

# Alabama Bottle Collecting History Spans More Than 75 Years

One of a series

By Tom Lines

Wow! Where to start?

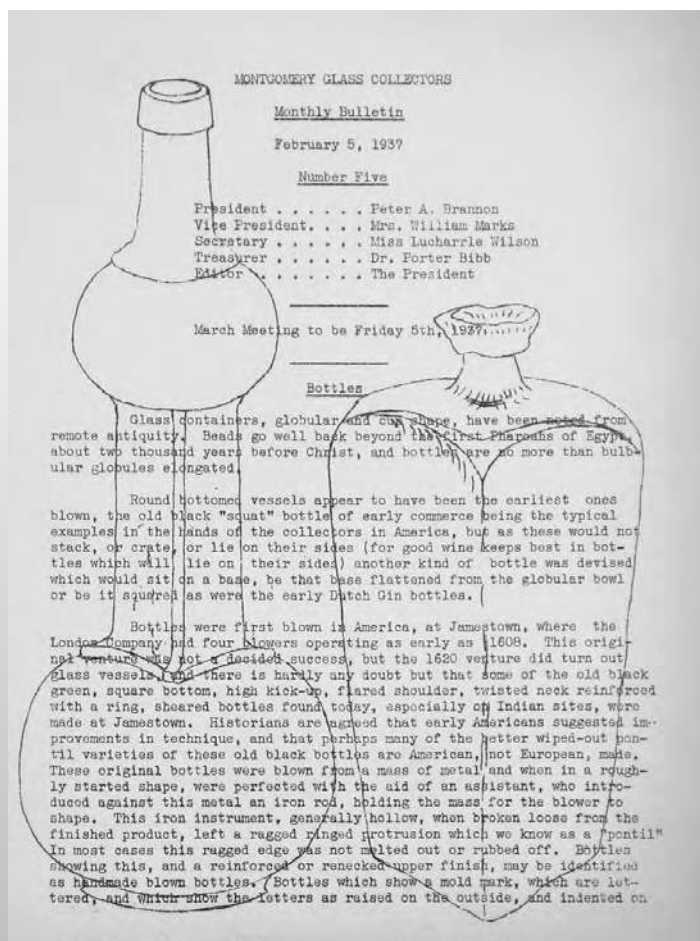
Bottle collecting in Alabama came in waves and it started early. After 35 years of collecting here in Alabama, I have no reservation about making the statement that organized bottle collecting has been actively pursued for more than 75 years. How is the term "organized" defined? I'll say that it's the pursuit of one's interest with the fellowship of others with similar interests who regularly meet to discuss their collections plus share their finds and knowledge with one another.

The great-grandfather of bottle collecting in Alabama had to be Peter A. Brannon from Montgomery. Mr. Brannon, associate director of the Alabama State Archives, had an interest in all facets of Alabama's history and associated artifacts way back in the 1930s. In fact, he wrote a weekly column for The Montgomery Advertiser entitled "Through the Years," which many times profiled bottle and glass finds in the state (Fig. 1). One story that sticks in my memory is discovery he reported of an African-American graveyard south of Montgomery where the graves were lined with figural bitters bottles of all shapes, sizes and colors. . . "examples of which would make any collector proud," he reported. As one who respected history and the dignity of the cemetery, he refused to divulge the location for concerns that the site might be looted. . . and that was back during the Depression.

Mr. Brannon organized the



**Figure 1: Peter Brannon's column "Through The Years" written for the Montgomery Advertiser. This article featured black glass that was coming from the Native American excavations going on within the state.**



**Figure 2: A 1937 newsletter for the Montgomery Glass Club, edited by Peter Brannon.**

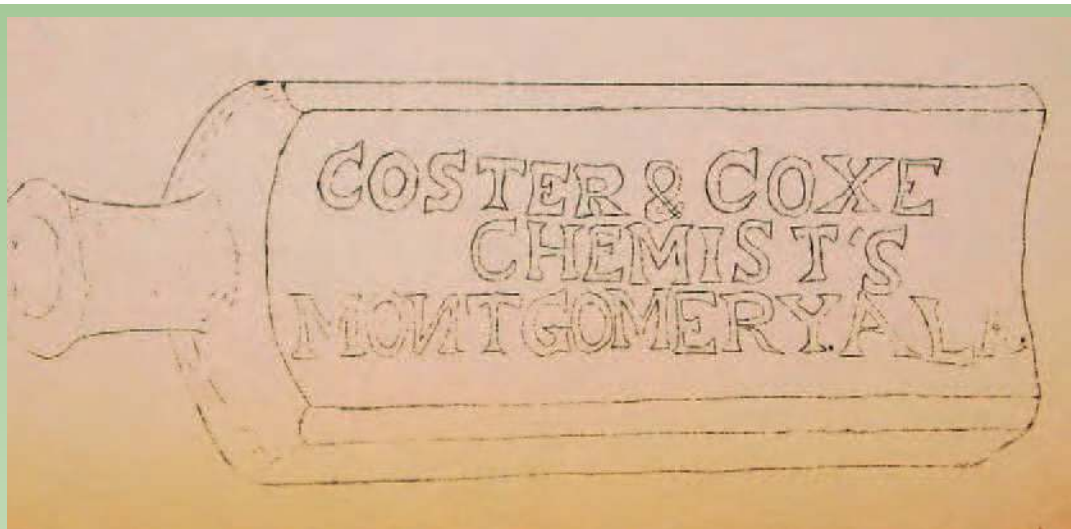
"Montgomery Glass Collectors" sometime during the 1930s and even published a monthly newsletter through the 1940s (Fig. 2). He wrote articles about recent finds by club members and included hand-drawn illustrations of the items (Fig. 3). Little is known about this early club, with the only information coming from surviving copies of the newsletters that were obtained by Mr. Brannon's son. Another contemporary of Peter Brannon's and also an

