

LEGENDS OF THE JAR

By Bruce Schank

[Editor's Note: This article is a result of long time collector and author Bruce W. Schank reaching out to long time collector Phil Smith.]

To say Phil Smith's collection is fabulous is an understatement. What I love about his collection is that you can look on one shelf and find a Beech Nut jar with a super label and pristine lid, look to the right a shelf over and find an incredible deep amber 3L Ball Mason pint, only to look over to the right across the room onto a different shelf completely and there's an absolutely phenomenal peacock blue HG Cross over Mason's plus on the other side of the room a plain ordinary ball blue HG Sanitary Sure Seal.

Phil is an eclectic collector with so many varying degrees of taste that he has jars almost anyone would love or appreciate from the beginner to the ultimate fruit jar collector. Phil has a complete set of Kerr Bells, a substantial range of Jumbo peanut jars, black memorabilia, phenomenal colored Lightnings, 1858s, pontiled wax sealers, corks, superb and rare odd-closed jars and Hemingrays. Phil also has many modern jars and a nice shelf of reproductions which he uses for educational purposes. In addition,



Phil has a fantastic colored collection of miniature lamps, salt and peppers and kerosene cans, too. For all you go-with nuts, Phil has a fantastic perfect condition mold used for the Kerr Bells.

Phil was born in 1947 in Indianapolis, Ind., grew up mostly in northern Kentucky and is a 1970 graduate of Morehead State

University. Hey, that's Phil Simms' alma mater, too. Phil has worked most of his life in the pharmaceutical industry in sales management.

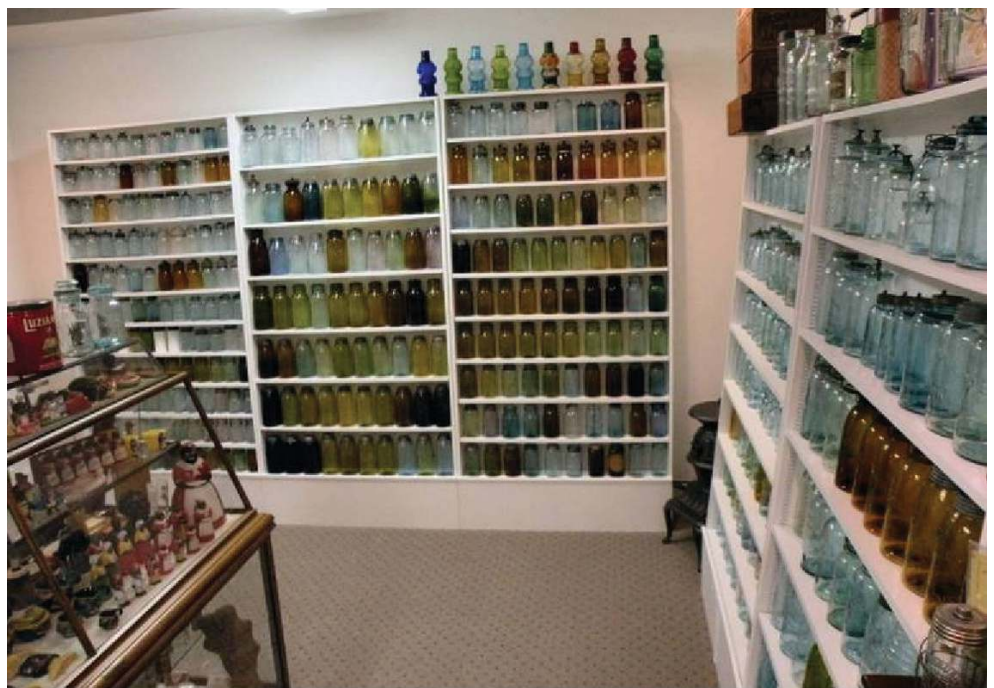
Phil started collecting approximately 22 years ago and according to him, his first show was probably in the late 80s. His first experience with fruit jars was with his brother, who collected Ball jars by the numbers on the base. But his brother wouldn't spend real money on jars so Phil decided he would have to. Fellow by the name of Schroll in Findlay, Ohio died many years ago and Phil went to the auction of his collection. He ended up buying 76 jars that day, spending \$1,200 in the process and, of course, at the time believed he was now big into the hobby.

Then he went to his first Indy show at the East 21st Street location and to his chagrin discovered he didn't really have anything of real consequence after seeing all of the great jars there. It was there that



he met Ken Dipold, Jerry McCann, the Lowrys and other notable collectors. Phil bought some halfway decent jars

in the middle price range while there but it wasn't until the following winter Indy show that he finally bought his first really good jar from Tom Caniff. The jar happened to be an HG Hoosier jar for \$650 and it was at that point Phil believed he had finally arrived on the scene. Well, that buy was the true energizer or trigger that caused him to then "live to buy good





fruit jars.”

