

A Line from the Past

By Rick Weiner

An unexplained connection



I

have been digging up old bottles for most of my life, and I know what it takes to find the good spots that give us a better opportunity to get into the older glass.

If you do not do the research to locate these bottle graveyards, you will not reap the rewards anytime soon. That being said, I have been going through a bit of a slump myself in that particular area. I have hit an all-time low, even with many mediocre to great digs under my belt. We just have not been able to locate many privies lately. I have garnered many permissions, but a cloud of bad luck has been looming overhead.

The last place we attempted to dig was in East Pickleville, Pennsylvania. The town looked very promising. It was a nice little old village, established in the early 1800s, and it looked like the bottles should be flowing from these outhouse holes like nobody's business. But that was not the case here because we could not locate one single privy! The ground felt like solid rock

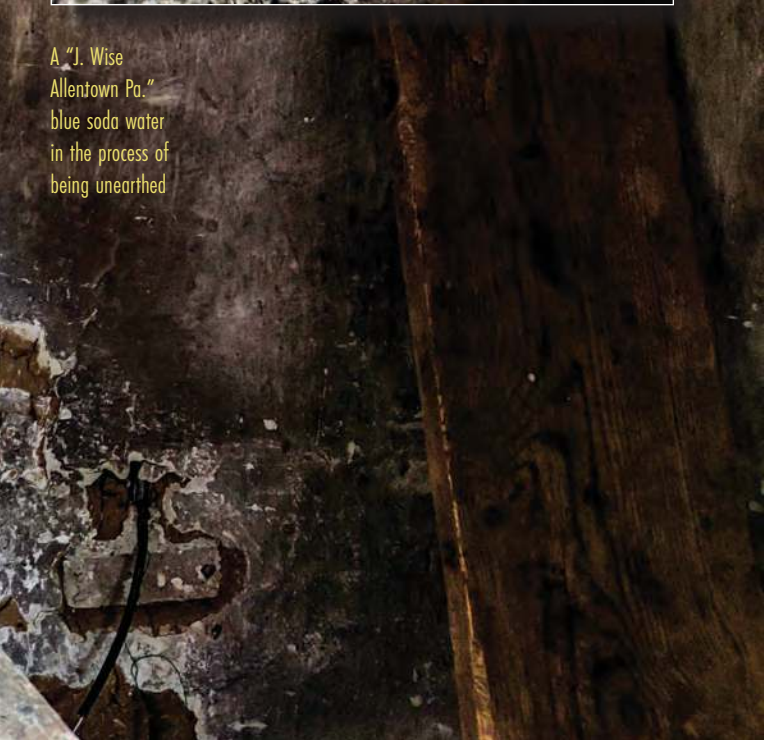
everywhere. When I tried to stick the probe in, I received an 8.2 aftershock from the vibration on the hollow handle!

I started to wonder if there were any privies in these yards at all. If we were having a hard time probing now, I am sure the people of the past had an even harder time digging these 10-foot-plus pits through solid clay and rock to make an outhouse for their daily use. When all else failed, they would usually use the "clean-out method": they would put buckets under the back of the outhouse where the seat holes were located. Then the buckets would be hauled away and dumped in the woods somewhere. These types of outhouses would not produce any bottles, or other types of artifacts for that matter, and "we despise the clean-out method!" It is a privy digger's nightmare.

I continued stabbing the ground, hitting nothing but hard slag and stone. Then, suddenly, the probe felt different as it quickly went down to the handle! Could our luck be changing? We were about to find out.



A "J. Wise
Allentown Pa."
blue soda water
in the process of
being unearthed



The work continued like any other privy dig, and the ash and fill began to pile up. Then, I tapped something with the shovel, which didn't feel like glass. It felt more like some sort of plastic material! We were high up at the beginning of the pit, so we were not jumping to any conclusions. I would be worried if we found plastic deeper in the hole. That would tell us the pit had been dug and filled in by a rival digger. So, we still had hope. The object was starting to take shape...it was odd-looking, and I noticed it was yellow. My digging partner Paul kept asking me what it was, but I didn't want to say it just yet. I needed to uncover more to make sure I didn't imagine things. Finally, what I saw matched my thoughts, and it was time to identify. One more time, Paul chimed in, "What is it, man?" I reluctantly replied, "It's a freaking yellow telephone, that's what it is!" He looked at me like I was coo-coo for cocoa puffs. Then with one hard tug, I pulled it out of the ground! It was definitely an old rotary-style desktop telephone with the cord intact! This certainly was one of the strangest things to come out of a privy, and we have found some real doozies in the past.

