



# What They Threw Away

Constance Cherba with Sam and Joe Ashkar  
examine what our ancestors threw away

**D**URING THE SUMMER OF 2021, THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER FELL TO historic lows. Sandbars challenged towboat navigation in the main channel, pleasure boats were trapped in harbors, and the artifacts from Dubuque, Iowa's early dump appeared along the edge of a river-fed pond on Schmitt's Island to the delight of our grandsons Sam and Joe. The boys, ages 12 and 14, collected old bottles and glassware, bits of early plastic, worn-out leather shoes and old rubber boots, stamped bricks, and other items discarded by a generation that included their great grandparents. The discarded items presented the boys with research opportunities and a peek into what life was like in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.



Site of former garbage dump on Mississippi River. (Constance Cherba)

A little research into old newspapers archived and available online at the local Carnegie Stout Public Library website, <https://carnegiestout.org>, helped date the “treasures” the boys pulled from the mud bank and the shallow water at the edge of the pond. The front page of the 22 January 1950 Dubuque Telegraph Herald announced in bold letters that the city would begin burying garbage on what was then called City Island in an all-out “Rat War.” To discourage rats that invaded open piles of trash, the new “landfill” method of garbage disposal called for workers employed by the Dubuque Street Department to dig seven-foot-deep trenches to hold garbage that would then be covered by two feet of dirt. Seven-ton scoop tractors would be employed to “dig the trenches, crush the rubbish, and push dirt over the top.”

## Bottles and Glassware

Although the tractors did their best to crush the garbage, small glassware items and thick soda bottles escaped destruction. The boys were surprised to learn that back before a few bottling giants took over the soda industry, towns across the United States had their own soda-producing companies. Over the years, Dubuque boasted nearly a dozen soda manufacturers and almost as many breweries and beer bottling enterprises.

One of the thick, aqua soda bottles the boys pulled from the mud was embossed “CH. E. KLEIS DUBUQUE IA.” According to Dubuque’s online encyclopedia found at [www.encyclopediadubuque.org](http://www.encyclopediadubuque.org), Christian E. Kleis, a German immigrant, began manufacturing mineral and soda water in Dubuque in 1863. After his death



Chris Kleis Bottle unearthing. (Constance Cherba).