



J. B. Healey & Co., Prescription Druggists, Westfield, Mass.
resting on blueberries

Blueberries on the Bushes and Bottles in the Attic!

By **Tony Marostica**

Late in the summer of 1969, my brother Marty and I were holed up in a vintage rural Massachusetts farmhouse where the seasonal berry picking laborers were assigned to stay. Outside, things were wet and getting wetter.



The clock radio's six a.m. wake-up had revealed a second straight morning of mist, gray clouds, and steady rain. Slapping the alarm I groaned at the prospect of another idle day, waiting for the drippy fruit-laden bushes to dry so that we could continue with our summer work assignment harvesting blueberries for a family farming operation in the hills west of Springfield. It was a "piece work" arrangement, so we'd discovered early on that we'd only receive pay for each "cleaned quart of berries" we provided. Not exactly slave labor, but not really too far from it.

Our Dad had set up this agri-labor opportunity through a Church acquaintance whose family had owned this farming operation for generations. There were just a few weeks left before we'd be returning home to start a new year at our Connecticut high school and I think being hired onto this rag-tag berry picking crew, one state removed from home, was as much about our parents wanting to get us out from under foot as it was about the potential of us racking up some cash for school shopping.

Besides having become proficient of late in the art of wielding a multi-slotted blueberry rake, Marty and I fancied ourselves as budding New England bottle collectors, adept at predicting where the former inhabitants of our region might have tossed their 19th century garbage. Flung over the stone wall along the back property line was generally a good bet, or perhaps tossed down an embankment along a hidden drainage or into some other pocket in the landscape – but mostly it just seemed like you could find a farm dump someplace out of sight of the main house. We'd heard that at one time a high percentage of the New England countryside had been cleared of trees and put into cultivation, so the job of dump-finding usually involved imagining the scene without the thick woods that now covered our rural stomping grounds.

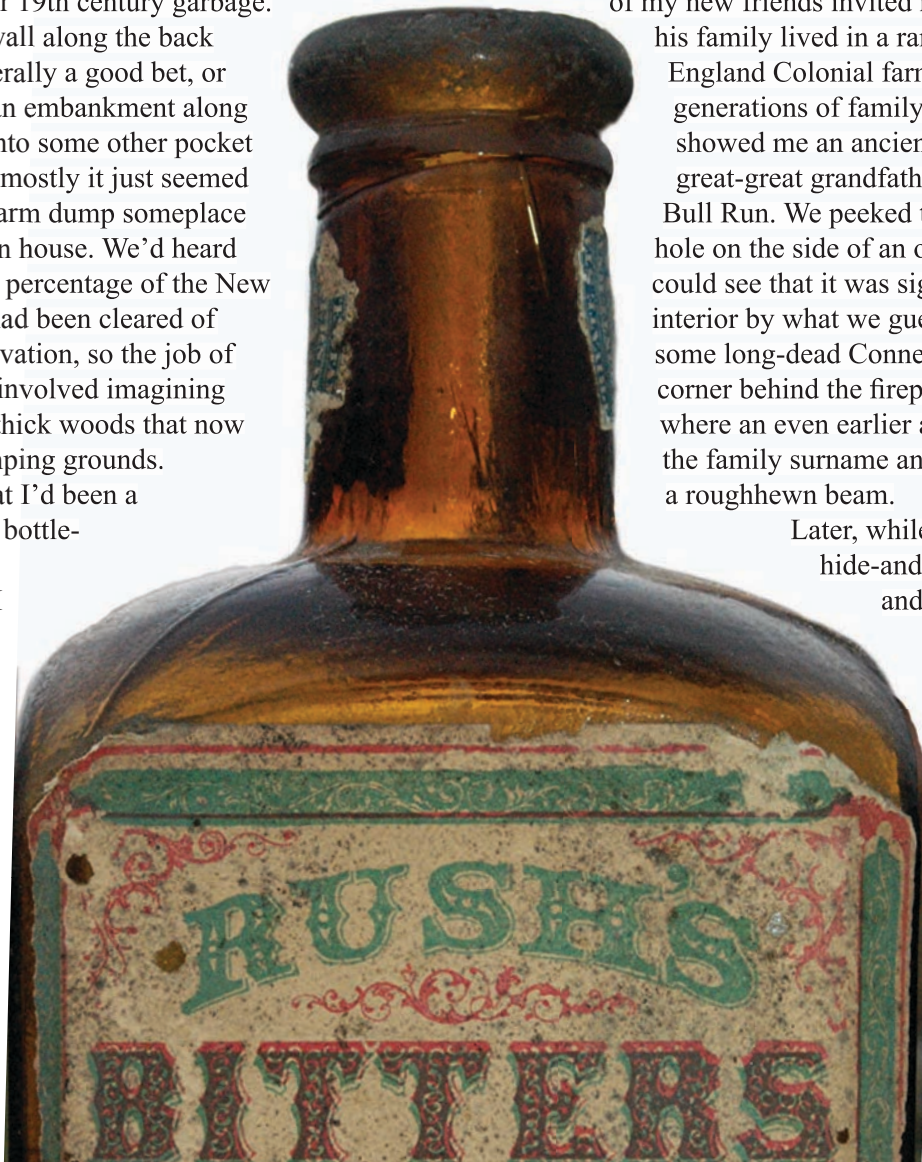
I have to admit that I'd been a little slow to catch the bottle-digging vision. As a child in Wyoming, I had watched a sewer line being excavated in the yard of my great-aunt Gladys in a small town east of Cody. While standing by, watching Uncle Hy operate his backhoe, I was fascinated when along with a scoop of sewage-scented dirt, the bucket