The phone was tossed aside, and we continued to dig. We worked at it for a while with no signs of glass or remnants of anything old. This would also be the case when we finally hit the bottom of this pit. The only thing that we found in this privy was a yellow telephone! It must have been tossed in when they filled the sink-hole around the 1970s.

We knew there were other privies in this yard, but since we probed every square inch and hit hard stone everywhere, we were at a loss as to where to try next. Paul was walking the yard searching for a spot when I had an idea to lighten up the depressing situation. I picked up the phone and spoke to the receiver, "Hello, do you know where the privies are in this yard?" Paul looked at me like I was nuts (once again), but he knew how I joked around all the time, so he shrugged it off and went right back to probing. To make the prank look more realistic, I went to the truck to get an old amber whiskey cylinder that had been lying in the bed for a few months. I held the phone, ripped the cord out of the base, and then stuck the cut end in the top of the bottle. I held the receiver in my hand and returned to the yard. Then I started my routine all over again. "Hello, can you please tell me where the outhouses are located in this yard?" Again Paul had that look.

Just as I was about to defend my sanity, I heard something strange. It sounded like a very low static scratchy sound. Was it a bee or something stuck in this receiver? I heard it again, and it was no bee. I was just about to throw the gag phone in the bushes when I thought I heard a faint voice! I was in shock! I did feel lightheaded from the heat, lack of food and water, and maybe too many Red Bulls.

So I thought that might be the cause of my delusions. I didn't want to tell Paul because he already thought I was whacky, so I just played it cool. I listened hard to hear this voice again. When I finally made it out, I could not believe what I had heard! It was indeed a voice, but from where and how? I was on the other side of the yard, standing in shock, unable to move. I remember asking, "Hello, do you know where the privies are located in this yard?" or something along those lines. I was seriously joking when I did this. The voice spoke these words in a creepy low, monotone voice, almost like an old scratchy horn phonograph. "Hello, good sir, the outhouses in my yard were situated on the back alleyway by the old weeping tree; good day" then it went back to static. I was numb with fear and excitement at the same time, but I had to act on this. It would not be in my best interest to block this out. I knew I was not going crazy, well, not this time, anyway.



Paul was in the middle of the property probing in the hot sun, and I was making my way back to the alley. It almost felt like I was floating, my legs were moving but my mind was in a fog. When

I reached the alleyway, I told Paul to toss over the probe. I stuck it in the ground right where “I was told,” and Bam! Down it went! I jammed the rod under the alley next to the big old dead weeping willow, and the privy was there! Right where the creepy voice told me it was. My body felt like jello. Now Paul had no clue about this weird event. I was not sure I was going to tell him either. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to tell him? I had to keep it quiet for a while to protect my sanity anyway. Just for chits and giggles, I probed six feet away from the first pit and, once again, the probe sank to the handle! We had two privies ready to open up just like that.

Paul didn’t pay too much attention to my outhouse-finding skills because we both have found privies this quick in rough yards. It’s just a matter of “luck” and perseverance with a little bit of probing skill tossed in for good measure. But this time was different! I didn’t know what to do about this whole crazy situation. I figured I would have to shut it out of my mind, if that was at all possible, and concentrate on digging these two privies. After all, that is what we came here to do. I knew this would be the strangest privy dig ever. I resorted to taking half of a Xanax to function normally. My insides felt like liquid sloshing around, and my mind felt like a slinky going slow motion down the Great Wall of China.

I started to think about all of the things involved here. First of all, this was something that only happened in the Twilight Zone or the Outer Limits—take your pick. Second, could the voice I heard be someone or something that had used this outhouse before and lived back in the 1800s? I wasn’t sure I wanted to believe all of it, but how else could it be explained? I would have to let Paul in on it real soon because it was too much for my mind to handle alone. Maybe if I let the cat out of the bag, I would feel better about the whole thing. It was now or never.

I walked up behind him and started the conversation as best I could. “Paul, do you believe in spirits from the past?” I knew I could expect an answer right away since he had told me of a strange event that had happened to him at Gettysburg when he went on a family vacation. It was a long time ago, and I forgot the details, so I made him give me a refresher. It went something like this: Paul and his family took a trip to Gettysburg, Pa., in the summer of 2007. They rented a bungalow very close to the battlefield. While his family was sleeping, Paul went to the window and peered out, soaking in the rich history of Gettysburg. It was a very dark moonless night; the only lights visible were those from other scattered bungalows in the vicinity. He could not make out much, but as he turned to go back to bed, he heard an odd screeching noise and jerked his head back to the window to have a look.