Phil remembers when he went to the Burlington Antique Market many years ago and met a guy who told him he had some Jumbo peanut butter jars for sale. Phil collects Jumbos and wanted to see what the guy had. When he went to his house, he noticed instead two really nice jars. One was a push-down cobalt and the other a ribbed Hemingray and Phil immediately decided his goal was to leave the house with those two jars which are still in his collection to this day. Phil said it was probably the best deal he ever made because he was able to buy both jars for \$250 and didn't give a hoot about the Jumbos at that point. Imagine that!

Phil told me that he just happened to



get into the hobby when things started to get really expensive. He was buying good jars but really had to pay for them. At the time, \$100 jars were going for \$200, \$250 jars for \$500 and \$500 jars upwards of \$1,000. Dick Landis was at an Indy show many years ago and due to poor health brought a lot of his good jars for sale. Phil managed to get a gallon 1858 and a Mason's Union Shield for not too much money. Phil was still learning at this point and was still buying jars from Jim Chamberlain, John Hathaway and others and he was





collecting just about everything. But as he got more experienced he went from buying just one or two good jars to three and four good jars. He told me “at that time my friends were building homes while I was buying fruit jars.”

Phil said another advantage he had was he teamed up with pretty bright people early in his collecting career such as Jerry McCann, Ken Dipold, Margaret Shaw, Al Vigon, George McConnell and Alex Kerr and benefitted from their knowledge in a great way. Phil said he



had the kind of relationship with Al that if he (Al) wanted to sell something pretty good, he (Phil) got the call.

Phil also remembers how Bob Christ once had a very dark green olive Trade Mark Lightning with matching lid that sat on his table at a very early York Show for \$650 and it didn't sell. Before Bob left the parking lot Phil managed to flag him down and told him he would call him about that jar. Phil called him within two days and both agreed on a price and subsequently Bob brought it to the next Indy show. Incredibly, according to Phil, there are only three or four known examples of this color jar and that jar is still in Phil's collection to this day.

I asked Phil why he had so many HGs in the collection and he said it was basically because more colors became available and were more reasonably priced than pints and quarts. Besides, Phil told me, “HG's look good and there's more glass to love.” Yet if you look over Phil's collection you can clearly see he loves all sizes of jars and in many cases has put together fantastic sets such as his



Ladies' Favorites in half gallon, quart and pint.

Phil's philosophy on collecting actually seems pretty reasonable. He says “we need to encourage new collectors that

they don't have to fill their shelves with very expensive jars. There are still a lot of unusual jars out there that aren't worth a lot of money that advanced collectors just don't want. but still add a lot to a collection. Phil also says if you do have the funds, of course it's most important to buy the good things; i.e., the good colors, the good sizes and invest your money there but also make sure they have good closures. Phil also says he looks at buying jars in relation to the five Cs of buying diamonds which are Cut, Color, Clarity, Carat and Cost. The five Factors of Jars are Character, Color, Whittle, Crudeness and Cleanness.



Phil had one particularly sad jar story to tell me. Five years ago, he had just finished washing a 4½-gallon Whitney 1858 and for some reason the lid when he put it on didn't catch the threads properly. So when he picked it up the jar fell out of the lid tumbled across his jar room and into a cabinet, ending its magnificent existence.





I didn't know who Phil Smith was until the January 2008 Indy show when I met him for the first time. It was then I found out from other collectors that Phil was a very serious collector indeed, so the rest is history in regards to this article. I must say, Phil and his wonderful wife, Joan, are great hosts and while there at their home (which in itself is fantastic) I just had a super time. Phil and I, as well as Bo Trimble, Dick Watson, Phil Alvarez and Dan Corker were all there

together enjoying what we all have in common --- fruit jars. This was actually my first exposure to activities of this sort and I found it fascinating how people of varying financial and philosophical backgrounds could get along together so well. It's because no matter what some people will tell you, the plain truth is the vast majority of those in this great hobby of ours is just downright good, decent people and that includes Phil Smith.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Phil has a killer fruit jar collection that rivals the best of the best. Yet I came away from my short visit there with a sense of something much more important than fruit jars. What impressed me was the lifestyle he lived and how I didn't have what he did in that respect. Phil's daughter and two sons live only houses



away and his grandkids are at his home with him a good amount of the time. I sensed a family unity, devotion to one another and love that transcends the nonsense and daily grind of life and for that reason I am envious of him. Lastly, at one point I jokingly asked Phil if I could be his permanent Jar Room security person, but we all know that's akin to letting the fox guard the hen house.

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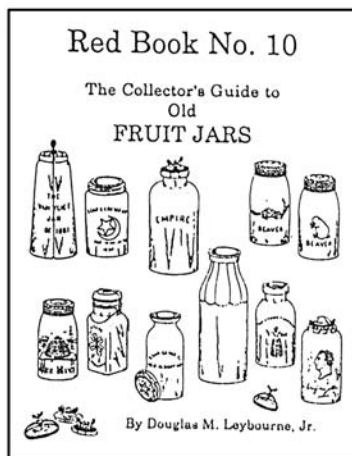
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