scooped up a curious glass bottle that rolled down the growing pile of earth and landed near my feet unbroken. Wiping off the grime, I could see that its surface had a sort of iridescent rainbow-hued stain, and inside the glass itself there seemed to be air bubbles trapped. Even more interesting was the fact that impressed into the bottle glass were words: "SYLMAR BRAND LOS ANGELES OLIVE GROWERS ASSN LOS ANGELES CAL." I remember marveling at how that old bottle could have come all the way from California, ending up underground in Wyoming without being broken. Ultimately, however, I didn't think much more about it. The old glass souvenir was packed away in my vacation travel bag along with a rattlesnake rattle, a small knife with "Yellowstone Park" printed on its plastic handle, and a couple of genuine Indian arrowheads that we'd picked up walking with Dad in the nearby sand hills. It was all proof of "what I did on my summer vacation" to be proudly displayed if called upon at Lincoln Elementary.

Several years later our family relocated from Colorado to the suburbs of Hartford, Connecticut when Dad accepted a position in the state welfare department there. Soon, a second encounter with old glass sparked my interest. We'd been living in "The East" about a year when one

of my new friends invited me over. Jeff and his family lived in a rambling white New England Colonial farmstead that contained generations of family heirlooms. He showed me an ancient sword that his great-great grandfather had wielded at Bull Run. We peeked through the round air hole on the side of an old military drum and could see that it was signed all around the interior by what we guessed were soldiers of some long-dead Connecticut regiment. In a corner behind the fireplace Jeff pointed out where an even earlier ancestor had carved the family surname and the year 1767 into a roughhewn beam.

Later, while playing a sort of hide-and-seek involving Jeff and his giggly younger sister, I squeezed into an attic crawl space through an opening in the back of an upstairs closet. When my eyes adjusted to the not-quite-dark I could just see several glass items reflecting from far back between





the beams under the slanted ceiling. While still in hiding, I stretched out and quietly retrieved two heavy greenish-hued bottles which, I would learn in later years were called "Hutchinson Sodas." To my surprise when brought out into the light, these two identical bottles had the name of our little Connecticut town embossed in the thick glass. After first being warned by Jeff's little sister that I'd have to put them right back where I found them, their mom generously offered to let me keep one.

The hide-and-seek discovery had not only renewed my fascination with antique bottles, but in response my brother and I began to roam the woods surrounding our home in hopes of finding more. When we began to occasionally hit pay dirt, scratching out old glass containers of various sizes, shapes and colors from mother earth, our very practical mom purchased a new book for us called "Bottle Collecting in New England; a Guide to Digging, Identification & Pricing," by John P. Adams.

It came complete with high resolution black and white photos of 463 old New England bottles that the author had excavated and photographed, along with a listing that provided height, color, suggested contents, and prices that ranged anywhere from 50 cents up to a whopping \$30.00 for a really good one. This book became our holy grail and we spent countless hours studying its pages over bowls of breakfast cereal, dreaming of finding the bottles that matched those listed. For example, I still would be pleased to dig a heavily whittled amber 3-piece mold U.S.A. HOSP. DEPT. bottle like the 9 1/2" tall one Mr. Adams listed, claiming it would sell for a whopping ten to fifteen 1969 dollars.

