

Lechauweki Springs to the Coalmine Digs

*Where are the old houses?
The old privies? Stay tuned*

By Rick Weiner, a collector from Fountain Hill, Pennsylvania

I recently moved to Fountain Hill, Pennsylvania. It is located just outside of the historic town of Bethlehem, better known as the “Christmas City.” Fountain Hill is a very small town, population 4,700, give or take a few heads. The area that is Fountain Hill is made up of only 478 ½ acres, which breaks down to about three-quarters of one square mile.

My first thought when moving here was, “Where are all the old houses?” The house I recently purchased was built in 1959. Not a good year for privy digging old bottles. The ongoing joke among my digging friends is that my house is as ancient as time itself. Why? Because 1959 was the year I was born. I thought it was funny for a couple of seconds. What fun would life be without the wisecrackers?

When you participate in the art of privy digging, you are always on the lookout for old houses. If I am driving with my wife and she says, “Oh, look at that cute old stone home,” without hesitation my mind drifts right to the backyard, wondering where the privies might be located and what goodies they may hold. In my opin-

ion, any house newer than 1880 is not worth thinking about, let alone digging. The reason? Plumbing.

Plumbing could have made it to that area around that time and the privies most likely would have been dipped out. Then a big metal drain pipe would have been installed in the pit wall for drainage from the main house. This scenario is very bad for the 21st-century outhouse digger. The privy most likely would have been “compromised,” cleaned out to the bottom. Then most likely all of the old stuff we look for is taken and dumped elsewhere. To avoid this disaster we try and get permission from the old houses. Preferably from the 1850s to 1880s.

One day while I was riding around in my truck with my basset hound, Willy, I noticed a neat little park nestled back in the woods about three blocks from my house. It had a strange name on the sign, “Lechauweki Springs.” I decided to park the truck and take Willy for a quick walk. As we walked up the crooked stone path through the woods I spotted a weathered wooden gazebo in the middle of a little, slow-running creek. I thought this was

pretty cool and decided to take Willy down the wooden bridge to the center of the building.

I knew nothing about this place at the time but I had that gut feeling there was some interesting history about it. I began to wander around and enjoy the crisp fall day when I spotted a huge stone cave of sorts. Willy enjoyed sniffing around the leaves on the inside. No doubt he smelled a curious fellow canine that explored the cave before him.

I then spotted something sticking out of the ground at the base of the hill. It was a picture/sign of a big old building. As I read the description, I began to get excited. It turns out there used to be three huge hotels sitting on this exact spot in 1875. There was a little more information about the park and its weird name was written at the bottom of the plaque. The curiosity about “Lechauweki Springs” made me search even beyond these plaques.

I visited the local library and found out a great deal of information. I learned that the Lechauweki Springs Summer Resort was built by a Philadelphian, John

Smylie Jr., a contractor who built many splendid structures, including the three Lechauweki Springs hotels that stood in the park. The remarkable resort had three large fancy buildings that were built on a 65-acre stretch of land. There are only five acres of that land accessible today. It is owned by the borough of Fountain Hill and is used as a passive park. Dog walking, nature walks and just having a day out in the sun are all the park is used for by the folks of Bethlehem.

Construction of the huge resort got underway in the early 1870s. Smylie was in charge. He was also the owner of a nearby factory called Shive Works where he employed fifty people.

At the start of 1876 the Lechauweki holiday park, which up to then had only been run through the summer months, started opening the gates year-round. In August of 1876, close to 200 people checked into the new summer woodland escape. They used a horse and carriage, light cream in color with a shiny silk milky interior, that moved the waiting guests from Bethlehem to the springs.

The main buildings were built from a brainstorm Smylie had whipped up. It could hold 160 guests, and two of the buildings had three floors and some fancy wrap-around porches. From the newspaper ads, the bedrooms were very large with bright paned windows, some of which were colored stained glass. Five private cottages were located a few hundred yards from the resort. These buildings were mainly for the out-of-town guests that planned to visit the park for longer than one day. Three lookout platforms were built on the side of the mountain at the resort. These large stands gave visitors views of the surrounding countryside and the distant Lehigh mountain. For all this, guests paid a whopping \$2.50 a day, or \$12.75 per week, in May and June. In the hot months of July and August, the hotel fees jumped to \$3.50 each day, and \$15 for the week, a lot of moola in the 1870s!