What he saw was unexplainable. In the open field, was a fully dressed Civil War soldier with a ripped-up coat floating across the battlefield slightly above ground level, moving at a pretty good clip. The figure was in the form of a mist with a dim grayish light coming from within him. The apparition seemed to be on a mission to get somewhere. He was gone when he reached the tree line, like vapor disappearing into the air.

That kind of story is hard to make up, and, besides, Paul was not the type of guy to tell tall tales. So with that strange story out of the way, I decided to tell him everything that was happening with the phone. “Hey, Paul, I have been getting phone calls from the



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past.” I figured I would get to the point right away instead of beating around the lilac bush. Obviously, he thought I was joking even though he had just recounted the story of the misty soldier. Because, as I said, that is what I do regularly, joke. Why would this day be any different? As I tried to explain the madness, the phone rang; the timing was perfect! Paul’s jaw hit the dirt, but he still thought I was trying to pull a fast one on him until I handed him the receiver. I didn’t hear what the man was saying, but by the look on Paul’s face, I felt he was telling him the same thing he had told me. Paul took the phone away from his ear, he looked like he was in another world, and he pretty much was. He laid it on the ground.

“What the hell was that?” he mumbled in a low, almost intoxicated-sounding voice. I went through all the details of what I experienced, and we sat there looking at each other for a few minutes wondering what to do. When Paul began to believe 100%, we decided to do some tests. I was unsure if we should call or wait for them to contact us. Besides, I didn’t know how to reach them; there was no dial pad; we just had a receiver, a cord, and a bottle. I am glad I used a bottle for the prank effect. I was unsure if the bottle was needed to activate the phone from the past. What I did know was we were about to embark on one crazy adventure!

When we finished with the yard and got everything back to the original condition, we decided to test the phone in a place where we could not find the privies. Even with weeks of probing, we could not locate a single hole. There were not too many times when we would abandon a yard without finding the pits, but there were a few instances where we had no choice. These “ghost pits,” as we call them, are depressing to even think about. We took the time to get these hard-earned permissions, but we leave empty-handed. Today we would go back to one of the non-productive

yards and wait for the phone to do its thing. It even sounded crazy casually talking about it, like it's an everyday occurrence.

It was a hot Saturday in August, and we were ready to tackle a "ghost pit" yard. It was exciting knowing what happened at the last place, but the question was, will it work here? We were nervous as we strolled down the busted-up Victorian slate sidewalk that led to an old weather-beaten, half-standing shed. I had the bottle phone sticking out of the top of my backpack. I turned around and gave Paul the nod to do the deed. He picked up the receiver from the backpack like he was calling in an airstrike on a battlefield. It was more like a yard strike of sorts, a tactical strike to locate some privies! It is funny how we called these elusive privies "ghost pits" long before we found this strange phone. It was almost like it was meant to happen to us that day, as the almighty bottle gods planned. You know how the old saying goes, "things happen for a reason," but what in the world could be the reason for this unexplained craziness?

We left the probes in the truck and let the phone do its magic. If it were to work on this yard, I was pretty sure we would be in business for future permissions. Heck, we may never need a probe again! Paul got on the horn and waited. There was no sound or static whatsoever, just dead silence, and I mean dead. As Paul walked around the yard in a grid-like pattern, the phone stayed silent. Was this the end of our creepy little game? But I spoke too soon; suddenly, the scratchy static broke the silence; it sounded like an old ham radio trying to get a far-off signal. But there was no voice to tell us where the pits were. This went on for half an hour. I sat down on the steps to drink some water, then it happened! This time, a woman's voice rose over the static; she began to speak, "the privy to my yard is located by the big rock, have a pleasant day gentlemen," and then it went back to scratchy white noise and faded away. A lot of times, the voice was very faint.

OK, we got the directions, but there were no big rocks in this yard? I did a walk around and did not see any rocks whatsoever, small or large. I decided to get a Red Bull and think about this. Paul was walking by the back of the house, looking for any signs of a huge rock. It shouldn't be too hard to spot because the area was not that big; it was a typical row house yard. I sat on the high grass and guzzled my cold Red Bull. As I went to put my drink down, I laid my hand on something hard and uneven. I removed some grass and dirt from one side with a hand tool. I believe I found the big rock! The rock was buried from all of the years that the ground had changed. It was most likely filled and refilled with topsoil many times. As I took more dirt from around the rock, its size started to take shape. It was definitely a "big rock" and probably the only one in the yard.

