

Florida bottle collecting history

One of a series

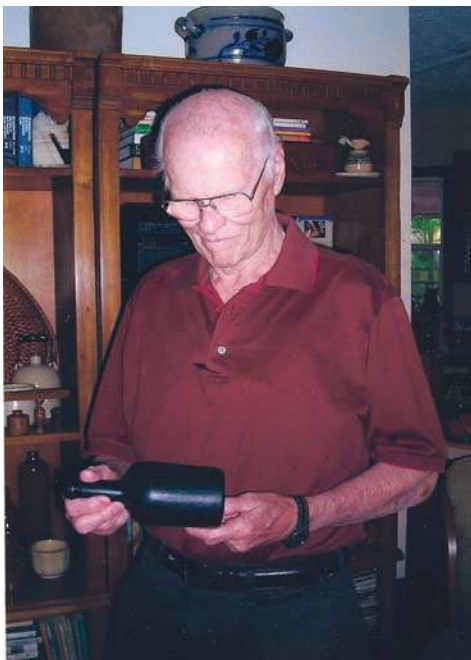
By Bill Baab, *Southern Region Editor*

In Florida, collectors soon learned that bottles are where you find them. That means under the earth. It also means on the bottoms of rivers, lakes, streams and oceans.

William E. (Bill) Franklin Jr., of Ocala, Florida, 80 years old when this was written in May 2009, got his start in bottle collecting while diving for Indian artifacts. He started collecting in 1949 and, when health issues intervened, stopped in 1997.

"I started my bottle collection while on a dive in the Oklawaha River. My friend, Ben Waller, was with me when we came to a bend in the river where there were some old stone foot bridges across what must have been small drainage creeks and where there was evidence of an occupation site, such as a hotel or home.

"We were in a 16-foot john boat. There were two seats in the boat, forming a compartment between them that measured 4-1/2 x 4-1/2 feet x 18 inches deep. That day, we filled the compartment with old bottles, including inks, black glass ales, whiskey flasks, round-bottom ginger



Bill Franklin of Ocala, Fla. checks out a black glass cylinder (photo Bea Baab)

ales, medicines, bitters and miscellaneous other bottles."

Franklin had his share of adventures, too.

"On another collecting trip to Silver Run, I was drifting along the bottom on the north side of the river and was dragging my flippers to slow myself down as I scanned the three-foot-wide strip of shells and sand for artifacts.

"When I glanced up to check my path, I nearly had a heart attack! Only four feet in front of me was a gigantic alligator! His body was lying on the slope at a 45-degree angle to the bottom. My first thought was 'Big George' had escaped. He was a 16-foot-long captive alligator kept at Ross Allen's Reptile Institute at Silver Springs and was prone to attack anything or anyone who stepped into his pen. I thought I was a goner!

"I was drifting quite fast, head first down the river and had no time to stop. In my left hand, I had a cloth collecting bag with some old bottles in it. I put it on the gator's snout and pushed sideways. He turned his snout sideways to get rid of the bag and blinked once as I drifted on by only two feet from that huge head. Fortunately, I didn't panic and start thrashing around to get away from him or he may have become excited. I merely pulled my feet and knees up to my chest and just drifted until I was about eight or 10 feet from him.

"I then thought about my brother-in-law, Lamont Pharmer, who was behind me and I worried that given a second chance, the gator might be more aggressive. So I headed to the surface and looked back for my friend's air tank bubbles. Fortunately, he was getting into our boat with Ben.

"Later, I was relieved to find out 'Big George' was still in his pen and learned from the captain of the Jungle Cruise boat at Silver Springs that the gator I'd encountered had been seen and was 'only' 12 feet long."

On another dive, Franklin was

on the bottom of the Suwanee River examining a black glass cylinder bottle he'd discovered when a huge rock hit the water and narrowly missed him.

"Then another big rock came splashing down and I headed for the surface to see what was causing the rock falls. Up on the bluff was a kid who had another big rock in his hands. He thought I was an alligator!"

He listed rivers where bottles were found as including the Suwanee, Oklawaha, Silver Run, Rainbow River, Withlacoochee (in west Marion County and the part north of the Suwanee), Santa Fe, St. Johns, Chipola, Wacasassa, Wekiva, Aucilla, St. Marks, Wacissa, Fenholloway, Steinhatchee, Crystal River, Homosassa, Black Creek and many small creeks along Florida's west side.

He dug bottles in Savannah, two Ocala dumps and dove around Cedar Key (around the sandbars next to the island), in the Gulf of Mexico along the Florida coast and around Key West.

