

Privy Digging Reveals the Frontier Times of Denver City, Colorado Territory

By Marty Homola

Over the last 35 years, I have done a lot of digging in Denver, Colorado and in the surrounding towns that date back to the mining era that put Colorado on the map. Mike and Tom Sandion, who also have 30 plus years of experience each, are my good friends and digging buddies. We have shared many digging adventures in the mining towns of Colorado (such as Georgetown, Cripple Creek, Silver Plume, Black Hawk, Leadville, and Telluride), along with the fort sites of the Indian Wars and the stations of the Pony Express. However, some of our best adventures have been in the city that lies in the flats below our homes – Denver, Colorado. Over the years, we have dug hundreds (if not thousands) of privies, trash pits and dumps, and recovered thousands of bottles dating back to Denver's pioneer era. Even today, we are always watching for new construction to expose sites we were unable to dig in the past. This past year, we got real excited when construction equipment was moved into a lot on 16th and Market Streets where, we knew, a historical landmark of Colorado and the West once stood. To understand the significance of this site, it is important to know about the history of Denver and the area.



This is a picture of the author along with brothers Mike and Tom Sandion digging another lot in Denver, Colorado.

On July 9, 1858, in what was then the western edge of the Kansas Territory, a party of prospectors including William G. Russell of Georgia struck gold near where Cherry Creek and the South Platte River meet at the foot of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Within a few short months, the lure of riches

attracted hundreds of fortune seekers to the area. Two small rival towns were established on both sides of Cherry Creek. The ramshackle encampment to the south was christened as Auraria (Latin word for gold), after William G. Russell's hometown in Georgia; in turn, the camp on the north side was called Denver City, in honor of James W. Denver, Governor of the Kansas Territory. By the close of 1858, the population of these two towns combined had reached 300. Shortly after the first gold strike, even greater quantities amounts of gold were found in the mountains just west of the city. To the south, prosperous gold mines were opened in the shadow of Pike's Peak. At the height of the boom in 1859, at least 100,000 prospectors were toiling in the Colorado gold districts. Mining towns such as Central City, Idaho Springs, and Black Hawk, sprang up overnight.

Hoping to stake a claim as the political center of the region and fearing competition from Golden, located a few miles to the west, the leaders of Auraria and Denver City agreed to consolidate their towns into one, to be called Denver City. At about the same time, three savvy Leavenworth, Kansas bankers, brothers Milton and Austin Clark along with E.H. Gruber, saw an opportunity to establish a banking establishment in Denver closer to the mining fields. On January 18, 1860, the Denver City Township sold (some sources say donated) three lots to Clark, Gruber & Co. One numismatic scholar notes that "As was typical of rapid migrations of people into sparsely inhabited areas, the Colorado miners and merchants had very few coins or paper money to transact business. Gold dust was the primary medium of exchange. Of course, gold dust trading was, at best, a very imprecise procedure, ripe with fraudulent temptations." The firm of Clark, Gruber & Co., at a cost of \$5000.00, built a two-story brick building on the northwest corner of McGaa and "G" Streets (today 16th and Market) in Denver City to address the need for trusted banking and assaying services.



A photo of the Clark, Gruber & Co. building, taken around 1860 – although no one knows, perhaps the three men standing in front are the Clark brothers and E.H. Gruber.

A large portion of Clark, Gruber & Co.'s business was in raw gold: gold dust, gold nuggets, gold ore, and rough ingots. Within a few months, it became apparent that the expenses and danger of shipping the gold to the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia were too high. The firm paid anywhere from \$12 to \$16 in gold coins for raw gold and then shipped the precious metal back East to the federal government for conversion into coinage. Even though the U.S. Department of Treasury paid over \$20 in coins per ounce of gold received from the public, the venture proved to be less profitable than the Clark brothers and Gruber had anticipated stemming from the cost of freight and insurance for shipping across country. It was at this point that the firm decided to establish in Colorado a private mint and convert the gold into coinage themselves.

