

SURVEY SAYS

Last week's survey asked: What do you most want for the holidays? More than 225 readers responded:

Toys	11.5%
Books	11.5%
Technology	37.4%
Gift cards	7.9%
Being with family	31.7%

KidsPost

History in the Back Yard

Boys' Discovery Helps Archaeologists Form Better Picture of Area's Past

Reading about history is nice, but finding ties to long-ago historical events in your own back yard is really exciting.

In their heavily populated Fairfax County subdivision, neighbors Adam Giles, 13, and Derek Hann, 12, uncovered pieces of glass that looked quite different from what's used today. "After digging about two feet down, I stumbled upon an interesting bottle," Derek said. The bottle had a "pontil scar" on the bottom, an indication that it was hand-blown rather than machine made. It also had the name "Fraser" on one side.

Adam found remnants of a green bottle and some very thick brown glass — again, far different from today's glassware.

After doing research on the computer, the boys contacted Aimee Wells of the county's Cultural Resources office. She showed them a computer program that digitally puts old maps over modern satellite photographs.

Bingo! Their back yards were once part of a military encampment used by Ohio soldiers on their way to fight in the Spanish-American War in 1898. In fact, thousands of soldiers from many states occupied a huge, temporary tent camp called Camp Alger — sprawling over 14,000 acres in the Vienna-Falls Church area.

The war lasted four months but effectively ended Spain's empire while establishing the United States as a world power. Cuba became an independent country, and Guam and Puerto Rico became U.S. territories.

So how do a few bottles get connected to a brief war that was more than a century ago? "We get there by good judgment," Wells said. "We know the time period of the bottles and what happened in that area." Anyone can dig a hole, but archaeologists (those who study relics and artifacts relating to long-ago human activity) seek a deeper understand-



Adam Giles, 13, left, and Derek Hann, 12, uncovered glass in their back yards, once part of a military camp 110 years ago!

PHOTOS BY ANH CAMERON SIEGAL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Archaeologists are people who dig up artifacts to study past human life and culture. Experts who dig up fossils and study forms of life in prehistoric times, including dinosaurs, are called paleontologists.



ing. How do objects found relate to things around them?

When Derek and Adam realized that a soldier might have held that Fraser bottle 110 years ago, they wondered what he might have been thinking. What did he see as he looked around him? How did he pass the time waiting to go into battle?

Historical records show that while waiting for orders, the soldiers in and around Camp Alger played baseball, played harmonicas and walked seven miles to the Potomac River once a week (!) for baths. An epidemic of typhoid fever forced the closing of the camp, and there are no buildings to study. "What's left is only what's in the ground," Wells said.

Derek's and Adam's back yards have joined the 3,400 places listed on the county's register of archaeological sites. The boys were given tips on how to dig effectively and safely, and on how to document the location of items found.

The official record of their finds



One bottle bears the word "Fraser," left. Other remnants show the word "registered" and what looks like part of the word "Washington." In 1898, the area's large military camp housed soldiers awaiting battle in the Spanish-American War.

serves as another piece of the puzzle for historians seeking to form a more complete story of what happened.

"Not everybody is going to have historical objects in their own yard,"

Wells said. "That's okay. Make your own time capsule and bury it. What would you want people to know about your life years from now?"

— Ann Cameron Siegal



Derek and Adam in Adam's back yard. Make sure you get your parents' permission before you dig in your own yard.

Before You Dig

■ **Do your research.** Check with historical societies and your local library to see what historical events might have happened in your area.

■ **Get permission from your parents.** You don't want to mess up a carefully landscaped garden. Never dig on public property; ask your parents to call Miss Utility (dial 811) to make sure you're not digging where underground wires and pipes are located.

■ **Wear thick work gloves.** Glass and other sharp objects can make a mess of your fingers.

■ **Dig slowly and gently with a small trowel.** Attacking the dirt vigorously or with a large shovel might break any artifacts you come across. There also have been cases of people finding ammunition (cannon balls, bullets, etc.) that could still explode.

■ **Sift through dirt carefully.** Otherwise, you might find the big bottle but miss the cool button that tells you about the clothing worn during a particular period. Trash and bones left behind also give clues to life in an earlier time.