The large main building, likely the one where the stone walls have been uncovered, was built halfway up a slope covered with mountain ferns, wildflowers, honeysuckle and acres of hardwoods. There was a second, smaller building located nearby. That was most likely used as the workers' station. Directly below the largest slope stood the main building. Near it was a babbling spring which flows to this day. At the time, the water flowed through three large spring-fed ponds, which were



Famous Clyde Run Whiskey bottle

filled with assorted trout; brook, brown, and rainbow. The last pond ended in a turbulent waterfall. The water emptied into a larger pond, and a white wooden pavilion sat dead center. This was considered the resting area. The mountain spring water was the reason for this resort's success.

Somewhere around 1880, the hotel was beginning to lay metal pipes to draw water from the mountain springs. An 1876 advertisement had made much of the water's supposed medicinal proper-

ties: "The agreeable taste of this water is mainly due to the nitrates contained in it and has been found remarkably beneficial in kidney and nervous afflictions to the body. For dyspepsia and bowel complaints it is unequalled."

Business at Lechauweki Springs eventually slowed down to a crawl. Newspaper accounts said that business was "only fair" in 1881-82. Sometime in the early 1890s, a massive fire destroyed the entire resort. Ten years later, the property was sold and afterward used to bottle the water.

Little evidence remains of the Crystal Water Co., and in later years the water from the springs was piped to nearby homes, but this practice came to a halt many years ago when Fountain Hill began to get its water from Bethlehem's supply.

There is very little information about Lechauweki Springs, whose founders borrowed the Indian word from the nearby river, which means "where there are forks." A newspaper article from 1876 stated, "The location is on the Lehigh Mountain, one mile from Bethlehem, Pa., and the healthfulness of the vicinity cannot be surpassed east of the Mississippi." The water from the springs was supposed to bring health and vitality to whoever raised a glass full of its natural goodness to their lips.

With this newfound history on Lechauweki Springs, I had to look for the cottages that housed the visitors of the resort. When I first moved to my new home I was very busy fixing things up and getting stuff moved in. But I needed to take breaks here and there — after all, I used to be a union worker.

One day I decided to take Willy for a ride and swing by the area, and I followed the map, which noted there was a row of houses a stone's throw away from Lechauweki. I took one glance and spotted five white homes that looked a lot older than any of the homes on that block. With a quick check on the Lehighcounty.org

website, I found that all five houses were built in 1875. Bingo!

My search was over, but now I just had to work some door-knocking magic into my schedule and try to get permission in one of these places of unknown history. But as I proceeded I found out it wouldn't be so easy.

I began to knock on doors on the "Lechauweki row." Each time I would get no answer. For the first year I lived in my new house I would try my luck on the row. One morning I decided to go and give a knock on the house at the end of the row. You never know what to expect, but this time was one of those lucky days. The owner came out, I told him what I do in my hobby and showed him a few pictures of bottles I dug. After that, he took me to his backyard.

When I got to the end of the walkway my jaw dropped. He had no yard! A huge garage covered the area where the privies would be. I guess he didn't fully understand the ins and outs of outhouse digging. We had a little talk about my findings and then I was on my way. I did get permission but did not get the pit. That is how the privy crumbles, sometimes. That one was off my list. I had four more chances to go.

The work week was upon us. I dabbled in landscaping part-time. Usually, I never knew what job we were doing until we got to the site. Our shop is five minutes from my house.

While driving towards Lechauweki Street, I started to daydream about the houses again. Later that morning I found myself looking directly at the white houses again. We were doing a job right across the street! Right away all thoughts of work left my mind.

I had a plan. I was going to keep an eye on all the houses throughout the day and intercept anyone leaving or entering. I had to look like I was a little interested

in work but in reality, I was lost in bottle land. The job we were doing was hard and heavy. We were building a huge retaining wall and I had to keep some of my attention on what we were doing for safety reasons.

A few hours passed and I did not see a soul on the other side of the street. But then it happened! A girl came out of the house directly across from us. She started putting a new mailbox up on the front of her house. This was my opportunity. So I started walking over.