I flagged Paul over and he agreed; it was definitely the spot. Now we just had to start digging around the boulder and verify there was an outhouse hole there. We still did not use the probes as we decided to use the phone exclusively. The homeowner came out and asked how things were going and if it was hard trying to find the outhouse in her yard. We looked at each other with sneaky grins and said, "Oh, it's going great; it's almost like a little yellow birdie told us where to dig." If she only knew. She offered us the use of her large patio table umbrella to put over the dig site since it was going to climb close to 100 degrees that day. I graciously

Freshly dug "Seitz & Bro. Easton Pa." soda water in blue glass.



Freshly dug and cleaned "Summer Tree" pictorial flask.



accepted her offer and set it up over the big rock. As the shoveling continued, we were still yet to get the vibe of any privy being there. Since we said we would not use the probes, we had to read the signs as we dug.

There was a three-foot trench around the big rock and no signs of “old life.” We were right on the fringe of calling it quits. Then, suddenly, I hit a crumbly red clay brick with the shovel. Signs of old bricks are always a good indication of humans from the past being there. We concentrated on digging out the brick. It turned out we were digging on the outside of a brick-lined privy! The huge rock boulder was smack dab in the middle of the privy blocking the center off like a giant cork! While digging around it, we had no idea it was that big!

Now another dilemma had taken center stage. “How the hell were we going to get this mammoth thing out?” My first thought was my truck and a chain. I just hoped the chain I had was long enough to make it from the alley to the rock-stuffed privy. We have done things like this a few times before. You have to get inventive when it comes to digging outhouses; it doesn’t always go as smoothly as you would like, as a wrench is often tossed in the mix to make things interesting, in this case, a mammoth rock!

The operation was in full swing. Everything was working fine, Paul gave me the hand signals, and I crept forward an inch at a time in my little S10 pickup. Before we knew it, the mini-mountain was sitting smack dab in the middle of the lady’s lawn. At times like this, I start getting nervous about the homeowner coming out and seeing the craziness that is going on in her lovely manicured backyard, and then we heard the words, “Oh my god, that’s enough! Stop what you’re doing” but then reality kicked in. If she made us leave on the spot, who would remove the massive bolder and clean up the mess in her lovely yard? We had her where we wanted her—on our side! She would just have to trust our skills as privy diggers.

OK, the time had come to check out what was under the rock. As we walked back to the dig spot, we were expecting to see ash and fill to the top, but what we saw shocked us silly! We were staring down an open five-and-one-half-foot-wide brick liner. It seemed to go down at least 20 feet, maybe more. My first thought was that we need a ladder to test the bottom of this thing if that was the bottom we were seeing. I had a 24-foot extension ladder at home, but that would mean I would have to drive 25 minutes to get it. The neighbor must have overheard our dilemma and was kind enough to offer us his ladder. I love it when people are friendly and understanding, as it makes the world a better place, especially in the privy-digging world. He was also very curious to see what was in this bottomless pit in his neighbor’s yard. Sometimes curiosity killed the cat and the neighbor. He probably has the same size hole in his yard. When this one is filled in, and the yard looks good, we will lay on the charm and try to get into his brick time capsule.

After a little small talk with the neighbor, we had the ladder in the pit, and I was making my way down into the dark, damp void. With each step, I was praying for good things to happen. Bottles on the bottom would definitely be on top of the list. As I stepped off the last rung, I felt nothing but air! I was a bit freaked out by

this. When the ladder was sent down, we figured it was on the bottom because it stopped dead and felt solid. But that wasn’t the case. With the use of my trusty pocket pen flashlight, I saw what the problem was. The ladder was sitting on a rock ledge. They seemed to have build the brick around a big rock protruding from the wall. Instead of trying to pull or break it out, the original diggers of the outhouse just left it there to save on the hassle of starting to dig another hole. We have encountered many privies with large rocks protruding from the sides and sometimes even the bottom. As I shined the thin beam of light downward, I could not spot any sign of the “true” bottom. It was turning into a dangerous situation. The ladder was hanging on by one rung, resting on the rock. I had to slowly and carefully climb to the top, extend the ladder, and pray it was a 24-foot hole because that is what the size of this ladder was. Right now, we were at 12 feet.

‘With a quick scan of the bottom, I saw something pretty unbelievable: colored sodas everywhere, laying on the top and half sticking out of the fill.

