

Louisville, Ky., History

by Betty Blasi
Louisville, Kentucky

Although there were surely bottle diggers in Kentucky before the 1960s, I knew nothing about them.

My own accidental trip into that wonderful world of the beautiful, the rare, the colorful and the whimsical from the glassblower's blow pipe began with a walk in the woods in the late '60s. I kicked up a pale aqua bottle embossed "Electric Brain Food / Sure Cure for Headache and Neuralgia" on the front, Palmer Chemical Co., on one side and Louisville, Ky., on the other. That little bottle continued to warm my heart for more than a half-century, always close at hand to show amused and interested guests whether they were involved in the bottle world or not. I recently sold my little favorite to Dr. John Wolf in whose fabulous Cure collection I knew it would find a perfect home.

If my first find had been clear and unembossed, the rest of my life may have been very different. As it was, I kicked around more, eventually finding an early 1900s dump in a nearby draw. Ever after, "she's down in the dumps" had nothing to do with my state of mind, but was the usual answer if either of our sons asked where I could be found in

case they needed me.

After many months of this behavior, my husband, Gene, who had belittled the passion I had exhibited for this "useless and unprofitable" pastime, suddenly changed his long-held position on the subject. He discovered that there were actually grown men in town who spent their weekends and all other available time they could manage digging on construction sites, turning up beautiful and valuable pieces of the history of our old river town. He joined in the group out of curiosity at first and was soon one of the most devoted members.

Here's a story I wrote for *Old Bottle Magazine* in 1973. I include it because it may be of interest to beginners to see how, after much trial and error and a few unpleasant quarrels, diggers in Louisville worked out some of the problems which seemed always to arise at a hole. Certainly not every digging group works this way. But as the '70s and '80s came and went, the process explained in this article was considered the fairest way to proceed.

The article was titled "Confessions of a Privy Digger's Widow."

"If you've never been a digger's

wife, you don't know what you missed. You've missed being hauled out of bed at three in the morning by a phone call from a male stranger who tells you that 'your husband needs a longer ladder at the Thirteenth Street dig.' You've missed those loving little calls, 'There's no place to eat around here. Can you bring something?'

"You've missed getting stares from the grocery boy when you open your car trunk and are exposed to the whole world as a hoarder of crud-encrusted shovels and shoes. You've missed explaining to the dog why you put down papers for Dad.

"But, you've gained a lot, too. Aside from the bottles and doll parts, guns, marbles and coins, you've gained some good friends and a lot of memories. You've also acquired a strange passion for dirty old glass. The best way to get hooked is to take a trip on a Louisville dig where the local diggers have gathered to excavate what looks like an old outhouse in a very early section of town.

"The prospects from the beginning seem exciting. The hole has been spotted on a vacant lot by one of the diggers, a construction foreman on a skyscraper going up nearby. He scouts the area from his salaried perch every day with binoculars. The calls have gone out and the clan has gathered.

"Wearing a hard hat and a butcher's white coat, Marvin Wylie arrives with his shovel and a three weeks' supply of Banana Moon Pies. Marvin wears a butcher's coat to keep clean and to look as official as possible. Casual passers-by may hear him addressed as 'Inspector.' He is a salesman for a well-known pharmaceutical firm. Bob Chaney, the skyscraper man, arrives. He became interested in bottles in a unique way. After chasing local diggers out of one of his construction sites four times in one night, he decided to get into the hole to see what it was all about. By the



Here's Betty Blasi at a Louisville show behind black glass, case gins and cathedral pickles. (photo courtesy of Betty Blasi)



This Louisville, Kentucky site produced whiskies, blobtop sodas and ceramic goods.

(photo courtesy of Betty Blasi)

time they crept in the fifth time, he was digging in it himself!

“My husband, a hospital pharmacist, is there: First-aid man, photographer and chief supplier of large equipment. He owns the extension ladder, the battery-charged spotlight, the ropes, baskets, gloves, scrapers, etc. Local entrepreneur and antiques man Tiny Kennedy arrives: Town character, friend of man and beast, possessor of outstanding knowledge and chief overseer of the labors of others. Ainslie Hewett, a commercial artist; Don Coulter, an insurance man; Billy Hughes, a TV repairman, and other bottle lovers congregate.