"Hi, it looks like you could use an extra hand." She accepted. To make a long story short I did my thing and I got permission. I firmly believe in the "right place at the right time" theory topped off with some help from the bottle gods. The next day I went over to her house at lunchtime and probed out two outhouse pits. It was all working out, and we planned on going over that weekend to dig.

But alas, this dig would never take place. The girl changed her mind because she was worried about her little dog, Snuffy, being in the yard while we dug. I tried to the best of my ability to sway her but to no avail. She had it stuck in her mind that her dog would be swallowed up by the canyon-size hole that we would be digging. It was hard to walk away, but it was time to move forward.

It would be some time before I tried again. These houses were always on my mind though. I would drive by that block every other day on my way home and dream of digging behind one of those old white houses. I was always thinking and plotting where and how to get permission to dig there. I also had a long list of potential digs in other towns. All I needed was a kick in the rear to get moving.

PHOTOS (from top):

Two pigeons enjoying some rest and getting a great view of the proceedings.

Badger and Gary starting to dig in.

Badger down in the pit.





As I get older it gets harder to get the adrenaline to flow. All I had to do was hop in the truck and go knock on some strangers' doors and ask if I could dig up their yards.

The more I think about that whole process the weirder it sounds to me. To the non-privy digger it sounds even stranger. And yet I have done it hundreds of times with great success. While getting ready to head down to Catty one day I received a text from an out-of-town bottle digger friend, Gary. He had a few permissions and wanted to know if my buddy, Badger, and I were interested in coming up for the day.

He lived up in the coal region, Mt. Carmel, a few hours away. I accepted without even asking Badger because I knew he would be in. For him to refuse a guest dig would be rarer than a chicken with teeth.

We planned the trip to the coal-cracker town for the upcoming weekend. I would have to put the Lechauweki houses on the back burner until I got back.

The weather for the upcoming weekend was going to be cloudy and miserable with a seventy percent chance of cold rain. But that never put a damper on our digging spirits. I had my trusty pop-up digging tent ready to make everything alright. The trip to Mt. Carmel was anything but smooth.

The GPS decided it was going to have a mind of its own and go haywire when we got to the coal region. It took us to "Minersville, Pa.," fifteen miles out of our way.

I have always wanted to visit Minersville, because my grandparents and my dad lived there in the early years. It is a very old coal town with the potential for good

PHOTOS (from top):

Badger doing some serious excavating.

Author Rick Weiner gives a salute from the pit.

It is now officially time to dig.

privies. But this day we were just passing through. We had other privies to conquer — if we ever got there, that is.

With a little backtracking and some crazy backstreet driving, we got on the right path to Mt. Carmel. We would arrive at our first destination in 45 minutes. It was a big, three-story brick apartment building built in the 1860s. Gary and his buddy had probed this one before and didn't have any luck finding the pits.

One look at the place and I could see why. There was trash and busted sidewalks zig-zagging all over. It seemed like the yard was shared with the building next to it. I tried for an hour to locate a privy but it wasn't going to happen that day.

Gary had other permissions to go to so we didn't want to waste too much time in an unproductive spot. We were off to the next permission.

We all hopped in my truck, three deep, and I didn't have much elbow room because the middleman, Badger, was almost sitting on my lap. He's such an affectionate guy. The next location was only a mile away. Gary told us we would have to move this old 1975 rusted Ford pickup to get to the sunken spot in a driveway. The keys were hidden in the ashtray. It sounded like a plan ...

But that plan would not unfold. The battery was dead. Life is never that easy. We tried to push it, but I noticed it had a flat! The only thing that was going to move this beast was a tank, and we didn't have one on hand that day. The privy under the truck would have to wait.

We each grabbed a probe and headed to the two yards. Gary had permission to do both of them and both were abandoned. I really like digging abandoned homes, as there is nothing to worry about. No people are peeking out of the windows and there are no homeowners asking questions. That makes for a nice stress-free digging experience.

