

LEGENDS OF THE JAR!

[Editor's Note: This article is a result of longtime collector and author Bruce W. Schank reaching out to longtime collector Jeff Harper.]

I became familiar with Jeff soon after I became a member of the Fruit Jar Discussion Group on Yahoo in February 2003. Eventually, I realized that he was quite a serious collector and had already amassed a considerable Ball jar collection. We interacted via email and eventually I ended up selling and trading with him. Finally, in January 2008, I met both he and his lovely wife, Mary, at the Muncie show.

Jeff was born in 1952 in Muncie, Indiana and also was raised there. He went to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Jeff is a senior implementation specialist for a company based out of Pittsburgh, Pa., which is a subsidiary of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. It writes software for community mental health centers. His main duties are to help new customers get up and running, do data-base conversions and any customization that might be required.

After college, Jeff visited antique stores and by the time he and Mary had married, he already had about 12 jars. He was also getting samples because he was a Ball shareholder, receiving the stock as a gift from his mother who had received the stock from her father, all Ball family-related. So Jeff is a Ball Corporation shareholder.

While growing up and when he was about 8 or 9 years old, Jeff was responsible for watching over and watering the cucumber patch. The family would make pickles and can them, in Ball fruit jars, of course. Yes, Jeff sure enjoyed eating those bread & butter pickles made from the cucumbers he had grown and nurtured and best of all lovingly canned in plain ordinary Ball fruit jars.

Jeff's great-grandfather incredibly just happened to be F.C. Ball. You know, one of the founding Ball brothers of the Ball Corporation famous for fruit jars around the world. F.C. Ball served as the first company president and remained in that capacity for 63 years. F.C. Ball had five children, one of whom was Margaret, who was Jeff's grandmother and his mother's



Jeff Harper

mother. So F.C. Ball was actually his maternal great-grandfather. Neither Jeff nor his parents ever worked for Ball Corporation, but his grandparents did. His grandfather, Fred Petty, was in charge of all of Ball "packer" jar product line and later became the comptroller of the company until he died of a heart attack at age 51. His grandmother was a director for 30 to 40 years for Ball Brothers, later Ball Corporation, and eventually retired when she turned 70.

Mary claims credit for actually applying the spark in order to get Jeff into collecting and then trying to get one of every Ball jar made (not a simple feat, mind you.) She used the logic of his incredible lineage as a contributing factor as well as the fact he already had some pretty Ball jars in his possession. Jeff thought that made good enough sense and pursued it. About 20 years ago, Mary found a flyer from Dick Roller advertising the Standard Fruit Jar Reference. So for Christmas that year, she bought it as a gift for him. Jeff's copy just happens to be exactly as mine; one of six copies made from what was left over, bug-infested material and not a hard cover original. So upon getting it, Jeff noticed how many Ball jars there were and so he started looking in earnest for them.



Rare Ruby Special Jar!

Around that same time, he began going to shows and attended one of the last Indy shows at which he claims the weather was pretty darned bad. When Jeff's daughter Katie was graduating from high school and looking for a college, he ingeniously combined weekends in which they visited colleges she was interested in and on which bottle shows were going at the same time. When they went to Bucknell University, he went to the York show which just so happened to be the first time he spent more than \$250 for a single jar (a PAT' APLD' FOR quart with rusty but original lid and metal closure). When they went to Vanderbilt,



F.C. Ball Family Portrait



Nice built in wall shelves



Rare upside down embossed jar.



Very uncommon modern cobalt Ball lid.

he was able to attend the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors National in Nashville, Tenn.. He remembers how fortunate it turned out that he was able to do both at the same time and how it all worked out so perfectly. It was at this 1996 National that he acquired the first of his porcelain-lined Ball Bros. Glass Manufacturing Co. (BBGM Co.) jars.