The result was a wonderful collection of black glass and miscellaneous bottles and pottery, most of which has been sold.

The Antique Bottle Club of North Florida was organized in 1967 and four years later gained new members Jackie and Clay McRae. The latter was born and raised in nearby Callahan and served 24 years in the U.S. Air Force, followed by 22 years with the Jacksonville, Fla., sheriff's office. His military tour of duty took him to Montana and South Dakota where the McRaes, who collected rocks and minerals, heard about bottle collecting.

"In Great Falls, Montana, we found the remains of some dwellings whose privies were located exactly 22 paces behind each." In one, Clay found a loaded .32 caliber pistol. "I figured that the owner either shot somebody and threw it down the hole, or else he lost it



Clay and Jackie McRae of Callahan, Fla. (photo Bea Baab)

down the hole,” he said. “In either case, he probably wasn’t interested in going down into the hole after it.”

Mrs. McRae found what turned out to be nursing bottle and developed a collecting interest in that variety.

“We came to Jacksonville and joined the club in 1971,” Mrs. McRae said during a May 2009 interview at her Callahan home. “Dumps were being uncovered when the interstate highways were being constructed. A creek was rerouted in downtown Jacksonville and an earthen

bank was uncovered. It had three distinct layers of different age dumps.”

She said some members of the North Florida club volunteered to collect goods to send to victims of Hurricane Frederick. “We filled two semi-trailers with hurricane relief supplies and, as a result, city officials let our club hold shows without having to buy a city license,” she said.

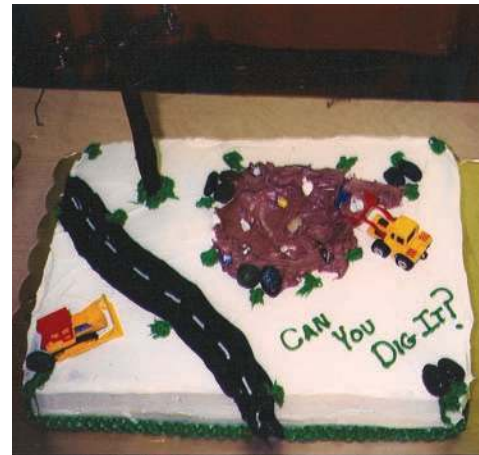
The North Florida club also was among the first to utilize a backhoe as a digging tool. Its success was documented in the May 1992 issue of *Bottles & Extras*, then published by Scott Grandstaff and Kitty Roach, of Happy Camp, California.

“We were able to get permission to dig from either the city or private owners, providing that we fill in our holes,” Mrs. McRae said.

Rules were simple: Keep away from the backhoe at all times, no drinkin’, watch those kids, exercise courtesy. There were also options: hand-digging at \$5 (you keep whatever you find), with the backhoe to fill in your hole; trench-dig at \$15 (keep whatever you find), the backhoe opens a trench down to the bottle layer. You stake out an area and dig; community dig at \$15 (the finds go into the community lottery). The hoe opens a large area of the dump, everyone works



From left: Clay McRae, Lynn McLarty, Jenine McLarty during 1992 Davis School dig, downtown Jacksonville, Fla. (Courtesy of Clay & Jackie McRae)



Specially designed cake displayed at 1994 show of Antique Bottle Club of North Florida. (Courtesy of Clay & Jackie McRae)

together, some dig, some rake, some sift and some wash and clean finds.

Each community dig participant is assigned a number which is printed on a poker chip and the chips go into a hat. Each collector takes his pick according to his number. Money collected on the dig paid for the backhoe and each participant signed a release assuming full liability.

Mrs. McRae edited the club newsletter, *Diggin's*, for a number of years and Arlene Caruso, of Green Cove Springs, appointed herself as “Roving Reporter,” compiling lists of finds to include in the newsletter.

Examples: From a Roving Reporter, Saturday, 19 March, 1994: brass belt buckle VMI (Virginia Military Institute), selected by Richard Harber. Mini-jug – Atlantic Coast – by Jack Ring. Cobalt square-paneled Lactopeptine – by Mike Parlette.

There were many jugs large and mini from Jacksonville merchants found, small town Florida Hutchinsons (Starke, Lake City), lots of straight-sided Cokes, numerous Jacksonville pharmacy bottles and an “Eagle Bark Bitters.” That was an Eagle Angostura Bark Bitters, listed as rare in the Bill Ham-Carlynn Ring book, *Bitters Bottles*.