These homes were huge, three-story brick structures built in the 1860s, similar to the first one we probed with the zig-zagging sidewalks. Today was not going so great with trying to find these privies. I hate when the doom-and-gloom cloud comes over me, knowing we might be going home empty-handed. And these two yards ended on the “skunked list,” but we can’t say we didn’t try!

Gary had one more card up his sleeve. If this didn’t pan out we would be going home with empty bottle bags. The drive to this spot was a 45-minute run. I prayed it would pan out and the pit would be loaded. If we could find it, that is. The first yard we probed I hit a privy right away in the back by the fence. We all jumped in and took turns digging the fill out. Glass started to appear and we all got that instant rush thinking it was going to happen.

The building we were digging was called the “Heroin Hotel,” and all of the spent syringes below the windows reinforced the name. It was another apartment complex built in the 1870s. Things were going smoothly in the first hour but as we dug deeper I noticed that there were no ash and fill layers in the hole. It was all mixed up. That can only mean one thing, the hole was dug by another privy gangster.

We had come to the last straw. It would be getting dark in three hours and by the time we found another place to dig it would be too late. We also had a two-hour drive ahead of us. I threw in the towel and decided to head to the truck and get ready for the ride home. I parked and made a beeline towards one of the abandoned buildings for a quick nature break. Two hours is a long time for us old people.

When I came around the corner I saw Gary pounding away. He was probing the first lot we tried, the spot where we couldn’t find anything. Before I could say “We are heading home,” Gary yelled out, “I got one!”

Badger and I looked at each other with disbelief and said, “Yeah, right.” But then I saw the probe shoot into the ground like it was going through thin air. Right then I knew it was a pit, no question about it! I guess we weren’t leaving after all. That is how things work out in this hobby of privy digging. When you least expect it you are in over your head.

We all jumped into action. Everyone grabbed a shovel and started to dig around the perimeter. All of the shovels came out with good signs. Ash and fill! We knew we didn’t have a whole lot of time to dig this one. The agreement Gary had with the owner was that we dig it and fill it back in on the same day. A remodeling crew was coming to drop off building supplies in the yard the next day. So we were literally on a timer. I knew we would be driving home in the dark on this one. That was fine with me, Badger could drive. I am as blind as a bat at night.

I heard someone talking in the distance, a drunk guy from next door staggered over and asked what we were doing. I didn’t feel like going into detail because we had such little time. So I said, “We are burying my buddy’s dog, please say a prayer.” He left right away. I had to do something, as we had work to do.

In no time we were down to about five feet. Good vibes were starting to flood our minds. Gary pulled out a Warranted flask from the sidewall. It was registering 1900s-1890s at five feet. We prayed the glass would get older as we went down.

The ash and dirt pile was building on the blue tarp and my negative outlook on this whole outing had started to change. As we dug deeper the old glass started to reveal itself. It turned out to be a big, double-seated stone-liner. I always loved the look of an old stone-lined privy.

PHOTOS (from top):

- E. Eising & Co. bottle from New York.
- A Lackawacky bottle is unearthed.
- The Mother’s Friend appears.





There were so many booze bottles and very little household items in this pit. We were pretty sure this had to be a tavern or a hotel outhouse.

I started to get that unexpected exciting feeling. The unknown will do that to a digger. With the next shovel out the age of the pit changed in the blink of an eye! I love when this happens. It went from the 1890s back to the late 1880s. I was pretty sure it would be a good privy. Since it was a stone-liner they most likely used it for many years. We prayed the bottom would be untouched from the dreaded honey dippers, leaving at least a few good keepers for us to take home.

It was my turn to drop into the hole. I was barely settled in my spot when my short shovel tapped glass. We all know that unmistakable “hollow tink.” I put the shovel aside and searched for my hand scratcher. Wouldn't you know it? I must have buried it. I am famous for that blunder.

I felt around and came up with a six-inch metal piece. It looked like a tine from a pitchfork but for now, it was a scratcher. I carefully dug around the object and right away I knew it was a fruit jar. I am not a big jar fan but I'm sure someone would want to give it a home.

As I dug further I realized it was not just a plain aqua jar. It was light yellow! My mind changed instantly to, “I hope I get this in the pick!” And to put the icing on the cake it was a Mason 1858. Things were looking up.

