

Nevada: History of Bottle Collecting

By Bob Ferraro

EDITOR'S NOTE: Bob Ferraro was elected president of the Southern Nevada Bottle Collectors Club in 1971 and 1972. The club was formed in 1965 and later became the Las Vegas Bottle Collector's Club in 1973. In that year, he was elected chairman of the Western Region of the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs (as it was then called), serving in that capacity in 1974. In 1976, he was elected federation president and served through 1977. In 2007, he was asked to serve as second vice president of the federation and in 2008 was named first vice president. He also found time for politics. He was appointed to city council of Boulder City, Nev., in July of 1976 and won reelection to that post in 1977. He also was mayor of Boulder City for six terms (24 years), becoming, he said, the longest serving mayor in the country. In 2002, he was inducted into the FOHBC Hall of Fame.

My interest in old bottles occurred in 1950 while I was in high school in northern Nevada. My folks were ranchers in Paradise Valley, a rural area about 40 miles east of Winnemucca.

My mother had developed a strong interest in sun-colored, or more commonly called "purple" bottles that were quite prevalent in and around the mining camps. At this time in my life, I really had no interest in old bottles, but I would go out of my way to search the mining camps and ghost towns to find purple bottles for her. Over several years, my mother's collection grew from just a few on the shelf to several shelves filled with purple glass.

I believe it would be worth mentioning that my early school years were quite different from those of many students. While going to a three-room school house, there were six students in the first grade and I was the only student in the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh grades. I was joined by four other students in

the eighth grade.

During my sophomore year of high school (all high school classes, as well as the seventh and eighth grades, were taught by a male teacher in one room), it became obvious that the high school would have to close the next year since state law required a minimum of five students to keep a high school functioning. For those of us who wanted to complete our high school education, we would have to go to the nearest school, which was 40 miles away in Winnemucca. I drove back and forth each day except during the treacherous winter months when I would stay with an aunt in Winnemucca.

When I graduated from high school in 1953, my mother wanted me to take the purple bottle collection, but I still didn't have any interest in bottles. Since I didn't want to disappoint her, I simply asked if I could wait until I finished college. She agreed that this was an acceptable arrangement.

As an undergraduate at the University of Nevada-Reno, I majored in general agriculture and for graduate school, I majored in range management. I earned both my bachelor's and master's degrees and remained at UNR for 10 years, conducting research and carrying out considerable agricultural work.

Upon graduating from college in 1959, an unusual event occurred: I met two families from Fallon, Nev., who had started collecting bottles. One Sunday afternoon while visiting with them, they asked if I knew where we could all go look for old bottles.

As I was thinking of places to go, I remembered an area in Virginia City, about a half-hour's drive from the university, where I used to walk over and look for old coins and other relics.

As I was telling Ray and Doris Alcorn and Ned and Grace Kendrick about the area in Virginia City that appeared to be a refuse or trash dump, they immediately wanted to go and determine if there might be any old

bottles there.

That was all it took before we were on our way with our shovels in the trunk of Ned's car. We parked near the area and in a few moments bottles of all descriptions were being unearthed.

Thus started my serious bottle collecting in 1959.

This was the beginning of the excavation which many referred to as the Church Lot since it was adjacent to the Catholic and Episcopal churches. For almost a year, we had this digging site to ourselves. Little by little, word got out, and I remember the times when I went there, I would find as many as 20 or 30 cars parked around the Church Lot. There were cars from California, Oregon, Idaho, Utah and, of course, Nevada.

I have estimated that within the next three years, more than 20,000 bottles were dug there. So from 1959 until 1963, I personally dug nearly 100 J.H. Hotstetter's Bitters, about 50 Lash's Bitters, more than 1,000 pottery ale bottles, and well over 70 pottery seltzer bottles were unearthed.

I also dug what I considered to be several quality bottles such as a green IXL Bitters, several Stephens and Jose sodas from Virginia City, a Choice Old Cabinet Bourbon Whiskey, a Jockey Club Whiskey, a W.A. Gaines Whiskey, a Gold Dust Kentucky Bourbon, six Bitter Whitches, many Nevada medicines including an aqua A.M. Cole, an aqua J.B.B. Lefevre, many colored pepper sauces, several cathedral pickles and more than 100 Congress Waters.

Every day we dug in Virginia City turned into an exceptionally good digging day. With all that digging there, we would anxiously await Friday afternoons so we could attempt to find other sites to search for old bottles.