Collecting antique bottles attracts people from many walks of life. One of the more notable North Florida members was Frank Dearing (1906-1989), an Episcopal priest for 55 years. His great-great-grandfather, Isaiah D. Hart, founded Jacksonville in 1822. Father Dearing was

a founder of the North Florida club and dug some of his favorite bottles in areas where his illustrious relative had lived.

Father Dearing loved to share his knowledge of bottles by giving club programs and making slide shows he donated to the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors.

While the North Florida club continues to hold annual shows, it no longer enjoys club status, going the way of many other clubs across the nation. Deaths of key people, members no longer able to drive at night and a loss of interest were among the reasons.

The **M-T Bottle Collectors Association** of DeLand was organized in the late 1960s, according to charter member Bill Dreggors, who is uncertain about the year.

Dreggors spearheaded the club's first show in 1970 and it celebrated its 40th annual show in 2010. The club, which has approximately 47 members, was on the verge of collapse in 2008 for various reasons, but longtime member Bill Marks said in a telephone interview in May, 2009, that some young collectors had joined the club and injected new life into it.



Charles Benton of DeLand, Fla. once owned a fabulous Florida Hutchinson bottle collection. (photo Bea Baab)



Legendary digger Art Smock, 91 when 2008 photo was taken. (photo Bea Baab)

The club is affiliated with the FOHBC and also supports the National Bottle Museum in Ballston Spa, N.Y.

One of its elder members, 93-year-old Art Smock, was thought to be the oldest, still-active bottle digger in the country. Smock was born May 2, 1916 in Espanola, Fla., and when interviewed at his Holly Hill, Fla., home in November 2008 said he'd dug "all over" Florida and then some. He also dug in Petersburg, Va., Charleston, S.C., Savannah, Ga., New Bern, N.C., St. Augustine, Tampa, Orlando and Winter Park, all in Florida.

His story was first documented in the February 1994 issue of *Bottles & Extras* when he was only 78 years of age. Smock started collecting in 1969, having begun a career as a house painter. During his lunch hour, he would probe backyards and fence lines of some of the older homes he was painting

The *B&E* story was written by his friend and fellow club member, Charles Oliver Benton Jr. The latter, 82, of DeLand, died Feb. 17, 2009 after an extended illness. Benton, who once accumulated the largest known collection of Florida Hutchinson soda bottles over a 39-year period, had served as club president and show chairman. Smock died at the age of 94 on Dec. 29, 2009.

Suncoast Antique Bottle Collectors Association

Ever heard of a "bottle hound?" Former Florida resident Wayne Shultis started collecting antique bottles in 1964

after tying "Tareyton," the family mutt, to a tree on a lot in Bradenton. The dog did as most dogs do, digging itself a cool spot to lay down in, and excavated an embossed bottle.

"I still have that bottle," Shultis said from his Crossville, Tenn., home. "It's embossed Dr. Sage's Catarrh Remedy / Buffalo, N.Y. / Dr. Pierce, Proprietor." The dog, by the way, was named after a popular cigarette brand of the day. Its commercials featured a blonde with a simulated black eye. "I'd rather fight than switch," she said during the television commercials.

"Then I read a book about finding bottles among the mangrove tree roots in the Keys," Shultis continued. "Dad, my brother, Richard, and I thought that would be true for the little islands around Tampa Bay so we all climbed aboard a small boat and went looking around the mangrove trees. We found household, medicines, gin and whiskey bottles.

There was a small flea market in Palmetto and there Shultis met bottle collector John Millington.

"He was selling bottles and later took me to Ybor City in Tampa where we dug. He talked me into joining the club."

The club was the **Suncoast Antique Bottle Collectors Association** and was organized at Bartlett Park in St. Petersburg, Florida on Sept. 19, 1967, with Millington elected its first president. Tragically, Millington died in 1968 in an on-the-job accident.

"After his death, his better bottles were auctioned off," Shultis said. "We bid on the remainder of his collection and got 10,000 bottles for \$30. While most were common, we found some worth keeping, some worth trading and some worth selling."

The club's first show was held Jan. 23, 1968 at the Bayfront Center Arena in St. Petersburg in conjunction with other hobby clubs.

The first dig held by the club, which hired a backhoe for the occasion, took place on Adamo Drive in Ybor City (Tampa) in 1971 or 1972. "I remember it being very muddy," said member Linda Buttstead. "In fact, I was in mud up to my knees."



