

Genessee Valley Bottle Collectors Association

By John DeVolder

The hobby of antique bottle collecting got started in our section of New York state during the 1960s.

During the summer of 1963, I was digging a woodchuck out of a wood pile for my dog when I picked up my first bottle, a plain white and tan pottery ginger beer. At that moment, something happened to me (he got hooked!) and I spent my summer digging out dumps. The only exceptional find was a Tippecanoe, which I packed away inside a box. I got away from the hobby over the next three years, but after my brother, Dave, got married in 1966, he suggested that we collect bottles together.

On Jan. 3, 1969, 10 collectors met at the home of Henry and Virginia Gesell to form the Genessee Valley Bottle Collectors Association. In addition to myself, our hosts and their daughter, Janice, the others were Pete and Muriel Van Dilst, Jack Stecher, Tom and Nancy Hopper and Burt Spiller. John Guttenberg was named president, Jack Stecher vice president, Nancy Hopper secretary and Allan D. Moore treasurer. Dues were \$3 a year. An organizational meeting held Jan. 16 attracted 27 members.

I became the first editor of the club newsletter, *Applied Seals*, but Uncle Sam came calling and my brother took over as newsletter editor.

Serving in the U.S. Army (1969-71) interrupted my collecting and kept me away from the huge growth experienced by our club. Having been an integral part of the club's formation, I felt a bit lost when I returned from the service. The hobby had changed quite a bit during those two years, really coming into its own. Bottles were no longer considered junk or given away and many were being sold for a lot of money.

Digging was still a way of finding some good things, but most dumps had been dug out. My brother found a friend



1969 publicity photo for GVBCA show: (from left) Jack Stecher, Nancy Hooper, John Guttenberg and Allen Moore. (Courtesy of John DeVolder)

and digging partner in Bill Huff. After leaving the Army, I fit in with them and we spent a lot of time digging in mostly town dumps.

Some of those ran to depths of 10 to 20 feet. The best bottles always seemed to be around the roots of trees so many trees were to fall because of our digging. One tree in particular, perhaps some 80 feet high, fell one hot summer's day with an atom bomb-type mushroom cloud of dust and a loud crash. It scared the three of us off the dump that day and when we later returned, we discovered that tree had been behind the local police station. Why we weren't arrested, we don't know, because we continued to dig there.

Our digging ethics left a lot to be desired. We would dig to the bottom, then mushroom the layer so the hole collapsed along with some 10 or 15 feet of fill dirt above it.

We never found anything great in one piece, but did come up with threadless insulators, pontiled sodas, mineral waters, decent inks and medicines. I never found a historical flask or a bitters in one piece.

My first club office was that of treasurer during the late 1980s and since then I have served as president and held many other positions, including being show chairman for more years than anyone else.

The presence of Burton Spiller, who later was enshrined as a member of the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors Hall of Fame, is among the reasons why our club flourished. In 1969, he wrote a column called *Bottles East* for *Western Collector* magazine. Spiller, who suffered a loss of hair early in his life, was the good-natured butt of Dave DeVolder's "Remedy for Baldness." The club was compiling



John DeVolder ponders a question during GVBCA's 1988 show and sale. (Courtesy of John DeVolder)



Those at head table at banquet of 1970 GVBCA show included (from left) Jack Stecher, Dot Villard and Charles Gardner. (Courtesy of John DeVolder)

a membership directory and Guttenberg appointed member John Martinelli chairman of the education committee.

The latter came up with an idea called "Primer for Bottle Collectors," to help educate members about antique bottles. Installments were published on the back pages of *Applied Seals*, with "Bottle Glass" the first subject. Other Primer topics included Classifying Bottles, Melting Pots, Furnaces and Bottle Molds, Reproductions and Fakes in a two-part series, New York glass factory histories, how pontils come about, bottle categories and insulators.

Spiller gave a comprehensive talk about "The Patent Medicine Kings of Rochester" during the September 1969 program and the newsletter editor noted club membership had spurted past 400.

In 1970, Martinelli succeeded Dave DeVolder as newsletter editor and published an interview with Charles Gardner in the January issue.

Rochester was tapped as the site for the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs national show in July of 1970. Guttenberg was named federation chairman for 1971



Evelyn and Dick Bowman at GVBCA's 1972 show with insulator exhibit. (Courtesy of John DeVolder)

and Martinelli second vice chairman. In 1971, Evelyn Bowman succeeded Martinelli as newsletter editor. She did such a wonderful job that, even after John DeVolder left the Army, she continued as editor.

"She was such a natural and did such a good job that when I returned in March of that year, it was mutually agreed that she would continue," John said.

In the early years, we'd sabotage our show displays. Goldfish were found swimming in a fountain that was a prop for one display.

Another had a backdrop that looked like Col. Sanders, with a Kentucky Fried Chicken box, bones and wrappers placed in the backdrop. It could have been made much better by showing a video taken of a woman in evening dress diving into a dumpster to get those new props!

Back in those days, the hobby produced one laugh after another and I feel a lot of the "fun-fun" has gone from today's times. The fun of finding something really nice is getting further and further between finds.

The post-1970 show report included the most expensive bottle sold was an amber Jenny Lind flask for \$350. Charlie Gardner bought a cobalt Wynkoop's Sarsaparilla and Jack Stecher an emerald green U.S. Syrup, both pontiled. The chance of very nice bottles being found at shows back then was very good. At one New England show, I wanted to buy a pontiled amber pepper sauce for \$270, but didn't have the money. The man wouldn't trade and Burt Spiller later added it to his collection.

Club meetings were always exciting or interesting and members hated to miss them.

On Jan. 15, 1970, lacking transportation, Bill Huff walked for five hours from Sodu Point to Rochester, some 25 miles in all, to make the club meeting. The July issue of the newsletter noted that club membership had climbed above 600.

Highlights of my personal connection with the hobby was meeting Charles Gardner twice, once before entering the Army and the other during my honeymoon. I attended a 1968 banquet in Syracuse where he was the guest speaker. He showed slides of his fabulous collection and then issued an invitation to all to visit him and his wife, Nina, in New London, Conn. He had added a special room to his home that housed his collection and I remember seeing three walls of windows with shelving that displayed a rainbow of colorful bottles. .



Kel Kelsey sports a club tie during an early 1990s GVBCA show. (Courtesy of John DeVolder)