

# A Brief History of Bottle Collecting in Minnesota

## *One of a series*

By Steve Ketcham

It was the 1960s. Perhaps it was the observance of the centennial of the American Civil War, or perhaps the turbulence of the decade which caused Minnesotans to look back in time and begin to focus on artifacts of the past.

A small group of Minnesotans began to notice that various urban renewal projects were uncovering bottles and stoneware. Several early diggers were often gathered at building and road construction sites. Others met at a garage sale where old bottles were featured.

On June 14, 1966, these individuals formed Minnesota's First Antique Bottle Club, meeting at the home of Fran and Harvey Rutherford. The club's first newsletter was published in April 1967, listing Fran Rutherford as club president, Dave Robertus vice president, Sherman Doran treasurer, Mary Essig secretary and Diane Essig as newsletter editor.

By 1971, the club had grown to the point where the membership decided to hold its first show and sale. On Aug. 8, 1970, however, the short-lived Lake Superior Bottle Collectors Club held a show and sale in Duluth. There were 25 tables and the table rent was \$5.

As of 2009, two bottle clubs still exist in Minnesota, and continue to play host to annual shows and sales in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

As Minnesota's First Antique Bottle Club was growing, other Minnesotans were also taking notice of the beauty, history and collectibility of early glass and stoneware containers. During the 1960s, Doug Shilson became a scuba diver for the Minnesota Historical Society. His interest in all things old was piqued by his underwater discoveries and bottles became his focus.

Before long, he was staging bottle exhibits at such sites as the Hennepin County Historical Society and the Gibbs Farm Museum. On Nov. 21, 1971, 14 of the people Doug met at those exhibits gathered and formed the North Star Historical Bottle Association. Those first members included Doug and Winnie Shilson, Doug and Carol Sather, Jim Conley, Jean and Don Donovan, Fran Rutherford, Jim Hasse, Debbie Knutson, Bill and Marilyn Bettendorf, Owen Mattson and Steve Ketcham.

Doug Sather was the club's first president, Steve Ketcham served as vice president, Pat Schimik was elected secretary and Winnie Shilson was the treasurer.

While North Star members participated in the early Minnesota's First shows, it wasn't long before the two clubs were cooperating to stage the annual event.

Minnesota's involvement in the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs (later Collectors) also began in the early 1970s. Though the federation was originally formed in California, Minnesota's bottle collecting activities were noted by California collectors and Barbara Robertus was tapped to become the FOHBC treasurer.

Soon Barbara and husband Dave were off to Missoula, Mont., for their first federation meeting. Before long, the Robertuses invited Steve Ketcham, a member of both Minnesota clubs, to attend federation meetings with them. While attending federation meetings around the country, they became involved in plans for a national bottle exposition to be held in St. Louis in 1976. A large group of Minnesotans attended and a collection of rare bottles from that state was assembled and displayed.

A large area of North Minneapolis was razed following civil disturbances of 1966 and that area sat empty for many years. Eventually, a number of diggers began to cruise the site, realizing that the missing houses were built at a time when each would have had an outdoor privy. Once the city gave permission, diggers enjoyed several years of searching and many fine bottles were found. More digging resulted when a new freeway was built through parts of this same neighborhood.

Other freeway and urban renewal projects were also under way during these same years and many a Minnesota bottle collector was born in the muddy recesses of long-hidden privy holes. Minneapolis and St. Paul collectors still speak in reverent tones of the digs simply known as Dunwoody, Williams Hill, Seven Corners, Selby-Dale, University Avenue, Northwestern Hospital, River Road and Cedar Riverside.

By the 1980s, many Minnesota bottle collectors had assembled large local collections. Numerous local bottles had been researched on city libraries and at the Minnesota Historical Society. Using the information uncovered, these curious collectors were sharing their research in articles written for the club newsletters. Before long, it was agreed that all of the information needed to be organized.



**A portion of the Minnesota crew attending the 1984 Federation Expo in Montgomery, Ala. Front row, L-R: Dave Robertus, Neal Sorensen, Steve Ketcham, Pat Sorenson. Back row, Vernie Feldhaus, Ron Feldhaus, Winnie Shilson, Barbara Robertus, Doug Shilson. (Courtesy of Steve Ketcham)**



Steve Ketcham's longtime friend, Jean Garrison, presents him with a plaque in recognition of his two years as Federation president. The event took place at the 1984 Expo in Montgomery, Ala. One of the two bottle quilts raffled off are hanging in the background. Other Minnesotans who have served the Federation include Dave Robertus (second vice president) and Barbara Robertus, treasurer and corresponding secretary). (Courtesy of Steve Ketcham)



Joint display at the 1976 National Antique Bottle and Jar Exposition in St. Louis by Minnesota's First Antique Bottle Club and the North Star Historical Bottle Association. Highlights include two sizes of Appetine Bitters, two sizes of Digestine Bitters, a Red Star Stomach Bitters, a Dime Remedy Company Vegetable Tonic Bitters jug (made by Red Wing Stoneware Company), a Dr. Ward's Barb Wire Cure, a Dr. Warner's Minnesota Tonic, a Smokine Cabin, an HSNB fire grenade, an iron-pontiled, cobalt Comstock and Steere blobtop soda, an amber Standard Bottling Company Hutchinson soda and cobalt and citron versions of the Spa Bottling Works Hutchinson. (Courtesy of Steve Ketcham)

With Ron Feldhaus as editor and dozen of club members contributing their research, two Minnesota bottle books were eventually published. Many members also contributed to the efforts by making rubbings and drawings, cutting and pasting and editing. Minnesota's First member, Neal Sorensen, a leader of the local printing industry, was instrumental in getting the first book published.

The Minnesota book was among the first club-written books to be published in the hobby. Copies of Volumes I and II of *The Bottles, Breweriana and Advertising Jugs of Minnesota* may still be purchased. Rumor even has it that even state archaeologists use the books for reference.

Another collecting club closely related to bottle collecting also was born in Minnesota. The Red Wing Collectors Society was formed in 1977 and now boasts 5,000 members nationally. While Red Wing potteries produced a variety of clay products during their 100-year history, manufacture of advertising jugs and crocks during the late 1800s and early 1900s means its wares are often the focus of bottle collectors as well.

An annual convention held in the Mississippi town of Red Wing each July draws hundreds of collectors from more than 20 states and many a bottle collector can be found in the crowd.

A host of Minnesota diggers, mostly North Star members, continue to seek subterranean treasures. The North Star club holds its annual "Best Dug" contest with nearly 20 categories. A similar contest for non-diggers, called "Silver Pick Awards," also is held annually. These contests bring out the best finds of the year and attendance at the meetings is high.

The 39<sup>th</sup> annual Minnesota Antique Bottle, Advertising and Stoneware Show and Sale was held March 28, 2010. Times have changed and while the North Star organization is now the larger of the two clubs, both continue to work together toward the success of the show.

In Minnesota, collecting the past has a great future.



Steve Ketcham, sans beard, as he appears today, showing off a portion of his collection. (Courtesy of Steve Ketcham)