Suncoast club's Trenice Gibson displays a ceramic Chinese Tiger whiskey. (courtesy of Linda Buttstead)

Shultis said that he and Linda's husband, Billy, "poked around in Brandenton and dug in Tampa dumps."

He helped Jim Daniel (now living in Sylvester, Georgia) organize a bottle club in nearby Apollo Beach. "Jim was instrumental in getting it going on the coast," Linda recalled. Shultis also started a Bradenton club, which eventually evolved into one in Sarasota, he said. "Billy and I were involved in that one and I served as its president one time."

Shultis and his father, Irving, who got the collecting bug shortly after his son did, also used to go onto ranches and turpentine stills in Manatee County, locating the dumps "and finding bits and pieces."

Shultis and his family moved to Tennessee in 1977 after Florida "just got too crowded."

Dogs, or rather Walker hounds, also spurred the interest in antique bottles for Suncoast member Lynn McLarty, who is Jackie McRae's son-in-law. He recalled the club's first show was held at a garden center in Clearwater. "I went digging every weekend for months. I remember my first bottle was a Lea & Perrin's peppersauce. One of our members was Judge Ed MacKenzie. I showed the bottle to him and he spent 20 minutes with me, giving me an education on which bottles to look for. I was so impressed and I'll never forget it. The judge later handled our club's articles



Key West pharmacy bottle among Suncoast members' best finds on the dig. (courtesy of Linda Buttstead)



George Dueben of Suncoast club shows off a Vandenberg sealed case gin. (courtesy of Linda Buttstead)

of incorporation.

"My best friend, Dale Morgan, started seeing old bottles in the woods. He dug a mosquito ditch near New Smyrna Beach, spotted a case gin and dug it out of the mud. He called me and wanted to go hog hunting so I loaded up my hounds. 'Do you mind if we don't go hog hunting?' he asked. 'I've been finding old bottles.' We went to the old salt works on what is now Cape Canaveral. The tide was out and we found a Walker's Vinegar Bitters and a Hayner's Whiskey on top. This was in 1966 and bottle collecting was wide open. We dug in Augusta, Savannah and Charleston."

McLarty also dug on the 44-acre Fort

Brooke site in downtown Tampa. "The city manager dug with us and we found many good artifacts, including military buttons, belt buckles and pipes." His main collecting interest is Florida Hutchinsons. He owns 162 different, missing only four.

In 2004, the Suncoast club held its first dig in more than 30 years. The results of that dig were written by Linda and published in the June 2005 issue of *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector*. Here are a few excerpts:

The dig was on the grounds of an abandoned hospital in Ybor City and was organized by club member Charlie Livingston for two weekends. The first took place on Dec. 4-5, with activities allowed the Friday night before that weekend. A backhoe was used to expose the trash layers of the late 19th and early 20th century landfill.

Several club members had generators that provided lights after dark and one enterprising member even wore a lantern on his head. Among finds were Vandenberg sealed case gins, a cobalt LACENTRAL Drug Store bottle from Key West, Udolpho Wolf Schnapps, black glass wines and beers and miscellaneous bottles.

Lynn McLarty found hundreds of broken Tampa straight-sided Cokes and perhaps six whole ones. Perry Houston dug 24 schnapps, with only about six being broken.

"The fun thing about digging is the hunt and spending time with people who understand what we do, why we do it and doing what we all love. . . finding free bottles," said Linda in wrapping up her story.

Miami – Key West Areas

The Antique Bottle Collectors Association of Florida (Miami area) was incorporated in May 1966 with 55 charter members, according to the recollections of Richard King, of Tampa, Florida. A club known as the Original Antique Bottle Collectors of the Florida Keys had existed before that. "I was president of the ABCAF during the nation's Bicentennial Celebration in 1976," he said. "The last president was Dennis Duke, of Fort Lauderdale. The association lasted until the early 1980s.

"The club met at a school in Coral Gables. It held an annual cookout and a dig or two in the Keys, as well as some beach combing. It held a bottle show every year starting in 1967. Those were during the days when people exhibited and there were often 30 to 40 exhibits. There was a program at every meeting. We held bottle auctions, monthly raffles, covered dish suppers and open houses. Members brought bottles to sell or trade and membership at times numbered as high as 125. There also were insulator collectors in the club."

In January of 1967, the association published *The Whittle Mark* newsletter and in May of that year, the club held its first bottle show at the Tropical Race Track. The second annual show as held in May of 1968 at the Museum of Science. In 1970, 33 exhibits overflowed the Museum of Science at the club's fourth annual

show and the club became affiliated with the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs, becoming charter member No. 36.

