

Bottle Collecting in Kansas on the Upswing

One of a Series

By Ed and Phil Stewart
Paola, Kan.

Ed recalled that “my dad, Phil, began digging and collecting bottles during the 1960s and later operated a bottle shop behind our home in Paola.

“When he decided to open the shop, he started a contest between my mom and all the kids who were old enough to name the shop. I was about 12 years old and my entry of Stewart and Sons Old Bottles was the winner. ‘Sanford & Son’ was a very popular TV show of the day and was my inspiration.

“Dad operated the shop for about 15 years. It was listed in several bottle books and even included in later editions even after the shop closed. Dad still occasionally gets calls from someone who saw the shop listed in one of the books.

“Dad also encouraged me and my younger brother, John, to enjoy the hobby. He helped us both build collections which we also displayed at bottle shows. John no longer collects, but the hobby obviously “took” with me. :-)

“A 50-state colored drug store bottle display at the 1978 Chanute, Kan., show won first place in the medicines and sodas category (blue ribbon), the Federation’s most educational ribbon (yellow and white ribbon), the Old Bottle Magazine Award (red, white and blue ribbon) and the judges’ Best of Show trophy.

“I’ll let dad tell how he got started collecting.”

“I got started collecting bottles in the 1960s by digging in old Montana ghost towns. I dug my first bottle, a pharmacy bottle from Fort Benton, Mont., in a ghost town named Granite near Phillipsburg. The whole town site had been heavily dug. Later, I dug in another ghost town called Garnet near Drummond.

“In 1965, I moved to Oregon, but there was no digging to be found in the two places I lived so I continued to collect, mostly by mail. The Old Bottle Magazine, published in nearby Bend, was full of interesting ads.

“In 1970, I moved to Missouri where great digging was found. In Windsor and Sedalia, digging was easy and very rewarding. Most of it was dump digging. I met a fellow from Nevada, Mo., who lived right on the old dump. He wouldn’t let anyone dig, but sold most all of what he dug. I used to buy amber Nevada drug store bottles from him at five for a dollar!



Ed Stewart showing a freshly-dug drugstore bottle.

“A move to Kansas came in 1973. There was a bottle club in Kansas City, but most of its members were from the Missouri side. We met occasionally in Independence, Mo., but no club digs ever happened because of a reluctance of members to share digging. That was most unfriendly.

“There was a lot of digging around eastern Kansas at the time, especially in the Kansas City and Leavenworth areas. The latter was heavily dug and the digging was made possible

by urban renewal projects. Many choice bottles were found, including a Denver, Kansas Territory Hutchinson.

“One of the most avid and early Kansas diggers I met was Pat Montgomery, who lived in Overland Park. As far as I know (in 2008), he is still digging. Once in 1973 or 74, Pat, another fellow and I flew in a four-seater plane to Louisville, Ky., to attend a bottle show.

“My special collection consisted of colored drug store bottles. I had a display of such bottles from all 50 states, with all but eight or 10 represented by colored examples. Amber, cobalt, emerald – they were beautiful. I collected best of show awards in Tulsa, St. Louis and Chanute, Kan. Fear of tornados made me sell the entire collection to a man in Texas.”

Now it’s Ed’s turn.

“One of the most active current Kansas bottle diggers and the owner of the largest collection of Kansas bottles does not actually live in Kansas. No history of Kansas bottle digging and collecting would be complete, however, without a mention of Johnnie Fletcher, of Mustang, Okla. In the 1980s, as the dumps were starting to play out or get covered up, Johnnie switched to privy digging. A lot of this digging was in Kansas and a large number of previously unknown Kansas bottles were brought to light. Johnnie purchased a collection of Kansas drug store bottles in the early 1990s, and then decided to collect all Kansas bottles. In 1994, Johnnie published Kansas Bottles, 1854 to 1915. This 380-page book has sold 400 copies and is the standard reference for Kansas bottles.

“I met Johnnie at the Southeast Kansas Bottle and Relic Show in Chanute in April 2002 and was invited to come on an

upcoming dig in May. After that first dig in Atchison, Kansas, I was hooked on privy digging. A few months earlier, Kenny Burbrink, an up-and-coming digger from Newton, Kansas, had also met Johnnie and benefitted from his years of privy digging experience. It wasn't long before Kenny, Johnnie and I were digging together regularly.

"One of the towns that we dig in frequently is Atchison. On one of those trips, Johnnie met a homeowner who became very interested in bottles and bottle digging. In short order, there was a new member in the regular Kansas bottle digging crew. Francis Wiltz is a very avid digger and is the king of getting permission, which he always generously shared with the group.



Francis Wiltz holding two rare Atchison, Kan. ales.

"In the last several years, I have dug with this group in over 20 of Kansas' 105 counties – from Atchison to Baldwin to West Mineral and Wichita. During this time, the group has uncovered several very important bottles. Those from Kansas include five different ale bottles from Atchison and a whiskey from that city. Kansas enacted prohibition in 1881 so these bottles are extremely rare and most are one-of-a-kind. Kenny Burbrink dug up a short blobtop C. Conrad & Co.'s/Original/Budweiser that was unknown in Budweiser collectors' circles.

"The group of diggers I belong to is one of the most active in the state. I believe that there are a couple of active diggers in the Leavenworth area, but I have not had the opportunity to meet them. There may be other diggers that I am not aware of.

"Each of my digging partners is also a collector with an impressive collection of Kansas bottles, with Johnnie's being museum quality. Among other collectors in the state are Jim Hovious, of Butler, who has a great Kansas soda collection; Mark Law, of Topeka, who has a wide-ranging Kansas collection, and Jim Ricketts of Holton, who has another great collection of Kansas sodas.

"Kansas has enjoyed an active bottle collecting history. More recently, there has been an up-tick in the interest of Kansas bottles as a collecting category. Active diggers are making new discoveries each year. Given this vitality and interest, Kansas bottle collecting promises to have a bright future."

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