

# Metropolitan Detroit Antique Bottle Club

## Raised the Bar for Clubs Nationwide

One of a series  
By *Ralph Finch*

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Michael Brodzik, the newsletter editor for the struggling-to-get-back-on-its-feet Detroit bottle club, recently raised questions regarding the club's early days. Ralph Finch, who was there almost from Day One, replied with . . .

Dear Michael:

While I am no longer active in the Detroit club due to issues of mismanagement by certain club members 20-21 years ago, I appreciated reading your excellent January newsletter, and your review of the first few years of meetings and the images of early newsletters brought back great memories.

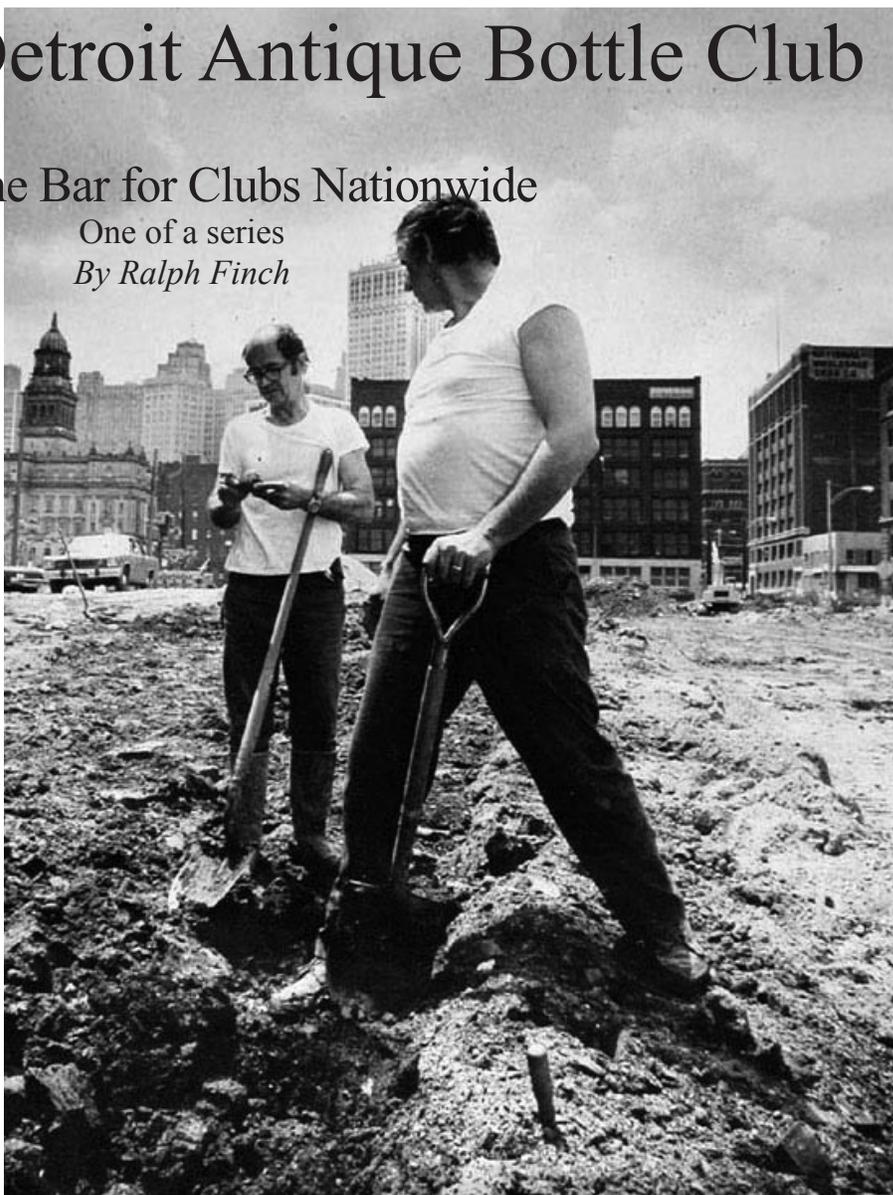
Here's how all those life-changing events happened to me:

In 1970, I was chatted up by a few people at an antique show held in an eastside shopping mall – the wonderful Inez and George Ward, and their daughter, Linda. When I picked up a fruit jar. I was asked of my (then fledgling) interest in glass, and was told that a small group of collectors met in homes each month around the metropolitan area. I was invited to attend.

