

CONNECTICUT BOTTLE HISTORY

One of a series - By Norman C. Heckler Sr.

Woodstock Valley, Conn. I don't recall the year, but I started collecting and digging for antique bottles sometime during the late 1950s. I didn't know about privies at the time, but sought out surface dumps. Actually, there are very few privies in New England. I dug for probably five to eight years, hit some wonderful dumps.

I don't remember the first bottle I dug, but I do remember the first important bottle. A young friend, Donald Crowe, and I checked out an abandoned stagecoach road and found a half-pint Sheaf of Wheat flask. I knew at the time it was different from anything we'd ever dug and remember telling Donald that I'd like to have that bottle. I still own it. In those days, we had no way to know how much bottles were worth. There were no auctions, few books, really no way to know.

I teamed with a local farmer, Bob Warren (now an attorney), who all of a sudden had an interest in bottles. He'd looked at the McKearins' 1941 book (*American Glass*) and wanted Masonic bottles. We found the North Ashford dump where we dug literally hundreds of Warner's Safe Cure bottles. I recall going with Bob to check out a cellar hole. I had a terrible headache at the time and sat down and watched him dig some Wexford bottles, I was moaning and groaning and put my hand down and touched glass. It was an Old Sachem Wigwam Tonic barrel. I remember trading it for some aqua pontiled medicines.

We eventually encountered other diggers including Art Henderson, Gordon Davidson, Carroll Husick, Bob Heath and Audrey Conick. They were all knowledgeable and directed us to people who weren't collectors, but had some bottles. Of course, Charles Gardner (of New London, Conn.) preceded many. What may have been the first New England bottle show was held in Laconia, N.H. It may have been sponsored by the Yankee Bottle Club of Keene, N.H. The show brought many people together and after that shows became commonplace.

My family was amazed by the number of bottles Bob and

I brought in. We'd spread them out on the living room rug. I eventually learned that things that were really good were saved and not thrown into a dump. They were saved because they were interesting to look at, or were historical in nature. Bob and I set up at little antique shows to sell some of our bottles. A man named Len Yaun would come in and buy the pretty things. We didn't know values. We'd say, "Is that one worth \$5 or \$2?" Len would go out and sell them and then come back to us and buy more.

One of the first bottles I bought was from a logger, Bob Eastman of Conway, N.H. Bob Warren and I went all over New England in search of bottles. My wife allowed me to go. We'd hop into his Corvette and travel Route 16 out of Portsmouth. I don't think the logger was a collector, although he had a

kidney-shaped demijohn from whose pontil scar had a sharp piece of glass hanging down. It could rip you.

Bob Warren and I began wandering around. He was a farmer milking cows and I was a teacher five days a week. One day, we stopped in Bolton, Mass., at an antique shop. We learned its owner was Robert Skinner, who liked bottles. He worked for Raytheon in Boston. We stopped at his shop every week after that and he'd bring in some fantastic stuff. We became close friends. During the late 1960s Robert decided to go into the auction business. I catalogued the stuff for him and had enough knowledge to

where his auctions became very successful. I became his right-hand man and started working for him full time in 1973. He was a very good boss and we'd become best friends. He had three daughters and I had three sons. Our families became close and we went to Disneyland and Bermuda together.

Robert died in 1984 and I started my own auction company in 1987, one of my sons (Norman Jr.) coming on as a partner.

My personal collection today consists of Connecticut historical and pictorial flasks, Union Glass Company-lettered flasks, other, very rare pieces from New London. I got interested in colored blown 3-mold decanters, Zanesville (Ohio) and Midwestern glass house bottles and off-hand table pieces, figural applied face bears, witch balls, demijohns, early utility bottles, some 2,000 pieces at this point.

My wife, Liz, also is a collector, interested in the witch balls and bears. I love 'em, too. Our home also features period furniture and accessories, redware (particularly early Connecticut stuff made by one potter, Sidney Risley of Norwich Conn., who was active from the 1930s through the 1980s).



Norm Heckler examines an artfully decorated National Ear of Corn Bitters. (Photo by Janet Finch)