

Stables dig yields tiny dinnerware

By ALLEN SEIFERT
News-Press/Gazette Staff Writer

A well no one knew was there is yielding dollhouse-sized dishes at the latest archaeological dig at the Pony Express Museum.

Mike Fisher, president of the St. Joseph Archaeology Society, reported the findings Tuesday, but was at a loss to explain what has been found or the source.

"We located the site of the well about a week ago, but weather forced a delay in excavating it," said Fisher, who says that the brick-lined well, which is about three feet in diameter, may be up to 15 feet deep.

"We were surprised by the presence of the well, because it would have been located within the old stables," Fisher said. "We know that indoor plumbing, or piped-in water came to this area about 1880, so we're assuming that the well was abandoned about that time."

The dig will continue until the bottom of the well is reached, Fisher said.

The first of the small dishes, which include plates about one inch in diameter, tiny pitchers with removable lids and tiny tea or coffee cups, were found just past the three-foot mark.

"So far, we've found over 100 of those dishes," Fisher said. "The staff of the St. Joseph Museum, including historian Jackie Lewin, is attempting to place them in time or find where they came from. We just don't know."

A number of other artifacts also have been filtered from the diggings. A number of shards from lamp chimneys have been found, along with several almost-complete chimneys.

A wash basin/water pitcher set made of ironstone china also has been unearthed. Those pieces carry the name J and G Meakin, Hanley, England. Fisher says he hopes that the missing fragments so they might be put back together.

"There was a lot of ironstone china made, so I'm not sure yet whether we can date those pieces. We're hoping we can," he said, talking while other members of his organization bustled around him in an effort to get as much work as possible done before bad weather comes again. More than 30 members of the archaeological group has assisted in the series of digs.

Another strange find in the dig was a few chunks of plaster of paris — unlike any within the present museum.

"This dig isn't like the one at Robidoux Row," Fisher said. "When we dug up there, we found a number of bitters bottles and whiskey bottles and we could find dates for them. What I'd like to find here is a coin with a date on it — or something autographed by (Pony rider) Johnny Fry with a date on it."



Staff photo by ERIC KEITH

Mike Fisher watches over Margaret Elder and Ron Meiners as they excavate the original Pony Express stables.

Archaeologists hope for pay dirt

Dig for artifacts resumes at Pony Express Stables

By ALLEN SEIFERT
News-Press Staff Writer 6-13-92

Members of the St. Joseph Archaeological Society returned Friday to the rear of the Pony Express Stables Museum, looking for another mother lode of artifacts like those found there last fall.

While society president Michael Fisher made random probes with a thin steel rod, Margaret Elder and Ron Meiners reopened a dig the organization had begun last fall.

The archaeologists soon will open a new excavation site east

and slightly north of this one. The new site likely will be the last one, Fisher said.

The present dig is a 10-by-10-foot square located near the alleyway south of the museum, and south and west of the well the group discovered last fall.

At that time, the excavators not only discovered a well, but within the well discovered artifacts that were probably used to fill that well once city water was piped to the old building in the 1880s.

Some of those artifacts — a children's tea set with miniature plates and pitchers, a large basin-type pitcher, an 1881 penny, and numerous shards of glass and pottery, are now on display in the museum, along with several old-style square nails also recovered.

The well itself likely will become a part of a permanent muse-

um exhibit at some time in the future — when the museum expands.

"It's my understanding that they plan to put a pump down in the well and use it to demonstrate how frontier families pumped water," Fisher said.

"We plan to go down another four inches or so at this site, then begin the new one," he added, noting that his ranks of volunteer excavationists had been thinned by vacations and work demands.

Meiners, from Maryville, is a senior at Northwest Missouri State University who is satisfying a scholastic requirement by participating in the dig. He will work with the group this summer, Fisher said.

"When we begin the new dig, we'll have a few more people," he said, adding that the digging will take place in the mornings.



