

# Jimmy Carter & Billy Carter

## Bottle Collector & Can Collector

By Cecil Munsey

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Collecting bottles and cans became easily recognized hobbies during the second half of the twentieth century. Collectors came from all walks of life and shared their common interests in democratic fellowship. Those were truly exhilarating times.

Some of those pioneer collectors were rich, powerful and famous and others were not rich, powerful or famous. Among the famous were Jimmy Carter who became President of the United States and his

brother Billy who became a self-confessed alcoholic.

### Part I – Jimmy Carter

The knowledge and verification that Jimmy Carter is, indeed, a bottle collector came to us by way of a 1976 photograph from *National Inquirer* magazine. The photograph (**Figure 1**) was taken in Plains, Georgia at Jimmy Carter's peanut farm. *Old Bottle Magazine* (Vol. 10, No. 11 – November 1976) was given permission to reprint the

photograph and that's where most bottle collectors first saw it. The photo caption: "Presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter, examining an old violin flask and a fruit jar from his collection. Jimmy has been a collector of old bottles ... since his childhood."

*Old Bottle Magazine* served bottle collecting for almost 20 years (Feb. 1968 – Nov. 1987) and was purchased by James Hagenbuch who merged it with his publication, (AB&GC) *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector Magazine*. AB&GC has since become the largest of the leading publications in the organized hobby of collecting bottles.

Jimmy Carter was born in 1924 in Plains, Georgia a farming community of 600 people. He was the oldest of four children. He served two terms in the Georgia Senate, and was the governor of Georgia (1971-1975). In 1976 he became the 39<sup>th</sup> president of the United States (1977-1981) – (**Figure 2**).

Following his presidency, he remained active in public life and gained new respect as an effective statesman and peacemaker, acting as a mediator in several international conflicts. He also used his influence as a former president to call attention to economic and social problems in developing countries and to promote human rights and democracy. He formed Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit organization that helps needy people renovate and build homes for themselves. In 2002 Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his accomplishments in these areas.

Carter wrote numerous books, many of which are now in revised editions. His books include: *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (1983); *The Blood of Abraham: Insights into the Middle East* (1985); *Turning Point: A Candidate, a State, and a Nation Come of Age* (1993); *Talking Peace* (1993); *Always a Reckoning and Other*

Volume 10 No. 11
November 1976



**Figure 1**

**THE COVER**

Sketch by Paul E. Mohrs of Michigan City, Indiana and Cutter whiskey photos courtesy of John Thomas, Weaverville, California.



Presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter, examining an old violin flask and a fruit jar from his collection. Jimmy has been a collector of old bottles and arrowheads since his childhood. *National Inquirer* photo

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Figure 2

*Poems* (1995); *The Virtues of Aging* (1998); *An Hour Before Daylight: Memoirs of a Rural Boyhood* (2001); *Christmas in Plains: Memories* (2001); and *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (2006).

Carter's bottle collection is still around and is housed at the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site in Plains, Georgia that is administered by the National Park Service. As a famous person he was not only a collector but also the inspiration for a number of collectibles. For example, in 1977 he was the inspiration for a character bottle opener (Figure 3) and as might be expected, he is featured on at least one collector plate (Figure 4). A wide variety of "Jimmy Carter" items can easily be found for sale on e-Bay.

While a number of American Presidents were known to be collectors, Jimmy Carter was the first U.S. president to collect antique bottles.

Another President Carter first: While the first reported sighting of an unidentified flying object (UFO) was near Mt. Ranier, Washington in 1947 by one Kenneth Arnold, in 1973, while Governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter filed a report with the International UFO Bureau in Oklahoma City of his 1969 UFO sighting:

*For 10 minutes on January 6, 1969, Carter witnessed an unidentified flying object in the skies near Leary, in southwestern Georgia. On a starry night just after dusk, a single, self-luminous object about 30 degrees above the horizon that Carter estimated to be about 300-1000 yards away hovered, changed course and direction, and then disappeared.*

## Part II – Billy Carter

Billy Carter was neither the first nor the last brother to embarrass a president, but he was surely the most colorful. From the time Jimmy Carter started running for president to the end of his term in office, his younger brother was never far from the spotlight. In 1976 he provided humor and a charming contrast to his straight-laced candidate sibling.

William Alton "Billy" Carter was born in 1937 in Plains, Georgia. He attended Emory University in Atlanta but did not complete a degree. He served four years in the Marines and returned home to work for his brother in the family business of growing peanuts.

Billy is perhaps best known for statements he made prior to the 1976 election. When the press gathered in Plains to get acquainted with Jimmy Carter, the surprising Democratic nominee for president, Billy became a star. "Yes, I'm a real southern boy," Billy admitted over drinks with reporters at his gas



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 7

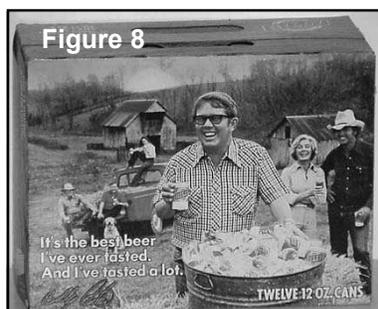


Figure 8

station across from campaign headquarters (Figure 5). "I got a red neck, white socks, and Pabst Blue Ribbon beer." When asked about his family, he got off one of the best quips of the entire campaign: "I got a mother who went into the Peace Corps at the age of 68. I got a sister who's a Holy Roller preacher. I got another sister who rides motorcycles and wears helmets. I got a brother who thinks he's going to be president of the United States. I'm the only sane one in the family."

