

THE LURE OF THE EMPTY BOTTLE

GINPA LATE
1965-1970
1970s

In 1929, Mrs. Gardner and I called on our friends, the Huntleys, at their summer home at the shore, where they had a window filled with bottles of various colors which they had accumulated from various sources. Among them were a couple of really old bottles. Our hostess, who collected and loved old things, explained the meaning of a pontil mark which appeared on the bases of these. Then and there I became interested in old bottles and since that time I have been an ardent collector.

I set out to buy practically every bottle I could find bearing a pontil mark on the base. As I learned more about the subject I grew increasingly more enthusiastic. Edwin LeFevre wrote an article "Why I Collect Empty Bottles" which was published in the Saturday Post for Oct. 19th, 1929 and this introduced me to the value of historical flasks. From then on my collection grew in size and importance to the point it has now reached, numbering some four thousand five hundred specimens, and requiring two floors of an addition I had built for the purpose of properly displaying my treasures. This addition is 16' X 36'. The upper level is all plate glass with glass shelves and sliding doors and the basement has opaque white glass windows. There is a fireplace on each floor which is attractive as well as useful.

Prior to bottle collecting I collected guns. One day Stephen Van Rensselaer, who had written two books on the subject of old bottles, came to see my collection. As he dealt in old guns, I parted with a station wagon load of these in exchange for bottles. This gave me a good start. As there are ^{SIX} five old glass factory sites in Connecticut I naturally became enthusiastic about Connecticut bottles and I am glad to say that today there are only three specimens lacking from collection of these flasks. I was a pioneer member of the National Early American Glass Club and exhibited at their various gatherings throughout New England. I made a great many friends through my association with the Glass Club. Although, unfortunately, a number of these have passed on, I have most pleasant memories of Harry Hall White, ^{Stephen Van Rensselaer} Edwin LeFevre, Rhea Mansfield Knittle, Lura Woodside Watkins, Ruth Webb Lee, James H. Thompson, George & Helen McKearin, the Charles Messer Stows' and many others who were interested in and wrote on the subject of old glass. Only two of the group survive.

Then there are the Sunburst Group, handled glass jugs (many with original labels), grenade fire extinguishers, pickle bottles, some with gothic arches on all four sides, peppersauce bottles, mineral water bottles and hundreds of bitters bottles, which in the main originally contained bourbon whiskey with a dash of herbs to cover the law, demi-johns in cylindrical, globular and kidney shapes, drug bottles and jars, chestnut bottles, so called because they resemble a chestnut in form, The New England and Mid Western type of swirled and ribbed Pitkins, inks, scents, many of them in the shape of small figures, Mid Western quilted, ribbed or swirled bottles and flasks and the very early types of black squat bottles, some from Indian graves and others bearing dates and seals on their sides from 1695 to 1846 (the earliest unmarked specimens dating back to 1660), pottery book bottles, produced in great numbers at Bennington, Vt. and figure or character bottles which are a field in themselves.

I also have a considerable number of glass blowers tools, including the bench, also ⁴two moulds.

One interesting side light on bottle collecting is the number of reproductions on the market. These bottles are produced in part by Clevenger of Clayton, N. J. Manufactured with no intent to fool the public but as decorators material, attractive bright colored bottles in the old designs at a very low price.

I have had an opportunity to watch glass blowing in several factories and it is a most interesting sight. Knowing how ~~my~~ bottles were actually made lends added charm. I have also visited a number of glass house sites where the former factories stood and have gathered fragments of glass that identified certain bottles in my collection.

I think a ~~hobby~~ of some kind is an absolute necessity to a person who has passed middle age. I am now seventy ^{eight}~~three~~ and I look forward every day to the prospect of finding something to add to my collection. Every motor trip we take or every visit to another city offers the chance for such a thrill. When one grows old, thrills are worth seeking.

Unlike some hobbies, bottle collecting can be a profitable investment. At the present market my collection would bring around ^{100,000} ~~\$50,000~~. Needless to say I did not invest that much. As an example of how bottles increase in value over the years I would cite a few instances. In 1931 I purchased a flask known as the Jared Spencer and marked Manchester, Conn. from Stephen Van Rensselaer for \$75.00. A few years later, a friend collector offered me a \$500 G. E. electric refrigerator for this flask and right away the wife made up my mind to accept. About three years later the same friend obtained a duplicate of the flask and traded it back to me for three flasks that cost me a total of \$45.00. In 1956 a duplicate of this flask sold for \$570.00. ^{and recently I was offered 1500 for the same flask} These four bottles, together with a few unimportant inks, are the only bottles I have ever parted with from my collection. Another time a picker brought me in a flask tightly clasped in his hand and said he was going to sell it to me sight unseen. I thought I knew just what it was, so I bought it at his price of \$8.00. Seems he had called a local dealer on the phone and told him he had a flask with a cornucopia on one side and an eagle on the other, and the dealer offered him \$2.50. However, he heard I was a beginner and thought he would take advantage of my ignorance. I am mighty glad he did; a similar flask sold a year ago for \$290.00 and the latest selling price for a similar bottle was \$700.00. To enjoy the fun of collecting and at the same time be aware you are actually making a profitable investment explains one of the important advantages of my hobby. As one chap said when I asked him how he could bear to part with his collection: "I have had all the pleasure of collecting them and admiring them over the years, and now I can have the fun of spending the money I get for them".

The universal question from the ladies is "Who keeps all those bottles clean?" I can only explain how I am indebted to my wife who is an enthusiastic and encouraging helper.