That was a period of great growth, visiting different people and seeing their diverse collections of . . . stuff. Hey, back then,, few of us really knew much about what was out there, or what things were worth.

Finally, in March of 1971, I volunteered my flat (and its several hundred aqua Mason's Patent 1858 jars, all almost identical) as a place to hold a meeting at which we would vote to organize a real club. (Amazingly, the March 2011 meeting marked the club's 40th anniversary. That makes me feel . . . older.)

Despite the city still recovering from the '67 riots, and the fact that my apartment



**(Two men with shovels) In 1973, Nat Champlin (left) and Rod Wing dig at the site of what was to become the 20-story Blue Cross / Blue Shield building. Nat is now 92, Rod 86. Photo was taken by club member Jerry Hostetler, then a Detroit News photographer.**

was near Detroit's Fisher Building and not far from where the riots began, the turnout of suburban white people was pleasing. And surprising.

Binger collector Joe Gourd, now of Illinois and still a major bitters trade card collector, was elected our first president. (Joe was also one of Michigan's early bottle diggers). I was also elected the club's first secretary, even though I later admitted that "I took notes that even I couldn't read."

For the occasion, and since I was a budding journalist at The Detroit News, I produced the club's first unofficial, 18-page newsletter, using mostly clippings I'd found in other papers. (The first article I wrote for The News, published May 3, 1972, was a full-page story on bottle collecting, and that resulted in the addition to the club of Nat and Mildred Champlin and – the hard way – Barb and Jerry Hostetler. I'll get back to Jerry in a minute.)

The current Detroit club newsletter editor and computer whiz Michael Brodzik later commented on that debut newsletter: "The first copy of the newsletter is quite an eclectic tome. I like the first page since it is made up of

cut-out words from other publications and reminds me of a ransom letter.”

I remind Mike that in those days, long before we ever heard the word “computer,” when I printed the newsletter with an old spirit duplicator, we would set the clunky machine on a table next to a vent on the furnace. We’d then push the thermostat up, and as the heat poured out, we’d crank the pages directly into the air flow to help them dry and not stick together. Doing this in the winter was fine; not so fine in the summer.

In 1973, the club allotted money for a new (but still used) duplicator and a new (but still used) typewriter – remember typewriters? The club and the newsletter, which cost 8 cents to mail, continued to grow.

We were \*Lower Michigan’s first bottle club and, later, other clubs were formed, in part by Detroit members who had to drive too many miles to make a meeting. By 1975, the Chief Pontiac club, the Huron Valley club, plus one in Flint and one up north in Petoskey, were up and running, and soon after, another spin-off in Essex County,



**Jerry and Barb Hostetler, all dressed up in observance of the nation’s Bicentennial, admire the FOHBC award for best newsletter. They played a big part on the club’s newsletter committee.**



**Representing the Detroit Club at the Jan. 11, 1976 Richmond, Indiana show were members (from left) Richard Davis, John Wolf and Barb Hostetler debating one purchase, while the late Dan Bell admires a bottle held by George Loik as Ralph (thumbs down) Finch offers his opinion.**

outside Windsor, Ontario, Canada, across the Detroit River. (\*A tiny club was formed at about the same time as ours in Iron River, in the Upper Peninsula.)

