

# Metal Detecting:

# CAN YOU DIG

## Reality TV Is Bringing a New Enthusiasm to the Hobby

by Amy Drew Thompson

**M**etal detecting—or “digging,” as enthusiasts sometimes call it—has drawn a plethora of passionate hobbyists with varied interests for decades, and reality television is shining a new light on this pastime.



From left: Rue Shumate, Bob Buttafuso, Ric Savage and Giuseppe Savage of “American Digger” discuss a find on a dig in St. Augustine, Florida.

# IT?

Wanna give it a try? The stars of Spike TV’s “American Digger” are happy to give you a few pointers.

It is not beyond my comprehension that a source would quote to me some wonderful nugget of literature that is unfailingly relevant to the topic about which we’re conversing. I can recall, in fact, many moments when someone has invoked an observation by Oscar Wilde or Dorothy Parker or Tennessee Williams to colorfully support a point.

Today, my eloquent subject reaches back into history—an apt metaphor in itself—to Mark Twain. A line from *Tom Sawyer*, to be precise:

“There comes a time in every rightly constructed boy’s life that he has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for hidden treasure.”

The caveat here is that you don’t necessarily expect such articulacy from the hulking Ric Savage. Formerly known as “Heavy Metal” Ric Savage, he is a man who spent much of the ’90s touring as a pro wrestler with large outfits such as the WCW; a man who now hosts Spike TV’s “American Digger,” a new reality show featuring dramatic explosions in its title sequence; a man whose enthusiastic look-what-we-found catchphrase—“*BOOM, baby!!!*”—would sound just as natural accompanying a metal folding chair to the face.

Fact is, however, that Savage, the son of an English professor, grew up surrounded by books. And it was between the covers of one, a circa-1880s children’s history volume called *The Life of General Robert E. Lee*, that the Civil War bug bit him hard.

“I was 9,” he remembers. “I read it and looked at the pictures and was fascinated and began reading everything I could get my hands on.”

A later visit to the Appomattox Courthouse sealed the deal. “My parents bought my first artifact—a dug bullet, which I still have in my collection—in the gift shop. That was it. I was hooked.”

### ‘X’ MARKS THE SPOT

Savage and his TV cohorts—a collection of men who share his passion for unearthing long-lost pieces of history—have turned their popular hobby into small-screen drama, using picks, shovels, metal detectors (and yes, occasionally explosives; it’s still Spike, after all) to unearth



*Ric Savage and his son Giuseppe contemplate an item they discovered while on a dig in St. Augustine, Florida, for Spike TV's "American Digger."*

relics from bygone eras in fascinating and sometimes unexpected places.

Has it sparked new interest in a long-standing pastime with a passionate base? The jury's still out. Treasure hunting has been around since just after the dawn of man; the advent of metal detectors merely gave the rest of us license to be less cool, suburban versions of Indiana Jones. But controversy amid the archaeological and collecting communities—some of whose members believe the show promotes the looting of historical sites—has given "American Digger" a press boost in its debut season, even if Savage and company think it's something of a manufactured storm.

"Some say the show will make everyone want to run out and buy a metal detector, drive to their local state park and start ripping it up," he says, chuckling. "But when 'Antiques Roadshow' came out, I didn't see a slew of people murdering their grandmothers for those old Singer sewing machines in the attic."

Savage notes quite emphatically, as will any archaeologist or city parks employee, that digging in designated historic sites is against the law.

"Much of the response is knee-jerk," he maintains. "They read things like 'battlefields and historic sites' in the press release and they think it's literal, that we're out at Gettysburg with a bulldozer."

He pauses, chuckling. "No, it doesn't work that way. We might be in Gettysburg, but we're going to be on someone's land that is not part of a national park. We only dig on private property, with the landowner's permission."

Bob Buttafuso, "American Digger's" resident gear head, heads up East Coast repairs for White's Electronics out of his Virginia shop ([www.cwrelics.com](http://www.cwrelics.com)) when he's not out shooting for Spike. He says some detectorists are up in arms over the deals the show works out with property owners.

"They think they'll never be able to get on private land, that every property owner's going to want money. They're annoyed that more detectors might get sold; more people will get into the hobby. In other words, it's more selfishness than anything else."

