

Arizona Collecting History

By Mike Miller

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Mike Miller started digging bottles back in Virginia in the mid-1970s. "Back then, we dug in old wagon dumps and I don't remember anyone talking about privies. I used to cart the bottles on my bicycle and sold quite a few of them to an antiques dealer in the small town of Occoquan. I spent a lot of time digging in Minnieville, Va., which was an area of Civil War camps during the battles of Bull Run (Manassas), finding quite a few Civil War relics among the bottles." He stepped away from the hobby until 1995 after having moved to Arizona).

As far back as the mid-1950s, several individuals had begun collecting relics from the old ghost towns and the deserts of Arizona.

Included were old bottles used during the territorial and early statehood days. Though this early collecting usually consisted of looking for purple glass, these gatherers soon began noticing markings or embossings and began to categorize these bottles into groupings of type of use.

Bud Bassett, one of the first to collect, fit this mold while working for the U.S. Geodetic Survey in Northern Arizona. Working at a site near Holbrook, Bud recalled taking a daily trip several miles south of town and noticing hundreds of old bottles, many purpled by the sun, just lying on the ground. In time, he began to pick up the nicest colored of these, but left many embossed bottles behind because his primary interest was color.

As his collecting interest changed, the focus moved to collecting bottles from local businesses. In time, he assembled the most complete collection of Arizona Hutchinson sodas. Bud once spoke of finding two very rare Winslow Bottling Works Hutchinsons in a Winslow trading post. Having a shrewd eye for a good deal, Bud purchased one for his



PHOENIX BOTTLING WORKS
PHOENIX A.T. With applied top 6 1/2".
 Back to Arizona, to Phoenix specifically. This hutchinson is the earliest example produced by the Phoenix Bottling Works. In fact, it was made between 1884 and 1888, before Arizona became a state. The A.T. stands for Arizona Territory, and the applied top would back up the age of the bottle. This one is very heavily whittled and is a nice bluish aqua. There is a pressure type ding in the top, which is only visible as you turn the bottle to one side. A superb example with very minor damage. Without the flash we would grade this an 8. Winning Bid: \$ 550 (ID: 10882) (Photo courtesy of Jeff Wichmann)

collection, but left the other. Today, the soda would bring well over \$1,000, but back then it was just another small town bottle.

Other early pioneers of bottle collecting in the Grand Canyon State consisted of Jud May, Monroe Robinson, Dee Morris and Wes Fleming.

"I didn't know enough to dig only a few feet down at that time," May recalled, "as most of the bottles were under the bushes and leaves. I didn't even bother with insulators as there were hundreds on the ground."

Fleming and Bassett were the earliest collectors to locate the old Seventh Avenue dump in Phoenix. Bud recalled the two digging partners spending days on end in the dump. When the days were too hot, they dug by lantern light at night.

By the early 1960s, several new collectors had joined these pioneers and by 1966 plans were begun to form a collecting club. Early meetings were held at a farmhouse on the west end of McDowell Road in Phoenix Saturday afternoons after a day of digging to discuss the day's finds and pass along information of the histories of the businesses which utilized the bottles. Soon meetings were held at several different club members' homes and then moved to the mineral museum at the state fairgrounds.

By then, the club membership had swelled to 15 couples and the name Arizona Treasures Unlimited was officially taken. In 1968, the first officers elected were Earl Cotton, president; Anne Colton, secretary, and Jack Miller (no kin to the writer), treasurer.

The first mechanical club dig was held that year at the Seventh Street dump. A backhoe was used to dig trenches and each digger rented a section of the trenches. Cost for these activities was shared by participating members and many good bottles were

found, including territorial sodas and pharmacy bottles.

In May of that landmark year, Jack Miller began making drawings and listings of Arizona sodas, the first real attempt to catalog the state's various bottles. Jack continued his project for 21 years, listing his 160th different soda in June of 1989. Soon after the listings began, Jack and others started sharing historical business information.

In 1969, the Phoenix club "fragmented" into two separate clubs, members with specific interests in digging and old bottles splitting to form the Pick & Shovel Antique Bottle Club of Arizona. Jack soon created a newsletter called *The Blister* and began to share his drawings of Arizona bottles with the remainder of the club members.

It also was in 1969 that urban renewal projects began in downtown Phoenix with the highlight being construction of a new civic center. Though not easily accessible, the site did yield some excellent bottles, including a lady leg Mills' Bitters from California, green Phoenix Bottling Works, Arizona Territory Hutchinsons, the only known example of a Yorba & Co., Tucson, Ariz., drug store bottle and the first known examples of pharmacy bottles from the ghost town of Jerome, Arizona.

Wayne Larson, a well-known digger from Phoenix, remembers meeting a supervisor from the civic center construction crew and being told about the many great bottles that had been dug on the project. Later, Wayne was invited to the gentleman's home and saw the line of Phoenix, A.T., sodas that he had picked up on the site. Upon stating that he would love to find one of the sodas, Wayne was handed one and told he could keep it.