At first, we met in what became a long series of rooms in bank buildings, community meeting rooms, neighborhood recreation centers – any place we could find cheap. And there were so many great and interesting people back then to pack those rooms. The whole Champlin family, Bob and Phylliss Wood, Loy and Betty Barker, Rod “No ball is worth a fall” Wing, Dick Davis, Dave and Ruthie Stagner, Inez and George Ward, Richard Davis, Alice and Warren Stephens, Lyn Meo, Darryl and Cathy Mazur, Jim Haehnle (who collected Haehnle Beer), Jim and Mary Iley, Vick and Vada Steele, Craig and Sharon Bunch, the always faithful Dan Bell, Duane Braidwood and so many, many more. The late Ron Binek, he of the 10,000 printed bottle tee shirts, came along in the 1980s and the incredible \*Carol Richardson who, 25 years after she dropped out of bottles, is still spoken of with awe around the Midwest. My apologies to the many others who deserved to be recognized here. (\*Everyone loved Carol, including the legendary George McConnell, of New Jersey, who gave Carol flasks and jars for our monthly raffles.)

In 1973, Pat and Bob Kursawa brought young son, Mike, to meetings. That lasted a few years until Mike discovered girls. And even before that, there was Rich Roosen: “My first memory of the bottle club is reading your answer to a question that someone wrote to the ‘Contact 10’ column of The Detroit News,” Rich recently explained. “That was in November 1969 when I was 13 years old. I asked my mother to drive me to the club meetings in the Community Room of a Manufacturer’s National Bank” located on the east side of town. And Rich lived on the west side (as I did.) Soon, “you and your wife and your former neighbor and his wife (Joe and Larka Gourd) were kind enough to drive me to meetings until I could get my driver’s license when I turned 16.”

A few more comments on people listed earlier: A drawing of the Champlins’ little boy was for years a part of the Detroit club’s show advertising (he’s now 42), and their beautiful little girl, Maia, grew up to become president of the Little Rhody Bottle Club some 20-or-so years ago (she is now 51). Loy and Betty, now in Florida, still have a major Coke collection. Vick Steele and Rod Wing (Rod was famous for coming home with truckloads of stuff) can still be found setting up at area

markets.

Earlier, I mentioned Jerry Hostetler. His introduction to bottles is the basis for a great story, told around the collecting campfires for years. My first bottle story for The News required a photo so the newspaper sent a photographer (Jerry) over to the home of Warren and Alice Stephens. Bottles were set up in the window and while they were being rearranged, one fell from the top shelf, cleared off the bottom shelf and all toppled onto the bottles sitting on a desk below. The crash, I was told later, was heart-stopping (a loaf-of-bread demijohn one of the casualties).

The News was billed, Jerry kept his job and became interested in whole bottles, and he and Barb were soon key members of our club.

The Hostetlers are still around (in Arizona) and I won’t even attempt to list the collectors who have gone on to that great digging dump in the sky, but we have fond memories of them all and the mark they left on the hobby. Smiling Jim Hey died in 1975; he had named himself the “Chipped Lip King,” which told you a lot about his bottles! In 1976, the club even created a “Chipped Lip King”: plaque which was given yearly to the person who best represented Jim’s enthusiastic spirit, unselfish dedication, congeniality and friendliness. The Hostetlers took it the first year and remained club spark plugs for years. Jerry also was an early digger.

Starting around 1971, the Champlins dug from Michigan to Massachusetts (and into the bay off Cape Cod) and the aforementioned Inez and George Ward almost 50 years ago were camped on federal property where they could not dig. So they set up their tent over a dump site and spent the night digging a hole inside their tent!

And whenever I see photos of Detroit’s 73-story RenCen, I think of all the cobalt Teller sodas/mineral waters that were pulled out of there (at night) when it was just a big hole in the ground, Vic Steele later amassed the most complete collection of Tellers known. (Loy Barker once said that “Vic could smell glass.”)

There was a story in a 1982 newsletter, perhaps apocryphal, that once after a dig, Vic came home, shook the dirt out of his trouser cuffs and found a pontiled medicine! And ‘82 was the first year for the club’s “Diggers Hall of Fame” award, which Vic won.

