

New York Bottle History

By Howard Dean

(EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1999, Howard Dean was inducted into the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors' Hall of Fame. He has published a number of books and stories on bottle collecting and, 91 at the time, still goes digging. Here are his recollections of how the hobby got started in his neck of the New York woods).

My first experience with the hobby of bottle collecting began on April 29, 1968, in Syracuse, N.Y. One of my friends, who used to fish with me, was Dr. Martin Hilfinger. I was an aquatic biologist and Marty and I got along well. On that date, I was in his office in Syracuse and asked him how the fishing was going. That started the following conversation:

"Now, Howard, I don't want you to laugh when I tell you this, but I have a new hobby. I now collect glass insulators and antique bottles."

When I asked how he found them, he said, "We dig in old dumps." My diary indicated that I said, "I must try this myself. It sounds interesting." I immediately purchased A Bottle Collector's Handbook as a start. The very next day at work along East Stony Creek in the town of Hope in New York State, I found my first old bottles. That was my start.

The closest bottle club to my home in Westernville was in Syracuse 50 miles away. That was the Empire State Bottle Collectors Association founded in 1965. It was started by Paul and Betty Chapman and is the oldest club in continual operation in the U.S.A. The Antique Bottle Collectors Association of California, founded in 1959 by John Tibbitts of Sacramento, broke up for a year or so, making our New York club the oldest.

The ESBCA newsletter was called Bits & Pieces and Betty Chapman was its first editor. "The club for many years exhibited at the New York State Fair in Syracuse, promoting bottle collecting," recalled longtime member Tom Dudarchik Jr.

"In 1975, the ESBCA produced a 10th anniversary bottle made from the original Poor Man's Bitters bottle mold in the collection of Dr. Leigh Simpson," Dudarchik said. "It was made in blue glass with a slug plate placed on the bottom depicting it as ESBCA's 10th anniversary bottle. Dr. Simpson later donated the mold to the Oswego County Historical Association. The county is where the bitters had originated."

A cup plate was designed and issued to mark the club's 25th anniversary in 1990. Millville (N.J.) Glass Works fabricated the plate and 250 were issued.

Charles Gardner, Helen McKearin and Don and Jean Garrison were among some of the "famous" bottle collectors who were association members.

Dean continues:

At first, I was mostly interested in glass insulators and found a great many of them along railroad tracks and on old telephone lines. I swapped many of them with collectors across the country.

Here is a list of New York State clubs existing in 1985:

Berkshire Antique Bottle Association in Stephentown. Black River Valley Bottle Club in Carthage. Genesee Valley Bottle Collectors Association in Rochester. Hudson Valley Bottle Club in Highland Falls. North Country Bottle Collectors Association in Carthage. Western New York Bottle Collectors Association in Jamestown. Empire State Bottle Collectors Association in Syracuse. Finger Lake Bottle Collectors Association in Ithaca. Long Island Antique Bottle Association in Long Island. Musrott Bottle & Insulator Club in Katonah. Capital District Antique Bottle Club in Albany. Western New York Bottle Collectors Association in Lockport. Suffolk County Antique Bottle Association on Long Island.

Even before this, there were unofficial bulletins. John Martinelli of Rush, N.Y., had the first Federation Letter and later became Federation chairman (now called president). He was the owner of Stonewall Antiques Shop.

On Saturday, Nov. 16, 1968, the Federation of Historic Bottle Clubs was formed. In 1974, the name was changed to the Federation of Historic Bottle Collectors, allowing individual membership.



Pioneer collectors Bernie and Jean Puckhaber, Ballston Spa, N.Y., at FOHBC National Show banquet in Las Vegas, Nevada in 1988. (Courtesy of Howard Dean)



From left, Jon Landers, Tom Kanally, John Golly and Darl Jones, all Empire State club members, while visiting Dick and Elma Watson in New Jersey in 2005. (Courtesy of Howard Dean)