Staff photo by ERIC WELCH

These marbles came from the archaeological dig behind the Pony Express Museum. They belong to the collection of Gloria Davis' grandfather. Davis gave a lecture at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum Wednesday.

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Old marbles are a rare find

Pony Express Stables dig yields gems

By **PRESTON FILBERT**
 News-Press/Gazette Staff Writer

Johnny Fry may have played marbles.

OK, it's a longshot whether we'll ever know if the young Pony Express riders were good at knuckling down and shooting keeps for a milky. But in the past two years, archaeologists at the Pony Express Stables have dug up half a dozen marbles, including one in the bottom of a well that was probably used during the mail business' brief stint.

Michael Fisher, supervisor of

the dig, brought three of those antique marbles to the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art on Tuesday to be identified by Cathy Runyan, "The Marble Lady" of Kansas City.

Runyan picked the orbs up, rolled them in her palm and, finally, subjected them to the big test: knocking them against her teeth.

"This is stone," she said of the marble found at the bottom of the well. "It's very dense."

She figures it probably dates from the late 19th century, as does a yellow clay marble found elsewhere on the site. The third marble is glass, made in Germany sometime between 1850 and 1890.

Runyan — and her teeth — know marbles. She started studying the toys when she realized nine years ago that her children had no knowledge of the game

she knelt in the dust to play.

"I realized nine years ago that it was about ready to die out, and no one even cared," she told about 30 people gathered at the museum. "If you were born after 1954, you've probably never played marbles."

She blamed the demise of marbles on television, which kept children indoors, and on the advent of blacktop playgrounds, which present a poor, bumpy surface for shooting your aggies.

In the past nine years, Runyan has helped create marble exhibits for museums and has written a book of marble games.

And now marble playing is coming back with a new generation, inspired by artists creating beautiful new designs, and by children who find the simplicity

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Tea for 20

Above: Excavators, from left, Mike Fisher, Robin Chappell, James Smith and Jim Burruss helped recover artifacts from a well behind the Pony Express Stables Museum on Wednesday.

Left: Miniature tea sets were among the discoveries. **Related story, page 3B.**

Staff photos by IVAL LAWHON JR.

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Old

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of the game appealing, she added. Also, grandparents with leisure time are teaching their children's children the old rules and techniques, just the way Runyan learned to play.

Gloria Davis, who brought a bag of her grandfather's marbles for Runyan's inspection, is one woman who has kept the faith: She's teaching her seven-year-old daughter how to play.

"I grew up with all big brothers and boy cousins," Davis said. "Marbles were the only thing I could do well, even if I was skinny and scrawny."

She and her daughter do their shooting on the carpet, and Runyan concedes it's possible that indoor carpeting is contributing to the return of the game. If so, it's coming back in a less dirty but still time-honored form: Ancient Persians played marbles, she said, using the big medallion patterns in their fancy carpets for the marble ring.

Archaeological crew gets to bottom of things

There was a time when St. Joseph's water supply came from rivers, streams and springs, followed by wells and cisterns. Sometimes these long-abandoned wells and cisterns show up in present times in strange ways and places.

When I was investigating some property to buy in town, the ground suddenly gave way beneath my feet. I found myself hanging from the side of a cistern.

Prior to the renovation of the Pony Express Museum, an archaeological dig was conducted behind the building. A well no one knew existed was uncovered.

The archaeological crew excavated the well to a depth of 22 feet and determined that the well was conveniently located for watering horses within the original Pony Express stable. The well, with a platform and pump attached, is now a hands-on exhibit in the newly renovated Pony Express Museum.

Research revealed that city water was piped down 10th Street and into the



Jim Watkins of St. Joseph helps clean out the well that was discovered at the Pony Express Museum just before the museum was renovated.

Pony Express Stable in 1880. Apparently, shortly afterwards, the occupant of the building at that time took

advantage of running water and used the well for an ash and trash receptacle, because underneath the debris

at the bottom of the well was an 1881 penny.

M. R. Fisher
St. Joseph