He points out that city beaches, where diggers find money and valuable jewelry, are replenished all the time, are almost always open season ("even if the lifeguard



*Pictured is an assortment of coins from Bob Buttafuso's own collection. All of these were found using a metal detector.*



*Buttafuso dug this 1858 silver three-cent piece, or trime. This was the final year of the design that shows two lines bordering the six-pointed star.*



*Buttafuso, pictured at a private residence, is “American Digger’s” resident gear head.*

might tell you to come back after peak sunbathing hours”). But those hunting for relics—or, more important, numismatic treasures—will probably want to steer clear of the strands.

Buttafuso recommends heading to the oldest burg in your area and locating its resident old-timer. “Ask him or her where the old carnivals used to be held, the old park events, things that are no longer there—that’s an ideal place to search for old coins. Anywhere people congregated, they lost things. In the same ground, you

can dig a 1795 coin or a modern penny.”

Obviously, the older the town in which you search, the older the coins you’re likely to unearth. Swimming holes, too, Buttafuso says, are often boons for treasure hunters. Oftentimes, people would show up unprepared for a dip and either ditch their clothes on the bank—where change was apt to shake loose from pockets—or just jump in with everything on. “Rings are common finds, since the cold water makes our fingers shrink. And water detectors make them searchable.”

White’s Electronics sells two such detectors that are entirely submersible. “You can walk out into the water with them and if you drop them—no big deal,” Buttafuso says. “You can even scuba dive with them. The headphones are waterproof; everything’s waterproof.”

Many land machines, he says, can actually be used in the water up to a couple of feet. “You just have to be extra careful not to drop them,” he warns, “especially if you’ve got a thousand-dollar machine.”

Farmers’ fields—post-plow and pre-plant—are ripe for good finds, Savage says.

“A lot of what you find with a metal detector is within the first 12 inches of soil,” he explains. “Most farmers don’t go much deeper than that.”

Construction sites can be boons, as well. “When they first go into an area, after they’ve cut the brush but before they strip the topsoil off and get the bulldozers in, is a great time to find things.” Without a thorough search, any treasures within will end up either in a landfill or buried in another part of the site. “People don’t ever

think, ‘Gee, there may have been artifacts in that dirt.’ But, quite often, there are.”

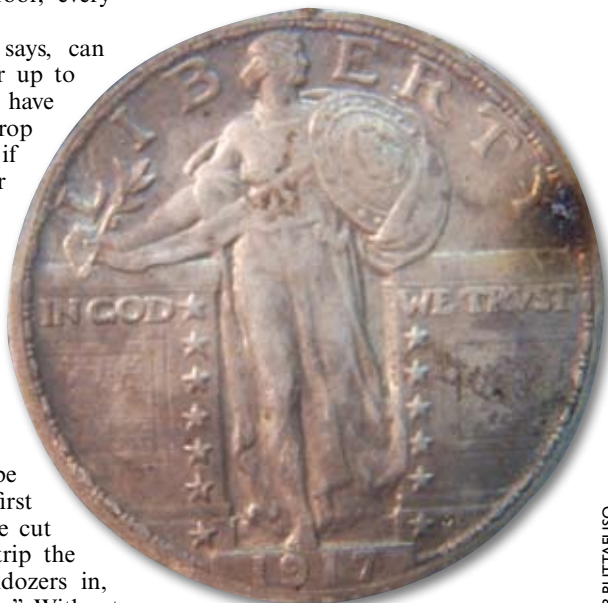
### BEING DISCRIMINATING

In listening to diggers as they hunt, you’ll often hear them reference sounds pinging on their headphones. These signals are distinct, as any metal object—whether a piece of eight or the pull-tab off a Pepsi—has its own unique signature as read by the detector’s coil. And detectors can be set to sound off on certain objects and remain silent on others—a process known as “discrimination.”

“For relic hunters, iron can be good,” Buttafuso says. “Guns, knives, swords, canteens, cannonballs—a lot of great items are iron. But for coin hunting, in particular, you don’t want to hear iron.”

These detectors, he says, can also discriminate on the low end. “That means tinfoil,” he explains. “But the problem with discriminating on things like tin is that you’re going to lose smaller gold coins and gold rings. A lot of these will read the same as a pull-tab.”

While discerning the various blips and beeps of a new detector takes time, modern technology is happy to lighten your load. Some models have a feature called



*Two varieties of the 1917 Standing Liberty quarter were produced. Buttafuso found this one using his metal detector.*



After discerning various blips on their metal detectors, Giuseppe and Ric Savage sift through the dirt. In essence, if you don't want to miss targets, you're going to have to dig just about everything you hear.

“tone ID.” Quite simply, beginning with the low end—tin—and on up the metallic food chain to the silver dollar, the tone goes from high to low as well.