There were a great many people who made up our clubs' membership who helped the hobby. These include Burt Spiller, of Rochester, N.Y.; Jacob and Mary Ellen Whistance (collectors of historical flasks since 1941), Kingston, N.Y.; Richard Vanderloon (fruit jars) of Brockport, N.Y.; Joyce and Len Blake (glass canes and whimsies) of Elma, N.Y.; Jim Whetzel (since 1966, operated Jim's Bottle Shop), Ardsley, N.Y.; Vince Martonis (Fenner medicines), Blasdell, N.Y.; John Morgan (stoneware), Pike, N.Y.; Tom Nolan (mineral waters), Ballston Spa, N.Y.; Gerry Strubel (mineral waters), Mechanicville, N.Y.; Leigt and Mary Beardsley, Auburn, N.Y.; The Bedfords (Ox Yoke Antiques & Bottle Shop), Lockport, N.Y.; Arthur Bealham, Brockport, N.Y.; Tom and Alice Mouton, Ballston Spa, N.Y., (jars); Tom Dudarchik Jr., (flasks), North Syracuse, N.Y.; David Byrd (jars), Windsor, N.Y.; Mark Yates (Saratogas), Cazenovia, N.Y.; Jack Stecher (Warner's and Saratogas), Rochester, N.Y.; Ralph and Eleanor Work (Saratogas), West Sand Lake, N.Y.; Phil Bennard (Saratogas), Saratoga Springs, N.Y.; Hank Gesell (Saratogas), Rochester, N.Y.; George Waddy (Saratogas and others), Vermontville, N.Y.; Tom Kanally (general), Courtland, N.Y.; Jon and Sue Landers (inks, Saratogas and "local"), Whitesboro, N.Y.; Howard and Lillian Dean (Saratogas, inks, "local" bottles), Westernville, N.Y.; Ken Cornell (Saratogas), LeRoy, N.Y.; Robert and Bernie Puckhaber (Saratogas), Ballston Spa, N.Y.; Evelyn Masters (Saratogas), Courtland, N.Y.; Gary Stephenson (Saratogas), Ballston Spa, N.Y.; Roy

Topka, Schenectady, N.Y.; Kel Kelsey (Saratogas), Rochester, N.Y.; Roy See (mineral waters and others), Constantable, N.Y.; Mike Anderson (figurals), Stillwater, N.Y.; Betty Risley, Ballston Spa, N.Y.; Martin and Robert Hilfinger (general), Syracuse, N.Y.

Other people very active in our hobby included Robert Pattredge, Al Spear, Roger Sweatland, John DeVolder and Don Keating, all of Rochester; John Spencer of Syracuse, Tony Knipp (N.Y. milks), Bob Prinnchab and Jeff Rosenthal of Buffalo, William Hawkins (jars) of Gansvoort, N.Y.; Chuck Moore of New York, Kevin Sives (Northeast director

and author); Chris Davis, Rochester; Rose and Stan Brewster (milk bottles), Syracuse; Peter Bliberg (milk bottles), and Bob White (Saratogas), Canton, N.Y.

Some of the prized bottles found during collecting's early days all seemed to be great, especially the pontiled variety). I dug a few pretty good pontiled flasks that I sold or swapped for Saratogas. I also dug an original Booz bottle, but threw it away because of a crack!

I found a quart fruit jar containing human fetuses which I gave to Dr. Hilfinger. The Utica, N.Y. dump contained a lot of stoneware soda bottles and a lot of White's stoneware pieces. Some of us started to collect the local bottles, too.

I had many opportunities to look for and dig in many different old dumps. My outdoor work as an aquatic biologist took me to nearly every place in New York state. Previous to that, I had been a U.S. Forest Service forester up in New England. That was long before I got into bottle collecting and all I did was to be careful not to cut my boots or shoes on all the glass I saw. That was during the 1940s and I really missed out by not being aware of the bottle hobby. All I collected back then were stamps and guns.

I will try to give you an account of my best digs:

There was an old dump right in Westernville that some of the local kids had found. They would bring me the bottles they had found for my comment and they did find some nice ones. For awhile, I did not dig there so as to not spoil their fun, but that soon failed and I took

over. One of my best finds was an iron-pontiled Dr. S.A. Weaver's Canker & Salt Rheum Syrup, a beautiful large bottle. One day, I thought I was standing on a rock as I dug into the bank, but the "rock" turned out to be a yellow-green quart U.S.A. Hospital Department bottle.

I must admit this dump was right along and under a road and right in the middle was an electric pole. I nearly toppled that pole by digging too close. When it started to lean, I stopped right then and there. A neighbor had dug up his septic tank and found a pint GIII-4 green pontiled flask (cornucopia filled with produce) that I bought for \$10.

One of the best dumps was in Boonville that a friend and I dug for a couple of years. It belonged to his mother and was full of goodies. Every time we went there, we stopped at his mom's house to tell her we would be down there. She would usually say, "Well, you won't find anything as I haven't been down there recently!" On our way out, we'd stop and show her what we had found and offer her something. Her reply was: "If I'd wanted it, I wouldn't have chucked it away!" We found a good many local bottles in what we called "Ma Cape's Dump."

I kept only blown bottles and left lots of fruit jars that my friend took and sold to Jim Chamberlain in Binghamton. I found some nice pint pontiled flasks that I later traded for Saratogas, but the local medicines and sodas I still have. Our activities would draw some folks and my friend would say, "Septic tank problems!" and they would laugh and leave. For awhile, we would dig day and night since I could drive my truck into the dump and shine its headlights on the area. We even dug during snow storms. The Saratogas found there were all common ones.