Prior to this time, digging in the Phoenix area was mostly confined to the Seventh Avenue dump and later the feed lots of the old Maricopa Packing Company. But some club members had begun seeking out new digging sites, locating and excavating old outhouses. Early privy hunters included Wayne and Jack Shirie.

Wayne was a prolific digger and along with his father dug hundreds of privies in the Phoenix area. Included in

their many finds were glob top whiskeys from California, Arizona territorial bottles and, while on a dig in the Southern Arizona town of Douglas, the first known Arizona Territorial whiskey flasks.



PRESCOTT BOTTLING WORKS
PRESCOTT AT. Here we have an Arizona Territory bottle, which appears to have been cleaned, and does have some light highpoint wear on the lettering. Grade: Overall, however, this is a very presentable example, as these don't turn up everyday. If you can live with some minor distractions, we would strongly recommend this one to anyone looking for a fairly solid example. Grades 8.4. Winning Bid: \$ 375 (Left Bid: \$ 400 ID: 18569) (Photo courtesy of Jeff Wichmann)

Jack Shirie, a sometimes digging partner of Wayne's, was noted for finding the first known examples of the E.E. Prowell, Phoenix, A.T., pharmacy bottle (considered by many to be Arizona's best) and an example of the Clifton, Ariz., crown soda (also Arizona's best). More importantly, Jack was the first in Arizona to start to keep a notebook on his digs. Details were kept of privy locations, what was found and the strata of dig sites. These notes were very instrumental in helping to date the bottles found. Furthermore, Jack began painstaking research of Arizona businesses well beyond what had been done previously. This information was utilized years later in establishing bottle dates during the writing of the present Arizona bottle identification book.

By the mid-1960s, activity in bottle collecting had also begun in Tucson, starting in 1966 with urban renewal project in downtown along Congress Street. Connie Zielbauer, Jimmy Adams and Bob Marcum were some of the earliest diggers on the scene. Connie remembers that excavators were just blading off the tops of privies and trash pits and the three would dig the bottles from the remaining layers just ahead of the machinery.

Hillard Frey, who worked with Jimmy and Connie at the Tucson Greyhound Bus Station and in 1968 joined in the digging, recalls one well which produced 50 to 75 J.F.I. (J.F. Innes) Tucson Hutchinson sodas. Connie remembers additional holes which produced many cobalt bottles including rare pumpkinseed flasks. Those early Tucson diggers also dug in many Southern Arizona's ghost towns including Charleston, Millville, Contention City, Black

Diamond, Pearce and Johnson. Connie recollected digging the amber B&B Union Soda Works tombstone Hutchinson in Charleston, slick cobalt Hutchinsons in Contention City which years later would be attributed to C.F. Riley's

Pioneer Soda Works in Tombstone, and finding the only known example of the C.F. Moss Benson crown soda in a dirt mound in Johnson.

By the 1970s, new collectors joined their older counterparts. Bryan Grapentine had started digging bottles with the Phoenix club at the Seventh Avenue dump and through the years without a doubt amassed the most celebrated collection of bottles in Arizona. Jim Bright, a native Arizonan, specialized in milk bottles, authored the Arizona Milk Bottle list and collects to this day (in 2009). Mike Schroff joined in the Tucson digs and became an instrumental contributor in assembling information on Arizona bottles. Jim Burns became one of the most prolific diggers throughout the state, locating rarities such as the first Yuma Hutchinson and the only known Glendale pharmacy bottle example.

By the late 1970s, digging locations were becoming more scarce as urban renewal projects wound down or became less accessible. The Seventh Avenue dump in Phoenix also closed after the tragic death of a non-club digger who had perished when his ill-advised tunnel collapsed. Though digging would continue, it was at this point the focus of collecting began shifting for many from digging to attending bottle shows. In 1977, the first Arizona bottle show was held at Del Webb's Townhouse in downtown Phoenix.

The 1980s saw a continuance of the trend toward less digging and increased activity in pursuing bottles at shows, antique stores and flea markets. Though sites at the old Bisbee and Prescott dumps and the St. Mary's dump in Tucson produced some good finds, most of the bottles now offered for sale were ones recycled from earlier digs or items found by non-collectors who were realizing their bottles were of interest to collectors.

