

# California Bottle Collecting

By Betty Zumwalt



**Betty Zumwalt Hall of Fame Picture**

*One of a series*

[EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1969, Betty and Bill Wilson co-authored "Western Bitters," with Betty doing most of the research and Bill all of the photography. Previously, they'd co-authored "Spirits Bottles of the Old West" (1968) with Betty the researcher and Bill the photographer. Now Mrs. Ernest Zumwalt of Sandpoint, Idaho, Betty shares her memories of those fabulous, early days of California diggings – bottles, that is, and not gold, although (as she remarked), it was like digging for gold!]

I must plead memory loss as to dates — too many years have gone by.

Interest began in digging an old earthquake dump (circa 1906) in Santa Rosa, Calif. How exciting it was – like finding gold! The goal was to find a whole "punkin seed" flask. Many bottles were found and also a new discovery – that some bottles turned purple. There were oh so many things to learn. Questions kept popping up – how was it made? Who? When?

Some answers were learned by asking other collectors or getting

involved in bottle clubs.

With this earthquake dump came several neighborhood teen boys. A need for explanation, safety and guidance became necessary. The Santa Rosa club (Northwestern Bottle Collectors Club) was formed to help with this. Some of those boys have become serious collectors, like Tom Jacobs in Marin County.

By joining the Sacramento club and digging in the urban renewal district, we advanced to older bottles. John Tibbitts, Elmer Lester and others, whose names I've forgotten, but not their faces. All of us had fun digging the Sacramento "gold."

I recall Elmer Lester doing a jig the day he dug his first cathedral food bottle intact. He went on to having a great collection of food bottles.

My interest was leaning toward the whiskeys so trading our other finds for them seemed the answer. Hence, the result was the book, "Spirit Bottles of the Old West." In the process of doing research on the whiskeys, bitters information kept popping up and I kept a record of everything. "Western Bitters" was a natural for us to produce the following year. A limited edition was produced because there was a limited audience. However, a beautiful book (with full-color photos) by Jeff Wichmann covers the subject today.

We published all of our books and that was expensive. It was difficult to collect bottles and write books. Knowing how many to print depended upon the subject. Western whiskeys and bitters meant limited sales to small audiences. Medicines were of interest to a larger group, but I wasn't in control that time ("19th Century Medicine in Glass"). However, the foods book has done quite well with a large audience. (It is still available from Mark West Publishers, P.O. Box 1914, Sandpoint, ID 83864).

It was during the research and writing of "19th Century Medicine in Glass" that the greatest dig ever

happened for me. Although I did dig, never was I lucky enough to find a cathedral pickle. (In her letter, Betty included a page with drawings of cathedral bottles, including pickles, pepper sauces and chutneys).

Benicia Bay was a challenge. One could dig only at low tide. Hip waders were needed, but sometimes got stuck in the mud. Lumber was required to shore up the sides of the hole. Caution was the by-word of the day and fortunately advertising produced scores of people, each looking out for the other.

Doc Ritz was pulled out of his hip waders, which were left stuck in the mud, more than once. It was an exciting time and as editor of my club newsletter, *The Glassblower*, I had to tell the world all about it.

During the years of being in the Northwestern Bottle Collectors of Santa Rosa, I served in many positions, including president, secretary and program chairman. The rotation of responsibility without new members came to each of us. It became our goal to interest new people, expand and grow.

New ideas included dressing up our annual show by wearing period costumes and having educational meetings with slides and talks. All made the hobby much more fun.

In the same light, we visited with fellow collectors. Richard and Ted Siri were frequent visitors and the talk of bitters and whiskeys (before our book) was enlightening.

Things were expanding. Clubs were springing up everywhere. Communications with future bottle collecting legends Charles Gardner, Jean Garrison and others showed the need for more organization.

Together with the Sacramento club and others, a beginning was formed. Dick Hanson, Bill Wilson and I wrote the bylaws which later were adopted by the newly formed Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs, later changed to Collectors.