I remember that Marty and I were getting more and

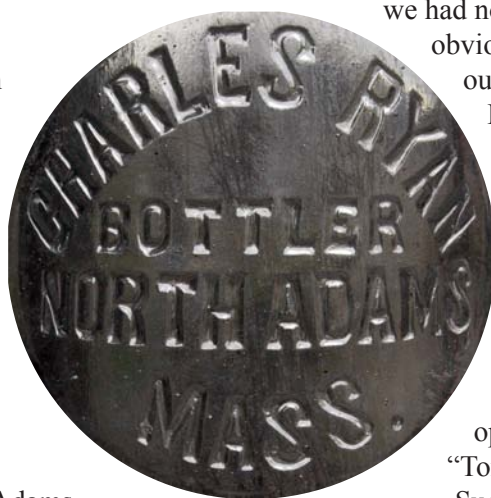
more restless on that dreary summer morning as the rain continued to drum on the ancient metal roof, thoroughly rinsing all those soon-to-be-picked blueberries out in the field. In retrospect, I have a clear memory of the Rolling Stones' newest hit, Honky Tonk Woman, blaring out of our little radio when I was suddenly seized upon by a rather desperate notion.

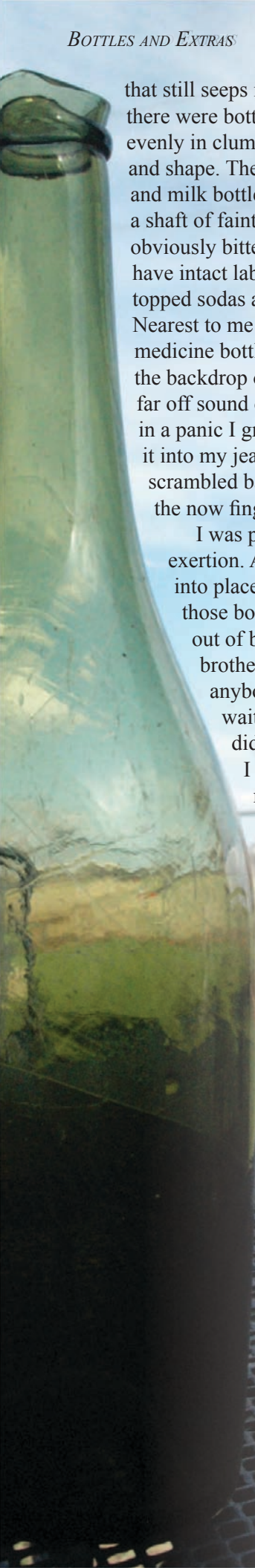
Situated in the high ceiling of our upstairs bedroom, we had noticed a rectangular framed opening, an obvious passageway into an attic space over our heads. With visions of the old bottles I'd discovered in Jeff's crawl space, we situated a dresser just so, and I boosted my younger brother up. The panel blocking the opening lifted easily and Marty pulled himself up through the opening into the dusty darkness above.

Seconds after his bare feet had disappeared into the gloom, I heard a muffled shout. His face reappeared at the opening and he hissed with excitement, "Tony, there are bottles everywhere up here!" Suddenly filled with a mixture of triumph,

curiosity and a growing sense of too-good-to-be-true anxiety, I demanded that Marty come down so that I could go up and take a look myself. Since we shared the house with other members of an adolescent picking crew, I feared that someone might catch us in the act of what was now starting to feel like a keep-an-eye-out-over-your-shoulder trespass.

Marty dropped down and, reversing roles, he boosted me up. I was surprised to discover that it was not as dark up there as I'd expected. Small diamond-shaped windows at either end of the attic allowed twin shafts of light to slant down through the dancing dust particles, dimly illuminating the space around me. As the raindrops drummed on the roof overhead, my eyes adjusted to the gloom revealing a scene





that still seeps into my dreams. Marty was right, there were bottles everywhere. They were standing evenly in clumps, lined up roughly according to size and shape. There were fruit jars, food containers and milk bottles in one group. Standing directly in a shaft of faint window light, were a number of tall, obviously bitters-style bottles, some appearing to have intact labels. There was one section with blob-topped sodas and crudely shaped whisky bottles. Nearest to me was an assortment of drug and patent medicine bottles standing in silent attention against the backdrop of a massive central chimney. The far off sound of Marty's voice broke the spell, and in a panic I grabbed the nearest bottle and stuffed it into my jean shorts. With my brother's help, I scrambled back down into the room, repositioning the now fingerprint-spotted lid on my way down.

