

In Search of hidden treasures in Key West, Fla.

By Pam Selenak

Last year, Randy and I decided to venture out to Key West, Florida for a history lesson on hidden treasures. We planned on visiting Mel Fisher's gold museum and traveling to Fort Jefferson, an island 70 miles from Key West built by the Union army during the Civil War.

We did this and also were able to do some antiquing along the way. We were surprised to find how our plans were about to take a turn. While out on our bicycles and checking out antique stores, we went into a small shop that had some bottles in the window. You never know what you can find. Along one wall were many bottles such as onion bottles, flasks and Florida pharmacies. We asked the store owner where these bottles came from and she told us that if we go outside the store and go around the building we would find a man selling bottles from a couple of tables.

It was quite warm and humid outside and the sun was beating down on us. Not comfortable. Here we found Bob with a few tables full of bottles. We struck up a conversation with him as to where he acquired all these bottles. He started to tell us of his many years of diving and snorkeling the waters of Key West and the bounty of glass treasures that are buried beneath the waters surrounding the nearby islands. He then invited us to his home to see more of his acquisitions. We thought about this for about three seconds and jumped on his invitation. He offered to pick us up and take us to his home.

Once we arrived at Bob's home, we saw a vast collection of many types of bottles he had retrieved and are now on display. So now comes the best part. He said if we come down again to call him and he would take us out on his boat and look for bottles. When we got home, I made reservations for a trip to Key West in 2012.

We informed Bob of our dates and we kept in touch with him throughout the year.

Sometime in January 2012, Bob told us of a friend of his named "Island Alex." Alex is well known in Key West as a singer and song writer that plays regularly at one of the many bars in town. He has also has been diving for bottles for about forty years in the keys. He was recently interviewed by the local TV station in Miami about his hobby in bottle collecting. To see this interview check out http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_G_QORxsWU&feature=youtube_gdata.

On April 7 2012, we took off to Key West for our treasure hunt and to meet up with some amazing bottle collectors. The forecast was clear, sunny, and in the 80's all week.

Just a brief history of Key West. Captains have been navigating their ships around the treacherous coral reefs of the Florida Keys since at least the 1500s. For the sailing ships, the Straits became the favored passage for shipping traffic between ports in the western Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico and ports along the Atlantic east coast and in

Europe. Because the swift flowing Gulf Stream current, unpredictable counter currents, calms in summer, hurricanes in the fall, gales in winter, and inaccurate charts, the passage through the Straits was considered one of the most dangerous of any along the American coast. As traffic increased so did the shipwrecks. By the 1850s, ships were piling up the reef at a rate of one per week.

The first lighthouse in Key West was built in 1825 and destroyed in 1846 by a tremendous hurricane. The present lighthouse was completed in 1849 although there have been upgrades to its construction since then. I was told by the curator of the lighthouse museum that the first year of the new lighthouse there were over five hundred shipwrecks.

By the 1850's Key West was the richest city per capita in the southern United States.

You have heard of the famous shipwreck named "Atocha". The Mel Fisher explorers are still bringing artifacts up from that site as well as others.

After hurricanes come through, the currents bring coins and other artifacts closer to the shores. These waters are literally littered with "old stuff." Due to some recent storms and heavy winds, the water was extremely cloudy and full of floating seagrass. We were unable to get in any diving due to heavy currents.

Bob picked us up and took us to Alex's home. Upon driving up his street, I noticed a HUGE anchor resting on the outside of his property along with the chain attached. As we walked up to the front door, I noticed old bottles sticking out of the exterior of the home. The steps leading up to the door were obviously old. There was definitely a nautical theme to the architecture. When Alex came to the door I was pleasantly surprised by the reception we received from Alex and Mary (his wife). As we entered the home, we walked into an open room with cathedral ceilings. There were bottles of all kinds everywhere.

While speaking to Alex, he told me that he has been diving for bottles in the Keys since the 1970s. He was a lieutenant for fire rescue in Deerfield Beach, Fla., for 27 years. He retired in 1998 and moved to Key West. Mary is also an avid diver as well as a very talented local artist. You can see her paintings throughout the house.

I also saw a huge anchor as well inside with an old cannon laying by the front door. As you look up toward the upstairs you can see an old wooden statue of a pirate in full costume.

Alex told me that he and Mary built this home by themselves and it took them seven years to complete. I asked about the bricks and he told me that they all came from the salvaging of wrecks and from old dumps from the 1800s and early 1900s. They also incorporated old coral they had found in the dumps into the exterior stucco.

Continued on page 24



Pictures from our trip (Photos by Pam Selenak)

Continued from page 22

On the outside by the front door, I saw a piece of art that was made into a fish from wire and wood that was filled with old bottles. A boat sitting on the property also was filled with old bottles as a decoration.

Alex and Mary are avid ecologists and use everything they find, incorporating it into their lifestyle in some way or another.

Alex is a local musician and writes music about his environment and life in the Keys. He also was in a play that was ending at the time we were there, but we did not have time to see it. Alex invited us to join him and Mary at an Audubon Society meeting where there was going to be a speaker about the local wildlife sanctuary where they continue to be activists. Afterwards, we went to dinner where I picked their brains for a couple of more hours.

Although we were not able to do any diving or snorkeling for bottles this time, we did not come away from Key West empty handed.

We were able to purchase a Dr. Planett's Bitters bottle from Bob. He found this bottle in the harbor in 2002 while diving. This will be another story that Ferdinand Meyer wants to write about. We have already planned next year's adventure to Key West and have been invited to dive with Alex and Mary and hopefully Bob as well. So maybe there will be a part two to this story next year.



Bob, Mary and Island Rick