“From the beginning, it is decided which men will dig this hole and it becomes their responsibility to the end. Others will take probes and check out the rest of the field for other buried brickwork which might indicate other outhouses or wells. Some will stay and dig for 12 to 14 hours, regardless of the weather and other obligations. (Many a cold dinner getting colder).

Some will drift off to promising holes elsewhere. Some decide to rest up and dig the next night. Some hang around to observe. When the Banana Moon Pies give out, the men are separated from the boys.

“This group of men is equipped to stay warm, stay late, store large numbers of bottles carefully and light their way to the bottom of a hole that may go 35 feet. Only one man is in the hole at a time. He

wears a construction helmet to protect his head from falling objects. Others take turns hauling up dirt in buckets to which ropes have been attached. At least one man always stays near the rim of the hole so that the man down under is never left alone. When a digger gets tired, he calls for the ladder and another takes his place.

“When the dig is over and the hole has been faithfully filled (to keep peace with Urban Renewal and prevent accidents), the men will flip a coin to see who gets the first draw from the night’s take. Then, in turn, each man chooses one bottle at a time until all the bottles

are gone. This procedure has long been adopted as the fairest way to distribute the treasure and the trash.

“A novice can learn a great deal from observing such major digs. He learns that on a bitterly cold night, a delicate pontiled bottle which has been buried deep in the warm earth should not be brought to the surface without some protection from the sudden change in temperature. A good bottle out of wet earth is easier to clean up later if it is kept moist with water or oil at the hole. A novice learns that there are times when a hundred-year-old brick wall needs to be braced for the safety of the man going down. Sheets of plywood and two-by-fours strategically placed are enough to make most excavations secure. Such deep digs can be very rewarding. Some excellent bottles have come out of these Louisville digs. Resident diggers are very fortunate that their town is a very old river community built on early river boat commerce. Bottles from all over the eastern United States have made their way up the cobblestone levee at Louisville.

“But some of the greatest bottles are the homegrown natives: the Louisville Glass Works scroll flasks; the pontiled ‘Dr. Geohagen’s Cure for Scrofula, Louisville, Ky.’; the beautiful blobtop emerald green ‘Crystal Palace’ sodas;



Neither rain, nor snow, nor anything else can keep bottle collectors from their privy digs. Louisville collector is unidentified *(photo courtesy of Betty Blasi)*

the unusual ten-paneled blobtop soda, 'J. Ruckstuhl, Louisville, Ky.>'; the delicate pontiled 'Dr. John Bull's King of Pain, Louisville, Ky.');

and the heartbreaking, almost emerald 'Daily's Balsam of Waughoo, Louisville, Ky.,' in eight pieces. (The latter was particularly tragic to the writer, who is a balsam collector).

"Since deep digs are not always productive, a sense of humor is a must. It is necessary to appreciate the less serious side of bottle digging. A neighborhood wino often drops by to pass the time of day and it can be pretty disconcerting when he tells you this outhouse used to belong to his family and you are wasting your time because his grandmother never threw anything into it.

"There are also the little kids hanging around, who ask questions so fast that they've forgotten what they asked before you get the answer out. Today's inner-city kids are fascinated by the whole idea of outhouses. The original purpose is beyond their comprehension, and they contemplate the whole idea with shock and disbelief. Their comments are legendary.

"It's all a great experience and when it's all over and your dirty old man staggers home with the night's haul, he may have a dozen pontiled medicines or he may have a 'Hoyt's Nickel Cologne.'

By the time my husband, Gene, became interested in bottles, the digging was being done by perhaps 12 to 15 individuals. The merry band was led by the unforgettable and inimitable Tiny Kennedy. Gene was standing next to Tiny in an antiques store one day when he overheard him talking about a "dig," entered into the conversation, and was asked to go along on the next one. Tiny had a special gift of talking his way onto heavily guarded construction sites. He always had something handy to use as persuasion to get next to tough overseers and determined supervisors. A bottle of whiskey, a hilarious story, a little sermon on the historic importance of what might be found – anything went for the good of the project.

