

The Jar

Stealing Artifacts from Cemetery Plots Can be Fatal

By Charles David Head

Everything that Benny Height got involved in turned to gold and, if not for King Midas, he would have had no equal to this day.

If it did not benefit Benny in some way, he would not have anything to do with it. Had it not been for one very bad mistake, ol' Benny would still be alive today and I wouldn't be writing this story. Actually, this has more of a resemblance to an obituary than a story, but I assure you that it's quite an interesting one, especially if you stick around long enough to hear about THE JAR!

On the surface, Benny seemed to be an ordinary, happy-go-lucky, hard-working, likeable kind of fellow. But beneath all that charm and radiant smile, he was as crooked as a box of fish hooks. He was such a good scam artist that he could have sold a hairbrush to Kojak!

I first met Benny while hunting antique bottles in Orme, Tennessee, a quaint little community set at the foot of the Cumberland Plateau, mostly forgotten about nowadays. It was once a thriving coal mining town at the turn of the 20th century.

Benny was in the midst of a trip to the Marion County Jail when I happened by chance to drive by and spot Deputy Lancaster putting him into the back seat of the patrol car. Crime being virtually nonexistent in Orme, I rolled to a stop beside the deputy to see what the handcuffed miscreant had done to bring out the long arm of the law. Having gone to school with Deputy Lancaster, I had no qualms about inquiring about what Benny had done. Congratulating the deputy for having the good fortune to be close by when the call came in, he could not help but chuckle as he recounted Mr. Height's crime to me.

Benny had been caught red-handed digging up Mr. Hunter Steele's back yard in search for antique bottles. Mr. Steele operated a

very successful landscaping company in the county and his nicely manicured lawn was a shrine that clearly showcased his talent as one of the best landscapers in the business. Arriving home from an early Sunday morning fishing trip, Mr. Steele was not at all happy to find someone digging up his back yard.

Even though Benny had assured Mr. Steele that he only meant to dig for old bottles on the property next door to his (where the old city dump had recently been rediscovered after a 100-year hiatus), the irate landscaper would listen to no such bunk. He called the law and demanded someone come and remove the human backhoe off his property immediately or else he'd be inclined to take the fellow fishing with him that afternoon and use him for bait!

Not wanting to see someone go to jail for "accidentally" straying across someone's property line while searching for antique bottles (since I'd come close to doing just that), I asked Deputy Lancaster if the matter could be resolved. He said it was up to Mr. Steele as he was the complainant and, since he had not yet signed the arrest warrant, it would be easy to drop the whole affair.

Having once worked for Mr. Steele and still being in his good graces, it was relatively easy for me to talk him into letting Mr. Height go. After all, Mr. Steele had a business to run and he'd have to spend a number of days in court should he care to pursue the matter. I had to reassure Mr. Steele that his damaged yard would be restored before the week was out and that Benny would never step foot onto the property once the yard work was done. A handshake sealed the deal and Benny was set free.

He was delirious with joy after I had saved him from a trip to the county lockup and more or less adopted me as his best friend then and

there. He accompanied me on several bottle digs and always seemed to find something worthwhile. During one of my visits to his home in Scottsboro, Ala., Benny astonished me by showing several boxes of Hutchinsons and straight-sided sodas that he had irradiated. What once were clear bottles were now dark purple!

Benny said that he used to just irradiate unembossed milk bottles to peddle as flower vases at bottle shows, but had noticed that often the color appeared more of a cobalt blue color rather than a dark purple. Thus inspired, he began to irradiate common embossed clear sodas that he than sold on eBay and at antique bottle shows as very rare cobalt blue variations. He said most people didn't know the difference, but when hit by negative feedback on eBay, he always refunded the money so as to retain his 100 percent favorable rating. Of course, he rarely got any negative feedback because he intentionally hid the bidders' IDs to make it difficult for others to contact them and warn them that they were buying altered products!

Benny said he raked in most of his money selling irradiated bottles as the real thing, since few people knew the difference. He gleefully quoted P.T. Barnum: "There's a sucker born every minute!"

He had only just begun and seeing that he had my undivided attention, he really got fired up.

He showed me a five-inch-high stack of patent medicine labels along with three shelves of plain cork-top, recessed paneled medicine and extract bottles. The bottles were worth very little, he said, until he pasted on the labels. He said he was getting \$20 for the labeled ones. He said he often felt like a Baptist preacher when he "married" a paper label to a plain bottle.

The plain bottles many collectors call "Plain Janes" he obtained from antique stores or from one of his ads in bottle collector magazines for a dollar or so. That saved him time and trouble of having to wash the plain bottles he'd been digging, plus he had

a reliable supply.

