

# CALIFORNIA COLLECTING HISTORY

By Roger Hill

EDITOR'S NOTE: Roger Hill, of Menlo Park, Calif., has been collecting antique bottles for nearly 40 years. He is an authority on Art-Deco sodas and is treasurer of the San Jose Antique Bottle Collectors Association, one of the first bottle clubs to be organized in California.

"C'mon, boys, today we're going on a treasure hunt," my dad told us as we excitedly got into the car. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon and before long, he stopped the family Packard at his job site down at the creek's edge – actually, a 40-foot-briny slough that came off San Francisco Bay and wound behind some of the peninsula's oldest buildings in downtown Redwood City.

It was 1959 and I was 4 years old, but I still vividly remember that day. My father was an associate engineer and inspector for the city on a construction project where a box culvert was being built. This involved setting up a dragline that spanned the creek so that a huge, mechanically driven bucket could excavate a trench through the mud.

I remember seeing what seemed like mountains of mud stacked side-by-side on the nearby creek bank with old bottles of every size and color sticking out like porcupine quills.

My younger brother and I followed dad over to the piles and watched him pluck out of the bottles. He handed them to us, telling us to carefully take them over to our mother, who was waiting at the car to pack them neatly into the trunk. I remember what great fun it was – each and every bottle treasure was unique and I also sadly remember that the trunk of our car filled up way too quickly. . . I wanted to stay longer and get more old bottles!

When we got home, my dad carefully washed the bottles and wrapped and packed them away in two 50-gallon metal drums that were in

our basement. I remember a wrought iron soda fountain ice cream table and chair set being delivered to our house by Don Kreiss, a big time local bottle collector. He had learned about our finds and negotiated the trade of that table and chair set for the two bottle-filled drums.

Today, as a sophisticated collector



**Varieties of Art Deco sodas are endless. (Courtesy of Roger Hill)**

who has acquired a thirst and a knowledge for local history, I can only imagine and wonder at the beauty and rarity of the bottles he acquired.

In fact, the dragline was set up behind quaint little brick building that was the Quong Lee Laundry dating to 1859. It is one of the oldest original buildings still standing in San Mateo County.

Redwood City was founded during the 1850s with a small wharf and community established on the banks of this creek.

While in high school in the early 1970s, a buddy (Jeff Rhoads) got me interested in collecting old bottles. We grew up in scouting together. As Cub Scouts, he got me interested in coin collecting. We both went on to become Eagle Scouts and have maintained a lifelong friendship. He is an architect living in Las Vegas and is a member of the Las Vegas bottle club. As a high school freshman, I can vividly remember walking into his bedroom one day and seeing his window filled

with beautiful glass bottles of different colors and sizes. I was instantly taken in with their beauty. He had found many of those while walking in the hills in and around his home.

Seeing my building excitement, he was generous to invite me out on an exploration. Alongside a creek bank, partly buried, I spied a Listerine bottle from the 1920s – a common find – but it was the one that sank the hook into me. It was my first bottle and it was old, with a cork top!

I also grew up in the hills of Redwood City near Emerald Lake where there were a number of abandoned summer cottages from the 1920s with contents still intact! Wealthy San Franciscans of that era would ride a train down to the temperate peninsula and stay in their bungalows for the weekend, hunting, fishing and basking in our renowned climate. Outside the cabins, beneath poison oak bushes, they tossed empty milk and soda pop bottles of the day.

I always kept those bottles and went on to dig in the important pre-construction site of the famous TransAmerica pyramid in downtown San Francisco. That's where the original embarcadero (wharf in Spanish) of Gold Rush San Francisco was uncovered.

In the middle of the night, while the guard was still asleep, we scaled down giant wooden ladders into the "pit." I will never forget that night. A full moon lighted the area as did lights from surrounding skyscrapers. We had on hip-high rubber boots and carried flashlights and probes.

When we got to the bottom, it was like stepping back in time. There were ancient redwood pilings from this historic wharf sticking out of the mud like old skeletons. It was unseasonably warm and musty – one could feel the history. There was debris everywhere – broken plates, bottles, metal, bones and wood. I remember sticking my probe through what turned out to be a case of champagne, hermetically sealed in the mud from Gold Rush days, and

the smell that wafted out was delicious! I only wish I had kept one of those bottles.

Jeff found a green Taylor & Co., eight-sided, graphite-pontiled soda, a Valparaiso, Chile variant (which hearkened back to the early pioneers and clipper ships that sailed around Cape Horn and up to San Francisco). Another high school buddy, Warren, found a flintlock pistol whose wooden handle dissolved as he pulled the scrolled and embossed weapon from the mud. Our minds ran wild with fantasies – we speculated that perhaps the pistol was a murder weapon that was tossed into the bay way back when. I then found an example of the city's first soda bottle, a graphite pontiled Lynde & Putnam 1852 cobalt beauty. That find was the Holy Grail for me.

I was truly bitten by the bottle bug and started collecting early soda and mineral water bottles of San Francisco (and every other type of bottle that I found). Peck and Audie Markota's *Western Sodas* book became my bible. It introduced me to the fascinating histories of the early soda water companies and the characters who founded them.

I still have every bottle that I have ever dug, bought, won or had given to me. My collection numbers in the thousands, in addition to the many U.S. and Canadian Art Deco sodas. I now specialize in that form, thanks to eBay.