Officers were Don Mann, president; Bob Hills, vice president; Imogene Davies, recording secretary; Paulette Mick, corresponding secretary, and Don Vonn, treasurer. Members of the board of directors were Bonnie Yarbrough, Vieve Yarbrough, George Banschbach, Stan Hooper, Bill Hearin, Cele Berky, Alan Grab, Don Bryant and Ken Wilson.

"I lived in Key West from 1968 to 1969 and there was never a bottle club there, as far as I know," King continued. "There were a lot of collectors throughout the Keys and plenty of beach combers were collectors. There were bottle shops in Key West, Marathon and Key Largo. Big Pine Key had a glass factory (Big Pine Key Glass Works) that produced quite a number of handblown commemorative bottles. A number of people who lived in the area wrote bottle books that circulated during the 1970s."

Mid-State Antique Bottle Collectors Inc., of Orlando

The Mid-State Antique Bottle Collectors Inc., of Orlando was formed in January 1969, according to J. Carl Sturm, of nearby Longwood. "Primary founder and first president was Carl Benson, with Ron Reaves as vice president, Carl's wife, Sara, as secretary-treasurer. The club newsletter, which had several names in the first year, was eventually named *Bitters and Sweets* in October 1969 and its first editor was Natalie Raymore." Later, Sturm and his wife, Joy, became co-editors.

Sturm said the club met once a month at First Federal Savings and Loan Association's Dover Shores Branch on East Conway Road in Orlando. The 1969-70 roster showed 22 members in good standing, but by the time the 1971-72 roster was published, membership had grown to 148 family memberships with a total membership of 223. It had to have become one of the largest bottle clubs in the nation. Bulk of its members ranged from Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas. Also listed were memberships in New York, Michigan, Indiana, Connecticut, Mississippi and New Jersey.

Sturm said club meetings consisted of a short business meeting followed by one or more informational; talks on the various aspects of a member or guests' bottle collections. Club meetings were well attended with 25 to 30 members as a general rule. Most attendees brought items from their collections to show and tell at the meetings. The first club function was a trade day and picnic in October 1969.

In January 1970, the Internal Revenue Service approved the club as tax-exempt non-profit club.

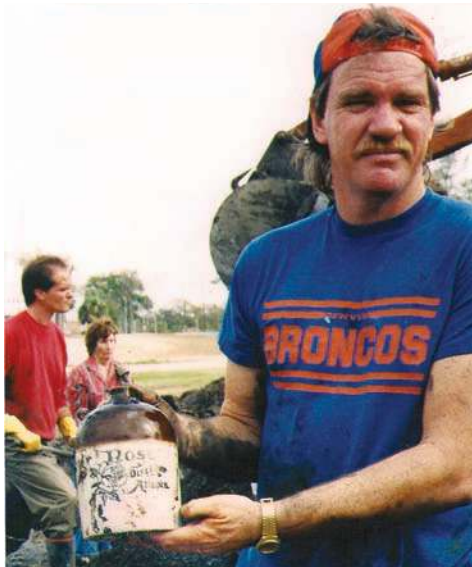
On May 29-30, 1970, the first annual show and sale was held at the same site as the meetings. The entire second floor was utilized, nine displays were judged and three states were represented by dealers. The annual shows continued until the club was disbanded in 1998. As was the case with many a club, this one literally "died out." Meetings had fallen to eight or 10 people who mostly had lost their mates and were getting together to keep old friendships going.

Most memorable show, Sturm said, was in 1976 "when we were lucky enough to get great advertising in both local papers because of the nation's Centennial Celebration. The gate at that show was 600-plus where our normal gate at the annual show was around 120 paid admissions. The show that year was held at Rollins College field house in Winter Park."

Between 1969 and 1998, many club digs were held locally when older buildings were razed as Orlando was experiencing a quick growth because of Disney World moving in.

Probably the most interesting bottle dug was an amber Orange Bitters, Orlando, Fla., while at an annual picnic held at a Mt. Dora park, a half-pint amber Osceola Exchange, Tavares, Fla., bottle was dug by Art Smock. He was the club's master digger who dug until his death in 2010 at the age of 94.

The club also had groups of members who went on digging trips as far away as Georgia and South Carolina. Several club digs were held in the St. Augustine area where 20 to 25 members met and dug the old dumps. After a while, the areas resembled the war-torn fields of Europe.



Benny Alford shows off Rose Distillers, Atlanta, Ga. jug from the Community College dig. (courtesy of Clay & Jackie McRae)