By early July 1860, in the basement of the bank, Clark, Gruber & Co.'s coin presses, dies, and other equipment needed to strike coins were declared operational. Later that month, the first Clark, Gruber, & Co. gold coins were struck and released to a coin-starved public. By October 1860, the private mint had produced a total of \$120,000 in gold coin denominations of \$2.50, \$5.00, \$10.00, and \$20.00. Sizeable gold coin quantities were also minted in 1861, to circulate alongside paper demand notes likewise produced by Clark, Gruber & Co. The 1860 coinage has an American eagle with the words "Clark, Gruber & Co." and the date on the reverse; on the obverse, there is an exaggerated picture of a mountain along with the words "Pike's Peak Gold" above and "Denver" below. The coins of 1861 more closely resembled United States coinage with images of liberty and an eagle, but the design still stated "Clark, Gruber & Co. Pike's Peak" on the coronet of liberty.



The Civil War erupted in April 1861 following the election of Abraham Lincoln as President. As the war raged, the Clark, Gruber & Co. mint ceased coining operations, but continued to issue bank notes, redeemable at full value in gold coins previously issued by the firm. So while regions of the country closer to the Civil War battlefields were suffering a currency and species crisis, in the Denver area the monetary system was relatively stable. President Lincoln declared Colorado a territory and named William Gilpin as its first governor. Upon arriving in Denver in May 1861, Gilpin rapidly organized a territorial militia to defend the Colorado gold fields against a possible invasion from the Confederacy. In the summer of 1861, Gilpin headed up a Republican Party convention held in Golden, where the local political powers declared their intention to push for a new U.S. branch mint in Denver. The Clark brothers and Gruber openly supported this proposal. In turn, after receiving a Colorado Territory delegation sent by the new Governor Gilpin, Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase recommended that Congress authorize a branch mint in Denver, and that the building, equipment, and machinery of the Clark, Gruber & Co. be purchased by the federal government to make the new branch productive as quickly as possible. On April 26, 1862, President Lincoln signed a bill authorizing the establishment of the Denver mint and the purchasing of the Clark, Gruber & Co. facilities in their entirety.

In 1863, Clark, Gruber & Co. sold its building and minting facilities to the United States for \$25,000. The banking division of Clark, Gruber & Co., in turn, became the First National Bank of Denver City which survives to this day. Immediately after the federal government bought the building, it underwent extensive enlargement and remodeling to the extent that it no longer looked like a store but rather a brick castle. The new "United States Mint and Assay Office at Denver" opened for business on September 24, 1863. Despite

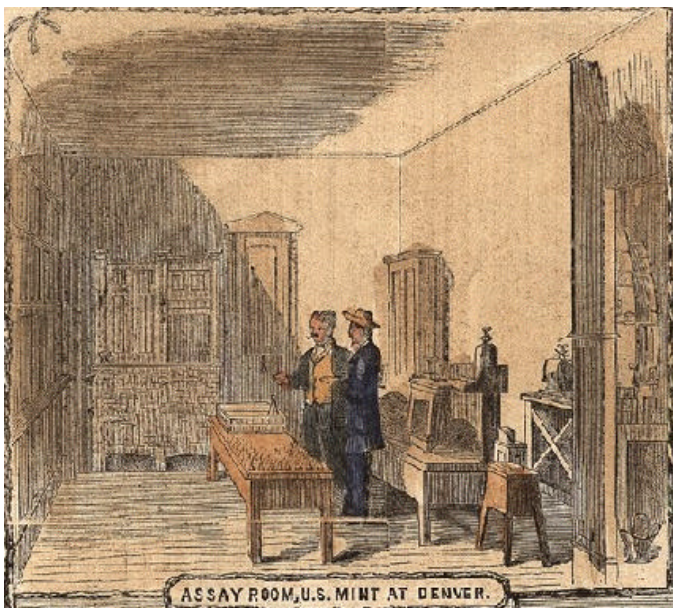


Pictured here is a \$20 gold coin minted by Clark, Gruber & Co., in 1860. An unrealistic rendition of Pike's Peak, later replaced by another design, is shown on the obverse. It is estimated that only about 1000 of the private mint's coins survive to this day.