I made my way up and out of that hairy situation, a little shaken but ready to go on. We unhooked the rope and the two hooks and let the ladder drop. “Klank, klank, klank,” it went down and stopped with a thud. “That must be the bottom” if it wasn’t, that would have left us with no other option but to abandon this crazy undertaking. It was time to flip the coin to see who would descend into this death trap. The coin was air-bound...“heads,” I called it, and I lost. I seemed to get the shaft once again, and it was only fitting. Déjà vu.

This time I was going to get to the bottom of this beast. While going down, I kept looking up and saw the hole getting smaller and smaller. As I stepped off the last rung, I was finally on solid footing. I couldn’t see too much because my flashlight was going dead. I yelled up to Paul to drop down a “scratcher.” I made sure I was hugging the wall so I didn’t get knocked on the head; even though I was wearing a hard hat, bad things could happen in deep pits. He let it loose, and I heard a loud “smash!!” I shined the beam in the vicinity of the sound and saw a blue squat soda smashed into three pieces! With a quick scan of the bottom, I saw something pretty unbelievable: colored sodas everywhere, laying on the top and half sticking out of the fill. These things don’t happen daily in the bottle-digging world. Hell, they don’t happen in a lifetime!

We were just scratching the surface, but there was a chance that the blobs we found on top were the only bottles in the pit. But, by the way it felt, my guess was most likely wrong. I reached down and started to pull out soda after soda with my three-prong

digger. Paul was getting antsy up top. I could tell he wanted to get down into this bottle gold mine and start pulling stuff out, but I needed one more swipe of the dig tool, and with that swipe, a 12-sided dark green blob just rolled right into view. It was a J. Z. Hockman from Philadelphia, one we had never seen before.

I started to wonder if only sodas and beers were in this privy. Sometimes people would dump large amounts of bottles they had lying around in their barns, sheds, etc. I often daydream about this phenomenon. The scenario goes something like this: The fellow's wife is hounding him to death to clean out all of the empty bottles from the barn he had been saving for some time. Then in a fit of anger because of his wife's heckling, he grabs the boxes of colored blob-top sodas and dumps them straight down the outhouse hole when they are filling it in for the last time, getting ready for another pit. Chanting, "There ya are, ya happy woman?" Anything could have happened and that just sets these wonderful digs up for us, the future outhouse diggers. There is so much history to think about in this hobby. That is what makes it so alluring to me.

This dig turned into a long night-shift operation. There were so many bottles, and the time was flying by. We had to break out the heavy-duty headlamps and flashlights to pierce the darkness. I had an idea, so I suggested we use an old whale oil lamp we found in another privy for light. I just happen to have a jug of modern lamp oil and an assortment of old lamp parts in my truck. I had them with me because I was going to sell some parts to Badger, a buddy of mine who collects antique lamps.

It felt like we were digging in the past with that old lamp burning at the bottom of the outhouse. With all of this excitement going on, we forgot about the "phone" and what we would do about this weird item. I had no intention of telling anyone else about it; they would think it was pure poppycock. Besides, I wanted to keep using it as long as it still worked.

As Paul dug the pit, I decided to walk around the neighborhood and check out a few potential yards. Since there was hardly any dirt to haul up, I figured he would be down there a while running his fingers through the colored beers and sodas. It was 11 pm, and I guessed there would be no one awake to get permission from, so I did a little "yard shopping." I would check out a house, and if it looked good, then I would knock on doors the next day and try to get permission. I had so much caffeine in me that I could walk and look all night long, but I couldn't forget Paul back at the open privy in case anything went wrong.

It was almost becoming an obsession. As I wandered the streets and alleys in the cloak of darkness, checking out the old homes on the block, I had a crazy thought. I even started to talk out loud; no one was around, so what the hell? "That's a perfect house that looks to be 1860-ish. I should check it out." I acted impulsively and jumped over this low busted-up, split-rail fence. It was now midnight, and the streets were completely dead. I figured no one would see me if I took a quick walk in the yard and asked the "phone" where the privies were. I knew it was trespassing, but I was not going to dig or disturb the property. I had to reassure myself I was not doing anything wrong when I knew damn well I was!



Variety "Easton Pa." soda water bottles in green glass.



"F. Seitz Easton Pa." soda water bottle in blue-green glass.



Left to right: "Seitz & Bro.," "Kohl & Beans," "G.A. Kohl" and "Seitz & Bro." all "Easton, Pa." in blue and green glass.

But the allure of that contraption from the past took over my better judgment.

