

# The Whens and Whys of Insulator Collecting

By Bill Haley

*(EDITOR'S NOTE: Longtime insulator collector Bill Haley, of Chattanooga, Tenn., who is president of the Dixie Jewels of the Wire Insulator Club, shares his thoughts of collecting the glass and ceramic gems in the first of two parts about his hobby).*

If you are confused about what exactly an insulator is, look to the top of a power pole. Insulators are the things with electric wires attached to them, one insulator per wire. Sometimes several will be mounted on a wooden cross piece called a cross-arm.

You will begin to notice insulators on each pole. Most are made of porcelain, plastics or composition materials now, but many materials with good electrical insulating qualities have been employed over the years. Glass was a favorite for many decades, but is rarely seen in service these days.

The electric wire is attached to the insulator using a short length of wire called the "tie wire." This wraps around the wire groove – an indentation near the middle of the insulator. Both ends of the tie wire are twisted around the main wire at both ends to hold it tight. An insulator's purpose is to hold the wire away from the pole or cross-arm, preventing the wire from touching other objects and the electric current leaking to the ground.

The bottle and insulator hobbies share certain things in common. First, both were manufactured strictly as utilitarian objects, used and then discarded when no longer needed. Luckily for us, they were usually made of materials that have stood up to the ravages of time and were produced in large enough quantities so many have survived to the present.

From the viewpoint of a collector, they have great visual appeal. Many were produced when quality control as we know it today wasn't a top priority. This gives them individuality and character. The fact that they were



**Photo 1: CD214 shows an amber Telegraphos Nationales insulator from Mexico, a Folembroy - nicknamed "gingerbread man" from France (not sure of the CD on this one), and a CD257 Hemingray-60 - nicknamed "Micky Mouse", from the U.S. Good one to show both colors and different styles with an international mix.**

manufactured in a myriad of colors, shapes and embossings is a win-win situation for modern day admirers (See Photo 1)

Bottles and insulators are usually small and easily displayed. Several shelves will sometimes suffice to house a collection. In contrast, if your collecting interest is vintage automobiles or locomotives, space considerations become more of a concern.

Finally, they share historical significance. They help tell the story of evolving industry and innovation. Many collectors today enjoy research into old factory sites, manufacturing time-lines or patent processes.

I'm certain the glassworkers and potters in factories of old would be both amused and amazed at how we fuss over them today. They would certainly be astounded at the prices we are willing to pay for uncommon and rare examples.

## BEGINNINGS OF THE INSULATOR HOBBY

The peak of insulator usage occurred between 1860 and 1960 when millions of insulators were used on telegraph, telephone and power lines. It was not uncommon to see poles

sporting many cross-arms, each full of insulators supporting electrical wires. That began to change in the 1960s as old telegraph and telephone lines began to be replaced by thick bundled cable. Many thousands of miles of open wire were suddenly outdated and were dismantled to be sold as scrap metal.

Sometimes, in rural areas the insulators and cross-arms, having fulfilled their function and no longer needed, were simply pitched to the ground and abandoned to the elements. In more urban areas, many went to dumps. Around the nation, many old signal and telephone lines along railroad rights-of-way still survive to the present day, a mere glimmer of what once was, but they, too, are rapidly vanishing.

People realized these beautiful pieces of history were being lost at a rapid rate and they began saving and collecting the old insulators. This was the birth of the insulator hobby.

In his book, *Most about Glass Insulators*, insulator hobby pioneer Marion Millholland reminisced about his introduction to insulators in this brief story titled "The Start." He writes: "Many years ago, we drove past a home where a mountain-high pile of telephone cross-arms were just thrown

down. There was no effort made for a neat stack, some cross-ways, some diagonal, just a big random pile. The insulators were still on the cross-arms. With the afternoon sun setting, we looked through this stack of helter-skelter cross-arms and behold: most of the colors of a rainbow came to life. A more beautiful sight in colors would be difficult to find. That moment, I was really taken into the insulator hobby. The search for these beauties has never ceased.”

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the hobby began to get organized. A few clubs were formed across the country and insulator swap meets and shows came into being. Books and price guides were published and some of the earliest guides had hand-drawn pictures of individual insulators. A nationally distributed magazine for collectors, *Crown Jewels of the Wire*, was first published around 1970. It is still in publication and recognized as the best monthly periodical in the hobby. An organization of collectors, the National Insulator Association, followed a couple of years later. The NIA is now the chief governing body of the insulator hobby. Slowly but surely, collectors established contact



Two CD145 “beehives” by W. Brookfield

with other insulator enthusiasts and the fledgling hobby grew.

Early on, it was realized that there was a need to categorize insulators in some manner to facilitate accurate communication between collectors. Woody Woodward, who remains active in the hobby, came up with a concept for Consolidated Design (CD) numbers based on the general shape of an insulator. He sequenced CD numbers based on the way insulators are used. Basically, small telegraph and telephone insulators have small CD numbers, large power insulators were given bigger numbers. It should

be noted that there are numerous exceptions to this basic rule and the CD numbering system has been subject to “growing pains” over the years. CD numbers are still being added for new discoveries and are adjusted to this day. Woody always has a final say on any changes that are made. Sometimes, instead of a brand new CD number, a decimal system is used. For example, a CD162.1 is a bit different than CD162, but still has a similar general shape. This system was a huge step forward for the budding insulator hobby.

A similar system called the Universal Numbering system, shorted by collectors to U numbers, was eventually developed for porcelain insulators. Since this first installment is primarily about glass insulators, I’ll plan to get into that segment of the hobby in a future article.

*Next month: Learning the “shorthand” of the world of insulator collecting.*



“Colored Signals”, depicts a Hemingray CD162 in orange amber, a CD161 California in deep plum, and a CD164 McLaughlin-20 in emerald green. All products of the U.S