I dug for a half-hour, filling buckets and sending them up. A few more keepers were added to the pile and a lot of “slicks” were blended in. It was time for me to get out of this claustrophobic time capsule and stretch my legs. I have been digging privies for many years and after awhile

cramping is inevitable. Once my legs resemble soft pretzels I know it is time to make my way to the top.

It was time for Badger to get in and do some digging. When I get out of the hole I don't want to do anything else but sit on a bucket and look over the finds that were scattered about. I'm too old to jump right in and pull buckets, I need a little healing time. But what usually happens is, I am back up and moving in ten minutes. Gotta get that dirt moving if we wanted to get home before midnight.

Dave was down in the depths filling buckets at an alarming rate. We needed that speed right now, and we were making great time when all of a sudden the glass did a disappearing act.

But there was no need to fret, we had a lot of this pit left to dig. Gary pulled up bucket No. 7 and, low and behold, some bottles were laying on top. I guess Badger wanted to surprise us. There were three bottles, all were “Famous Clyde Run Whiskey” from Philadelphia. There were two racehorses with jockeys abroad. Pretty neat bottles. We each had one to take home.

With a few more buckets up from Badger it was Gary's turn to drop in the hole. The glass was really starting to flow now. Unfortunately, the sun was gone and it would be dark in an hour or so. But we all had headlights and handheld flashlights, so that would give us a little more time.

Badger and I were up top going through the fill pile to see if anything interesting would pop out. Back in the day, I used to screen a lot of the pit dirt in search of old goodies, but after a while, that becomes too much like work. And we have enough work trying to finish off this giant stone-lined monster. We didn't hear too much from Gary down in the privy.

Every digger is different, some dig in silence and save the excitement for when they get out of the hole, and some go



PHOTOS (from top):

Three Mile Island doll.

Another treasure from the privy.

Lucky horseshoe pin.



Safe Cure knock-off.



Yellow 1858 Mason jar.



Eagle Hutch.

crazy at the slightest hint of a bottle sticking out of the wall. I have a friend that resembles digger No. 2. When he sees a piece of colored glass I hear this coming out of the hole. “Wo Wo Wo Wo Wo!” Everyone has his degree of excitement I guess.

Gary was definitely in the No. 1 category. He was as quiet as a church mouse in the pit. He wouldn't even answer us when we asked, “Anything good yet?” We continued to scan the mountain of fill when all of a sudden Badger chimed out, “Gold!”

I looked over and tried to hold back the laughter. I tossed a modern Thomas Jefferson gold dollar coin in the pile hours before and forgot about it. I knew eventually the Badger would sniff it out. They should know better. I am famous for those little pranks, you would think they would wise up over the years, but I get them every time!

Nightfall was now a half-hour away. Gary was still in the hole and there was

still dead silence. I had to peek in to see if he was still moving; it was that quiet.

Just then I heard a strange sound coming from the right. It was a fluttering type of sound. As I looked towards the abandoned house I saw two pigeons roosting on the window's edge. They knew nightfall was near and were settling down for the evening. I was just ready to wake Gary up and tell him we had to get a move on if we were going to fill this pit in by midnight.

Before I was able to voice my opinion he yelled out, “Bucket up.” I guess that was the sign to pull the empty bucket up and start to get ready to fill it in. But as Badger pulled up the bucket I heard some glass tinkling and clanking.

Low and behold, the bucket was filled with bottles and there was not an ounce of dirt! There was an array of bottles, some of which we didn't have in the pile. With that last bucket out, Gary made his way up the ladder.

Now it was time for the work we didn't enjoy. But it has to be done each time we dig a privy, so why complain. Gary stood by the hole and said, “Hey, I forgot one.” He reached into the side pocket of his pants and pulled out a bottle. It was an amber flask. I thought it was just another common amber strap-side. But when we shone the light down I noticed a weak embossing on the front. There was a “safe” dead center in a slug plate!

Gary didn't notice the strike because it was dark in the pit. This turned out to be a Warner's Safe Cure, the best bottle out of this privy. We all did our picks for the day and each of us ended up going home with some cool bottles. There was still that nasty task of filling in, but it is always less of a chore when good bottles come to the top.