I was panting from the excitement and rapid exertion. As we slid the heavy dresser back into place, Marty whispered, "Did you SEE all those bottles? What are we gonna do?" Still out of breath, I replied in predictable big-brother fashion. "Shut up and just don't tell anybody! We'll figure something out. And wait," I dropped my voice even lower, "I did bring one down, just to make sure I wasn't dreaming." Reaching into my tightly-filled pocket, I wriggled out a crude aqua bottle. Our eyes bulged as I held it up to the light and we read the heavy embossing; "PHOENIX BITTERS JOHN MOFFAT NEW YORK \$1.00." For the second time in my short bottle collecting career, I was holding an embossed antique bottle that might well be considered "attic mint."

With the weather clearing, the following day found us back out in the blueberry patch. Mentally reliving our bottle adventure of the previous day, Marty and I were having trouble focusing on the agricultural task at hand, thrusting in our blueberry rakes and attempting to use the sort of proper wrist action to pull them back out brimming with berries. The trick, we'd been told, was to dislodge and shake out just the berries, with a minimum of leaves, twigs and other flora, before dumping the contents into waiting containers. The "cleaned quarts," upon which our pay was

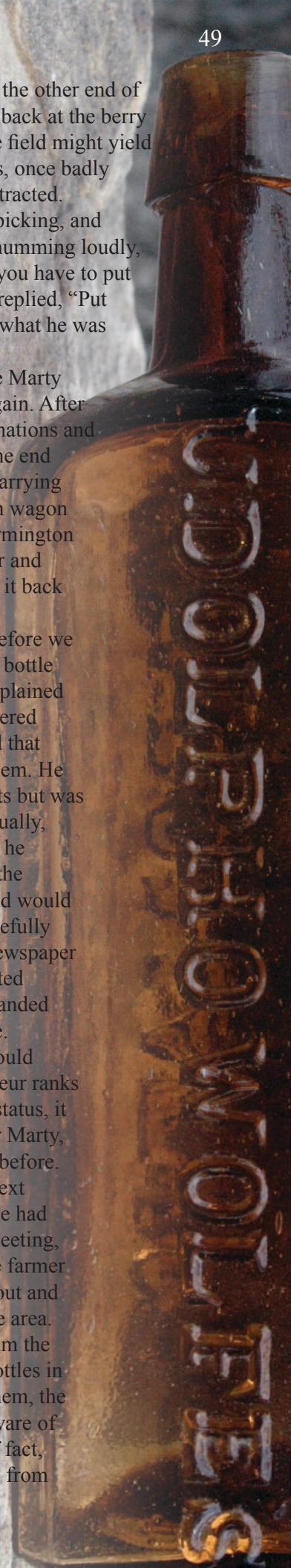
based, amounted to what came out the other end of a conveyor belted cleaning system back at the berry barn. A poorly picked bucket in the field might yield only a fraction of its bulk in berries, once badly harvested plant matter had been extracted.

At the end of that long day of picking, and with the berry barn conveyor belt humming loudly, Marty confronted me. "You know you have to put it back." He said. Playing dumb, I replied, "Put what back?" But I knew very well what he was talking about.

It was many weeks later before Marty and I would see that little bitters again. After numerous rationalizations, recriminations and reversals, the last thing we did at the end of the picking season, just before carrying our bags down to the family station wagon waiting to whisk us back to the Farmington Valley was to reposition the dresser and replace that coveted bottle. Putting it back was, for us, an act of faith.

Back at home, it wasn't long before we shared a casual version of our attic bottle experience with the parents. We explained to Dad that the bottles we'd discovered were truly unique and valuable and that our dream was to somehow own them. He listened to our impassioned requests but was skeptical and noncommittal. Eventually, however, after various approaches, he relented, saying that he would see the farmer at an upcoming meeting, and would broach the subject. Marty and I carefully calculated our berry picking and newspaper delivery savings. When the appointed meeting date arrived, we soberly handed Dad \$100 in small bills and change. Knowing that such a bold move would immediately take us from the amateur ranks up to professional bottle collector status, it amounted to our best offer. Neither Marty, nor I had ever tried to buy a bottle before.

