

Tom Askjem Really Digs America

Give him time, and some day you'll find him in your back yard

By Tom Askjem

PART I

Tom's latest email sounds like all of his others. Hey, how have you been? I've been busy digging and working on my new book project but I'll get to the book later. First off, I ended up digging not only a bottle that I thought I may never own, but three of them.

In Search of the Vallandigham Hutches

As you know, I've been a North Dakota resident my whole life, so naturally I'm drawn to Dakota bottles. With all the research I've done with the books, I've concluded rarity, examples known, etc. of many N.D. bottles. I've also gotten requests from collectors of the bottles they're looking for.

There is one bottle that stuck out, The Sheyenne Bottling Works E.R. Vallandigham Hutchinson soda bottle from Valley City, N.D. There was only one example known. One of the most prominent N.D. collectors needed only that Hutch to complete his N.D. Hutch collection. He had been collecting since the 1980s. After finding all of this out, I decided to go on a hunt to find it. It started earlier this summer.

After looking at maps of Valley City, I decided there wasn't a lot of potential there, so I thought the surrounding area could have good potential. The first town I tried was Oriska, N.D., which is located just twelve miles from Valley City. I brought my friends Ethan and Jake along. The first lot we chose once had an old hotel on it. It was now vacant. I drove around and talked with some locals.



Hutches and another bottle from Fargo.

It turned out the first person I spoke with was on the city board. I found out that the lot was now owned by the city. He gave me the go ahead to probe, though he also told me that I would need to secure permission to dig. He informed us that a house stood on the rear of the property after the hotel was torn down, so it may be a bust. We started probing and after about a half hour probed out a potential dig site. I then made some calls and got the mayor's phone number. I gave him a call and explained to him what I do. He said to OK it with one other person from the city council and told me where I could find them. I found them and spoke with them for a bit and got the go-ahead to start digging.

We laid out tarps and opened up the dig site. It probed out roughly 6 feet long

and 3 feet wide. We hit an ash layer at about the 3-foot mark. We then started finding a mix of some machine-made and tooled-top bottles. This wasn't a bad start considering the bottle we were looking for dated from 1898-1904.

After a few more feet we had pulled up many ironstone fragments, some broken soap dishes stamped with "Hotel" and machine-made crown-top soda from Moorhead, Minnesota. The bottom foot or so was mostly all tooled-top bottles, though had nothing in particular that we were looking for — just a few extract bottles and a common patent med or two. The pit bottomed out and although we didn't find the Vallindigham bottle, I felt accomplished. We dug our first pit in the area and found some bottles.



We then decided to go after the train station pit. The guy from the city board mentioned that the city also maintains that lot, so we went over there and started gridding it out.

The ground was very hard-packed. North Dakota was in a heavy drought this year so probing was tough. We started gridding out the area and found a potential site. It seemed like a big pit, so we decided to call it a day and come back tomorrow.

I live roughly an hour from Oriska. Ethan and Jake live a half hour in the other direction, so we decided to meet at my place and go from there. We got out there at about noon. We started digging and at a foot down we started to hit a bunch of rocks. We continued through and eventually started finding stove ashes. Then bottles. We found some tooled-top extract bottles and then some tooled-top drug store bottles. The pit kept going and I pulled up a Hutchinson soda from Fargo, North Dakota. It was from the American Bottling Association. I was stoked.

I'm mainly a soda collector, so finding a Hutch from my home state is always a thrill. The pit was starting to get deep and we decided to widen it out. At about the 7-foot mark my buddy, Ethan, mentioned a couple sheriff vehicles were pulling up. I thought he was joking and went back to digging. I then heard him say hi to someone and I heard another voice. I looked up and saw two guys in uniform. At this point I was down too deep to get out alone so Ethan helped pull me out.

The first thing I said when I got out was "Someone must have called about us?" One of the guys said "Yeah, someone said there were some guys digging a big hole." I then explained to them what we were doing and showed them a few newspapers I'd been in and a couple books I had written. I also informed them that we had permission to be digging there. I name-dropped a couple guys from the city board and everything checked out.

