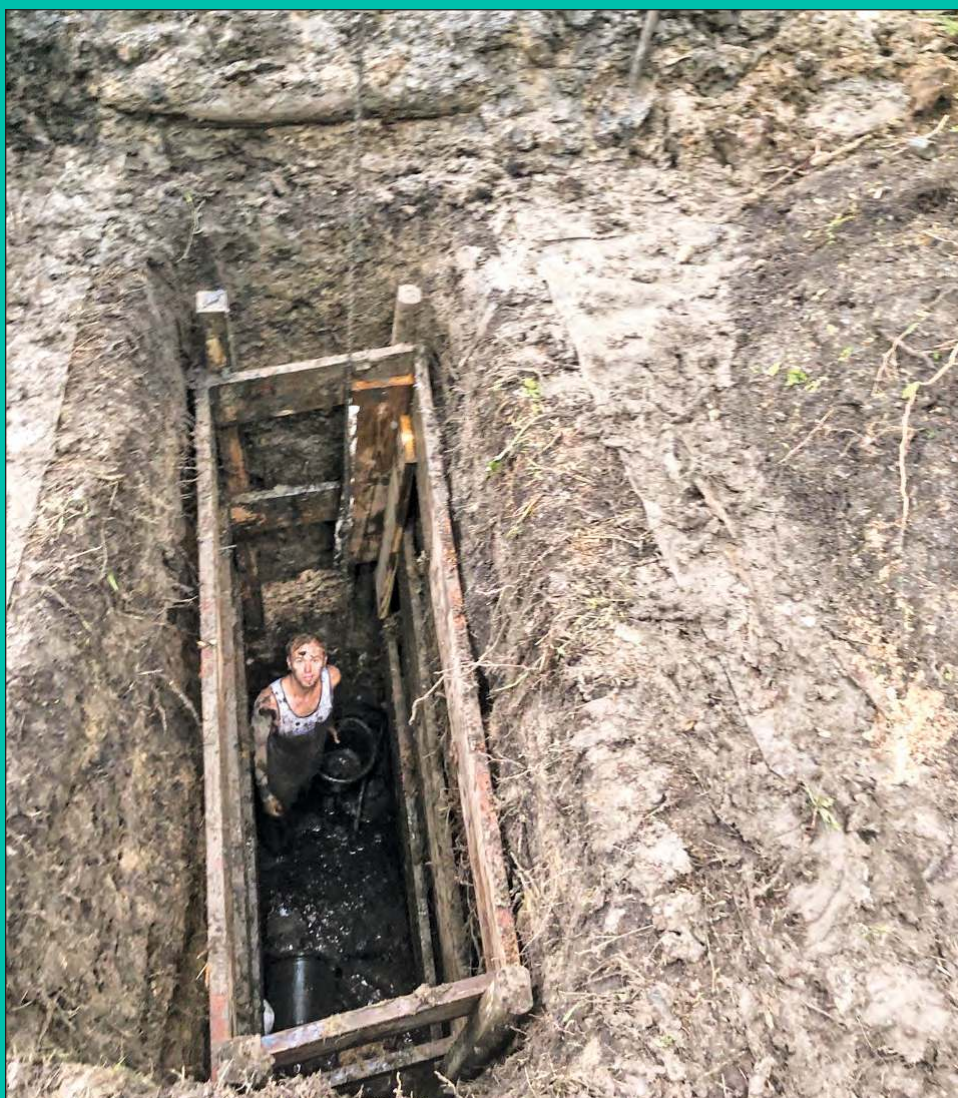


a valuable source of information on the earliest bottlers.”

“The date range covered in this book is based mostly off of my interests with the earlier bottles. The earliest bottles known from bottling operations in North Dakota date back to 1879. I decided to end the date range at 1930. It was around that time the next-generation ‘art-deco’ and ‘national-brand’ style bottles were in general use. Though some next-generation bottles were used in North Dakota bottling operations in the 1910s and ’20s, I wanted this book to focus on the earlier styles.”

In it, Tom explores 76 bottling operations. “This book is meant to be a history book, a reference book, and an identification guide. From years of researching, collecting and digging for antique bottles, I’ve found that almost everyone has a connection with them. Old bottles are often found while digging a foundation, during a renovation, in an old crawl space under a building, in the woods while out on a walk, in a dirt pile on a construction site, or maybe in outbuildings after purchasing a property. I’ve heard all sorts of stories like these. Sometimes the bottles are found to be interesting so they’re kept, and other times little is known about them so they are once again discarded. I’m hoping that this book will help preserve these antique bottles, which are a part of everyone’s history.”

*Editor’s note: The book, hardbound with 80 pages on glossy paper, with 240 different bottles shown, can be purchased for \$60, with free shipping. PayPal or a check by mail is fine. Tom says: “My Paypal is Thomas.Askjem@gmail.com.” Checks can be mailed to Tom Askjem, 16813 16th St. NE, Buxton, ND 58218. For more information, contact thomas.Askjem@gmail.com; his phone number is 701-864-0126.*



**TOP:** The four cobalt blue USA Hospital Department quarts that Tom dug at the old fort.

**BOTTOM:** Tom peers up from the depths of a deep and muddy dig.