One of Mary's best jar finds was when she went into her favorite resale consignment shop called the Guild Shop. About 20 years ago, while visiting there, she found a nice little blue ½ pint teen series BALL PERFECT MASON for the sweet little price of \$4.50 which even back then was dirt cheap. Smile

Jeff remembers once finding a very scarce and desirable Ball jar through an ad he placed in Bottles and Extras. According to him, dues to the FOHBC covered a couple of 50/60-word free ads and he always put in an ad for rare Ball jars. Approximately eight or nine years ago, he received a response to his ad by someone from Buffalo. The guy told Jeff that he had this jar that said Ball Fruit Jar on it and he also knew the jar listed at \$3,000 in the Red Book which was No. 7 at the time. He had a daughter who lived in Katy, Texas which was 40 miles away and mentioned if Jeff was interested he would send it to her and he could take a look at it. The guy wanted \$3,300 for it which was a strong price and Jeff remembers someone at a Muncie show at that time telling him he should be able to find an example for \$2,500 which, of course, never happened. So Jeff and Mary went and looked at it, liked what they saw and bought it.

At another time in response to his ad, he was approached by someone who had a clear quart La Abeja (which translates to "The Bee") which Jeff bought and is now extremely happy to own that jar. Two examples of this jar are known to exist. It seems Jeff's ad brought him more than a few good jars because he was able to acquire a yellow green pint bead seal Ball THE Mason from his ad, too. Looks like these finds are proof positive that advertising pays off and in a big way sometimes.

For people who enjoy collecting Ball jars no matter what type inexpensive to the most expensive they may be, Jeff has a very nice thorough collection that only a relatively few people can rival. He has some of the rarest Ball jars known in the hobby as well as many "seemingly" common jars that just can't be found or seen in the average person's collection. He enjoys collecting certain genres and goes to extremes such as having a seven-jar Ball Standard set in which the embossing progressively goes from higher to lower on the jar



Very scarce Special only jar



Just a few of the really nice wooden boxes in Jeff's collection.

all the way towards the heel. Although his ultimate goal is to have an example of every known Ball jar listed in the Red Book or not listed as well, he doesn't necessarily want or desire complete sets of the same jar. Jeff has approximately 600 to 650 jars on display in his home in just about every room and wherever you can put a shelf or set a jar.

He also has an extensive and wonderful box collection as well as a phenomenal amount of go-withs of many hard to find and highly sought after Ball-related items including oodles of Ball paper stuff such as Blue Books, posters, photos and more. His lid collection is possibly the largest I have ever seen and superb in every respect. And what he has in a special display that he built himself are only part of them because he has many more on jars scattered throughout his home that are in the collection.



Very scarce Spanish Ball jar!

He has over 700 jars in boxes in his garage and with the completion of their fantastic, absolutely beautiful and massive log cabin lake home, they now have plenty of room to eventually display their entire collection. Jeff told me he doesn't personally put a premium on color so he doesn't have a tremendous amount of color in the collection overall, but what he does have is extremely nice indeed.

On day two of my visit with Jeff and Mary, they drove me to their lake home and I must say I was floored, to say the least. What a spectacular vacation home it is and I just loved it. A contractor showed up to give a quote for some work. Before long he was also quoting new shelving for the walls so I piped in about how nice it would be for them to have shelves built into the casing of some really large extra long front windows on the second floor. I mentioned something of the nature of a "stained" glass look with all of the jars being there. Well, before you know it, that was a done deal and Jeff



Outstanding grouping of Ball made glass lids.



Just a fabulous Lake House in the country!

jokingly told me he would possibly now have to go after more colored jars considering he'll have so much more room to display them properly. Oops, as I swallowed hard, I have a big mouth... Smile

My weekend visit with Jeff and Mary was a dual purpose because I not only wanted to get this story, but I also did a cash trade with Jeff. I'm not sure how it came about but Jeff knew I owned a Red Book No. 195. That is a jar quite literally at the top of his most wanted list and he has been pursuing it for quite some time. So I flew to Houston with jar in hand. Normally, I wouldn't have let

go of a jar of that magnitude, but tough economic times dictated otherwise and I was glad that the jar went to a very good new home and a real ancestor of the family who made it approximately 125 years ago in Buffalo, N.Y.

Jeff would say to new collectors: Buy what you like. That's what a lot of longtime collectors would say as well, but he would also add to not regret it if your tastes change. You bought what you liked at the time and if you're not interested in it now, you can always sell it or store it. When you buy certain jars and the book says \$5, \$10, \$20, but all you can get them for is double, then that's what they're worth no matter what the book quotes.

Jeff has over the years acquired a goodly portion of his jars from eBay, but he says you have to make a decision based on what you're paying for the jar including shipping which adds a considerable amount of money to a cheaper jar. eBay obviously is a good place to find jars if you can't travel, but there is many instances where you will pay more for a jar on that forum than if you found it on a shelf or at a show. But for those who only have that option then that is the way to go.