The first U.S. Denver Mint, sometime in the late 1860s. The original Clark, Gruber & Co. building was expanded significantly and a tower added. The structure was used by the United States until it built its new mint facilities at another location and then was demolished sometime between 1906 and 1909.

the fact that the Denver branch mint had the necessary equipment, including a coin press, no coins were ever struck at this facility. Activities were confined to melting, refining, assaying and stamping gold ingots. Back on the East Coast, Director of the U.S. Mint James Pollock cited “the hostility of the Indian tribes along the routes, doubtless instigated by rebel emissaries (there being a Civil War) and bad white men” as the reason for no federal Denver coinage in the 1860s.



This lithograph shows the Assay Room at the Denver Mint sometime in the 1870s – there are no bottles to be seen but perhaps that is because the employees kept their “medical supplies” on a shelf in the outhouse.

Shortly after Colorado became a state in 1876, the brick building that originally housed Clark, Gruber & Co. and then was adapted by the United States was reported to be almost uninhabitable. The Mint Director’s 1879 Annual Report to Congress stated that the old building “is in an unsuitable condition for minting purposes. The irregular and unequal settling of the foundations has caused the walls to crack to such an extent as to render the edifice unsafe for the employees and the government property contained therein. Provision should be made, not only to restore the building, but to provide additional facilities for manipulating the precious metals.” But it was not until 1906 or 1909, that the structure was razed. As an aside, prior to the brick building’s demolition, it is rumored that a local entrepreneur purchased the top six inches of soil from the dirt basement floor, hauled the soil a few blocks away to the Platte River, and washed a worthwhile quantity of gold out of the soil. Soon thereafter, a warehouse which minimally disturbed the site was built on the lot.

It was a little more than 140 years later that I was driving in my truck and checking for new digging sites when I came upon the lot at 16th and Market Streets. As I looked at the earthmoving equipment loading onto the spot where the Clark, Gruber & Co. building had once stood, visions of finding gold coins and, of course, bottles from Denver’s early days flashed through my head. One of the first things Mike and I decided to do was to get permission from the project foreman to dig the lot. After telling the foreman about the history of what once stood on the lot and what our intentions were, we got the same old story that every bottle digger has heard – permission to dig would be a problem because of liability. But he gave us one alternative: first, no digging during working hours when his crew was there and the heavy equipment was operating; second, there would be limited access to the lot through the alley. All this meant that we would only be able to dig in the evenings and on Sundays which was fine with us as long as we were able to dig this historic spot.

The first dig at the lot was not productive as there was still a lot of blacktop and rubble to be cleared. The three of us did find a couple of wood-lined privies that did not have much in the way of intact bottles but the pits were pretty early for Denver as they contained broken pontiled bottles and some intact snap case unembossed bottles. Although we did not find what we had hoped for, we were glad to be digging older outhouses as these are few and far in Denver. The next few days we dug a few more pits but they had few whole bottles other than an early 1880s “C.A. SCHEIDEMANTEL / DENVER / COL.” soda. The site still had lots of rubble that would have to be cleared away by the machinery so we could get to the good stuff.

As the work on the site progressed, we watched as built-up layers of rubble and building debris was hauled out on dump trucks. Rather than digging in the dark after the crew quit working on Saturday, Mike and I decided to wait until daylight on Sunday. The next morning, I picked up Mike early in the morning to get a full day of digging under out

belts. While driving on the highway into Denver, we both talked about how this was going to be the day to hit some good bottles. By the time we finally got to the site, Tom was already waiting for us and he told us the same thing – some good bottles were waiting to be found.



An early 1880's C.A. SCHEIDEMANTEL soda is shown at left with a G&G / DENVER / COL from the same period on the right.