I showed them a few bottles and the deep pit. They said it was one of the coolest calls they had been on and said when we were done that we should check out Nome, N.D. They said there were some old buildings out there that may have potential. They stuck around for a few minutes and then went on their way. All in all they were really cool about the whole thing.

Shortly after they left I found the bottom of the pit. It was at about the 8-foot mark. I started digging across and pulled out two more American Bottling Association Hutes from Fargo, N.D. I then found the edge. The pit was roughly 8 feet deep, 8 feet long and 4 feet wide. We found many bottles, though most were slicks.

I was very happy with the Fargo Hutes, though there was no sign of a Valley City bottle. I thought maybe the old city dump could have potential but decided to hold off for a bit, because I would likely need to bring in an excavator and didn't want to overwhelm anyone in town.

We were worn out by the time we got the depot privy filled back in. We decided to call it a day. I had to drop Jake and Ethan off first in Grand Forks/East Grand Forks so it was a long drive after all the digging. I was absolutely wrecked by the time I got home. The next morning Ethan had to work so it was just Jake and me. We decided to check a couple of other spots in Oriska and then possibly head to Nome.

After checking out Oriska for a while and getting turned down on the railroad boarding house lot, we headed for Nome. I looked at some old maps and confirmed there were some vacant lots where some old businesses once stood. I drove around for a while, checking out the lots and looking for any signs of life.

I had just about given up on finding anyone home and was on my way out of town when I saw a guy out in his yard. I stopped and talked with him. Of all people, he was the guy who wrote the Nome history book. I showed him some of the books I had written. We talked for a bit and I asked about the vacant lots. He informed me they were owned by the city. That included two hotel sites and the store site. The train tracks had been pulled up there so the depot site was also vacant. He told us where to find the mayor. I gave a little presentation and he granted permission to dig.

We decided to check out the depot site first, being that it was overgrown and would be the least invasive. The depot was built in 1901, so there was great potential to find Valley City Hutchinson bottles. There wasn't a lot of reference to where anything had stood, other than a rough outline of where the tracks had been and a road. We took some measurements and started gridding it out, though it was getting late. We decided to call it a day and make the brutal two-hour drive back home. I would normally have camped, but it was very hot out, plus I spend so much time on the road, it's nice to sleep in my own bed when I can.

The next day started out with me picking up Jake from East Grand Forks. Our friend Randy was planning to meet us out there and was there when we arrived. Most of the day was spent gridding, probing and digging. The ground was so hard that even in the grassy areas we needed a hammer drill to get through it. We found a couple of suspect areas and started digging.

It was still hot out so we kept having to take breaks in the car with the AC on full blast. After a couple hours of digging we found that both spots we had probed out were busts. All we found were some pieces of coal and rubble from a building (likely the depot).

We finished gridding the areas that seemed to have the most potential and didn't find anything else. I started to think that maybe the pit had been dipped long ago and that there was nothing to be found.

I decided to give it one last try and walked further back from where the depot had stood. I started drilling random test holes and found a location where the bit dropped in. I probed it and sure enough there was some ash and glass. I called Jake and Randy over to show them.

I started finding the dimensions of the pit and concluded it was big, maybe six feet by ten feet. In no time we had it opened up and started finding glass. At first it was only machine-made cork top bottles and then a mix of tooled and machine-made. I knew the site had great potential so we continued. There were many beer and liquor bottles. Most were slicks, though there were a few generic embossed ones.

Bottle after bottle came out. Most of them were whiskies and beers. At that point everything dated to about 1915.

What was interesting to me about this is that the sale of alcohol was prohibited in North Dakota at that time. This indicated that there was very likely a blind pig, or illegal saloon, being run out of the place.



Tom poses with the bottles from Nome.

Do note that from what I've gathered, though the sale of alcohol was prohibited in North Dakota, possession was still legal and that alcohol was still federally legal. Folks would evade liquor laws by ordering the alcohol in by mail and then charging admission into the saloons. They would then "give" the alcohol away.

Other than liquor bottles, we were finding many drug store bottles and fragments of blue and white china dinnerware. The dinnerware implied that there was likely a restaurant being run in connection with the depot and blind pig.