He was strong on bottle knowledge, but notoriously slow in the spending of

elbow grease. Even so, he was usually found at any working hole. He was so completely absorbed in the business of digging, researching, collecting and selling bottles that it dominated his life. In fact, his wife, Robbie, felt it was appropriate to have the bottle part of the well-known logo for the Kentuckiana Antique Bottle & Outhouse Society engraved on his tombstone. It was beautifully done and she was right – nothing could have been more suitable.

Other diggers in those early days included Billy Gonterman, Billy Hughes, Jim Smith, Steve Vittoe, Ken and Gordy Raymond, Steve Keith, Peter Guetic, the Goffinet Brothers, Karl and Howard, Ainslie Hewett and his son, Don Kay, Frank Mathews, Bob Menafee, Marviun Wylie, Gene Blasi, Stan Roessler and partners Cliff Campbell and Jerry Richie.

Some of the digs were particularly memorable. There were high



Here's the view from below as a Louisville digger awaits his turn in an outhouse pit. (photo courtesy of Betty Blasi)

expectations on one and the diggers' imaginations were stirred when the merry band was allowed to dig in the backyard of the Thomas Edison House. It was understood that all relics would be donated to the museum being planned by the Thomas Edison Butcheron House Inc. Such possible riches!

It turned out to be a big disappointment. After spending all day in subfreezing temperatures, they didn't find a single item or locate the outhouse.

By far the most exciting time was

when six diggers went in together and bought an old city dump in Shelbyville, Ky. There was a deal, of course. When they were through with it, the diggers were to donate the land to that city for a public park!

There was an old shack on the property in which they were to live for whatever length of time it took to dig the sizeable piece of property. Problem was, the house had not been vacated and the diggers were forced to sleep in a rusty hulk of an old school bus deep in the nearby weeds. No running water, of course. The tenants, who had been in no hurry to leave, changed their minds when they were invaded by six shovel-wielding, unshaven dirty men who eyed them almost malevolently.

It was three days before the tenants departed and the merry band took over the shack. It was no castle, but it sure did beat that school bus. Food had to be brought in every day, lunch and supper by station wagon from Louisville because the men couldn't get clean enough to go into any Shelbyville restaurant. Wives spent day after day cooking and packing food, washing towels and occasionally supplying clean clothes, although the latter task was certainly not a priority.

It was all worth it. There were hundreds of amber Coke bottles which were much in demand and would bring \$5 each or more if the bottles came from an unfamiliar bottling works. There were cathedral peppersauces, wonderful beers, rare whiskies and almost daily visits by the Shelbyville mayor who, with good reason, felt he'd better keep an eye on the goings-on in his future "park."

That dig went on for about three weeks, as I remember.

For the most part in Louisville, diggers were allowed to do their thing because the police force came to understand that holes were always filled and these diggers were always good about getting permission. It was the cherished big construction sites near the river that were always touch and go, depending upon the supervisor's whims.

Relics and worthy bottles from that huge dig invariably would appear at the next Louisville bottle show. Some of



Charles H. “Tiny” Kennedy was a founder of the Kentuckiana Antique Bottle and Outhouse Society in Louisville. Following his premature death, his widow thought it appropriate to have his grave marker engraved with the bottle part of the club logo. He is buried in the Low Dutch Cemetery in Pleasureville, Ky, (photo courtesy of Betty Blasi)

them were sold on the spot to individuals in the sizeable crowds that collected to watch, especially around lunchtime. The first Louisville shows were put on by the Kennedy family, but after the sad loss of Tiny in 1974, the club took over and put on its first show in 1975 at the Holiday Inn on Fern Valley Road. It was easy to find, had plenty of space, and the show prospered there for many years.