When Dad returned from his next Massachusetts Church gathering, he had a story to tell. He said that at the meeting, he'd been surprised to hear that the farmer and his family had decided to sell out and that they soon would be leaving the area. When Dad privately shared with him the story of our chance discovery of bottles in his attic, and our deep interest in them, the farmer had said that yes, he was aware of all those old bottles. As a matter of fact, he'd revealed, all the antique items from



his barns and buildings were due to be appraised and sold in an upcoming farm auction. Dad then told him that his hopeful boys were prepared to offer \$100 cash for that lot of old bottles. Dad said that the farmer's reaction was one of surprise but said that he wanted to think about it. That's where they'd left things and Dad returned, bringing back our cash. Marty and I were not sure if this was good, or bad news.

We agonized over the next couple of weeks, pestering Dad for any updates. Then, one evening he returned from work with news. The farmer had called and said that if we wanted them, he'd sell us the bottles for the \$100 we'd offered, but we'd have to come and get them before the auction a week from Saturday.

Two days later we were back in the Impala wagon rolling north. As Dad drove, Marty and I rode in silence. Snug in my pocket was folded the first \$100 bill I'd ever had in my possession. Dad had suggested that we go to the local bank and trade in our accumulated "chickenfeed" in an effort to make the transaction easier on the farmer.

Upon arrival we were led back behind the berry barn to a jumble of cardboard boxes brimming with dusty bottles. Before shaking hands on the deal, the farmer said that the appraiser had cautioned him against selling the bottles to us, believing that they would produce more than \$100 in an auction setting. He said, however, that we'd been honest, hard-working farmhands and that he'd rather we had them, even though he was pretty sure he'd told all the live-in pickers that attics were off limits. With a sidelong glance at my brother, I solemnly handed over the crisp Benjamin.

Back at home we filled our mom's kitchen with an

assembly line of old glass and began to evaluate the specifics of our purchase. First, we counted the haul at over 150 bottles, including that fateful Phoenix Bitters. Some quick math on Marty's part indicated that we'd paid an average of about 66 cents per bottle, which sounded a lot better than having spent our entire bundle on things that, to our parents anyway, seemed to have little intrinsic value.

Next, we began a process of cleaning and carefully examining each dusty item. We kept the John Adams reference guide handy, hoping to find amidst our take a fair number of bottles that "matched."

We found that a number of the bottles sported labels that announced the vessel's contents in stilted 19th century language. Some labels were torn or stained and our mother initially suggested that we soak the grimy labels off all the bottles "so that they'd look prettier in a window." Marty and I consulted briefly over this suggestion but remembered that in the Adams book, two bottles on the very first page displayed labels. We took the notation "with paper label" as a sign of enhanced value and said no, we'd just wipe the dust off the labeled ones and set them aside. This decision was also applied to a few that were corked with original ingredients still inside, or with odd contents; including one which held lead buckshot and another that sported an assortment of metal strips that appeared to be meant for banding wild blackbirds.

Everything else went through a soapy wash and rinse in our kitchen's double sink and was laid out on the carpet to dry. We discretely disposed of a couple of mummified mice that appeared along the way without tipping off our generally squeamish mother.

As our newly acquired collection sat drying, and with the Adams book in hand, we attempted to make an initial valuation of our



haul.

It was quickly clear to us that while there was some good news, it mostly seemed to be quite bad. Buyer's remorse weighed heavy as we concluded that only half a dozen of our 152 purchased bottles matched up, even approximately, with the Adams reference.

We hung our hat, however, on the one bright spot of very good news: the most valuable bottle in his published collection, according to Mr. Adams, was an 11 ½ inch free blown rough pontil push up "wine" bottle, color: light olive green, with an applied collar below a sheared lip. He valued this gem at \$25 - \$30. And to our relief, sparkling there on our carpet was an exact match!

The other "matches" included a couple of Mason 1858 fruit jars, some slick blob sodas that seemed similar, and a couple of common food bottles that matched up. Most were valued at less than \$3.00, except for Mr. Adam's aqua half gallon Mason jar that he valued at \$6 to \$8 dollars – but even that one wasn't a true match: ours was marred with an italicized number 2 below the word Mason that his lacked.

Marty and I were puzzled. We honestly didn't think that there could be many more than 463 types of old bottles in all of New England, yet we seemed to have proof on our living room floor that quite a few more might exist.