Before I knew it, I was in the yard, pacing up and down with the phone to my ear. If someone were to see me, they would call the asylum rather than the cops. Soon I heard very low static but no voice. I was getting a little nervous, but I kept moving. I planned to locate the privy tonight and then go back and knock on the door in the morning to try and gain permission. Just a few more steps, and if all I heard was silence on the contraption, I was ready to call it quits. But all of a sudden the phone spoke! "The outhouse to this homestead is back by the...." It just cut out; no more static, just dead silence. In a split second, I was bombarded with bright lights! Oh my god, it was the cops! It was almost like the phone knew the police were there. How was I going to explain this one?

The tall officer spoke, "do you live here, sir?" No, I replied. "Stay where you are, don't move." They started to make their way into the yard. All I could do was stand still and shake. I tried to think of something to say, but I had nothing. Soon I was face to face with two cops in someone's backyard at midnight. I knew it was coming, "Sir, what are you doing with that phone?" I knew I was sunk, so I decided to tell them the truth. I had nothing to lose but my dignity. "I use it to find old outhouses." They both looked at me like I had four heads. The saying is usually two heads, but this was so bizarre I was pretty sure they saw four heads. The next thing I knew, I was in handcuffs and being led down the back sidewalk around the corner to the front door. I knew I should have listened to my inner gut and stayed on the other side of that fence. One of the officers knocked on the door,

and we waited. A few minutes passed, and no one answered; after all, it was 12:30 at night, and most "normal" people were sleeping. Then the door slowly swung open "oh my god, what happened" there stood an old man sporting a Yankees cap. He also was wearing a red night robe. He stood there looking at us while rubbing his eyes. When he turned the porch light on, he shouted out, "Rick? What the hell are you doing here?" I could not believe my eyes! It turned out to be one of Paul's dad's old friends Johnny Gud. I had no clue he lived in this town. What are the odds? The cops blurted out, "Do you know this man?" Thank god he said yes.

After all the talking and ensuring everything was in order, they took off the cuffs and started to leave. As they were walking out, one of them said, "by the way, what did you say the phone was for?" I just looked at them and said, "what phone?" Not another word came out of their mouths, and they slowly drove off. I was sure they would be telling some good stories back at the station.

I had met Johnny a few months ago at a car show. Thank god he remembered me. I went on to tell him that Paul was digging in an outhouse three houses down. The great thing was that Paul's dad told Johnny all about our crazy hobby a while ago, so he believed every word I told him. Except for the phone, I didn't tell him about that as enough was going on, and I didn't want to open up that can of worms. I explained that I was looking for another place to dig for tomorrow, and he just nodded his head, gave me a hand signal, and said goodnight. I caught him just before he got back in the house. "Johnny, would you mind if I checked the yard before I head back to Paul?" He was fine with it. He gave me his blessing and mumbled, "you guys are nuts.



Amazing line-up of dug Pennsylvania soda water bottles.

Lay off the caffeine,” then turned out the porch light.

I returned to my digging partner to see what he had piled up over there. I hoped it was a glass mountain of old colored bottles. The Monster caffeine drink was starting to wear off now, and I was slowing down to a crawl. When I arrived at the pit, Paul was sprawled out on the homeowner’s fold-out lawn chair with a pair of pants from the clothesline over his head. I guess he was losing steam, also. Then I did a double-take; he was actually cutting zzz’s sleeping. I scanned the area around the privy and did not see any bottles, so I figured I would wake Paul up and ask him how he made out in the pit. But just as I was about to shake him, the flashlight caught a blip from under the lawn chair he was on. With closer inspection, I was looking at at least 70 colored squats and stone beers! I guess he cleaned out the bottom while I was getting arrested.

I didn’t want to wake him since he did all the work getting the bottles up and out of the deep pit himself, so, quietly, I gathered up the tools, spruced up the area, and covered the hole with a sheet of plywood so he could take a long catnap. Thank god there was nothing to fill in; that doesn’t happen to us very often. The homeowner mentioned something before we started about making a bomb shelter of some sort if we found a brick-lined pit. He got his wish, and we got ours.

This dig was history, my watch said 2:30 am, and it was time to get our filthy bodies home and crawl into our beds. We would have to wait to use the “privy phone” again. It would be at least a week and a half before we would hear that wonderful creepy scratchy sound. We had Johnny’s yard to do, and I prayed that the

good people from the past would not let us down. Time will tell.

The bottles and pictures used in this article were all dug in this life, all from hard work and determination. No “mystery phone” needed!



Fresh from the pit.