While digging, I noticed embossing in one of the larger crown top bottles. I carefully pulled the bottle out and was blown away. It read "Sheyenne Bottling Works-Stevens & Co Props-Valley City, ND." It was a quart tooled-top crown soda bottle. Note this wasn't the Vallandigham Hutch we were looking for, though it is a really good bottle. I believe there is only one other example known.

Now I'll explain the embossing: Vallandigham sold the Sheyenne Bottling Works to Stevens & Co. in 1904. Stevens was only with the company for a short time and by about 1905 he wasn't involved. This indicated that the

Stevens & Co. bottles were only produced for some time in 1904. We were getting closer. I then saw the mug base to a Hutch. I brushed off the lettered and saw "ABA." This was a generic Hutch used by the American Bottling Association. They had branches in Fargo, Grand Forks and Carrington, N.D. I was very happy to find it.

Shortly after, I had finished that side of the pit and started digging across. I found more dinnerware fragments and more slick alcohol containers plus a red wing whiskey jug. We had nearly finished the pit, though we decided we would need to move across and dig another hole. It was undermining hard and I didn't feel safe digging much further.

We filled in that part and headed back. I was alone the next day and again it was hot out. I dug the last section of the pit down and found a few more slick whiskey bottles and another jug. I totaled the bottles at 181. Here's a list:

Nome Depot: 27 food bottles; 54 beers; 9 bitters; 14 ketchups; 33 drugstore bottles; 2 hair bottles; 1 Bromo; 2 soda; 30 whiskies; 3 patent meds; 1 shoe polish; 1 cold cream; 4 round chemical bottles; 1 whiskey jug; 181 bottles.



After that I decided to head home for the day. As mentioned, it was hot and I had been working alone. I was spent.

The next day I had my friend, Randy, to help. We decided to try one of the hotel lots on the south side of Main Street. We found out that the whole south side had burned in about 1920, so there was a good chance that there would be some older stuff there and we wouldn't have to sort through too much modern junk.

We started gridding it out and after a while found a couple suspect areas. The ground was still hard packed, so we had to use a hammer drill to make pilot holes for the probe. We found four locations. One by one we dug them. The first one turned out to be a hotel pit based on the dinnerware marked "HOTEL" on bottom. We ended up getting a few crown top sodas out of that one. The other three were busts, though one yielded a few broken Fargo, N.D. Hutches also from the American Bottling Association.

We decided to do some more research and found out the other hotel wasn't built until 1910, so the odds of finding the bottles we were looking for was slim to none. Across the street where the mayor lived was where the pool hall once stood. I asked him about digging and he told us to wait until he got back from vacation. He was leaving within a few days and would be back after a week or so.

This gave me down time to check out the Oriska dump. I spoke with the mayor about bringing in an excavator. He gave me the go-ahead and I made arrangements for a large excavator to be dropped

off a couple days later. The dump consisted of a 300-foot by 300-foot area with huge mounds of dirt. The dump had been abandoned sometime in the 1980s, so I knew there would be a lot of modern junk to sort through. After a day or so the excavator was dropped off. We showed up that morning.

I decided to start at the back and work my way forward. I brought my Dad along that day. He thought the whole thing was interesting, plus it helped having someone there to grab bottles rolling out of the bucket.

The first few scoops I took yielded some stove ashes and cow bones which appeared to have some decent age. I dug around the area, not finding much else and then started digging toward the big mound, assuming the earliest stuff would be in the middle. Right away there was plastic junk and 1980s beer bottles.

As I dug further the age didn't change much. I then started finding some 1950s ACL sodas. Most were 7-UP. I kept digging and again found new junk. The dump was no doubt mixed up from when it was buried. I then started finding bits of aqua and clear Hemingray insulators. Then some whole examples. There were hundreds of them, though most were broken. I figure every insulator on the line running through the town was dumped there. We ended up with a couple pails full of aqua ones.

While digging I found a few porcelain enamel signs. Most of them were deteriorated from being in the ground but we got a couple Gargoyle Mobil Oil signs that were kind of cool. I had dug just about to the center of the dump and didn't see much change in age, so I decided to go to the back again. There was a smaller mound that I dug into. We found a couple Art Deco "Sheyenne Bottling Works" soda bottles and a couple Donald Duck ACLs. The area was still somewhat mixed up but had better age.

