

Charles Matzen Near to His Goal: Completing Savannah Collection

By Bill Baab

SAVANNAH, Ga. — Mention Savannah and most collectors of antique bottles conjure up visions of cobalt John Ryan sodas.

But collectors who are willing to dig a little deeper into the port city's records of the past will learn that as far as potential Savannah bottle collections go, Ryan sodas are just a small part of what's out there.

Acquisition of four varieties of bitters, some whiskeys, lots of medicines, drug store bottles and stoneware merchants' jugs has been challenging to Charles Matzen.

"My goal has always been to form the most complete collection of Savannah bottles," the 46-year-old construction company owner said.

He was bitten by the bottle collecting bug in 1972, although his interest in old glass collecting came earlier.

"I grew up with a plumber's son whose dad paid us two or three bucks to help dig ditches and we'd find bottles. We used to walk around the barrier islands and find bitters and soda bottles. I remember the first Savannah soda I found — a Henry Kuck dated 1878. Ryan and Von Harten sodas and a Lippman's bitters were found later after I had gotten into my teens."

Matzen took a hiatus from collecting until he reached his 20s. He and another veteran Savannah collector, Mike Brewer, worked at Intermarine USA, and after work and on their days off would travel to the Frogtown area of the city. "That's where I met Gene Autry who headed a bunch of diggers calling themselves the 'Ryan Excavators' after famed Savannah soda bottler John Ryan," Matzen said.

"There was a school under construction and contractors had exposed privy holes. We dug lots of bottles there until the contractor told us we could no longer dig. It was then I asked Gene what it would take for me to join the group and he said to find some places where they could dig.

"I was able to line up some lots and joined that group. One of our best digs was an old dumping ground on Norfolk Southern Railroad property on Boundary Street. Bob Simmons (Atlanta collector) and I worked hard to obtain permission and secure the property. We had to fence it in and maintain security on it for nearly 24/7

because there were other diggers in Savannah who would have loved to come onto the property. We used a high hoe and a back hoe during 1991-92 and dug hundreds and hundreds of bottles. It was great!"

Despite his goal of collecting examples of all of his city's antique bottles, Matzen likes soda bottles best.

"My favorite is a rare, pink-colored Ryan I dug myself. I also was able to purchase a super-rare, amber round-bottomed Ryan, just one of two perfect ones in existence. Some damaged examples are out there."

Matzen led visitors into a corner room of his spacious Savannah home where shelf after shelf are lined with his eclectic collections of stoneware, bottles, sharks' teeth (some are 60 million years old, give or take a few years) and other fossils. Just for laughs, he dons the connected jaws of a 16-foot blacktip shark he caught years ago like a toothy necklace.

In another corner of the room hang photos of the late Peyton Youmans, one of Matzen's closest friends and a super collector in his own right.

Let's check out just a small part of it all:

In one section, Savannah merchants' jugs, including mini jugs, share space with others from Crawford County, the latter located below Bibb County and Macon, Ga. Crawford County pottery was made for the thriving Macon spirits market during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of the jugs are signed with potters' initials on the handles and the pots enjoy ever-growing popularity as collectibles.

On another shelf, a row of Lippman's Great German Bitters bottles ranges in colors from honey to dark amber. Savannah's only cobalt bitters — Solomon's Strengthening and Invigorating Bitters — share space with Lawrence & Weishkelbaum's Arabian Bitters and Deutenhoff's Swiss Bitters.

Pharmacist C.M. Heidt, who manufactured the Swiss Bitters, also put out some stuff called Phosphatique, and an example of that joins the others.

A D.B. Lester cylindrical bottle — a more scarce form than the Savannah grocer's

amber strap-sided flask — keeps company with a four-leaf clover-embossed Belsinger & Co., Distillers. On one leaf is the word Clover, on another Whiskey and on the last two Est'd and 1874, respectively. The company was pretty lucky until statewide prohibition began in 1908.

An aqua B.F. Ulmer / Druggist / Savannah, Ga., heads a wide array of other drug store bottles. Interesting medicines include a Clay's Rheumatic Remedy for Rheumatism in clear and amber bottles and a Clay's Medicine, Beneficial in Treatment of Lumbago and Gout. Both were manufactured by E.J. Kieffer and are joined by the Columbia Drug Company's RU TO NA, which claimed to cure just about anything.

Eighty-six different examples of the famous John Ryan soda bottles sparkle from shelf to shelf. The tough ones are pink, red and gray. Matzen also owns a lone example of Savannah's rarest soda, an iron-pontiled, cobalt L. Glinde about whose 1840s history little is known. Many other of the known brands of Savannah sodas are on the shelves, too.

"My friend, Tommy Mitchiner, made it possible for me to acquire the rare John Ryans from his collection," Matzen said. Mitchiner, from Gordon, Ga., had assembled probably the greatest collection of the Ryan sodas over more than 40 years. In fact, he is known as the "King of John Ryan Soda Collectors."

While his impressive collection may now be the most complete of any Savannah collector's, Matzen is still lacking a few varieties.

His heart's desires include an aqua James Ray XXX Ale, a Persse & Lindsey bottle (it could be either a Hutchinson or base-embossed Matthews' Gravitating Stopper), a John Ryan seltzer bottle with wooden crate, and a 1790s black glass bottle bearing the seal of pioneer Savannah apothecary G. (for George) Harral. The only known whole example is in a private collection. Another seal was found and glued to another black glass bottle.

Anyone turning up those treasures can reach Matzen at (912) 355-6781.



Just a small portion of the results from one dig by the Ryan Excavators. [Courtesy of Charles Matzen]



An array of eagle sodas from the port city. [Courtesy of Charles Matzen]



Reddish amber to honey amber marks Lippman's Great German Bitters quartet. [Bea Baab photo]



Dark red John Ryan (left) appears almost black. Sodas sport a wide array of colors. Owner is in the background with his dog, Princess. [Bill Baab photo]



Lippman's (top) and Solomon's are Savannah's famous bitters. [Courtesy of Charles Matzen]

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One of the rarest of the rare Savannah bottles. Amber John Ryan roundbottom, one of the two perfect ones known. [Bea Baab photo]

