

Digging a Hole to China

by Kern Hagg

(#18 of Series)

In the summer of my 12th year (1960), my very good friend, Dewey Oberlin, and I decided to try to dig a hole to China. We were old enough and wise enough to know that we could not make it to the earth's core, but we wondered what we would find if we dug a 4'x4' hole straight down, down, down deep into the earth below Stonegate. We worked this mineshaft into a vacant lot directly north of Dewey's home on Dryden. We appropriated lumber from new homes being built in Stonegate. We used the lumber to build shoring at the top of the shaft so that black dirt would not tumble down upon us. We affixed a three-quarter inch plywood lid to the top of the shoring, and we secured it with a padlock. We certainly did not want animals, including children accidentally tumbling into the hole. The vacant lot was not ever mowed, so it was populated with scrub trees and various tall weeds making it difficult for anyone to see what we were plotting. We took turns going into the hole to dig while the other pulled up buckets of black dirt and clay. We spread the contents of our mineshaft around the vacant lot so as to keep our project inconspicuous.

I quickly learned that a four-foot square vertical shaft entailed the removal of great amounts of dirt when doing this by hand. It was backbreaking work, and we had dug to a depth of about 15 feet, and the project had to be ended. We had built a wooden ladder along one side and that was used to climb in and out of the hole.

One day, we unlocked the lid and found that our mineshaft was about 18 inches deep with water. Apparently, we had struck a shallow water table and it changed our project from a mineshaft to a well. We did use our bucket to extract a great deal of water, but the following day, the same amount of water had returned. Also, Dewey's father had learned of our endeavors, and he required that we immediately refill the hole with dirt. Now, we were in real trouble because the dirt we extracted was not in a pile. We threw it all over the vacant lot as we emptied each bucket one-by-one. It was much more difficult filling the hole than it was emptying it because we had to take single shovels of dirt (many hundreds of them) from around the vacant lot to replace all we had extracted. That process took us a couple of weeks, blistered hands, aching feet from jumping on spades, and a painful lesson learned about water tables.

In hindsight, I think we had to be grateful that neither of us was killed in the bottom of that dark, deep abyss. Our shoring only protected the top 10 inches of our project. Had the dirt been loose anywhere along the next 14 feet, one of us could have been enveloped with a cave in of loose dirt and clay. Happily, we both lived to tell the story for another 60 years (so far).