The lot was basically clear of all the rubble and debris at this stage in the construction, so we started probing and test holing like there was no tomorrow. In less than an hour, Mike called me over to where he had a test hole that revealed a round, wood-lined pit full of leather. It took us about four hours to dig it out down to the bottom which was long time since the pit was not that deep. The problem is that the leather was real hard after being compacted by the soil for over 100 years. However, this privy brought us back to Colorado's early statehood and territory days as we managed to extract some nice bottles including a green ladies leg whiskey, a couple of umbrella inks, a nice igloo ink with a bird embossed on the top, three fluted neck food bottles, and a local soda from Denver. The soda was a crude, applied top, gravitational stopper bottle embossed "G & G / DENVER / COL." in a slug plate that according to David K. Clint's [Colorado Historical](#)

[Bottles & Etc., 1859-1915](#), dates from about 1880. After that pit, we kept probing for more outhouses for an hour or so but had no luck and decided to call it a day.

Knowing that there were more privies (and bottles) in the lot, the next evening I met Mike at the site after work. We were both impressed that the construction workers had removed a ton of dirt and the lot was getting deep. Our friendly foreman had once again left us access through the alley and within a few minutes we both started probing. After a while, it did not look like there was much to be found but then we spotted a small dark patch of coal and broken shards of glass on the ground near a dirt embankment. Mike stuck his probe down into the ash patch and the steel went down like butter and then glanced off glass. With a grin on his face, Mike looked at to me and said this is going to be a good pit. Clearing off where the loader had pushed dirt, we uncovered a square dark patch. With the first shovelful of dirt, seeds were showing. I then slid my shovel down slowly and out popped a crude amber flask; we knew this was a good bottle as Mike and I had never even seen one before that day. Below a dripping applied lip, the flask was embossed "DIMMITT'S / 50 CTS BITTERS / SAINT LOUIS" and showed no damage. After that first bottle, it soon became obvious that the loader had removed the top half of the privy; however, we still had the best part to dig because there was at least two feet of night soil remaining. Near the bottom of the privy we found another intact Dimmitt's along with two variants of early short blob top 1860s "J. Schueler" sodas from Denver and two rare local druggist bottles embossed "J.O. Bosworth & Co." (which states "Pat. Applied For 1871 C.W. Stoeckel" on the bottom).



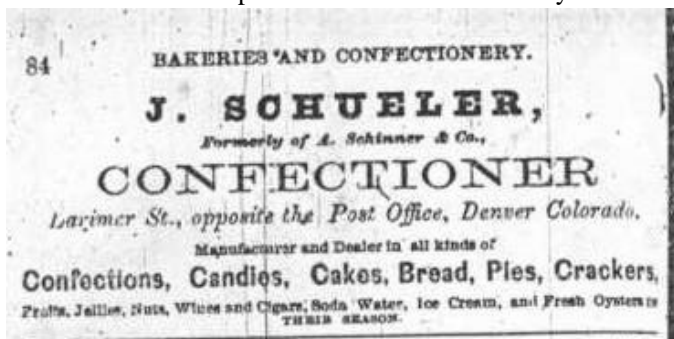
After a little research I found out that the likely age of the Dimmitt's was from 1864 to 1874 – and for a Denver discovery that is a nice age for a bottle since few people other than native Americans were living here before 1858. The Ring/Ham book on bitters, lists the bottle we found as D75 and attributes it to Dimmitt, Hale & Co. (but neither the

company's location nor the source of the information is identified). Fike's medicine book (at pp. 23-24) has a listing for a "M. DIMMITT / St. LOUIS // COUGH // BALSAM" and a "DIMMITT'S / CAPILLARIA / FOR THE HAIR" -- both of which are smooth based. The Fike book also states that "Marcellus Dimmitt, 'wholesale and retail dealer in drugs, patent medicines, chemical & c.' established his business in 1864." Apparently the St. Louis business directories note that the firm became M. Dimmitt & Bro. in 1870 and then was not listed after 1874. In addition, Dimmitt was also associated with Robert S. Hale in Dimmitt, Hale & Co. from 1870 to 1874. Since there is not a clear relationship between our bitters and any of those particular companies, the best date range for we could come up with for the Dimmitt's Bitters is from 1864 to 1874.