John Brookner, a bottle collector who actually (and legally) worked at the RenCen site, after hours found a mint cobalt “Teller’s Mineral Water / Detroit.” Brookner had a



**The Tellers Mineral Water / Detroit was coveted by many Michigan collectors**

second Teller's Mineral Water, an aqua open-pontiled example that was missing the whole top. He sent it to Don Spangler, the world's greatest bottle repairer. However, George Loik took Don aside and asked for "a little favor." When the bottle came back, instead of an old tapered top, it had a new crown top! (We had so much fun back then. A 1977 newsletter pictures Rod Wing's newborn granddaughter, Tiffany, with her milk bottle – an amber Indian Queen with a nipple attached!)

When the now 20-story Blue Cross / Blue Shield building was just an empty lot, on May 27, 1973, Rod Wing, the Champlins and others were there looking for so many great bottles – Cronk and Norris sodas, Kling and Stroh beers, or Fisher Electric Railway insulators. And Dr. Owens European Life Bitters were coming up in the early '70s. Many rare cures and bitters came from the city, too. A building didn't go up or down without one of our members scouting it out.

Let me add this about the three-day Memorial Day Weekend Blue Cross dig. It was my one and only bottle dig. The clay was so hard that IF you could get a shovel in and pry out a glob of clay, you could have carved it into a bowl and never have to bother firing it! Others dug eight hours each day. I dug one hour, one day and then retired my shovel.

But the Champins were a different story. They kept hard hats in their car trunk, in different colors. They'd drive up top a construction site, check out the hard hat color du jour, suit up and . . . go to work.

Almost four decades later, Mildred Champlin recalls the hard hat selection. "They were required in the excavations where we had permission to dig. We usually made friends with the superintendents, who gave us permission, and dug above board, so to speak. On other occasions, we did have Nat walk through the site with the hard hat on and a clipboard, which another digger had suggested, just to scope out the possibilities. Once he overheard a worker ask another who that was. The worker said he thought it had to be 'one of those damn supervisors.' Other times, we just showed up after the work day."

In 1977, John Brookner reported that "there were 58 soda manufacturers and various partnerships between 1840 and 1900 in Detroit," and he was trying to dig an example from each one!

And while shovels were going into the ground, divers were (and still are, occasionally) going into the Detroit River, both downtown and all the way up to Port Huron.

Let me return to the Champlins. Almost 40 years after I first met them, this e-mail from Mildred: "I'll send you the story of our first dig, which is what propelled us to find a place where we could learn about the bottles we got from an old farmhouse, leading me to recall an article about bottle collecting that I had cut out earlier,



Excavated area for Detroit's 73-story RenCen



**The Renaissance Center, at right, was supposed to represent Detroit's future, and to a degree — for better or worse — it has. Most definitely for many of us, the RenCen represents a giant glass and steel tombstone, marking the former site (above) of so much of Detroit's bottle history, including such names as Teller, Cronk, Norris, Owens ...**

written by a guy named Ralph Finch. Thanks for writing it. And it was nice to meet Ralph Finch at our first (club) meeting. And to hear from him again so many years later.”

And Mildred also sent this note regarding the Blue Cross building dig. “What I remember the most involves a four-leaf clover Andrea found on our lawn when she came home from school, generously allowing me to make a wish on it. Nat and I were just packing our car on the way to the dig so I closed my eyes and wished for a really good blue Detroit soda. It was a nice sunny day and when we arrived downtown we parked, hauled our digging tools from the car trunk and, Nat leading the way, headed our heavy boots toward the muck. I no sooner took a couple of steps when I saw a beautiful blue soda sitting right on the surface. I just had to lean down to pick it up and turning it around, read on the pristine blue surface, ‘Norris Bottling Works, Detroit, Mich.’ That bottle was the best of the whole dig because of how we got it and Andrea was ecstatic when she learned how magical her four-leaf clover really was.