After finishing the back, I dug around the corners of the dump and found a couple BIMAL crown tops from Fargo. After digging the back, corners and a trench into the center I concluded the dump didn't have the age we were looking for. I filled everything back in and leveled it off. I decided to pull the plug on the excavator rental being it was somewhat costly and the dump wasn't producing enough to make it worthwhile.

My next prospect was Dazey, N.D. Dazey is located about 30 miles from Valley City. There were some maps that showed building locations and there was definitely some potential. Again a lot of the vacant lots where early businesses once stood were on city property. I got a hold of the mayor and asked about digging. Justin was his name. I explained my process and what I was looking for. He seemed intrigued and basically said to have at it. I called in locates (the call before you dig number) being the ground was so hard packed. It took a few days to get everything marked. The first spot I decided to dig was where a Territory-era saloon had once stood on Main Street.

The saloon was closed down due to North Dakota entering as a dry state. There was then a drugstore operating out of the building. After Prohibition ended there was another bar there. Dazey, like a lot of towns around North Dakota, didn't get indoor plumbing until the 1960s or '70s. This means there are A LOT of modern pits to sift through before finding the old one.

After a few days I got a notification that everything had been marked out. My Dad had again volunteered to come with and help out. As soon as we got into town we were met by a local, Gary. He had been mayor prior to Justin. Gary was now retired, though knew a lot about the town. He was a great guy. He helped with connecting us to other locals and later on with lining up more permissions and even filling in the sites with a tractor.

PHOTOS (previous page, clockwise from top left):

An ABA Hutch and a Sheyenne Bottling Works bottle from Valley City, N.D.

A Western Bottling Works bottle from Moorhead, Minnesota (middle) flanked by two other finds.

Tom poses with more prizes from the dig.

One of the Gargoyle Mobil Oil signs.

An easy and quick way to fill a privy dig.



L.E. Nelson / City Drug Store / Fargo, D.T.

Gary hung around most of the day while we dug a few bust sites: a couple of modern privies and one older ash dump. I started worrying that maybe the original pits had been dipped. I probed out three more at the end of the day and decided to open them up the following. My Dad again volunteered to help out and I was hoping to show him a good bottle dig.

The next day we opened the pits one at a time. The first one of the day was modern. The next one was on the other side of the property from the newer ones, so I had my hopes up. In the backfill I started finding tooled-top drugstore bottles. That was promising. I then started finding applied top beer bottles and coffin whiskeys. Saloon pit. Just being in a pioneer-era pit is good enough for me, whether or not I'm finding anything I'm looking for; it's always interesting to see what the pioneer era folks were using. It was a well-used pit and had no end in sight. I found a broken chamber pot, more liquor bottles and a bunch of Bachelor's Hair Dye bottles.

At this point I was digging with a stick and a plastic scooper so that I wouldn't risk breaking anything. Then all of a sudden I saw a larger clear bottle. I flipped it over and right away I knew it was a good one: "City Drug Store-L.E. Nelson-Fargo, D.T." Even better, it was a 12-ouncer and mint.

These digs don't happen often, so I was definitely living for the moment. I finished the pit shortly after finding the drug store bottle, bottoming out at about 7 feet. Nothing more came out other than a broken beer and a few more hair dye bottles.

We got it filled back in and opened up another pit. It actually turned out to have plastic in it. I rifled a test hole down, making sure there wasn't a change in age. Nothing. I then opened up another that was in line with the first ones we had dug. I didn't have much faith in it, though I had to know. I opened it up and right away started finding broken drug store bottles. I assumed it was a pit from when the drug store was there. It wasn't a big pit, bottoming out at 4 feet or so. There were a good few broken drug store bottles, though nothing had local embossing. I did end up with a citron Whittemore shoe polish bottle and an olive oil bottle from Santa Barbara, California.