By 1986, the Phoenix Bottle Show had grown to 286 dealer tables and the club name changed



to the Phoenix Antiques, Bottles & Collectibles Club. Along with the name change, which reflected a desire to gain new members by expanding the club interests, came a new kind of collector which sought out old Arizona items in general as opposed to collecting specific categories. For these collectors, bottles were only a part of their interests which included advertising, souvenir china, tokens, calendar plates, mining and

Left top: THE WELLINGTON SALOON THE F.G. MCCOY CO INC. PRESCOTT ARIZ. 6 ½" half-pint. Here we have another oddly shaped flask from Arizona, this one from Prescott. The Wellington Saloon was located on Montezuma Street in 1902 and it is believed that it closed in 1906. The bottom also reads, "DESIGN PAT. AUG 9 1898." Considered a rare bottle, this is the first one we've seen. Condition is terrific and would grade a solid 8.5 if not for the smallest of a tiny pressure dings the size of a nail head. The bottle has never been cleaned and has some light stain. In spite of the super minor flaw, is still a real gem. Thanks again to Michael Miller. Est. \$400-700. MB \$400 Winning Bid: \$ 900 (Left Bid: \$ 1,000 ID: 13547) (Photo courtesy of Jeff Wichmann)

Left bottom: RETURN TO JOE GRIBBLE OLD CROW SALOON DOUGLAS, A.T. 6" Screw cap with ground lip. Close to a half-pint. Please note the catalog says, "A.Z." while it is actually an Arizona Territory flask. One of Bryan's passions, since he does live in Arizona, is Arizona bottles. This rare flask was made for a saloon that bordered Mexico. In 1903 Joe Gribble opened a saloon on 10th street called "The Whitehouse" and another called "The Old Crow". A very rare bottle, this is certainly the first one we've seen and most likely the last. Joe's flask grades an 8.5 with just a hint of light stain that would easily clean out. A highly sought after Arizona territory flask. Est. \$1000-2000. MB \$700. Thanks go to Michael Miller for additional information on this bottle. Winning Bid: \$ 4,600 (ID: 11010) (Photo courtesy of Jeff Wichmann)

railroad pieces. Possibly the most comprehensive collectors who fit that mold are Rick and Karen Hopwood. Rick began collecting Arizona sodas, both embossed and applied color label (ACL), but quickly expanded his interest to other categories. With Karen's interest in collecting being as strong as Rick's, they were soon at the top of the list of historical Arizona item collectors.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, the number of new bottle collectors in Arizona has remained fairly constant. Privy and dump digging have been reduced to infrequent attempts being made by men like Scott Given, Jim Dews, John Moody and myself, as well as older diggers such as Jim Bright.

In 1996, I became president of the PABC and rediscovered some of Jack Miller's drawings in a pile of old newsletters given to me for safekeeping. The drawings, along with small snippets of historical information on Arizona businesses found sporadically throughout the newsletters, inspired me to begin a project to catalog every known Arizona embossed soda, beer, pharmacy, food and whiskey bottle. The drawings were complemented by historical information, photos of go-withs and price and rarity guides.

The first edition of *A Collector's Guide to Arizona Bottles & Stoneware*, covering bottles from 1880 to 1920, was completed in 1999. Demand for information on soda bottles from the machine-made era, the second edition of the book was expanded to include embossed bottles from the 1880s to the 1940s.

Bryan Grapentine's phenomenal collection hit the auction block during 2007 and 2008 with a series of auctions conducted by Jeff Wicher at American Bottle Auctions. Visitors to Bryan and Pearl Grapentine's



SELTZER BOTTLE BUBBLING WATER BISBEE BOTTLING WORKS REG. ARIZ. CONTENTS ONE QUART. 11 3/4". With original spout. Here's a seltzer from the bustling little town of Bisbee. For those unaware (as we were a few minutes ago) Bisbee was an early copper mining town in South Eastern Arizona. This seltzer is considered rare and is the first we've ever handled. It has the original metal spout and condition is generally a solid 8. A good one for the seltzer or Arizona collector. Winning Bid: \$ 450 (ID: 18300) (Photo courtesy of Jeff Wichmann)

home could have told you that it was impossible to take in the whole collection in one trip. The auctions netted a record amount for the sale of an individual collection and, in addition to all of the other categories included, Arizona collectors were able to obtain some great pieces that rarely see the sales tables. Bryan has not stopped collecting, with his current interest Sandwich glass.

The present shows a great future for bottle collecting in Arizona. Though the days of the 200-plus-table shows are long gone, the last several years have seen an increase in the Arizona show which has once again grown to more than 100 tables. Many of today's collectors have followed the Hopwood model of collecting many categories, while others continue the tradition of specializing in only one. Local items seem to have an edge in interest over more national categories, although it is becoming difficult to find quality in either area.

The collecting community also reflects the entire spectrum of age group and experience level. Bottle collecting pioneers such as Bud Bassett are still active in their pursuit of the last few bottles to complete their collections. Although many collectors such as Jack Miller and Jack Shirie are no longer with us, Hillard Frey, Bryan Grapentine and Jim Bright continue to collect and are happy to help young collectors.

Second wave collectors such as Rick and Karen Hopwood, Cole Lewellen and Karen and myself have amassed large Arizona collections and newcomers like Brent VanDeman have moved into the forefront of the picture representing the future top collectors of the hobby in the state.