And, yes, I did acquire my mother's purple bottle collection. In fact, I still have a few of the deeper-colored ones such as catsup and spice bottles in my general collection.

In 1959, I had come to know Edith and John Tibbitts and Elmer and Ruth Lester, members of the Sacramento Bottle Club. They enjoyed having visitors to discuss bottles and view their collections. Some may recall that John was newsletter editor for the Sacramento club and referred to his monthly publication as *The Pontil*. (He later published a book called "Chips from *The Pontil*.")

One weekend, the Tibbittses and the Lesters invited me to come explore the redevelopment area in old Sacramento. While walking around the area, we came upon a number of derelict diggers who were sharing a wine bottle while digging near a crumbling brick wall. I was amazed that these on-site squatters had found several good sodas, including several green ones bearing iron pontils. For the most part, their bottles were for sale; however, they were acutely aware of the values of their treasures.

I also remember in 1960 visiting John and Florence Fountain in Amador City, Calif., and being totally in awe of some of the bottles they had in their shop. The shop was located on a street with a very colorful name – Pig Turd Alley!

I had become so fascinated with the variety of bottles I was finding or seeing in various collections, so I started to assemble an extensive collection of notes. My quest for information was insatiable. I would contact firms, both foreign and domestic, for information on the identifiable bottles in my collection or other people's collections. Within a year, I had collected a considerable amount of information.

In fact, in late 1969, I decided the information I had collected on the old glass containers should be made available to other enthusiasts. My first wife (Pat) and I published "The Past in Glass" in 1970 and within a year or so published our second book, "A Bottle Collector's Book." Both were well-received over the next 15 years, with about 70,000 copies sold in the U.S., Canada and Europe.

One evening after I had given a talk on old bottles to a group of collectors in Fallon, a nicely dressed man came up and asked if I could possibly stop and see him in his office at Harold's Club in Reno where he was serving as curator for the museum and relic collections.

A week later, I was in Reno so I went to see Ben Hathaway at Harold's Club. While we were in his office visiting, he asked if I would like to accompany him to see Mrs. Dorothy Smith, the ex-wife of Harold Smith, owner of Harold's Club. I told him I could take the time so we drove to her house in Reno.

At her home, we were invited in, and Dorothy said: "I understand you collect old bottles." I admitted that I did, and that's when she said, "let me show you something in the basement."

As soon as we got down there, I counted about 50 partitioned cardboard boxes sitting on shelves. "Look and see what's in those boxes," she said. It was unbelievable. Those boxes were filled with primarily whiskeys, various food bottles including cathedral pepper sauce and pickles, bitters, black glass, and household bottles such as inks, glues and blackings. She told me the bottles "had been purchased in

1952 for \$500 from a man in Sonoma, Calif., and they have never been out of those boxes. I want to sell them for exactly what they cost us in 1952."

I told her I would like to purchase the collection, but I would have to ask my wife. She said, "That's fine, just let me know your decision in the next week or so." It was obvious the collection was worth more than \$500. Since Pat and I had just had our first child, money was almost nonexistent, which meant I would have to get a loan from our bank.

I was back in Reno within two days with five \$100 bills to acquire the amazing collection. Upon returning home, I began calling other collectors who I knew would have an interest in the items I didn't want. Within less than a day's time, I had found others willing to spend far in excess of \$500 for the pieces I didn't want. To this day, I still have number of the Harold's Club bottles in my personal collection.

Another interesting acquisition that occurred involved Ray Alcorn. In the spring of 1960, we drove to the remote mining camp of Victor in Churchill County and within a couple of hours had filled several burlap bags with embossed whiskeys and bitters. It was just another example of what was available for little or no effort in those early days of collecting bottles.

After about six months of earnest collecting, I realized that the sheer number of bottles in my collection had become staggering and unmanageable. There was absolutely no way of exhibiting that vast number so I made the decision to begin specializing.

I couldn't make up my mind at first, but after attending the Charles B. Gardner auction in 1975, I quickly realized I should specialize in figural bitters and whiskeys. So from 1976, I concentrated on these two categories of bottles. It became evident that there were quite a number of collectors who also liked these two categories. Figural bitters and whiskies are still the primary focal point of my collection.

In addition, my Nevada bottle collection has expanded to where it has become the most complete collection that has ever been assembled from my home state.

