

Donnie Medlin's World is Pepsi

by Bill Baab

Since 1988, Pepsi-Cola has been hitting the spot for Donnie Medlin, who has amassed one of the greatest private collections of memorabilia relating to that soft drink in the world.

Three rooms of his home are jam-packed with everything Pepsi, including fans, Barbie dolls, clocks, thermometers, signs, footballs, cans, tennis shoes, bottle molds and a cardboard cutout of Cindy Crawford, the super model who has been a spokeswoman for the Pepsi-Cola Company. He also has an autographed photo of Miss Crawford.

The most unusual is a toilet seat with the Pepsi bottle on the underside of the cover and a pair of 12-ounce Everlast boxing gloves emblazoned with the Diet Pepsi logo on their business ends. Put up your dukes!

Medlin has most of the cardboard signs framed to protect them, with a long series of mobiles featuring Pete and Pepsi, the Keystone Kops from the late 1930s-early 1940s, hanging inside one rectangular frame. The cutouts are dangling on strings and are illustrated on both sides.

These are being reproduced, but the new ones have gold grommets around the string holes," said Medlin, who acquired the rare original set from a Michigan friend. "There are no grommets on the originals. My friend went to a yard sale and the woman running it said she had some Pepsi stuff in her basement. He went down to check it out and there were the Kops. 'Pick out the ones you want and I'll cut the strings,' she told him. 'No-no-no! Don't do that! I'll take all of them,' said my friend. I don't know what he paid, but he sold them to me for a good price a bit later."

Actually, signs are No. 4 on his list of collecting priorities, with bottles No. 1, clocks No. 2 and thermometers No. 3.

You just wouldn't believe all those bottles!

"I started collecting Pepsi-Cola just because it started in my home state," said the 60-year-old Roanoke Rapids, N.C., native and Raleigh Bottle Club member. Among the bottles are examples from Caleb Bradham's drug store in New Bern where Bradham developed the beverage during the 1890s. First called "Brad's Drink," he later changed it to Pepsi-Cola.

*Pepsi-Cola hits the spot!
Twelve full ounces – that's a lot!
Twice as much for a nickel, too!
Pepsi-Cola is the drink for you!
– 1940s Radio Jingle.*



Here's an item for the Pepsi collector who has everything, and Medlin almost has it all.



"Ok, you wanna fight? Put up your dukes," says Donnie Medlin, "armed" with Diet Pepsi gloves.

"There is so much Coca-Cola stuff out there and I thought Pepsi would be more challenging to collect," Medlin said. Based upon a visitor's viewpoint, there is so much Pepsi-Cola stuff out there, stuff the average collector doesn't know exists, but this Tar Heel "Pepsi Nut" has been able to track down much of it.

In addition to his estimates of 950 to 1,000 pre-1930s embossed Pepsis and 65 amber-colored examples, Medlin also has

a huge collection of the so-called "throw-out" containers, the ones marked "No Deposit – No Return."

In fact, he points to one example as a favorite. It's a 12-ounce "stubby" throw-away embossed No Deposit – No Return and has an applied color label that duplicates the design on an early cone-top can.

"It was produced during 1951, the transition year when the design was switched from the familiar double dot, and so far is the only one known to exist," he said. The "double dot:" is the part of the Pepsi logo between the "i" of Pepsi and the "C" of Cola. Taking the place of a hyphen, there also are single and triple dot logos. Collectors can go "dotty" trying to acquire all of them.

His collection includes other soft drink brands bottled by Pepsi-Cola, including Mountain Dew, Slice, Jefferson Club, Pilot, Mason's Root Beer, Virginia Dare, Tom Thumb, Mission Orange, Goody, Cloverdale, Tom's Kist, Blue Streak, Belfast, Tarver's Hollywood, M&K, Big Nickel Ginger Ale, Sun Fresh, Town Hall, Sunbo, Suncrest, Orange Crush, Minges, Dixie Dew and Old Colony, to name just a few. Each of those applied color label bottles sports the magic words: "Bottled by the Pepsi-Cola Company."

Medlin said the only place he's "dug" for his prizes is in his wallet. He's never turned a spadeful of earth in search of bottles in any dumping ground.

"I've tried to establish myself with others in the hobby as someone who is a serious collector of Pepsis," said Medlin, sipping from a cold can of Diet Pepsi. "I buy rare ones because every day they go up in value. My whole collection is an investment. I don't mind paying fair prices for anything I'm interested in. Many of my friends look out for me and put out the word that I pay good money for empty bottles. I'm sure I've paid too much for some things, but it all evens out."

Medlin's marketplace includes eBay, auctions, bottle shows, antique and "junque" shops, and that word of mouth. Visitors to his home wonder if there's enough space to house more, but the collector keeps on searching for bottles and extras he doesn't have.

