

PIKE'S PEAK OR BUST

By
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I remember the first time I heard “Pike’s Peak or Bust”—I was about ten years old. It was painted on the canvas of an old covered wagon at a hot spring my family and I frequented in California. I discovered at that time California was only one of several gold rushes. The Pike’s Peak rush was well known, just less than the ‘49ers. Fast forward to 2016, when I moved from Hannibal, Missouri, 30 miles south, to Louisiana, Mo. It took two years for me to meet one of my neighbors from a block and a half away and around the corner.

Will is a large, bald, imposing fellow who looks the type you really don’t want to piss off. He is the classic stereotype of opposites—a kinder, gentler soul you will never likely meet. I had been studying maps of the town and my neighborhood and had noted several houses on Will’s block that were represented on the 1876 bird’s eye view map. Will’s property once had a large two-story structure on the map with a small one-story, barn-looking house next door. This smaller one was still standing and had been vacant since my relocation. While passing by one day, I noticed Will mowing the lawn, so I asked if he knew the owner, to which he replied he did. When I asked if he could obtain permission

“So, do you happen to know
how old your property is?”



[Left] Colorado Gold Rush “Pike’s Peak or Bust” painting. Following the California Gold Rush of 1849, a second gold rush occurred in the Kansas-Nebraska Territories and in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The motto of the prospectors was “Pike’s Peak or Bust!” The slogan led naturally to the flip-side of the gold-fever coin; namely, the “Bust!” An engraving published in 1870 by W. M. Cary proved quite popular. It showed a Colorado Gold Rush prospector at the end of the line. He lies dead alongside his covered wagon. An Indian arrow through the wagon’s covering is evidence of his probable cause of death. His ox sniffs at the skull of another beast of burden whose fate he is destined to share. This 16” x 13” oil on canvas signed Jim Smith is a copy of that engraving. It is quite well-executed and dates circa 1884. It is housed in an ornate gilt frame by Shussler Brothers of San Francisco. There are two sections of raised wooden molding missing. The painting is in excellent condition. It is quite a handsome piece, ready to hang and enjoy. — *Heritage Auctions*

for me to hunt for the old privy for old bottles, he said he was pretty sure it was no problem. Since I was already there and had breached the always delicate topic of privy digging, I took it to the next obvious level.

I asked Will, “*So, do you happen to know how old your property is?*”

He proudly puffed up and replied, “*Well, yes, it was built way back in 1915.*” I smiled back as one harboring a secret would. I have had this happen on numerous occasions when homeowners are unaware of the history of the property, not just the existing structure.

“*No! I had no idea!*”



[Left] The Denver area was sparsely settled until the late 1850s. Occasional parties of prospectors came looking for gold, then moved on. In July 1858, prospectors found a small placer deposit near the mouth of Little Dry Creek. By spring 1859, teams of thousands of gold seekers arrived and the Pike's Peak Gold Rush was under way.



Standing near where the two privies were located behind owner Will's home.

“*Hmmm,*” I pondered and nodded in agreement. “*Yeah, I can see that. Are you aware there was an earlier house, at least by 1876 and likely much older?*” Will got wide-eyed and had a look of total amazement. “*No! I had no idea!*” Will replied, astonished.

I told him of the maps and that I would print him copies if he wanted. The earliest Sanborn map dated 1896 for our neighborhood showed a one-story house by then with a different footprint than Will's current house. This tells me there should be at least two privies, one for each of the earlier homes. I noticed Will was a bit of a yard freak with a perfectly manicured lawn. I figured my chances of obtaining permission to dig in his yard would be slim to none, but before I could even ask, he

I moved methodically along the back property line and noticed two very slight depressions about ten feet apart. One probed out glassy right before hitting solid clay near the handle of my five-foot probe. Not good news, I thought to myself. I angle probed for the sides and hit the clay walls, indicating another wood liner. The cap felt unusually hard and I might have missed it if not for the glassy feel near the bottom. Moving over to the next depression, I encountered something that felt more like a sewer pipe, also shallow at about four and a half feet and again having clay walls. All the privies I have dug except one late brick liner have been wood liners in this town of mine. Consequently, they tend to be tougher to probe and dig with any exactness. Usually, all the wood is long rotted away, with a possible stubborn corner post nearer to the bottom. The bottoms are usually a solid clay barrier.