During the dig I met a local historian. His name was Rodney. He was very helpful with telling us about local history and even did a bunch of research for me. He was into metal detecting so I told him he could detect whatever we dug up and that he could keep whatever he found. The pit finished up shortly after and we left for the day.

The following day I was on my own. I dug another bust pit on the saloon lot, finished probing it out and, after not finding anything else, decided to check out where the old pool hall and hotel once stood.

The second generation pool hall building is still there, but actually it's now Punky's Bar. The first generation pool hall and the hotel burned circa 1910. I spoke with the owner of the property. Anita was her name. She gave me permission to dig and I started gridding out the parking lot. The only issue was that my hammer drill batteries and charger were left back home.

The area I was probing was a gravel parking lot, so the hammer drill was essential. I quit early for the day and needed the rest anyway, so it all worked out.

The next day my friend Jake said he would help out again. We started by drilling through the parking lot and probing every few feet. It took all day but when we finished we had a couple pits probed out. They were big. Roughly 8 by 4. I sunk a 7.5-foot rod into them, indicating they should be good. We decided to dig them the following day.

We got there around 11 a.m. and had to bust through the gravel with a hammer drill and after a while got down into the pit. At first we hit some modern post-Prohibition junk but I knew the pit was deep so there was some good potential of there being some earlier things. Sure enough at about the 5- to 6-foot level I started finding some tooled top whiskey bottles.

Tons of them! It was almost just bottles stacked on top of each other. Many of the flasks were embossed with "Issac Weil & Sons-Minneapolis." I had seen these before. They were fairly common, though they had good age for what we were in search of. Most of them had tooled tops so that was promising. More and more whiskey bottles came out and then I found the bottom. It was roughly 9-feet deep, 6 long and 3 wide.

I cleaned the side out and then climbed up out of there. I was amazed with how many bottles were found. There were 161! Of those there were 49 drugstore bottles, 35 whiskey quarts, 49 whiskey pints, 3 bitters, 13 beers, 2 tincture bottles, 8 extracts, 1 patent medicine and one sample medicine. I concluded that the pool hall also had a blind pig being run out of it.

None of the bottles were really anything we were in search of. All of the drugstore and bitters bottles were slicks. The embossed liquor bottles were all somewhat generic, most of them being Hayners from Ohio. The pit dated from about 1905-1920, which fit the time-frame for the pool hall. After filling the pit in we called it quits for the day.

The bar we were digging behind was going to be open the next day, so we decided to hold off on digging the other parking lot pit until they were closed again. This meant we would now start gridding out the west side of the bar's property behind where the hotel once stood. There were a couple obvious spots that had settled, so we tried those first. There was definitely a difference in compaction. We opened up the big one first. We got down to about the 4 foot mark and started finding post-Prohibition bottles. Broken ACLs and art deco sodas plus many screw top bottles. I was amazed that there was anything newer than 1910 in there, being there was no record of a building standing on that lot after the fire.

Later, I concluded that the hotel lot had been sold to the guy who rebuilt the pool hall. I was hoping the age would change once we got to the bottom of the pit but it didn't. It appeared to not be an outhouse pit either, but a junk pit. Aside from post-Prohibition bottles, there was part of a Model T frame in it and a sickle mower blade arm. After digging it down to about 6 feet and tunneling down to bottom at about 8 feet, we decided to fill it in and call it a day.



The collection from the pool hall dig.

I had taken the following day off to go walk the river, being that it was really low because of the drought. We were hoping to find some old bottles but didn't find anything remarkable in that category, but we did end up with some old bison bones. The following day we went back to the bar lot. The bar was closed that day so we decided to try the pit in the parking lot plus an ash pit that was on the edge of it. We decided to dig the ash pit first, because I don't have much faith in ash pits around here. I figured we would be worn out later and the adrenaline of being in the better pit would keep me going. We were met by Gary, who talked with us for a while. He then said that he would open the pits up for us with the tractor.