A few years ago, a friend in St. Paul, Minn., decided to sell his collection of Pepsis and Mountain Dews numbering between 500 and 600 bottles. Medlin flew to St. Paul, bought the collection, rented a



Photos:

Top left: Medlin's favorite "Pepsi Girl," super model Cindy Crawford surrounded by stuff.

Middle left: Rare one-gallon Pepsi syrup jug.

Middle right: Original "Keystone Kops" store display mounted in rectangular frame is Medlin's pride and joy.

Bottom left: Here's just a part of one wall loaded with pre-1930s embossed Pepsi-Cola bottles. You've got to see it to believe it.

Bottom right: Early cone-top Pepsi can is super-rare and so is the cardboard carton.





Photos: Top left: Just a few of the collector's paper-labeled Pepsis in amber, green and clear versions.

Top right: Rare amber Pepsis, 65 in all, grace the glass-fronted cabinet.

Middle: The Pepsi-Cola Company bottled many other soft drink brands, including these.

Bottom left: Rare signs among Medlin's Mountain Dew collection.

Bottom right: Donnie Medlin with just a few of his Pepsi Cola clocks. All of them used to operate, but he found it too much of a job to keep them ticking.



van and packed it full. "There wasn't enough room left for a passenger," said Medlin, who drove 23-1/2 hours to his North Carolina home. "I'd decided I didn't want to risk staying overnight and having someone see that van loaded with boxes and decide to rip me off," he explained. "During the drive, I reached the point of having to roll down my window so the cold air would keep me awake. I stopped only for fuel, to use the bathroom and buy snacks to eat."

He was used to driving long distances. He spent 23 years with United Parcel Service, first as a driver of those big brown trucks, and later as a supervisor, retiring in 2000 at the age of 55. He invested heavily in company stock and has never regretted it.

Medlin enjoys attending "Pepsi Fests" held in Indianapolis, Ind., and Las Vegas. "Some 500 to 600 Pepsi collectors converge on one motel or hotel and we do some swapping and buying on room-to-room visits," he said. "There used to be one held in Charlotte, N.C., but not lately for some reason. I rarely sell, maybe just four or five bottles since I've been collecting."

When you walk through the doorway of one room, your eyes quickly find row upon row upon row of embossed Pepsis of the early 1900s from throughout the U.S. Rare North Carolina bottles featuring slug plates embossed Rose Hill and Cherryville and the only known 1905 Dixie Carbonating Co., crown top from Augusta, Georgia dug by Mike Newman of that city several years ago. He sent it to Pepsi book author James Ayers and Medlin bought it from the Virginia

collector. Medlin also owns a tall aqua Augusta Pepsi which also is one-of-a-kind. Just as rare is a bottle embossed with 15 PC initials, but no city name. A trio of the only known Hutchinson Pepsi from the Escambia Bottling Works of Pensacola, Fla., join other rarities on the shelves.

And speaking of Ayers' Pepsi books, that author spent hours shooting photos of Medlin's collection to illustrate his second book.

A 1930s Pepsi cooler sits in one room. "Pepsi changed from paper labels to applied color labels because of coolers like this one," Medlin said. "When the ice melted, the paper labels detached from the bottles."

What else out there that's among Medlin's Pepsi heart's desires?

"Anything I ain't got!" he chuckles. "I've heard of Pepsi bottles from Oxford, N.C., and Forsyth, Ga., but don't know if they exist."

The Forsyth bottle does exist in a tall, straight-sided clear version, with Pepsi-Cola in script embossed between Forsyth at the top of the oval slug plate and Forsyth, Ga., on the bottom. The bottle is pictured in "Georgia Early Embossed Crown Top Soda Bottles," by Carl Barnett and Ken Nease.

In addition to Pepsis, Medlin also has a marvelous collection of Mountain Dew items, including rare bottles, cans and cardboard signs, others that light up, and a wonderful, lifelike figure of a hilarious hillbilly with a Mountain Dew jug. Medlin plugs in the cord and the figure sways and sways — maybe a bit too much Mountain

Dew.

"Most of the time you see this store display missing toes on his feet, but this one has all his toes and is the only one I've seen that moves," the collector said.

More signs, clocks and other memorabilia tout Orange Crush, Dad's Root Beer and other soft drinks popular from the early 1900s to date. The sight truly boggles the mind of Medlin's visitors.

Later on, fellow Raleigh Bottle Club member Jack Murdoch got Medlin started on a "new" hobby. "Why don't you start collecting North Carolina whiskey flasks?" Murdoch asked him.

More than 100 embossed North Carolina whiskey flasks from the 19th and early 20th centuries are now in Medlin's collection, said to be the finest in existence.

However, a final question remains unanswered:

"When you get older and grayer, or if you lose interest in all this, what's going to happen to it?"

Medlin figures that the day he'll lose interest "would be like finding a snowball in Hades," and, as for the collection's future, only time will tell.

Photos by Bill Baab



Medlin even used the vaulted ceilings to display signs and thermometers.