To show me the simple process of making something out of nothing, Benny took one of the labels: "Stories Flux Mixture, A Safe, Sure and Effective Cure, Dr. J.H. Stories, Dayton, Tenn." He glued it onto the front panel of an aqua cork stopper medicine bottle. "There," he exclaimed, "I just made thirty bucks!"

Then he took me out to his storage barn and I must admit that I was impressed by his setup. On the floor and on a long work bench were every types and sizes of plain stoneware jugs. He took one off the bench and showed me what was stenciled on it: "Coca-Cola Bottling Works, Pikeville, Tenn." I was dumfounded and asked him why in the world didn't he have this rare jug in a safer place. He let out a loud guffaw!

"You nitwit, the stenciling on the jug is fake. I personally etched that wording onto it less than a week ago!" He switched on his computer and showed me a mate to that jug listed on eBay. With two days left, bids were already up to \$587.25.

"But how do you get away with such fraud?" I asked. He said the jug's photo wasn't sharp, but "people will buy absolutely anything marked Coca-Cola and rarely check to see if an item is authentic. Should a buyer deem the stenciling on the jug has been faked, I always give a refund under the condition that they withdraw their negative feedback. This has only happened twice since I started doing this and twice out of 63 jug sales is not a bad average at all, don't you think?"

He took me out to his garage where he showed me something else. He took an unembossed, coffin-shaped flask and right before my eyes etched 18th Ala. Rangers (large horse-shoe in the center). C.S.A. "This will bring at least \$40 on eBay before the week is out," he declared.

I asked him if wasn't he afraid of being caught and sent to jail. "The folks at eBay have never taken any action in any of the fraud claims filed against him and anybody else that I know of. I think the higher-ups at eBay are more concerned about mak-

ing a buck than protecting their customers from scam artists like me!

"If you think my Civil War flask is something, you need to check out my nice assortment of name brand siphons. I buy them for three bucks each from a foreign country, etch them with some bottler's name along with a well-known brand name, list them on Bay and watch the bids go out of sight! Surely you don't think I can afford this nice house, a new pickup truck and two ATVs on just my salary as assistant manager at the hardware store?"

I just shook my head in disbelief.

Two weeks later, Benny asked if I wanted to ride with him to check out the new antique mall in Madison, Ala., as he heard it had a nice assortment of bottles. Despite reservations, I agreed. Once there, I was surprised to find an old friend behind the store's counter. Barry Lewis and his wife had been in the antiques business for at least 20 years and I'd stopped by one of their earlier stores in Huntsville, Ala. I used to shop at their store, but more often than not stop by to sell the Lewises something I'd found and had no desire to keep.

After chatting with Barry for a few minutes, Benny and I went to the area of the store where antique bottles were lined up along a wall shelf. I showed Benny a number of nice poison bottles, including an embossed amber skull in triangular shape. I couldn't afford it. We browsed around the store and I bought a 1908 vintage post card showing the Portland Dixie Cement Plant in Richard City, Tenn.

You can imagine my astonishment and dismay when Benny pulled onto the highway and then began pulling poison bottles from his pockets, including the amber skull I'd admired so much! "These are yours," Benny said. "I saw that you liked them and thought I'd save you a few bucks by getting them the five-finger discount way!"

"My lord, Benny! What have you done? Stolen bottles from my good friends! "Awww shucks," he replied. "They won't miss a few bottles and if they do, we both know they have insurance and they can always claim

double the value of what I actually took."

"Yes, and then their insurance rates will go out of sight!" I accepted the bottles and later returned them with an explanation on how they ended in my possession. I assured the Lewises that Benny would not be back in their store again, at least, not with me.

That little incident didn't dampen Benny's friendship for me. I saw him three weeks after he'd attended the Jackson (Miss.) Antique Bottle Show, gloating over some of the "bargains" he got there. The "bargains" he obtained by catching some dealers away from their sales tables, swapping price stickers and purchasing the bottles from whoever was minding the tables.

Benny showed me his best "bargain," a bottle that had been marked \$200 that he was able to buy for just \$20 after swapping price stickers. He also got a WW LAKE'S / CELERY TONIC BOTTLING WORKS / JACKSON, MISS.. He said the celery tonic was actually his second choice at M. Robert Wagner's table, but seeing as how the young fellow at the table didn't have a key to a locked display case which held a mint BIEDENHARN / CANDY CO. / VICKSBURG, MISS. embossed Hutchinson soda bottle, he had to settle for it.

It was at this point that I decided it was high time for me to part company with Benny and make it a permanent separation. After all, I had many friends in the antique bottle collecting hobby and here I was associated with a fellow with absolutely no morals. It also was slowly dawning on me that Benny was using me to get close to others in the hobby in order to steal from them later.