After almost 40 years, memories sometimes need correcting. Later Mildred added: “I just talked with Andrea and it was a 7-leaf clover! She thought that with so many extra leaves, there’s be that many extra wishes and she could afford to pass them around.”

Mike, in your last newsletter, you pondered the reason behind the change in the club’s name, from Metropolitan Detroit Bottle Club to Metropolitan Detroit Antique Bottle Club. I remember the reason well.

I don’t think we had a real problem with Jim Beam or Avon bottles. After all, our first bottle show held in 1971 at the Dearborn Ice Arena on Ford Road and organized by early show promoter Neil Wood of Indiana, was half new bottles (commemorative whiskeys and such) and half old bottles. Here is the real reason for the change:

We were meeting in the community room of the Bank of Commerce in

Center Line in late 1973. As usual, we had advertised in area papers that we were having a “Bottle Meeting.” Shortly after the evening began, two men, rather. . . seedy, walked in and sat in the front row. After the minutes of the last meeting were read, president Warren Stephens announced upcoming antique bottle events; the two men looked at each other, quietly got up and left, never having said a word and never to be seen again. Later, we figured they thought the meeting was for Alcoholics Anonymous, so we added Antique to the club name.

I continued for almost two years to produce the newsletter and each month I whined and pestered club members for items to use in it. One day, George Loik countered, “How hard can being the newsletter editor be?” I immediately resigned and handed off the position to George, and he then whined and pestered club members each month for newsletter items.

But George was very enthusiastic about the job – he held it for three years – and we created a newsletter committee. Barb and Jerry Hostetler, now of Arizona, were a big part of it and each month a group worked on the newsletter, stapling, cutting and pasting, hand-coloring the covers, making hold-to-light covers, fold-outs, or mechanical covers with movable parts. By April 1973, we were mailing out more than 100 newsletters a month. One cover (for July 1976) was a “connect the numbered dots” challenge to reveal an exploding firecracker! We went crazy with the newsletter, and we loved it. We had people join the Detroit club from all across the country, even from Hawaii and Canada, who just enjoyed receiving the newsletter.

About the same time, the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs (now Collectors) was formed and planned its first Expo in St. Louis in 1976. Our club was well-represented there. At the Expo banquet, in front of 625 people, the announcement for “Best Newsletter” was made, the award going to the Metropolitan Detroit Antique

Bottle Club!

We cheered, the audience applauded, and our group sprang into action. We had high hopes of winning and had printed up a few hundred extra copies of that month’s newsletter. We then disrupted the banquet proceedings by fanning out through the huge room, handing out the copies to everyone present!

We rented buses for trips to other bottle shows, we had club digs, club picnics, incredible Christmas parties and each meeting was chockful of activities. Each month, the meeting was themed. For March and St. Patrick’s Day, it was green bottles, green lightning balls, green seltzers, a green target ball! October, for Halloween, it was spooky bottles. Members brought in ghost town bottles, witch balls, skull and crossbones poisons, embossed “blood” bottles, glass with ghost lettering. November was our annual Turkey Bottle night, of course, showing off. . . well, things we wished we didn’t have.

What great meetings we had. In late 1976, we hosted the Federation’s Midwest meeting and the late Bill Dudley flew up with Jim Spencer in Jim’s small plane. Jim was the publisher of one of the hobby’s early bottle magazines, *Antique Bottle World*. After the meeting, the late Norman Barnett, then Federation coordinator (and president to be), wrote a thank you to the club, saying in part, “I wish every club in the Federation could have heard the newsletter presentation of the MDABC. They certainly are an enthusiastic team and I know they can instill that same enthusiasm in anyone who had the opportunity to listen to them.”

At one of those club meetings, cure collector and club member John Wolf (now of Dayton, Ohio) mentioned he is looking forward to writing his book on cures. Hmmm, John, that was 35 years ago!

Bottle collecting has given me a world of experiences – great glass, great travel, great friends.

Sincerely, Ralph Finch