

Random Shots

by Robin R. Preston



While I do have a fascination for all things pre-pro, I'm really a collecting purist in that I have little real passion for accumulating anything other than the etched glasses. But I recently had occasion to investigate Roseville pottery, a highly collectible line manufactured in Zanesville, Ohio from the late 1800s up through the early 1950s.

If you've hunted pre-pro shots "in the wild," you've seen Roseville because examples can be found in the showcases of every self-respecting antique store in the U.S. It's an attractive line that features simple floral designs molded in relief on vases, jugs and bowls. Prices for the more common pieces begin at around \$100, while the rarer examples command tens of thousands.

High prices combined with strong demand usually fuels growth of a reproduction industry and the Roseville market is predictably flooded with fakes. Some of these were made in Japan in the 1930s and hence qualify as antiques in their own right, but China is currently the main source of reproduction Roseville and the quality is so high that it has found its way into even the more high-quality antique malls. eBay is awash with them. Thus, the thought of beginning a serious Roseville collection is about as appealing as jumping into shark-infested waters with a gaping leg wound!

The repro problem obviously is not confined to ceramics and bottle collectors will be all too familiar with the garish cabins purporting to originate from E. G. Booz, a Philadelphia liquor dealer operating ca. 1840-1870. The sheer number of these bottles currently in circulation would suggest that Booz' output approached that of the modern-day Jim Beam Distilling Co.! Sadly, the Booz

bottles are just the tip of a reproduction iceberg and, even as I write, the Dog River Glass Works is making brand-new bottles using antique molds and cullet so that the end product is good enough to fool even the experts.

These examples made me appreciate that the shot-glass world is a wonderfully bucolic collecting backwater, well isolated from the corruption of big-city, high-dollar collectibles. But as the value of the rarer shot glasses climbs inevitably toward four figures, the threat of someone manufacturing reproductions grows ever more imminent. Indeed, the first unpleasant whiff of something rotten in pre-pro-land is already on the wind. This edition of Random Shots addresses the problem of fake pre-pro shot glasses and considers how collectors might protect themselves from unscrupulous traders.

Until recently, there had been no systematic attempts to foist fake pre-pro glasses on collectors. There are several

**Caveat emptor.
Fake pre-prohibition shot glasses**

modern look-alikes that might confuse a neophyte, glasses that were commissioned by the Jack Daniel Distillery Co. in the 1970s. They are smaller and more delicate than the typical pre-pro shot, but the paper-thinness of the glass used in their manufacture is an unmistakable nod to the genuine article. These modern glasses stand around 2" tall and bear inscriptions in black or gold print. Some simply say "Jack Daniel's" with a circled "Old No.7" below [Figure 1], while others are inscribed with "Tennessee Squire" and a picture of a rider within an oval outline [Figure 2].



Figure 1



Figure 2

The labels on these glasses are unmistakably modern but they do make interesting additions to a pre-pro collection. Note that while Tennessee Squire glasses are quite common, Jack Daniel's is such a desirable brand that they command prices that match and often exceed that of a generic pre-pro! No doubt someone enterprising soul will be making fakes of the Jack Daniel's reproductions in the near future.

The glasses shown in **Figure 3 and 4** are pre-prohibition, or at least the vessels are. These art glasses were created by a pre-pro collector who applied new labels to vintage glass blanks. With glass in hand, it's easy for an experienced collector to identify the etching as new, but it would be impossible to make this determination from an auction photograph, for example. One could easily imagine the glass in Figure 4 fetching well in excess of \$100 on eBay if a line of text that included the words "whiskey" or "San Francisco" were added.



Figure 3



Figure 4

These glasses were made as an artistic exercise and were not meant to defraud. Indeed, when one of them was sold online, it came with a clear disclaimer about its authenticity and origins. But over the past couple of years, at least one individual has been running auctions that feature contemporary shot glasses with home-cooked labels designed to look antique. The seller has been careful to make no claims regarding age but, by the same token, has never indicated their true lineage. Fortunately, the first few offerings were so clumsy that no-one was interested in buying them [Figures 5 and 6].



Figure 5



Figure 6

The inscriptions on the replicas mimic the ubiquitous acid-etching seen on the older glasses but they've been applied to heavy cheaters that are obviously contemporary. Also, while Old Crow is a brand name whose roots lie in pre-pro years, the inscriptions on both this glass and the Stony Ridge [Figure 6] could well be of recent design and hence one could easily dismiss both glasses as folk art.

