

Underground History

For a generation of Santa Cruzans, bottle digging has been a serious passion in the region since World War II.

By Geoffrey Dunn

It's a damp and grey spring day out on Old San Juan Road just outside of Watsonville, and James Antonelli, who spends most of his days as a salesman at Freeline Design Surf Shop in Capitola, but by avocation is a bottle-digger par excellence, is driving around with a booklet of regional plot lines in hand, looking for a good location to dig. He spots what he calls on "old salt box"—a building constructed in the 1850s or 1860s—and goes up to the door of the main house to see if they will allow him to "probe" the property.

Permission received, Antonelli begins thrusting a sharp, narrow steel bar into the earth and eventually identifies what he believes to be an old 19th-century outhouse shaft that has been filled in with dirt.

Within a half-hour or so, he has dug deep into the old privy and come up with



a shaving mug and a couple of green-glass pitchers, all roughly 100 years old. It's not a great find—he suspects that this particular hole dates from roughly 1900 to the early 1920s, rather than from the 1860s—but the few underground remnants he discovers add clues to the ways in which people lived here a century ago.

Watsonville is Antonelli's favorite place to dig, he says, because it "was much wealthier than Santa Cruz in the 19th century as a result of all the agriculture in the Pajaro Valley. People had money to buy lots of neat things, and we still find them more than a hundred years later."

(Top) A display of a few of James Antonelli's collection of vintage bottles. (Left) An example of a cobalt blue Empire Soda Works bottle from San Francisco.



One of Antonelli's most productive digs was on Whiskey Hill, on the north side of Watsonville, near the junction of today's Freedom Boulevard and Green Valley Road, which in the 1850s and 1860s was Santa Cruz's version of the legendary Deadwood, South Dakota—a motley ensemble of outlaws, saloons, cantinas, and whore houses. "One day I hit a hole there that just felt really different," Antonelli says. "We wound up digging 30-feet. Lots of whiskey flasks. We found some rare beautiful glass down there."

For Santa Cruzans of a certain vintage, bottle digging has been a passion for decades, especially in the aftermath of World War II. My high school buddy Ed Morrison's parents went on bottle digging expeditions in his youth as something of a family outing—it was a cheap form of entertainment that occasionally rendered valuable finds.

Morrison recalls that his parents would take the clan with them down to a section of Front Street in downtown Santa Cruz that was being dug up for redevelopment in the 1960s. "Actually, it was my mom and one of her lady friends that did most of the digging," he says. "We dug in downtown, up near the Wilder Ranch and in Benomond, too. Lots of fond memories."

I was introduced to bottle digging by my dad and then by my cousin, Kenny

(Above) James Antonelli studies Watsonville's 100 year plot plans which can possibly lead to a treasure-trove of bottles.

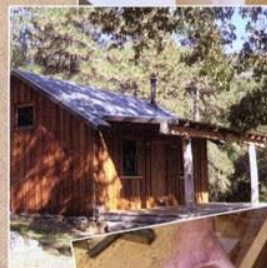
Lamb, in the 1970s, when the outhouses and dump sites of old Victorian homes in Santa Cruz were still largely untapped.

"Digging for bottles back then was much like being a '49er when they were panning and mining gold in the mother lode," my cousin says. "It was a rush. You could get rich in a day if you found a valuable bottle, but you were also going back in time, one-hundred-and-fifty years or more, when Santa Cruz was a new Yankee town. You could almost imagine who was alive then, who had drank out of the whiskey flask, or who used the ink well, or who was taking the medicine."

Antonelli concurs that you can really get in touch with another time through digging. "Sometimes you find medicine bottles at the top of a dig," he says, "like liver cures, and by the time you get to the bottom you know you're going to find whiskey flasks. You just know where it's going."

There are some basic ethical guidelines to bottle hunting, diggers say, that should always be followed. The primary one is to never dig without formal permission from the property owner. Always return your dig to a pristine condition. Once you dig a hole, never leave it open

Details tell the story.



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overnight. Respect whatever improvements or plantings are on the site.

Most importantly, most diggers will tell you, is never to dig by yourself. Walls can collapse. There have been deaths of bottle diggers throughout the country, and they happened more often than not because people went alone. Even when working with others, bottle digging can be dangerous. When I was in high school in the early 1970s, a wall of dirt collapsed on some friends of mine digging downtown during construction of the two-story Church and Cedar street parking lot. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt. Precaution is always

the first rule of digging. And it's always wise to go with an experienced partner.

Indeed, most diggers in the region were mentored by longtime locals who are not only familiar with the history of Santa Cruz County, but who have paid close attention to where digs have been executed for decades. Antonelli was mentored by a pair of older friends, Steve Page and Mark Accardi, whose roots go back in the community for more than half-a-century.

One of Antonelli's digging partners has been another well-known local, Hans Have-

(Above) The shapes, sizes, and colors of antique bottles can seem almost endless.

man, the proprietor of H&H Fresh Fish Co. at the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor. Haveman began digging as a teenager and has been probing sites throughout the county—and throughout the state—ever since.

Some of his most memorable digs, however, have been close to home. In the aftermath of the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake, opportunities to dig downtown presented themselves as they hadn't for





decades. One of Haveman's favorite sites was at the corner of Soquel Avenue and Front Street—then home of the Silver Bullet Bar—but which in the 1870s had been the site of livery stables, various businesses, and dwellings in the 19th century. "It was amazing," Haveman says of the dig. "We found everything. Buckets of horse shoes, dolls heads, you name it. And glass was everywhere. It was insane."

Haveman's rarest find to date has been

a Cutter Old Bourbon flask from the 1870s; for Antonelli, his was an Old Sachem Bitters and Wigwam Tonic barrel bottle from the late 1850s. Both were worth several thousand dollars.

But both Antonelli and Haveman emphasized that it's not the lure of the big bucks that brings either of them back to the dig. "The bottles coming out of the 1850s and 1860s are so beautiful," says Antonelli. "It's just so much fun to find them."

Haveman concurs. "It's a way of getting directly in touch with history," Haveman muses. "For a lot of us, it's a way of bringing history back to life." ■

(Top) Antique bottle aficionado James Antonelli reveals a 100 year-old bottle from outside an old salt box house near Watsonville. (Below) Geoffrey Dunn's collection of vintage bottles for products made in Santa Cruz.