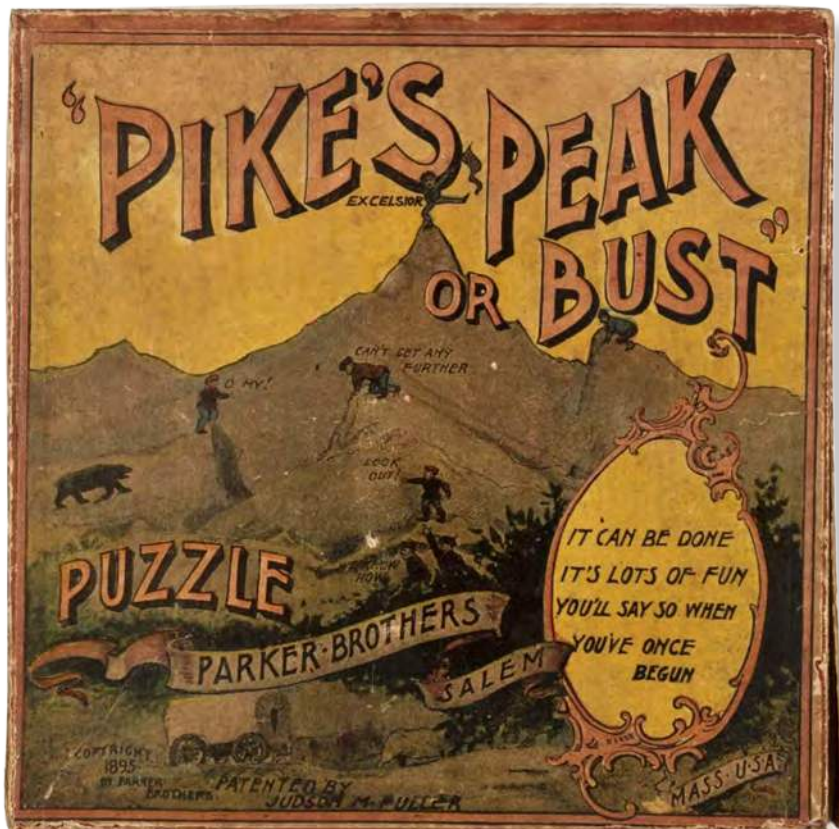
[Next Page] Very rare, beautifully illustrated antique Victorian engraving of Pike's Peak and Manitou Springs. The engraving is from *Marvels of the New West, a Vivid Portrayal of the Stupendous Marvels in the Vast Wonderland West of the Missouri River*. Published in 1888 by the Henry Bill Publishing Company. Digitally restored.



I flagged out the two likely spots and asked Will if that weekend would be OK to dig? He pondered on it and said, “Sure. We’re having a family get-together and BBQ for Memorial Day weekend here, but you’re welcome to come over and join us for the fun.” Suddenly realizing I had forgotten it was a major holiday, I suggested rescheduling for a later date to dig as I didn’t wish to impose. Will was too gracious and insisted I come over and added there would be plenty of young ones to help move dirt if the need arose. I shrugged and agreed to return Saturday morning. When I arrived at 10 am, the yard was void of any activity and I wondered if I got my days mixed up.

Chinese Liquid Blueing Tripple Strength.” I always like these with the misspelling of “blueing” and “trippel” and have a couple with different lip finishes in my collection. Along with this shard came a gloppy applied top lady’s leg neck looking every bit the 1870s. This got me excited! Few things give me a jolt of energy, as does a good shard. Along with the neck was a base to a Whitney Glass Works fruit jar. Now we’ve got some age!

It wasn’t until after four hours of digging that the first intact artifact appeared, and it wasn’t even a bottle! I first thought it was a mini-night lamp used to find the outhouse after dark, except it



[Left and above] Parker Brothers “Pike’s Peak or Bust,” Puzzle, 1895, Salem, Massachusetts, Cardboard, paper, metal. Overall: 1 x 7 ½ x 7 ½ in. The Liman Collection, New-York Historical Society, Museum & Library.

I laid out my first tarp and started an exploratory hole at the spot that felt glassy. My goal was to keep the size of my hole to a minimum to cut down on the disturbance factor, something I do in yards that are this well-maintained. I’ve perfected my method of digging a post hole without the aid of a post hole digger, which allows less chance of breaking anything encountered undamaged. The soil was darker than usual, not the normal tan color of the native clay I’m used to seeing in the caps. In addition, this topsoil was as hard and tough to dig as any clay cap I’ve ever encountered. At three feet deep, I hit the more typical clay cap and was able to bring up about six inches of seedy night soil at about four and a half feet deep. Up to this point, there had been no shards of glass or pottery fragments or any definitive signs of a privy. I eventually uncovered a few bones, one with a butcher cut that told me someone gnawed on it and tossed it into the pit. All this took a good part of an hour and a half as I slowly worked at widening the hole little by little, keeping it to a minimum.

It “only” took me another hour to find my first glass shards—a base marked “A&DHC” with partial embossing for a “Gillet’s

looked like it had lugs. Maybe a weird insulator? It was embossed, “Mrs. G. E. Haller-Patd. Feb 25 73.” Later I discovered it was a strange and fancy fruit jar stopple. The opening that I had thought was for a lamp wick was actually the opening to the juicer part of the device.