The first indication that these shots were actually an attempt to deceive came in the form of a glass bearing the name Louis Taussig & Co., a company based in San

Francisco from ca. 1873 - 1918. The same glass later appeared paired with an ashtray bearing an identical inscription. Since Taussig & Co. disappeared with Prohibition, there could be only one reason to offer this glass at auction without a disclaimer, and that was to defraud.



Figure 7



This and many of the subsequent reproduction glasses sported labels that might easily have been copied from standard reference texts, but others bore designs that were unlisted, suggesting that the creator had knowledge of, and access to, a number of genuinely old glasses. But since all of these "fantasy" shots listed with a starting price of a few dollars and still failed to attract bidders, their existence remained of academic interest only. [See examples illustrated in **Figure 8** on the next page.]

This all changed when the Foust glass shown in **Figure 9** listed on eBay. Billy Foust's Distillery was located in Glen Rock, Pa., and for unknown reasons, has gathered a cult-like following over the years. Shot glasses produced by the company during its pre-pro operations have been well-documented and are highly sought-after, the rarest being a pair of shots featuring a label in the base under glass. The more common of the pair displays the distillery name in black text against a white enamel background and sells in the \$250 - \$350 range, whereas a rarer red-on-white version [Figure 10] sells for double or triple that amount.

This same authentic pre-pro design is reproduced in crudely-rendered form on the



Figure 8. A gathering of some of the reproductions that have appeared on eBay. The Golden Wedding shooter on the far right is the genuine article and presumably served as the model for the reproduction at its side (top center).



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

Photograph © Rich Lucchesi

side of a modern glass in **Figure 9**. It listed with a starting price of \$20.00 and I was dismayed to see how quickly it was bid up into serious money range. A collecting colleague tipped off the auction participants about the true nature of the glass but, while the high bidder heeded the advice and withdrew, the others stood their ground and the auction closed at a few pennies short of \$73. Not bad for a \$2 glass with a home-made label!

The seller went underground for several months after this auction but recently re-emerged with a new identity and with their

feedback hidden from view. The glasses were now also offered in private auctions, presumably to prevent unwelcome interference from other collectors who recognized the glasses for what they were. The most recent offering was listed in April of this year and is particularly disturbing because the label has been applied to what appears to be a genuinely old, pre-pro blank [**Figure 11**].

As usual, the seller was careful about the claims made in the auction description, noting only that it was a "2 1/4" Shot glass. **Very old thin glass. Age unknown. No chips. Very nice condition.**" The glass was inscribed with a label that read "IMPERIAL WHISKEY," as shown in **Figure 11**. The significance of the timing of this auction may have escaped many collectors, but it appeared just days after Rich Lucchesi had auctioned off an authentic Imperial Whiskey shot glass [**Figure 12**]. Imperial was sold by Goldberg-Bowen, a company located in San Francisco and Oakland in the years leading up to Prohibition. San Francisco glasses always sell at a premium and this one was no exception: the auction closed at \$152.50. The reproduction was thus designed to ride the coat-tails of a genuinely rare glass. The fake-glass auction was terminated a day before it was due to close, with the cryptic message "The seller ended this listing early because the item is no longer available for sale." Rumor has it that an unknowing collector had purchased it in a behind-the-scenes deal for \$135.

As the value of pre-prohibition glasses continues to climb, it seems inevitable that someone will be driven to perfect the art of faking them. The first four months of 2005 alone saw 30 glasses auctioned for \$100 or more, a two-to-three fold increase over an equivalent period of 2003 and a serious incentive for fraud. So what can a collector do to protect themselves, particularly if they're new to the field? While there's no real substitute for education and experience, there are options. Personally, I avoid any online auction where either the seller's feedback or the bidder's identity are marked "private," because it usually means that the seller has something to hide. Perhaps the best advice is to seek out the help of collectors who know the field well. The shot collector's website www.pre-pro.com has a thriving community that's always eager to offer free advice via the chat room (<http://www.pre-pro.com/glasschat/mboard.php>), and notices about fake glasses are typically posted on the site within hours of the appearance of a suspicious auction listing.

Pre-pro glass collectors have often lamented the fact that their limited numbers has made it difficult to organize, but the lack of critical mass has also limited the opportunity to make a killing through selling fakes. Thus while suspect Roseville vases will continue to haunt the display shelves of antique stores, it's unlikely that the shelf above will ever be filled with "rare" etched pre-pro glasses from San Francisco. But the threat of reproduction glasses finding their way onto the market remains very real. For now, all we can do is document their appearance and spread the word.

My thanks to Bruce Silva for providing information about modern reproductions of antique bottles, Rich Lucchesi for allowing me to use his auction photo, and to the multi-talented "junkmoney" for his generous gift of the art glasses.

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