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How I got started in Bottle Collecting

It all started when I was going down to Merrimac River to dig mud worms for fish bait. I didn't realize I was on a dump that had closed in 1904. As soon as I started to dig, I found an aqua bottle with a ring around the neck. Another one popped up and I picked up worms at the same time. I found a wine bottle with a kick-up. I kept digging, going down 1-1/2 feet.

I couldn't believe what was there – ink wells, inks. I took them all home and started to wash them off in our kitchen sink. Later, I dug a case gin and then a Warner's Safe Cure came up. Holy cripe! What the (expletive deleted) am I doing here?

The hole got bigger and I started to run into pontiled stuff. I kept going and going. I had the hole bigger than a manhole cover. This was taking place more than 40 years ago. I was a teenager and still in school. I am 61 now and retired on a disability.

I told a few people and they all started getting into the hole. I learned a bottle show was going to be held in Laconia, N.H., and I met Dr. Burton Spiller at the show. (Dr. Spiller is a member of the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors Hall of Fame). I had taken a few bottles and remember selling him a Dr. Spiller's Golden Hair Balsam, a common bottle, for 7 or 8 bucks. (Those who know what Burt looks like today will get a chuckle

from this) In the early 1970s, he sold me a F. Brown Boston/ Sarsaparilla & Tomato Bitters for \$32. I still have it. I also dug four of the Cuticura for Constitutional Humors bottles.

Soon, there was a whole gang digging there. Some of them were retired and had more time to dig. I started digging under the roots of a huge maple tree. I was able to tunnel under it. Later, I went back and found the tree had tipped over. There were eight or nine trees and all of them eventually fell.

I dug my first Greeley's Bourbon Bitters barrel in the dump, which covers a quarter of an acre and is eight or nine feet deep. One time, I was digging a hole and standing on a pile of glass. I started scraping away and found a four-log Drake's Plantation Bitters. I thought it was an ashtray! It was broken, but I found a whole one later. A Success to the Railroad historical flask came out. It was a great dump!

I had an awful scare once. There was a pile of coal above the hole and it started sliding into the hole. I couldn't move. I took my hands and carefully dug myself out. It took an hour or more. I left my shovel buried under that stuff. As soon as I got out, I went home. I was so scared!

Owner of the property was a lunchroom lady at the grammar school. Her daughter came by on a bike, saw the toppled trees and told her mother. She got mad and called the police. I was a minor (16) and they couldn't do anything.

I had gotten three years' worth of digging out of it. I used to put my bottles in a basket on my English bike and carry them home.

Later, I started going to bottle shows and buying for my collection. I bought another barrel, a Dr. Roback's Stomach Bitters and later I found a Dr. Stephen Jewett's Celebrated Health Restoring Bitters from Rindge, N.H. I wound up selling it for \$1,500 and later wished I still had it. So I called (dealer) Norman Heckler and he came up with one in olive green. I was disappointed because it was not in the "Stoddard color." (Note: The Carolyn Ring – W.C. (Bill) Ham Bitters Bottles book lists olive green as "extremely rare.") Bill Ham owns that bottle today. (Ham also is a member of the FOHBC Hall of Fame).

The dump is still there, but now it's been planted with grass and looks like a golf course. I've been talking to a son of the property owner, urging him to get a backhoe and dig out what's left of the dump.

He's thinking about it.