Dimmitt's Confectionary in St. Louis

The "J. Schueler" bottles we uncovered are from the business of Jacob Schueler located on Larimer Street opposite the original Denver post office. His establishment was a combination of candy store, bakery shop, and ice cream parlor, which among other items sold wines and soda water. According to the business directories, Jacob Schueler purchased his shop from A. Schinner & Co. starting in 1866 and, as stated in the 1873 directory, lived above his store. Schueler is perhaps better known as a savvy businessman who in 1873 was so impressed with a nearby German bottler's establishment and enthusiasm for brewing that he agreed to invest \$18,000 in a venture to build a brewery. This young man was named Adolph Coors and the rest is history: their



This is a Jacob Schueler advertisement from the 1866 release of the History of Denver with a Full and Complete Business Directory.



SCHUELER Short Blobs (above) and BOSWORTH & CO at right

first output of beer was sold in 1874, and from that time on there has been an ever-increasing output from the brewery. In May 1880, Coors purchased Schueler's interest and thereafter carried on the business as a family enterprise – which it remains today. Over the years we have found a number of Schueler bottles; it appears that those embossed "Denver, Col." are not as old as the plain Schueler bottles but, based upon context of where we have found these bottles and their style, the early short blob tops are definitely from the late 1860s to the early 1870s. Thus,



the Schueler bottles we found on the Clark, Gruber & Co. lot probably pre-date the Coors and Schueler joint venture meaning they are from 1866 to 1873 which ties in with the date of the Dimmitt's Bitters.

Over the next few days, the construction on the lot progressed and the foundation for the new building was almost completely dug other than the dirt access ramp going down in the hole. Mike and I went back for one last time and were probing the side of the ramp when we noticed a brick wall about where the Clark, Gruber & Co. lots had been on the block. We thought this might be a brick-lined privy or maybe part of the Clark, Gruber & Co. foundation but there would have been too much digging to do that day to start a hole. Also, my dad had passed away and although he would have wanted me to keep digging, I went out of town to tend to the funeral and family affairs. My mind, however, was at ease knowing that Mike and Tom would go and find out what the brick wall was that we had uncovered. The next evening they went back to the construction lot, located the brick wall again and dug down. And wouldn't you know it – they finally hit the privy for the old Clark, Gruber & Co and the first Denver branch mint!



In the background of the picture of the construction site is the ramp along which we found the privy for the Clark, Gruber & Co. and Denver Branch of the U.S. Mint.

As the boys dug down they found lots of three-part mold unembossed bottles, along with a few patent medicines and a couple of stoneware inks. As Mike later told me, he was cleaning out the last couple of feet of the privy when he exposed a black glass whiskey cylinder. After carefully pulling the bottle out from where it had laid and not seen the light of day for 140 years, Mike brushed the dirt from the glass with the back side of his glove being careful not to scratch the bottle. He revealed around the shoulder of the bottle embossing, which Mike read aloud to his brother, that said "U.S.A / MEDICAL SUPPLIES / FROM / PIKE & KELLOGG. St. LOUIS." To say that Mike and Tom were excited is an understatement. The guys then carefully went about finishing the rest of pit. Shoveling out the bottom of the outhouse, they found one more Pike & Kellogg tucked away in the corner. Tom and Mike then both sat back, admired the two fantastic embossed whiskey shaped "medical supplies" bottles, and talked about how they were thankful that the

Denver Mint assay workers were tipping more than just the gold scales.



The Pike & Kellogg's are three-part mold quart cylinders in dark amber with a green tone. The top is has a double collared crudely applied lip. The bulk of embossing is around the shoulder; in addition, the base is embossed "A. ARBOGAST PITTS." According to [Bottles on the Western Frontier](#) by Rex L. Wilson, the base marking represents an unidentified glass factory in Pittsburgh that likely existed from 1860 to 1880. This linkage to Pittsburgh is not confirmed but it should be noted that Philip Arbogast of Pittsburg and St. Louis, who patented a mechanical press and blow process for bottles in 1881, was the older brother of an Absalom Arbogast (for whom little information is known). In addition, there is some indication in the Ball State University archives that the Arbogast family was involved in glass manufacturing in Pittsburgh starting in 1862. None of this information is conclusive; however, there is some useful historical information about Pike & Kellogg. St. Louis business directories note that Henry Pike was in business -- as a distillers, rectifiers or liquor wholesaler -- at 105-06 North Levee Street from 1857 to 1859; in turn, the firm of Pike & Kellogg was listed at 129 North 2nd Street starting in 1860. Moreover, there is a connection to the military in that the firm of Pike & Kellogg donated funds to arm the Union Guard for St. Louis at the beginning of the Civil War to protect Missouri and St. Louis from Confederate sympathizers. It is not a great leap to connect this support of the Union cause with a contract to distribute "medical supplies" (in the form of whiskey) to the U.S. troops that protected Denver and its new branch mint during the Civil War and afterwards.