Billy Beer (Figure 6) was invented and first brewed in 1977. It was brewed by the Falls City Brewing Company (Figure 7) of Louisville, Kentucky. The brewery operated from 1905-1978. Falls City Brewing convinced Billy Carter to launch his own brand of beer. He was selected as spokesperson because his brother was president and it was widely known that he enjoyed beer drinking. (However, it was also widely known that his brand of choice was Pabst Blue Ribbon.)

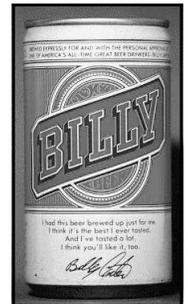


Figure 6

Falls City Brewing invested heavily into national marketing and distribution of Billy Beer. The plan was to license the beer to other regional brewers and create a new national brand. The regional brewers involved were Cold Spring Brewing of Cold Spring, Minnesota; West End Brewing, Utica, New York; and Pearl Brewing of Ft. Worth and San Antonio, Texas. Billy was quite proud of his small display of Billy Beer cans from each of the breweries that made his namesake beer. He kept the cans on a shelf in his service station in Plains.

A case of Billy Beer was featured on the cover of *Newsweek* for November 14, 1977. The cardboard case featured a picture of Billy Carter (Fig. 8) and the endorsement: "I had this beer brewed just for me. I think it's the best I ever tasted. And I've tasted a lot. I think you'll like it too."

Sales were really hot when it first hit the market and it received enormous media coverage. Most agreed that Billy Beer was nothing special and Billy ran into some serious personal criticism when he signed a representative agreement with dictator Omar Kadaffi of Libya. It was a public relations disaster and the last gasp of Falls City Brewing. Shareholders closed the company in 1978.

Scoundrels tried to convince people that Billy Beer cans were worth hundreds of dollars as a collectible. In April of 1988, after seeing an advertisement in a Washington newspaper, a West Virginia couple paid \$2,000 for a case.

Johnnie L. Parsons, a farsighted fellow West Virginian, had stored the beer. "I knew it would be worth some money some day," said Mr. Parsons. He is holding on to a second case, just in case. The current value of a can of Billy Beer is \$1.00 or less.

Reynolds Metal produced several million cans for Billy Beer. How many were filled has never been revealed. It is known that in October 1978, Reynolds Metals bought nearly 9 million empty Billy Beer cans and melted them, signaling the end for the brew.

In 1976, a year after his brother Jimmy gave the famous "...sinned in my heart..." interview to *Playboy Magazine*, Billy also agreed to an article in *Playboy*. The November 1977 article revealed a lot about the Billy Carter mystique.

At the height of his career as "First Brother" of the president, he was reportedly making \$500,000 a year through appearances (\$5,000 each) at events like the "Golden Ratchet" (auto mechanics) Awards, the "World Championship Belly Flop and Cannonball Contest and the annual "Swamp Buggy Races" in Naples, Florida.

Billy had a drinking problem that was well known. The problem grew worse as the spotlight on him intensified. "Billy ended up with a reputation and then he tried to live up to it," according to his nephew Chip. "While his brother

*Jimmy was busy running the country, Billy hit the talk-show circuit, cracking one-liners and hawking Billy Beer."*

After the failure of Billy Beer, Carter sold his house in Plains to settle back taxes with the IRS.

In the midst of all his problems, Billy announced he was an alcoholic. He entered a treatment center in California and gave up drinking completely. He went public with the facts of his addiction and treatment to "...help others."

Billy Carter died of pancreatic cancer on September 1988 in Plains, Georgia. His mother and both sisters, Gloria (the motorcycle freak) and Jean (the Holy Roller evangelist), also died of pancreatic cancer. There has been some speculation in scientific circles that a possible link between all of the Carters' cancer exists in the use of agricultural insecticide on their farm.

Like his famous brother, Billy Carter was an inspiration for a number of collectibles. For example, political buttons like the one featured as **Figure 9**. A beer mug was sold at Billy's service station that was popular (**Figure 10**) and a T-Shirt (**Figure 11**). Just as in the case of Jimmy Carter memorabilia, a wide variety of "Billy Carter" items can easily be found for sale on e-Bay.

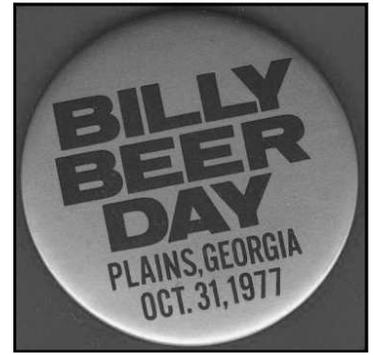


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

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