early club member was Doy McCall, from Monroeville, Ala. Some readers may remember Norm Heckler's first auction after leaving Skinner's; he auctioned the Doy McCall collection. McCall would travel to New Jersey to meet fellow collector Ed Hoffman and from there they would hit the road for a week-long antiquing adventure, looking for flasks and early glass. This was during the 1940s.

In the 1950s, a new wave of collector began to emerge. Urban renewal and expansion began with cities across the state unearthing long-buried treasures from old and abandoned municipal dumping grounds. In Mobile, Dr. Sidney Phillips' family began digging and collecting bottles. In the Tuscaloosa area, the House family also started collecting. From Glenn

House, the son of Ma’Cille House, I have stories of their beginnings and some of their extraordinary finds over the years. . .like when river banks were dug in Montgomery, finding some 35,000 bottles over a five-week period. Then they learned about digging privies, Their single best find was a triangular Balsdon’s Golden Bitters (Ring B15) that was later sold for \$1,000 at an early Mobile bottle show, most likely to another second wave collector and bitters enthusiast Mac Wimmer.

Glenn said his best dig was uncovering a “nest” of 1846 block insulators. The family dug across the state and the southeast, including Gainesville, Ala., Demopolis, Selma, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, Birmingham plus New Orleans, Key West, Hilton Head Island and St. Augustine, then Savannah, Ga., also known as “the sweet spot.” The House family dug so many bottles than Ma’Cille opened the



**Figure 3: Example of the hand drawn illustrations in the newsletters for the Montgomery Glass Club. And this is an exceptional bottle too!.. currently only a handful are known to exist.**

Ma’Cille Museum of Miscellanea in the 1960s in the small west Alabama town of Gordo. The museum and its contents were sold at auction about 10 years ago. Glenn remembers his parents starting the Tuscaloosa Bottle Club in the 1960s. They met regularly and held swap meets in the Tuscaloosa area, drawing folks from all around.

The 1970s

brought the largest wave of diggers and collectors into the hobby. Urban renewal and expansion of the new interstate highway system led to the discovery of numerous city dump sites across the state. Digging was easy and many people joined in to prospect for their fortune. Bottle clubs popped up in Birmingham (1971), Montgomery



**Birmingham sodas (L-R) Coca-Cola, Elephant Bottling Works, Fountain & Wells (B’hams 1st bottler)**



**Montgomery sodas (L-R) Wells Brothers & Co (Matthews Gravitating Stopper), D.P. Wests Bottling Vaults, Star Bottling Works.**

(again), Mobile and Huntsville. At one of the more famous Birmingham area dumps on Greensprings Avenue, 50 to 75 diggers could be seen at the dump on any given Saturday. The Birmingham club had nearly 100 members, including families. Meetings were social events and bottle shows were soon to follow.

Bottle shops opened up, with the first shop belonging to Ed Sawicki in Mobile. Another was Merrill's Bottle Shop near Sylacauga. The shops depended on the mercenary diggers just out to augment their income and the local collectors who wanted to add to their collections. Mobile actually had a number of African-American diggers who dug simply for the money they could get from selling things they dug. One such digger produced the only two known half-pint quasi historical flasks from a Mobile privy (C.T. Bond, New Albany, Miss., featuring a Pittsburgh-type eagle on one side in yellow amber). Antique bottle "dealers" came on the scene, wheeling and dealing just in bottles. . . and they were quite savvy with their transactions as they knew the local collectors as well as the regional and national collectors, which gave them an edge and leverage with the rarer examples.

Many of the founders of those early clubs have passed on and none of the clubs are still active. However, the Mobile Bottle Club continues to sponsor an annual show, making it the state's longest running, continuous annual show on record. Five years ago, a small group of

Birmingham die-hard diggers and collectors vowed to restart the shows in their area. After forming the Alabama Bottle Collectors, LLC, shows started up again in 2008 with a mere 60 tables. This year (2010) marked the third year of the show with 98 tables, so maybe we're seeing yet another wave of collecting in the state. I hope so!

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

Contributors to this story included James Smith, Glenn House and Jim Simmons.



**Group of Mobile sodas (L-R) S. Twelves, E. Carre, A. Bartunes, Horne & Tonsmeire, D. Palliser (Arthur Christain Patent bottle)**



**Jefferson Cty (B'ham) picture sodas (L-R) Bessemer Bottling Works (Bird) from Bessemer, Crown Bottling Works (Crown) from Ensley, Pratt City Bottling Works (Indian Head) from Pratt City.**