In the end, we may not have found a Clark, Gruber & Co. gold coin or a Denver Mint assay bar but we did end up finding a number of rare and historic bottles in those establishments' privy. We also got some nice keepers from other several privies on the site. In addition, even though I did not get to dig in the last pit, the guys did trade to me one of the Pike & Kellogg whiskeys, which I treasure not only because it is rare but also because its connection to Denver and the development of the West.

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www.civilwarstlouis.com, a web site devoted to the historic events of the Civil War as pertains to St. Louis and Missouri.

www.pre-pro.com, a web site devoted to the appreciation of pre-prohibition shot glasses (Containing information on historic St. Louis business directories).

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

MARCH 6, 2005 - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Baltimore Antique Bottle Club **25th Annual Show & Sale** (8 AM to 3 PM) at the Physical Education Center, Essex Campus of the Community College of Baltimore County, 7201 Rossville Blvd., Baltimore, Maryland. INFO: **Bob Ford**, PH: (410) 531-9459, Email: bottles@comcast.net



MARCH 19 - RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

The Raleigh Bottle Club's 5th Annual Antique Bottles & Collectibles Show & Sale (Sat. 9 AM - 3 PM, \$2 Adm.; Dealer set-up, 6 - 7:30 AM, Earlybirds, \$10, 7:30 - 9 AM) at the North Carolina State Fairgrounds, Holshouser Bldg., Raleigh, North Carolina. INFO: **David Tingen**, P.O. Box 18083, Raleigh, NC 27619-8083; Email: RBC@antiquebottles.com; Website: www.antiquebottles.com/raleigh.

APRIL 24 - WASHINGTON, PENNSYLVANIA

The Washington County Antique Bottle Club's 31st Antique Bottle Show (Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM, donation \$3) at the Alpine Star Lodge, 735 Jefferson Ave., Washington, Pennsylvania. (From I-70, exit 17) INFO: **Nigel Dunmore**, 121 Highland Ave., Avella, PA 15312; PH: (724) 587-5217; Email: legin1247@msn.com.

APRIL 24 HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA

The Historical Bottle-Diggers of Virginia 24th Annual Antique Bottle and Collectible Show & Sale, (9 AM to 3 PM), at the Rockingham County Fairgrounds, (US Rt. 11 South, Exit 243 off I-81) Info: **Sonny Smiley**, PH: (540) 434-1129 or Email: lithiaman1@yahoo.com

MAY 22 BRICK, NEW JERSEY

Jersey Shore Bottle Club's 33rd Annual Show & Sale, (9 AM to 2 PM), at the Brick Elks, 2491 Hooper Ave., Brick, NJ. Info: **Richard Peal**, 720 Eastern Lane, Brick, NJ 08723, PH: (732) 267-2528, Email: boxcar1@worldnet.att.net

JUNE 26 - CHEVERLY, MARYLAND

The Potomac Bottle Collectors Annual Show & Sale (Sunday 9 AM to 3 PM) at the American Legion Post 108, 3608 Legion Drive, Cheverly, MD 20785. Info: **Jim Sears**, 4211 N. 2nd Rd., Apt. 1, Arlington, VA 22203 PH:(703) 243-2409, Email: searsjim@usa.net or **Andy Goldfrank**, PH:(202) 258-2389, Email: amg_sticky@yahoo.com