I was graduated from UCLA and with my brother started a company inventing consumer products. As part of our research, we frequently found ourselves in the Sunnyvale Patent Library (one of only two on the West Coast). One day, I walked past old volumes from the 1920s and was excited to find renderings of patent designs issues for clothing, furniture and jewelry. I really got excited by discovering page after page of Art Deco-inspired soda pop bottle designs, a few of which I'd found

in the hills. There were many more unbelievable designs I'd never seen that were truly spectacular.

About 11 years ago, I got serious about this area of bottle collecting. I visited a number of antiques stores and occasionally I'd pick up a new variant for my collection. Then came eBay and suddenly I could visit "500 antiques stores" in just an hour or two.

Meanwhile, back to my days as a teenager and what and who

held it up to the sun.

He was born in Fresno in the Central Valley of California and grew up in a farming community. He served in our armed forces and came to the Bay Area in search of a better job during the late 1940s. He became a carpenter and expert installer of hardwood floors, a profession into which his sons, Arnold Jr., Robert, Fino and Vince, soon followed.

Arnold Sr., first started digging bottles in San Jose in 1958. In those days, bottles didn't mean much and it was simply a great hobby. "Digging was about having fun and he truly appreciated finding these handmade works of art," said Arnold Jr. He and his brothers joined their soon-to-be-legendary father in the pursuit of old glass.

The senior family member was also a pioneer in developing digging techniques and tools, experimenting with different types of steel for probes. He devised one of the first "hammer probes" for breaking through asphalt and hard-packed earth.

He was blessed to have dug in all the great spots in San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland, Stockton, Sacramento and also in Nevada.

In 1971, the San Jose Bottle Club nicknamed him "The Dumbarton Kid" because he scoured San Francisco Bay near the Dumbarton Bridge at low tide, finding all kinds of antique bottles. He participated in the famous "Big Dig" in San Francisco in 1998. You'd find Arnold Sr., there filling holes as fast as his sons dug them.

"I'll never forget the smile on dad's face at the sight of so many fantastic bottles," the junior Arnold said. Rivaling that dig was the old dump on Virginia Street in San Jose during the late 1960s. Many rare whiskeys and many Cassin's Bitters came from there. Arnold Sr., found the Russell City dump in Hayward – gigantic boxed pits into which nearby hotels, saloons and brothels dumped their 1880s trash. He said 85% of the bottles found were



**Jumbo the Elephant (left), Mammy (3rd from left) among pictorials to be found in an Art Deco collection (Courtesy of Roger Hill)**

else influenced me in digging and collecting. I stumbled across a bunch of bottle diggers going at it alongside the 101 freeway in Redwood City near the site of Frank's Tannery, which had stood since the 1880s until burning in the 1960s. It also was next to a broad slough which transported flatboats loaded with freshly cut and milled redwood lumber from the peninsula to build the exploding Gold Rush town of San Francisco.

Not knowing of this crazy hobby back then, I stood there in awe as people dug holes in the ground and pulled out glass treasures one after the other. Suddenly, I heard one digger exclaim: "There's Arnold Sierra!" The handsome and energetic man hurried across the site and went to work, working his probe quickly. He dug his hole faster and deeper than anyone else's and before long, I saw him emerge with a beautifully ornate amber bitters. He wore a broad smile on his face as he



gloppy (applied tops) western whiskeys, the majority of them whole.

Arnold Sr., dug at the San Francisco wharf sites in the 1970s, punching through concrete floored basements of demolished buildings in what originally was the wharf area for clipper ships jamming the Gold Rush shoreline. His rewards were boxes full of stunning graphite-pontiled sodas. He dug many historic sites in and around Oakland after the Loma Pieta earthquake. Several buildings were demolished, giving him access to the "booty" that lay below.

Some of his most spectacular finds included a rare green Kreiss beer from the 1870s with an embossed goat from Redwood City, a Durham Whiskey, Old Woodburn Whiskey, a Kentucky Gem, many super bitters including the ultra rare amber Cassin's Bitters, many

pontiled bloptop sodas, including the earliest and rarest CC & B, colored Wonser's Bitters, Gold Dust Whiskeys

get out of bed to greet his sons returning from late night digs. "What did you find?" was his inevitable question.

Arnold Sierra Sr., died at the age of 79 on Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2008. I remember him for his personal warmth and friendliness toward me and everyone else. I owe a lot of thanks to his sons, who became the legendary Sierra brothers; Jeff Rhoads, Peck and Audie Markota, Jeff "Human Steam Shovel" Watson, who I used to dig with before he moved to Oregon; Grant Bacon, fellow collector and my digging buddy who is always out searching for new sites; pioneer diggers and collectors Del and Vi Kenyon, who founded our San Jose Antique Bottle Collectors Association; Kathy Craig, our

tireless club president and newsletter editor, and John O'Neil and John Shroyer, who have inspired me to one day build my own "man cave" or home bottle museum.



**The appeal of Art Deco stems from colors and shapes like the Smile (2nd from left) and Whistle (right) sodas. (Courtesy of Roger Hill)**

and early San Francisco beers that authority and auctioneer Jeff Wichmann calls "as scarce as hen's teeth."

As he got older and his health would not allow him to do much digging, he'd



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