About this time, my nephew in Pennsylvania got into bottle collecting. He had found an old hotel long closed in Greeley that he would go into at night. He'd climb into the attic where he found many medicine bottles in perfect shape. One evening, he invited me to go with him, but when we got there, the building was gone. It had fallen and was just a pile of junk. I guess that was a close call.

My daughter and a friend found an old empty house up in Boonville that they had entered and brought out a pail full of bottles for me. They were good ones, mostly from the area, and from the Snow-Top Spring Water Co. I later went back to it and found many old bottles in the attic and cellar. I think the rarest was a pontiled Taylor's Indian Ointment. I was offered a lot for it, but it is still in my collection. The house didn't last long and soon burned.

There was a village dump in Pulaski that some of our club members dug, so one day there was a Syracuse club dig. Best things we found that time were a few of the red glass (Schlitz) beer bottles. I never dug another in any other place.



Clint Capron in "Grandma Capes' Dump," Boonville, N.Y. in July 1978. Note bases of bottles jutting from the bank.
(Courtesy of Howard Dean)

Early in my bottle collecting years, I found a small dump along East Stony Creek in the town of Hope. I found two nice jugs in it. One was an A. Hodgson / Galway that measured 1 foot high by 1-1/2 feet and was in perfect condition. I knew there had been a pottery in Galway so I took my jug to the National Bottle Museum to find out something about it. I loaned it to be photographed and measured and it caused quite a stir, but there was nothing known. I still own it. I also dug a very crude stoneware quart whiskey debossed J.C. Schnell / Sour Mash / Kiln Dried Grain / Whiskey.

One of the larger dumps uncovered during the early 1960s was in Utica and for some reason I avoided it until late in my life. It is a huge area with holes 10 to 20 feet deep left by diggers. Hundreds of old bottles were found and are still being found there, including many rare local bottles and some Saratogas, but I haven't found any to brag about yet although I'm still trying!

The Poland Spring dump was one that my friend, Bill Zimmerman, and I dug for three years. We filled our car trunk with hundreds of bottles, but again, nothing to brag about. We never found a Poland Spring bottle.

The Horseshoe Lake dump and underwater work brought many of the very rare bottles from that shortlived business of the early 1900s. I dug around up there and found some good jars and old bottles, but the divers I took up found dozens and dozens of the sunken loot.

There also is a big city dump in Rome, N.Y., that has given up many good bottles, but so far I haven't dug any real good ones. I'm still at it and hope to find a beauty this coming season.

The Saratoga-Type Bottle Collectors Society was founded Nov. 7-8, 1981 when Bernie Puckhaber called 25 collectors together at the National Bottle Museum in Ballston Spa, N.Y.

The National Bottle Museum, formerly owned by the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs, held its grand opening on June 2, 1979 and sponsored the new organization, although it no longer does.

The society's quarterly newsletter, The Spouter, was first published in January 1982 and continues to this day. Sharon Strach conjured up the name. Present-day plans call for updating information about mineral water bottles and reporting all the news that's fit to print about collectors of Saratogas.

Eleanor and Ralph Work of West Sand Lake, N.Y., were elected the society's first co-chairmen in 1982. William Zimmerman of Lock Sheldrake, N.Y., was vice president, Sue Heller of Granby, Conn., was secretary and Don Garrison of Sparrow Bush, N.Y., was treasurer. Puckhaber was newsletter editor.

The first membership list named 53 families, 27 from New York State and the rest from 19 other states.

Puckhaber, author of the Saratogas book in 1976, died Sept. 25, 1990. In 1993, his wife, Jean, revised and updated that book and in 1986, one of the society's members, Donald Tucker, published a Collector's Guide to the Saratoga-Type Mineral Water Bottles, with a

revised edition coming out in 2005.

I was elected president of the Mohawk Valley Antique Bottle Club in Whitesboro that was started in 1994 and served for two years. I also served as vice director of the Northeast Region of FOHBC from 1992 for a few years, as well as the club poster chair for the FOHBC in the 1990s. The local club is still active with more than 100 members meeting every month of the year. Some are active in the Federation. I served as second vice president when Sheldon Baugh was Federation chairman.

As far as having wild adventures while collecting, I can say that, yes, we /all have been embarrassed. I can recall a few times when some of us were caught behind a chainlink fence scratching around in a construction area in Saratoga, N.Y., during the mid-1980s. It was on a Sunday and we climbed over the fence and had actually found a few old bottles, but I had to give them up when the police arrived. There were no arrests, but we got a good talking to!

Another time, my friend, Jon Landers, and I were digging deep into my hometown dump when a large rock slid down and pinned him so that he couldn't move. The dirt covered him to the point where he could hardly breathe. It wasn't a fun time. His wife and I finally got him clear.

It didn't take me long to realize that it was nice to get permission from owners before trespassing on land. Most said OK.



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