

The Mud, The Blood and the Beers

By Tom Bostwick

January 2022 was milder than most winters here in Oregon. So, when a digging buddy, Paul Jeffries from Vancouver, Washington, called to tell me about a dig he'd lined up in Portland and asked if I'd be interested in "pulling buckets" for him, I said yes without thinking. I have no natural immunity or fortitude regarding a request to participate in a good (or bad) dig, so I cheerfully agreed to submit to whatever physical or emotional torture it required to complete emptying the privy. Isn't that what friends do? He'd probed out the privy the previous Saturday

1870s-80s era, which made things more exciting.

Henry Fleckenstein had begun his wholesale liquor business in 1871, and in 1877 joined partnership with S. Julius Mayer in downtown Portland when it was still known as "Stumptown" due to the amount of stumps left in the middle of the streets. So, Fleckenstein flasks are very popular with collectors due to their age and crudeness.

The old house that stood on the lot had been removed and the site was squeezed between a high-rise retirement apartment complex and a single-story dwelling. Potentially, we'd have 312 living room windows overlooking our digging activity. And as exciting as that was, the real thrill was the mud which was wet clay. But in Paul's defense, he'd warned me this was going to be a "really difficult and muddy dig with hundreds of spectators,"... and he was right!

Another exciting factor was the location...a short, very steep street lined with yellow curbs and No Parking

signs. Naturally, I was forced to disregard city ordinances and continue my life of crime as a No Parking Zone offender.

Once parked, we took a brief detour to a recently vacated lot nearby and probed out a shallow trash pit, and popped out a tiny Brainard, Montana drugstore along with some amazing-colored shards, circa 1880s.

Back at the original site, we re-opened the wood liner, which measured 4 x 6 feet, with unknown depth since neither



My digging buddy Paul Jeffries about 12 feet deep in the hole.

Tom Bostwick holds a clear "K. Selig & Co. Portland, Or." pint flask fresh out of the hole. Karl Seelig was an early Portland wholesale liquor dealer, opening his first shop in 1873.



There was quite a variety of bottles coming out of our hole.

and began digging. Somewhere around eight feet, and with no bottom in sight, he decided he needed some help. Fortunately, I'd just graduated the previous fall with a BA in bucket pulling, and I was ready to flaunt my degree.

Paul knew the pit was worth the effort since he'd already dug a beautiful "Fleckenstein & Mayer, Portland, Or." flask in honey amber the previous Saturday in the top eight feet. Plus, a 6" cobalt blue "Powers & Estes, Portland, Oregon" drugstore, and a whittled "Plunders Oregon Blood Purifier" with the stopper and a small assortment of unusual Portland drugstore bottles. The privy looked to be circa the





of us had anything longer than a six-foot probe. Early slicks began to surface, along with an unembossed amber coffin flask. Around the four-foot level, Portland drugstores began oozing out of the mud, and a bit deeper, a beautiful aqua pickle appeared along with an aqua umbrella ink and more unembossed coffin flasks. Then a clear “K. Seelig & Co. Portland Ore.” pint popped out.

Karl Seelig was another early Portland wholesale liquor dealer, opening his first shop in 1873. Yahoo! Another very desirable Portland flask! We continued to power down through the sticky clay, which was packed with broken dinnerware, serving dishes, mugs and mixed with some unbroken Florida Water bottles, shoe dressings, unembossed drugs, and a marble.

Then, suddenly, a clear “Marx & Jorgensen, Portland, OGN.” pint coffin flask bubbled out of the muck. Wow! Daniel Marx formed his partnership with Emil C. Jorgensen in 1877 and opened a wholesale liquor shop at 28 N. Front Street in Portland to serve the thirsty needs of local pioneers. I’d never dug so many nice early flasks in one privy before. So, despite the weight of the buckets, this was turning into an awesome dig!



[A] Freshly dug 1870s chemical bottle.



[B] Florida Water bottle right out of the hole.



[C] Peruvian Bitters caked in mud.



[D] K. Selig & Co. Portland, Oregon flask.



A broken Fleckenstein & Mayer from the bottom of our hole which was pieced back together.

A continuous flow of “John Childs Pharmacy,” “Plummer & Byerly Druggist,” and “Skidmore Druggist” bottles appeared around eight feet down. And, naturally, we encountered a steady supply of unembossed beer, wine, and ale bottles—so many in fact, I finally had to insist...no more beers Paul! I’ve had way more than enough! But despite my protest, he kept on tossing them up to me! About then, he accidentally sliced his finger open on a shard hiding in the muck. When I tried to offer him a band-aid, he just looked up and smiled, saying, “this is way too good a dig to stop for anything short of a heart attack!” **And THAT’S how the blood got mixed with the mud and the beers.**

Pulling buckets from the 10 and 12-foot level became nearly impossible for me since the wet clay simply refused to come out. Likewise, it wouldn’t come off the shovel either. So, I resorted to a surefire trick that always works—I began to whine. It’s never seemed to make the clay any less bothersome, but it has garnered me a tiny bit of sympathy through the years.