While we appreciated all of our dealers, many of whom came from faraway places, we had a special affection for the bottle lovers from Chicago. They always chartered a big bus and brought dozens of enthusiasts with them. It was such fun to watch them pile out of the bus with their boxes and bags and “so happy to be here” attitudes. Each year, we gave them something to raffle off on the trip home. One year it was a country ham, another time it was a gift certificate to a Chinese restaurant in Chicago. Each year it was different, our way of expressing our sincere appreciation for their wonderful continued support.

Several books emerged from the interest in antique bottles, which had begun in 1966 with Tiny Kennedy as he dug around the yard of his 100-year-old home. Peter Guetig and Conrad Selle produced a true labor of love when they published the 292-page “Louisville Breweries, A History of the Brewing Industry in Louisville, Kentucky, New Albany and Jeffersonville, Indiana.”

It included great old ads, photos of collectors and an unbelievable amount of information.

Also appearing on bookstore shelves was “Louisville’s Early Medicine Bottles,” a 92-page, spiral-bound study of 200 Louisville bottles written by Gene Blasi. This book has old ads, clear and sharp drawings of almost every bottle showing the embossing on all sides with complete descriptions of each bottle as to color, size, type of lip, base and rarity.

Like books that have been written about bottles, collections of bottles have been lovingly assembled in Kentucky. In fact, Kentucky’s distilling families have a special bent for collecting these relics from our past.

Robinson Brown of Louisville is known to have assembled one of the finest collections in the country. It’s no surprise that his grouping includes some spectacular old whiskies. There is early black glass, a 2,000-year-old bottle and about 700 fine old bottles and decanters. Mr. and Mrs. Brown generously shared a part of their collection with the Louisville club by displaying it at one of the annual shows.

Another Kentucky distilling group represented in the bottle world is the T. Samuel Williams family, whose collection is smaller than the Browns’, but very impressive. Along with gold-lettered decanters, this collection houses a large group of back bar bottles lettered in gold leaf and some are elaborate in design.

This reminds me of a would-be treasure in the Louisville club archives. It is a letter on White House stationery stating that the President of the United States appreciated the invitation to visit the Louisville bottle show, but would be unable to attend. If only this had been signed by the President, which we had been hoping for in the very least, it would have at least been an amusing topic of conversation. But it wasn’t, We had to check the date and count back to stir the memory that it was President Jimmy Carter who was in office at the time.

There are other well-known bottle collections in the state, including many that were dug. Peter Guetig’s beer

collection is by far the most complete of Louisville and southern Indiana examples. Another collection worth mentioning was Gene Blasi’s Louisville bottles. Every category, inks, whiskies, beers, condiments, sarsaparillas, bitters, cures and medicines, were represented. The collection was sold after his death in 1996.

Of all the bottles owned by Kentuckians, which are considered the best of the best?

Residents of Louisville and pig bottle lovers certainly would vote for the Duffy’s Crescent Saloon bottles. There aren’t many of these little charmers known. John Duffy, whom operated his saloon on Jefferson Street in Louisville, used to hand out these bottles full of whiskey at Christmas.

Then there are the Galt House flasks and, like Duffy’s pigs, are perhaps rarer and more popular locally. Galt House was one of the most famous hostleries in the South. It boasted the best of everything from oysters to weddings. The 6-1/4-inch tall, dark amber flasks are either embossed “James Raine, Galt House,” or “Silas Miller Co., Galt House, Louisville. Raine was the hotel’s proprietor in the 1850s.

One night on an early dig on property near where the original Galt House had stood, six of the flasks were dug from one hole. Five were embossed with Miller’s name and one with Raine.

Another important piece of glassware from the early days of Louisville is a one-of-a-kind target ball. It had been manufactured by the Louisville Glass Works and had been in the Tiny Kennedy collection unseen for many years.

The 1855 glass house, credited with being Louisville’s first, had sprung from the earlier Kentucky Glass Works founded in 1850. The target ball’s embossing reads: “Manufactured by the / Kentucky Glassworks Company / Joseph Griffin & Sons Sole Agents / Also dealers in Guns, Pistols and Fishing Tackle Louisville / Kentucky.

It was bought at a 2009 auction by Michigan collector Ralph Finch for \$21,850!