He drove up to the site and took a few scoops. As mentioned, this was not an excavator; it was a tractor with a sort of loader bucket on it. The bucket measured about 8-feet across. Every scoop he took

must have saved us a half hour or more. He got down to about the 3-foot level and started hitting ashes. I still wasn't convinced that the site had much potential, so I asked him to take another scoop. At that point I noticed some glass and thought we should start digging by hand. In no time we were pulling out bottles. Most of them were ketchup and liquor with the occasional slick drug store bottle. We also found a few A.M. Smith wine bottles from Minneapolis. They were dated 1914. Based on the other pieces we were finding, I would say that was definitely around the time the trash was thrown in. The pit was deeper and wider than I had expected and had significantly more than the probe had indicated.

I started tunneling across and noticed a large crock fragment. Though it was just a fragment I was excited, being that I don't usually see pieces that big. I thought it had to be from a 20-gallon crock. I tried



TOP: Tom in the middle of an excavation.

ABOVE: Tom with the 20-gallon Red Wing crock.

pulling at it but it was lodged. I didn't want to risk breaking anything around it so I started to carefully dig it out. Bucket after bucket full of dirt the crock piece was exposed. I pulled it out and didn't see any stenciling, though I noticed some more pieces. I kept digging and eventually had a pieced-together 20-gallon Red Wing crock. It seemed to be an earlier slip-glazed example with a double birch leaf design.

By now we were at about the 6-foot level and had just about finished the site. I was cleaning out the edges when I saw the mug base of what appeared to be a soda bottle. I cleared out around it and carefully pulled it out. It was another American Bottling Association Hutch from Fargo. It was mint. I felt accomplished. Hutchinson soda bottles are very difficult to find around North Dakota. This is likely due to late settlement and the cold climate. Though the ABA Hatches are more common among the N.D. Hatches, it was still a great find. What's even more remarkable is that it was just about the last bottle pulled from the site. In no time the pit was finished and we called Gary, who came with the tractor to fill it in.

I thought we would have had time to dig the other but it was already getting late. We decided to leave the other one for tomorrow. I made the two hour drive back to drop off Jake and then headed home. I was driving 4-5 hours per day plus digging and was exhausted. We were getting permissions to dig and had plenty of dig sites lined up though, so it was definitely worth it.

Jake decided to take the following couple of days off. I asked my Dad if he would help out and he agreed. We made the hour and a half long drive there and opened up the other site on the pool hall lot, which I was certain was a privy. This one was also in the parking lot, so we had to use a jackhammer bit on the hammer drill to break up the gravel. After getting through the gravel I dug it down several feet only to find post-Prohibition machine-made bottles. This was somewhat discouraging. I knew that it could have earlier pieces the deeper I went, so I decided to dig a test hole down. In the process I found a 1940s ACL 7-UP bottle. The bottle was from the Jamestown Bottling Works of Jamestown, N.D. I am a soda bottle collector, so finding this was a bit of a prize.

Though the pit wasn't as early as I had hoped, I thought maybe there would be a

rare ACL in there somewhere. A rare one from this part of the country would be a Gilles Beverages from Wahpeton, N.D. Those bottles are from the 1930s and have Snow White's Seven Dwarves featured on them. I know they are extremely rare and the odds of digging one are slim to none, though I continued. I dug around for a while and after another hour or so had seen enough. I dug it down to bottom at 7 or 8 feet and didn't even find another piece of an ACL soda. We filled it back in and opened up another spot that I thought would have good potential.

This next one was directly behind where the hotel had once stood next door. It probed out at roughly 4- by 4-foot wide and I had sunk a 7.5-foot probe into it. I thought for sure this would be the jackpot. I started digging and found a few slick tooled top pharmacy bottles. This was a good start. I kept digging and at about the 4- to 5-foot mark started finding early machine-made bottles. They post-dated the bottles I had found in the upper layers, which was strange. All the layers seemed to be intact, so I had ruled out the possibility that it had been disturbed. There also wasn't much in it.

Don't get me wrong, it was loaded with seeds and was no doubt a well-used pit, it's just that there wasn't more than a few broken plate fragments and a few small machine-made cork top and screw-top bottles. I kept digging in hopes that the site would produce.

Editor's note: Little did Tom know, but he was just about to uncover the Holy Grail. In the next issue of AB&GC magazine, the story continues as Tom digs among his 1,300 privies.

CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE!