



Ruins of Fort Snelling's round tower

History of Collecting Bottles in Minnesota

by Doug Shilson

*My thoughts from 43 years
of having bottle shows in
Minnesota – 1967 – 2010.*

One of a series

For me, the start of it all was in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Snooping around old Fort Snelling's hexagonal and round towers. . . the changes around Minneapolis and St. Paul were coming fast, especially the freeway system. . . the love of trying to be an archaeologist since I was knee-high to a grasshopper got me going to look for anything that looked good to dig for. Bones, old bones, really old bones. Fossils, that is. I had boxes of them. Many were found near the Mississippi River. All had strange-sounding names.

The diving craze hit us younger folks in the 1950s when the self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA) became available. I dove for the Minnesota Historical Society and found pre-1800 artifacts. However, the late 1800-early 1900 bottles became mine because they weren't old enough to interest the historical society.

Then, construction of new freeways started and billions of bottles were unearthed. Nowhere to put them all. Trucks couldn't get rid of them fast enough. Open dumps were found by many would-be archaeologists, Where to put them all? What to do with all the ones we kept, the ones we spent many hours soaking and cleaning?

Who would be interested in them? I did some research at the local library to find information behind some of the names embossed in the glass. What I found I decided others needed to know. So I went to the Ramsey County Historical Society in St. Paul, location of the Gibbs Farm Museum. I didn't have a clue as to what to expect.

After walking around the old farm house with its creaking floors and steps, I found Mr. Letterman, the caretaker, and told him about my new-found hobby. He was interested, so I set up a day in 1967 for a showing. The only place we could fit was the big red barn, 100 feet west of the

main farm house.

It was smelly, cold and dusty, containing a couple of buggies plus anything else the barn would hold. There were spider webs and little creatures that didn't want to move over! The Lettermans said it's yours for a few hours.

They did all the advertising. Then I got a call from the farm museum, telling me they were getting many calls from people interested in this new-found hobby called old bottle collecting. I said, "Come see for yourself." We did several shows in the next few years and one fall day brought in 1,400 strangers to see just what this new hobby was all about.

Collectors who helped me during those early years included Winnie and Debbie Shilson, Wayne Shilson, Tim Verney, Larry Schaaf, Steve Ketcham, Fran Rutherford, Shelly Donovan, Jim Haase and Owen Mattson. In the farm house were Jean Donovan and Bev Ehmreiter with their stained glass repair class.

During those early years, we even made a trip to the Freeborn County, Minn., museum to show our collections and spread the word about our new hobby. We filled the parking lot with new bottle collectors. Steve, Fran and my daughter, Debbie, were along on that trip.

Yes, those were the years, 43 years ago, to be exact.

Here are a few more of my memories:

Fort Snelling was built in 1824. All that remained were the foundation, a round tower and the remains of a the "Hex" tower. As the freeway system was being built around the fort, tons of dirt were being moved. A friend and I were looking for old coins, found some and a "one-shot" derringer. I looked for old glass. I found many old marbles. I also found beads from the Indians who lived in the area a century before. The site was a mess. The state archaeologists were in the process of laying out the grids and their workers uncovered many broken pieces of glass of all types, including fruit jars and bottles. Too bad the right person wasn't there to supervise the saving of the broken pieces.

Diving in a St. Paul lake in 1955-57, I found a Hutchinson soda (naturally, I didn't know what it was). It was embossed New England Bottling / Minneapolis, Minn. It shared space with my many fossils and jump-started me to seek old bottles. While diving in Lake Superior, our dive group located a ship in about 50 feet of water. We found some light bulbs still intact and in their sockets.

The fossils such as trilobites and brachiopods were numerous along the shores of the Mississippi. My favorite find was a 6-inch brachiopod which I later learned was just a small part of this prehistoric creature that grew to 10-1/2 feet long. Later, I traded a large box full of fossils for a box of dug bottles. One was a George Benz & Sons Appetite Bitters from St. Paul.

While digging bottles, I also found many shards of pottery until finally digging my first intact stoneware jug from Minneapolis. Most of the jugs we found were from the Red Wing (Minn.) Clay Works.

I found my first bitters – a Hostetter's – at the Fort Snelling dump and now have about 200 in amber and several colors in between. Besides Hostetter's, I now have over 1,200 different shapes and colors and counting. My best ones have labels. That's where the history is.