Finally, a little over 12 feet down, Paul hit bottom. Surprisingly, there lay a glazed crock jug. No markings but no doubt a local item. Among the broken bottles scattered about was another smashed “Oregon Blood Purifier,” a whittled “Warner’s Kidney Liver Cure,” “Lydia Pinkham’s Blood Purifier,” “Doyle’s Hop Bitters,” another “Fleckenstein & Mayer” flask, along with figural colognes, candy jars, and dishes. Even after we reached the bottom, the bottles continued to ooze out of the east wall of the privy, so Paul followed the vein back another three or four feet until it became unsafe.

We’d began our dig around 11 am and by now it was 5 pm and getting dark—yet there stood our 12-foot hole demanding to be filled. Paul had done the majority of the work shoveling, but at

72 years old, overweight, and out of shape, I was done for. I was beyond exhausted. Fortunately, Paul is an expert motivational speaker. And after a brief “pep-talk” laced with colorful adjectives, nouns, and a few well-placed verbs, I snapped out of it and was back to my useless self.

As we backfilled, we continued to dig out the sides of the privy, which had gone untouched in our rush to reach the bottom before dark. As a happy surprise, at the 4-foot level, I uncovered a drippy top Peruvian Bitters stuck against the side wall. Additional Portland drugstores embedded in the mud dripped out as we continued to fight the wet clay. And when we were nearly finished, a fantastic hand-painted broach from the 1870s appeared. It pictured a pretty lady who may have been the original house owner’s wife.

By 8 pm, the privy was finally filled back in, despite the gnashing of teeth and threats of bodily harm towards the bucket puller. In retrospect, it was probably the most difficult dig I’d ever tackled with just two people—one of whom was quite a crybaby. And again, it wasn’t so much the depth as the difficulty of the material we were shoveling. Then a funny thought struck me “how ‘bout a little whine to go with that clay!”

When I originally wrote this story for our Oregon club newsletter, eight days after the aches and pains were still fresh, I was overwhelmed by how much good stuff we found in that one privy. Now rewriting it four months later and re-living it again, it just keeps getting better!



Pleased with this
Peruvian Bitters
after cleaning.

For you East Coast diggers, this would probably be considered a typical dig. But for the elderly West Coast diggers like me, it was a real chore. Our privies here in Hood River tend to bottom out about five or six feet, with sandy soil, not clay. Still, I wouldn't trade that digging experience for anything. One regret is, in all the excitement of the digging, I forgot to photograph Paul's Fleckenstein & Mayer flask. He showed it to me Saturday night as we were packing up to leave the site, and under the streetlights, it was an amazing flask. I was, however, able to reconstruct most of the broken Fleckenstein from the bottom of the privy and have pictured it.

At 72, I have to wonder, how many more good digs like this will I be allowed to enjoy? A quality dig with a friend I respect and admire is almost worth more than gold. I'm sure you older diggers can appreciate what I'm saying. None of us wants to reach that point of calling it quits due to age. This dig definitely goes down on my "bucket list" as a successful accomplishment!

List of bottles found:

Mint, Fleckenstein & Mayer light amber pint flask.

Broken Fleckenstein & Mayer flask.

Clear Marx & Jorgensen, Wholesale Wine & Liquor Merchants, Portland, OGN. pint flask.

K. Seelig & Co. Fine Wine & Liquor Merchants, Portland, Or. clear pint flask.

Amber Oregon Blood Purifier with fancy stopper.

6 inch cobalt Powers & Estes, Portland, Oregon drugstore.

4 inch Geo. Strawbridge, Druggist, Portland, Ore.

Three Pacific Drug Co. Apothecary, 3rd & Jefferson St., Portland, Oregon drugstores.

Two Plummer & Byerly Pharmacy, Portland, Ore.

Eight or nine John Childs Pharmacy, Portland, Ore. drugstores.

Skidmore Druggist, Portland, Ore. drugstore.

Other assorted Portland drugstores.

I forgot to record a yellow-amber coffin flask—unembossed.

Large stoneware jug.

Aqua umbrella ink and other clear inks.

Large square aqua pickle.

15-20 unembossed beers, wines, and ales.

15-20 slick medicines, pharmacy bottles, perfumes, fruit jar lids.

Peruvian Bitters.

Cylinder mustards.

Hand-painted broach.

Small medical vials and so much broken stuff like dinnerware, doll parts, calendar plates, stoneware beers, mugs, cups, and other items I forgot to record it all.