It was actually years before we gained a true appreciation of what our act of faith had yielded, and the good fortune brought to us through the generosity of a crusty New England farmer. We built shelves in our basement where we proudly displayed the first bottles we ever bought, alongside the best ones we would dig. It's been decades now since that 1969 blueberry summer, and many of those bottles still grace the collections Marty and I have continued to nurture.

I've provided with this piece photos of just a few of those attic bottles that passed into our boyish hands there in rural Massachusetts. While we never created a true inventory of our instant collection, what follows is a mention of the most identifiable and memorable items it contained.

For starters, there were 7 embossed amber RUSH'S BITTERS (most with full labels) and 1 amber DOYLE'S HOP BITTERS (with a partial label). Unlabeled, but in the bitters category was our cherished PHOENIX BITTERS, 3 aqua ATTWOOD'S JAUNDICE BITTERS, an orange-amber UDOLPHO WOLFE'S AROMATIC SCHNAPPS, and 1 RUSH'S BUCHU AND IRON in aqua.

Besides the aforementioned free-blown and pontiled wine bottle, there were more than a dozen more open and graphite pontiled bottles (all unembossed) of various sizes and shapes, including a couple in a beautiful greenish-bluish color. In addition, there were the following that were both pontiled and embossed: a DOCT MARSHALL'S SNUFF, a DR. PORTER NEW YORK, and a very crude LOMBARD & CUNDALL EXCELSIOR HAIR TONIC SPRINGFIELD MASS with a sharp tubular pontil.

Besides the various embossed bitters, there were quite a few patent medicines, including an astonishing two dozen unlabeled aqua RUSH's SARSAPARILLA & IRON bottles. In addition to those there were each of the following: a crude hinge-mold aqua LYONS KATHAIRON FOR THE HAIR NEW-YORK, a heavy paneled HUNT'S REMEDY, WM. E. CLARKE PHARMACIST PROVIDENCE. R. I., a DR. MILES RESTORATIVE BLOOD PURIFIER, a RENNE'S PAIN KILLING MAGIC OIL "IT WORKS LIKE A CHARM" and a KICKAPOO COUGH CURE. There was





just one embossed hutch soda, a CHARLES RYAN BOTTLER NORTH ADAMS MASS REGISTERED, but there were five short blob sodas, including two shades of BIGELOW & CO SPRINGFIELD MASS (aqua & emerald green), plus three slick ones with roughed slug plates and metal closures. There were a number of unembossed amber and aqua cylinder whiskeys, but three liquor bottles really stood out from the rest. They were made with heavy dark green glass and leaned crudely with bulging necks and globby applied tops. Each had a dainty string tied around its neck which we left in place, wondering what venerable New England glass house might have produced them.

Representing the somewhat local flavor of our items were embossed drug store bottles as follows: J.T. WEBBER & CO SPRINGFIELD, MASS., JOHN J. CRUSE PHARMACIST SUCCESSOR TO PABKE & CRUSE SPRINGFIELD, MASS. J.B. HEALEY & CO PRESCRIPTION DRUGGISTS WESTFIELD, MASS and from across the border, a WILLIAM M. MILLS OPERA HOUSE DRUG STORE WINSTED, CONN., as well as a COWLES & BROTHER DRUGGISTS FARMINGTON, CONN.

Among the unembossed but labeled containers were three pint milk bottles with labels that announced their contents to be BLUE ROCK OYSTERS. Also sporting paper labels were bottles identified as containing, BLACK'S LINAMENT, HALL'S VEGETABLE SICILIAN HAIR RENEWER, along with various common labeled whiskeys. In addition there were several three-piece mold bottles in olive amber who's orange and

black printed labels described their contents to be BRAUNSCHWEIGER MUMME MALT EXTRACT LONG ISLAND BOTTLING CO. F.M. DOYLE & CO. BOSTON MASS.

In the fruit jar category, there was both a half gallon and a quart MASON'S 1858 with #2's embossed under the arched MASON'S, along with several different cylinder 1858 pints, all of the ground-lip variety, a couple with lugged lids. There were a few aqua TRADE MARK LIGHTNING quarts and pints, plus one very pretty apple green quart. The most curious of the canning jars was a beautiful aqua/teal shaded quart LUDLOW JAR that still sits front & center in my jar collection today.