By now, the BBQ was in full swing and the older adults were keeping an eye on the food while the younger adults were playing whiffle ball with the kids that ranged in age from about four to sixteen. In all there were about 20 kids and adults playing ball about 40 feet from where I was digging my foxhole! The game was a form of baseball with bases to run. Whoever caught a fly would exchange places with the unlucky batter. Extra points were jokingly awarded to whoever hit the ball into the privy hole! Several of the younger crowd came over to check out what I was digging for, but they each quickly became bored and went back to their game—all but one little girl who sat quietly at the edge of the hole, wide-eyed and not missing a thing. She seemed absolutely transfixed and I would be surprised if she didn’t become an archaeologist. Poor deranged child!

After four and a half hours of hardscrabble digging of mostly broken shards, I finally came upon a bottle I'd recognize anywhere, mainly because I've dug dozens of busted ones and only one whole one. I first recognized the oval plate with "Old Rye" embossed. Just above it were the familiar long skinny legs associated with a "For Pike's Peak" flask! "Well, it's undoubtedly busted," I said to nobody in particular. I decided to take some in situ pictures anyway, just in case. One never knows. Well, it was a good call as it was not only whole but undamaged! It was also a large quart size to boot! WOWZER! I was over the moon! First whole bottle out of the hole! I was now having delusions of grandeur of what could be waiting below. I was quickly brought back to reality with a second quart-sized For Pike's Peak flask in several pieces. Underneath that was another quart flask but a clasped hands type, also in pieces! To rub it in, the bottle goddess wasn't done with me yet and delivered even another quart clasped hands flask in pieces! I surmised they had been likely tossed in the pit altogether and all broke against each other except the top flask! OUCH! It hurts worse than a glass cut!

On Tuesday at 10 am, I tarped out the second pit and got to slingin' dirt. I expected it to have more glass as the later pits around these parts tend to be full. By the late 1890s, they seemed more relaxed about cleaning out the privy holes, and folks filled them in while loaded. I was sadly disappointed to discover this pit was more sparse than the last one! Within a short couple of hours, I had this pit cleaned of the handful of bottles that had been patiently waiting for me. I quickly discovered what had felt like a sewer pipe when first probed. I pulled up several massive pieces to a gigantic crockery container of at least five gallons and nearly as thick as a sewer pipe!

The first bottle of any age was a "Vibro Oil" bottle; side embossed only. It was badly cracked and missing the base when I pulled it up. It seems to be unlisted, as I can find nothing about it at all. It had a tooled top so it was a good sign. Next out of the hole came a plain shoo-fly flask. A foot from the bottom came a "Kickapoo Indian



In the next three hours, numerous broken bottles, half a dozen whole unembossed flasks, medicines, and various lamp pieces found their way out of the hole that now bottomed out at seven feet deep. Of the whole embossed "keepers" came a "Trask's Magnetic Ointment" and a "Matthew's Peruvian Celery." Along with the Pike's Peak flask and the glass stopper, that was it! Of the broken pile, the criers were a bottomless "C. Conrad Original Budweiser," a crude "Hostetter's," a light strawberry puce "S.T. Drakes," and a gorgeous golden yellow "Dr. John Bulls Compound Cedron Bitters." Near the bottom of the hole, I found three pontiled bases to the larger apothecary jars of the Civil War period that seem to be common in the early 1860s pits, which is what I would date this one to.

Even though I came home with only four embossed items after eight hours of tough digging, the Pike's Peak flask made it all worthwhile. It turns out it is likely the most common of all the Pike's Peak variants, a GXI-8, but then ask me how many I have found in my 56 years of digging before this, and I can say, "Not enough!"

After hiking the block and a half to my home to shower and rehydrate, I returned for some BBQ and talked of hunting for bottles. It took me until Tuesday to recuperate from the eight hours of digging and the first real dig of the season after what seemed a five-month-long winter. I discovered I had gained a few more pounds during the winter than usual.

Oil" cylinder from the Healy & Bigelow Co. Next to that was a fancy eight-sided sample bottle embossed, "Oriental Toilet Water - T. Kingsford Oswego, N.Y." On the very bottom of the pit was a sapphire blue atomizer-style perfume bottle with remnants of Mary Gregory-style characters painted on the sides, definitely the best, if not the oldest, find of the day.

I couldn't help but feel this wasn't the newer privy hole I was looking for, and as I write this, I'm becoming more convinced another search may be on the horizon. After all, the 1880s seem to be completely unrepresented from either pit and likely all of the 1890s as well. This last dig smacked of turn-of-the-century stuff, for the most part.

The final part of this story is the coincidence of how I moved from one county to another to lead me to the Pike's Peak flask. I doubt I would have ever met Will or dug his yard without making the move, which leads me to the point—I live in Pike County, named for the one and same Zebulon Pike of Pike's Peak fame! The only thing better in my mind is digging one on Pike's Peak itself! So I guess I'm now a bonafide Piker!

Maybe my next move is to Alaska, where I can dig up a rare Alaskan hutch soda! Naw! I can't see it! Maybe Hawaii for a Lovejoy whiskey! Ha!