I managed to avoid Benny for the better part of six months. Then by chance I happened to run into him at the First Monday Flea Market on the Scottsboro, Ala., courthouse square. He was glad to see me and I sort of felt kinda bad when he asked why I had not dropped by or answered messages he'd left on my telephone answering machine. I told him I'd been

busy as heck and that my phone's been on the blink for a while.

Benny said he knew of a very old cemetery in South Pittsburg, Tenn., that he'd like to go look over and if I wanted to, I could go with him. It dated all the way back to the Civil War and while we may not find any old bottles to speak of, it would be an interesting way to spend a day in which to catch up on what's been happening with one another these past few months.

I couldn't think of any kind of excuse to avoid going with him and, anyway, I love history and always enjoyed checking out old cemeteries. I couldn't think of any mischief he could get into so I agreed to go with him. We stopped off for breakfast at The Pirate restaurant (Benny's treat) and then headed to the old city cemetery perched on a knoll behind the old McReynolds High School now being used as a city maintenance shop.

The cemetery exceeded all my expectations as it covered some 30 acres and nearly all the tombstones and grave markers dated to the early to late 1800s. Some of the graves were marked by just a small creek rock, while others had gargantuan monoliths that would have made a pharaoh envious. Many graves had no markers at all.

In one section, Benny and I found a number of Union soldier's graves, results of a Civil War battle at Fort McCook at the mouth of Battlecreek on the Tennessee River in 1862-64. Large oaks, hickory and pines shaded the graves of the rich and the very poor, those long forgotten and the ones found in history books, such as James Bowron, one of the town's founding fathers. There were few flowers, flags or accouterments on the majority of the graves, but the cemetery was adorned with pretty spring flowers, budding dogwood trees, a recent growth of grass and sweet-smelling honeysuckle.

Here and there scattered among the adults' graves were those of small children and babies, a heart-breaking sight indeed. Most had markers of some kind, usually a little lamb

perched on the top of the stone, or an angel with outstretched wings. Cast iron rabbits or puppy dogs were in graves of infants whose parents could not afford the more ornate markers. The cast iron figurines were probably made at either the Blacklock or the Lodge foundries in South Pittsburg.

Other graves were decorated by vases and fruit jars full of flowers, but few of the vessels had survived many years of neglect. All were empty, stained and cracked or broken, probably by rain water being frozen during the winter.



Toward the close of our visit, Benny and I found one of the tiniest graves in the cemetery. It was all by itself beneath a splendid holly tree. The little lamb stop the stone was a tribute to the fallen angel underneath. The stone was carved with HELEN MARIE SIMS / TWIN OF / LEONA CHRISTINE SIMS / B MAY 11, 1906 / D AUG 31, 1909. We wondered what misfortune had fallen upon the child to cause her to die at such a



tender age. Perhaps the dreaded typhoid fever, cholera or another disease had snuffed out the child's life. In the center of the child's grave was the smallest bell-shaped, half-pint U-SAV-IT jar that I'd ever seen. The little jar sparkled and glittered in the late afternoon sun as if had been manufactured that very day. The onslaught of more than 80 years of weather had not dimmed its shine. Benny spotted the jar and loudly proclaimed, "That's Mine!" Before I could utter a word of protest, he

snatched up the jar, turned on his heels and ran out of the cemetery.

Horried by such an outrage, I ran after and soon caught up with him. I told him that stealing from a cemetery, especially off a child's grave, was about as low as anyone could stoop and I'd not stand for it. I demanded he return the jar immediately.

Benny said the jar was extremely rare and that he'd been looking for one of that size for a decade. If he left it on the grave, it would eventually get broken by the elements and he intended to keep it.

"But placing that jar on the grave of their child was one of the last acts of love that her parents could have performed for her," I remonstrated. "It's a sacrilege for you to remove it!"

We had by now reached the four-lane highway that we had to cross to reach our trucks parked in front of the restaurant. Smirking, he turned to me and replied, "I'll worry about that sacrilege business when I meet my maker," and stepped off the curb into the busy highway. Big Mistake!

He stepped right into the path of Mr. Robert William Coffman's fully loaded pulpwood truck and into the arms of his maker as well. Droplets of Benny's blood rained down upon me, but that didn't numb my mind nearly as much as did the sound of little Helen Marie's jar breaking. I knew that the love and affection that her parents had memorialized in the jar was now shattered into a thousand pieces.

After a lengthy interview with the police and a night of fitful sleep, I awoke the following morning hoping it was all a bad dream. But once I turned on my radio, I heard the announcer making much ado about the previous day's tragic accident. I'd misplaced my wristwatch and, thinking I'd lost it when I made a grab for Benny to keep him from being hit by the truck, I returned to the accident scene.

There on the edge of the highway, beside a remnant of yellow police tape, was not my wristwatch, but the tiny U-SAV-IT jar. It sparkled and glittered in the early morning sun-