Jeff's biggest surprise is the skyrocketing upward



Jeff would say to new collectors, "Buy what you like."

Every Ball jar collector loves a splash of color in the collection



Wherever Jeff could put a shelf there's jars to be found.

value of colored jars in general. Colored jars that sold nine or 10 years ago are probably four or five times the value now and rising. Other jars have not risen to those levels. Of course, rare jars are a totally different animal and they rise in value due to their rarity and desirability. He doesn't understand why, but the number revamping and additions Doug accomplished from Red Book No. 7 to Red Book No. 8 changed things on the Ball front. Jeff credits Doug Leybourne with making Ball jars more interesting to many people because they perceived the amount of time he spent on the revamp as proof Ball jars were worth collecting. Ball jars are currently highly sought after by many newer collectors.

If Jeff has any regrets it would be that he hasn't bid high enough on many items he really wanted over

the years. He's lost out on a lot of good pieces because someone else put a higher value on them than he did, but in recent years that has changed dramatically. He has really jumped headlong into the bidding wars with the goal to win on good stuff and whoever bids against him has real competition to deal with indeed.

As a Ball jar collector myself, I was quite pleased to be with Jeff and share stories and see all of the incredible items he has amassed over the years. I personally do not have the room, means or desire to collect the amount of items Jeff has amassed already. His eventual pursuit will put him most likely in the 1,600-plus category, not including go-withs. It's a safe bet with the collections and collectors currently opting out that it won't be long till Jeff is "The Premier Ball Jar Collector" in the country



Nice set of scarce upside down embossed Ball Mason jars.



Perfake Ball Mason

and deservedly so. Suffice it to say, it would take a lot longer than a weekend visit to get a better grasp of everything in Jeff's collection. I really got a kick out of the cobalt Ball Perfake Mason made by Jim Del Grado.

God has truly blessed both Jeff and Mary and rightly so. It's evident in everything they have, do, think and project about their lives. They are without a



Jars are everywhere in the Harper's Houston home.



I think every collector enjoys paper labels.



doubt very warm, friendly and extremely giving people, the kind of people that anyone would be honored to associate with and have as friends. They are fantastic hosts and are reaping the hard work they have accomplished all of their lives and living life to its fullest. I was treated so well by them that I actually felt a bit guilty about it all. I didn't expect it and I tried to refuse it, but they insisted on giving me a large dose of warm Texas hospitality and they succeeded in the biggest way. And isn't everything about Texas supposed to be larger than life anyway?

Jeff and Mary have given me an open invitation to come back again and next time with my better half. I will most undoubtedly take them up on their offer.

It is with sadness that I now tell the jar collecting world that Jeff Harper passed away on May 18, 2012 at 12:43 a.m., peacefully in the presence of his loving wife Mary and their two children, Katie and Andrew.

The above article was published in the



Yep, even the hallways are loaded with Ball jars.

November 2009 Midwest Glass Chatter, the official publication of the Midwest Antique Fruit Jar & Bottle Club. After publishing this article, Jeff went on to acquire the now legendary Mason Bright Ball Jar Collection. Along with that huge acquisition and other great additions to Jeff's already fabulous Ball Jar Collection he was undoubtedly THE King of the Hill in the Ball Jar World.

While on a summer trip last year, my very good friend and fellow collector Joe Coulson stopped by Jeff and Mary Harper's home to see all of the improvements and additions they had put in place. It was quite an obvious change from when I had been there and a sight to see. I am truly sorry that I never got the chance to go back to the Harpers again after my 2009 visit.

Jeff in my estimation came closer than anyone in the goal of having the most complete Ball jar collection. He was the King and no one else can claim that but him. But in my simple mind there was something else about Jeff outside of the realm of jars that was much more important. Jeff was a genuinely good man, husband and father. Jeff was a special person because of his love for God and other people.

Jeff also in my humble estimation lived a great life. He accomplished far more than what many people could ever dream of. I feel privileged that Jeff allowed me to go to his home and share even a brief moment of his life. I am also honored that he considered me among his friends
God Be with You Jeff,
Bruce



The new shelving looks pretty Fab if I do say so myself.

Special sign Mary had made for Jeff.