“Most modern detectors have a visual discriminate,” Buttafuso says. “It will actually say—or show you a picture of—a quarter, nickel, dime, penny, pull-tab, bottle cap or ring ... If you go over a ring, it'll say, ‘Possible ring or bottle cap.’”

In essence, the expert says, if you really want to be a good coin hunter and not miss targets, you're going to have to dig the pull-tab.

A joke about diggers perhaps enjoying the benefits of yoga to prevent back strain gets me schooled in additional equipment pretty quickly. “As I get older,” Buttafuso says with a laugh, “and especially if I'm hunting out in fields, I use a long-handled shovel so I don't have to bend over as much.” Additional conveniences include GI-style folding shovels that store neatly for easy toting while on the hunt.

#### FORMIDABLE FINDS

You might imagine that counterfeit pieces are unheard of amid found treasure—but surprisingly, that's not the case. One dig yielded Buttafuso a counterfeit piece-of-eight. Interestingly, it was one made in the same era as the genuine article. “Turned out to be a neat find,” he says. “A period fake.”

As long as you're following the rules about where you're digging and honoring agreements made with the land

owner on private property, most treasures should be finders-keepers. But there are exceptions.

“Any human remains must be reported to the authorities,” Savage says, noting that in areas such as his home state of North Carolina, where Native Americans have lived for eons, finds can often be of cultural and historic significance and not

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necessarily indicative of foul play.

Although Buttafuso has enjoyed the social aspects of the hobby for decades—he is a former president of the Northern Virginia Relic Hunters Association, the oldest such club in the country—he recommends that you keep group digs intimate if you're planning to ask for permission to search on private property. “You've got a better chance of getting a yes if there's just one or two of you knocking on the door.”

And when you do get the nod, there are ethics involved. “Always cover your hole and put it back like it was. In a nice, manicured yard, use a digging knife with serrated edges so you can cut a plug. If you're really nice, bring plastic and put your dirt on that so you can pour it back down the hole when

you're done. And if you're on a farm—close the fences. You have to leave everything as it was when you arrived."

Many diggers hope that the U.S. will adopt laws similar to those in England, where Buttafuso hopes future seasons of "American Digger" will send the show. "Over there," he says, "you get a permit to hunt. When you dig something that's over 100 years old, the government has the option to buy it from you at full retail."

In other words, while the detectorist can't refuse, he or she will be handsomely compensated—and still enjoy the thrill of discovery.

"I had a buddy go over and he dug three Celtic coins. [The government] bought one at full price; the second went to the landowner and the third he was allowed to keep." If similar laws were adopted state-side, he believes, American archaeologists would have far less to be unhappy about where diggers were concerned.

To Savage, whose own coin collection includes pieces from his beloved Civil War era to others from World War II Germany and ancient Rome, the essence of the hobby is a profound love of history.

"We can't go back in time," he says dreamily, but diggers have found something pretty close. He unearths a Civil War slug, holds it in his hand, knowing he's the first to touch it since a soldier dropped it right on this spot. "What was he doing?" he wonders aloud. "Was he sitting in a trench with bullets flying over his head? Were there troops coming over the ridge with bayonets?"

It's much the same talk I hear from coin lovers who pore over their prizes, wondering what each might have bought, in whose pockets and purses they might have traveled.

While Savage might be making a living pursuing his passion, Buttafuso warns that for most, it's still a hobby. "I once rented a detector to a guy going to the beach on vacation. First hit off the boardwalk was a Rolex watch," he relates. "Paid for his whole trip." But that, he says, is just classic beginner's luck.

"The most exciting part, no matter what you're out for, are those moments after you get your signal and you're in the hole digging—just wondering what it is."

OK, so metal detecting isn't a career. But for people such as Savage and Buttafuso—and thousands more—it might be something even better.

It's a way to be Tom Sawyer. In perpetuity. ☺



*This 1841 Seated Liberty coin has some damage to it. Part of the fun of metal detecting for coin hunters is thinking about who may have carried this coin, what they were doing and what caused the damage it incurred.*

*This 1857 Seated Liberty coin is also from one of Buttafuso's digs. Anywhere people congregated, they lost things, making it a great place to hunt for coins using a metal detector.*



*Rue Shumate and Bob Buttafuso hunt through some debris in St. Augustine, Florida. "American Digger" obtained the property owner's permission before exploring with metal detectors.*

BOB BUTTAFUSO, SPIKE TV