

ANTIQUÉ BOTTLE DETECTOR? By Allan Holden all rights reserved

When people enter my shop for the first time, the site of dozens of antique bottles from the 1800's in every size and shape catch their eyes! "Wow!" they exclaim! "Will metal detectors find bottles?"

Of course I have to explain that the bottle collecting is a separate hobby of mine and, no, metal detectors will not find glass.

We have seen some nice old bottles found because they still had a metal lid intact or, maybe, the bottle just happened to be where we were digging for something else. Bob MacDoudall brought a really cool, amber Kendall's Spavin Cure bottle to the May club meeting that was found just that way!

Actually a metal detector can be a valuable tool to the bottle hunter. This is a letter I wrote in response to a man who was asking about 'bottle detectors.'

" Sorry Roger, I have dreamed about such a detector, because I am a bottle digger myself.

A great location for digging antique bottles is old farm dumps. These old private dumps were frowned upon back in the 1950's and 60's. It was during this time when the public was warned to use public landfills. The public landfills were easy to monitor and control and they seemed to be the best way to go in those early stages of our growing environmental concern.

Many of the old family dumps were covered over or hidden to avoid cleanup costs and then just forgotten. Many of these dumps were located at the banks of rivers, near swamps, ditches or ravines. These areas were picked for dump-sites mainly because this sort of land had little value if it couldn't be plowed or planted.

Fortunately for the owner of a metal detector, besides containing antique bottles, these old dumps contain a large quantity of metallic trash, such as tin cans, barrel hoops, zinc jar lids, discarded farm equipment parts, and tons of other large metal items.

A friend and I were once digging a dump site that, for some strange reason, was filled with dozens of old baby nursing bottles from the 1870's and 80's. The problem was, right smack dab in our way was a Model-T Ford! Just try digging one of those out with a spade!

I have found that one of the better detectors for finding these hidden dumps is a relatively inexpensive machine made by

Bounty Hunter, called the Landstar. This detector is loaded with some great features for its price.

Some Landstar features for beach combing, coin shooting, or for relic hunting are: Visual Target Meter Id., Audio Tone Id., Coin Depth Reading . . . these are all great features! But, for our dump finding application, the feature that makes this unit stand out is its uncommonly powerful "All Metal" mode.

You can cover a vast area in your search for bottle dumps rather quickly with this machine. This is done by hunting in the all metal mode, while holding the search coil raised very high above the ground (about 10 to 12 inches). With the coil held at this height, the detector will ignore most small random items, even if they are on the surface, yet at the same time locate a large dump's debris field 3 to 5 feet deep!

When you walk onto a dump-site location, the detector goes off full-blast throughout the location! This will allow you to map-out the shape and size of the dump area. Once the dump's borders are located, the detector is then put aside and the real work begins.

With a large shovel, test holes are dug at four sides and, perhaps, in the middle. At each of these sample digs, an attempt is made to date the dump. We keep in mind that the first items uncovered are usually the last items that were thrown away. So, the deeper we go with our hole, the older our finds become.

Because I am a collector (and not an expert), many people bring bottles they have collected from old

dumps to my shop for appraisal. Unfortunately, I have the sad task of telling them that their finds need to be returned to the nearest landfill, because they are indeed trash.

In their excitement, after finding a surface exposed dump, they gather up all of the unbroken bottles they can, then rush off to find the value of their new-found treasure ---only to be disappointed. The real disappointment comes when somebody with more experience finds the same dump, but knows enough to dig deeper!

Don't be fooled, detectors costing hundreds of dollars more, will not do this job any better. Also, this work can be accomplished with the Landstar's standard 8-inch open search coil!

In the truest sense, antique bottles have not been produced for over 100 years. The real antique bottles are the 'hand- finished' bottles made before the invention of the "Automatic Bottle Machine" which came along at the very end of the 1890's. Now that doesn't mean that all machine made bottles, (A.B.M. bottles), are without value! The rare dairy, soda, beer and even perfume bottles, which are A.B.M. bottles, can be very rare and very valuable!

The key word is "Rare." I see tons of very old Coke bottles brought in for my appraisal, which are of the old familiar Mae West shape. For the most part, these bottles, even though nostalgic, are not rare. The reason they not rare is because Coca-Cola has always been very successful and millions of these bottles were sold!

Small farm dairies, on the other hand, made an extra effort to see that their refillable bottles were returned to be cleaned and refilled. With a small quantity to begin with, finding certain dairy bottles can be like finding a needle in a hay stack!

The good news is, the old farm dump can be the right place to look! I sold a one-pint dairy bottle from Lake Odessa, Michigan, on E-bay recently for \$375.00! Clearly it was not a hand-finished antique bottle, but it was a rare A.B.M. bottle and a dump find!

Two of my best friends, Ernie Lawson and Jack Short, were the ones who started the Kalamazoo Antique Bottle Club nearly 30 years ago. And it was this dynamic duo who got me hooked on old glass collecting!

During their early digging days, they noticed, for some strange reason, that the early settlers were drawn to the river banks when discarding their trash. After finding fewer dumps to dig, they came up with a great idea. This awesome brainstorm would have them taking a small row boat down a local river early in spring. The vegetation had been frozen back and packed down by the hard Michigan snow fall. With a lack of leaves and other vegetation, they were left with a clear view of the river bank.

As they worked along the river's bank, they would look for tell-tale signs of a dump. After a dump was found and permission secured, test holes were dug into the river bank to determine the dump's age.

On one occasion, an old dump dig was producing better and better finds! By the time the two bottle diggers started recovering medicine bottles, inks, and other great treasures from the Civil War era, they had dug a rather deep cave into the river bank. Every boy's dream is a treasure cave -- and Jack and Ernie had found one!

Of course, these two veteran bottle diggers were always very safety-minded, and they knew of all the danger signs to look for--- or so they thought!

Cave-ins are the first concern to a bottle digger, and being careless can mean death! Their experience made them good judges of the most dangerous soil types and conditions. On this occasion, the two felt very safe with their project. One reassuring factor was the tremendous root growth over the ceiling of the cave. Like reinforcing rod in cement, the root system held the structure firmly together.

The only annoyance from the roots, during this chilly spring dig, was the constant wet dripping. The water not only added to the muddy condition underfoot, but it soon soaked the diggers clothes!

However, the excitement of recovering one rare bottle after another made the cold virtually unnoticeable!

It wasn't until a few hours later, that the bottle diggers discovered that the wetness that soaked their hair and clothes was mostly from the root system of a well-established poison ivy patch! Makes you itch doesn't it? Their 'dream come-true,' turned quickly into a nightmare . . . a nightmare which even led to hospital treatment!

Although my two friends can look back on their experience with smiles, they would be first to warn you that the dangers are out there!

Cave-ins, as well as insects, like bees, wasps, poison spiders and now, even virus-spreading mosquitos, all guard the hidden treasure, so be very careful!