

Louisville Museum Gets Bonanza in 601 Historical Flask Collection

By Bill Baab

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — An outstanding collection of 601 American historical flasks is now the property of Louisville's Speed Art Museum, thanks to the generosity of longtime collector Robinson S. Brown Jr.

The collection was accumulated over a 50-year period by Mr. Brown, retired chief executive officer for the Brown-Forman Company, a Louisville-based beverage firm. He is a descendant of company founder George Garvin Brown.

The flasks were produced by American glass factories between 1815 and the 1890s and originally held whiskey. Some of the flasks were produced at either the Louisville or Kentucky glass works.

Grouped into 15 categories, the collection includes historical (presidents, railroads), decorative (scrolls, sunbursts), organizations (Masons) and locales (Pike's Peak, Baltimore Monument).

"Mr. Brown's goal was to try to collect an example of every flask listed in the book, *American Glass* by George and Helen McKearin," said Julie Thies, manager of collections information. "We were pretty shocked when we saw (the extent of) it."

Mr. Brown has been an avid collector for more than a half-century. In addition to the flasks, he is interested in paintings, early cut glass and coins.

He got his start in flask collecting quite by accident, he said.

"In 1948, I was living in New Jersey and drove into Vermont where I found an antique shop in a barn," he explained during a telephone interview last spring. "There were 100 historical flasks for sale at \$5 apiece and I bought a few. Looking back, I should have bought all of them. Then I started picking them up here and there."

He continues to collect, but hasn't found any more \$5 flasks. "The most I ever paid for one was \$20,000, but most of them cost about \$200," he said.

The exceptional flask is an aqua pint embossed with an early steamboat with paddlewheel, waves at the bottom, and the words, THE AMERICAN SYSTEM. Its reverse shows a sheaf of rye and the words, USE ME BUT DO NOT ABUSE ME.

Mr. Brown, now 88, found others in auctions conducted by Jim Hagenbuch (Glass Works) and Norm

Heckler.

"Norm came to my house and it took four days for him to appraise the collection. My children weren't interested in having them, so I decided to donate them to the Speed Art Museum."

"His initial collecting habits were with bottles," said Heckler, from Woodstock Valley, Conn., himself a collector for 46 years, and well-known throughout the bottle collecting world. "He has a few bitters and a few sodas."

"He bought what appealed to him, whether it was color or shape. Given his background in whiskey, I would have thought that he'd collect those bottles, but he didn't. When he started collecting historical flasks (which contained whiskey), he looked for color and different lip finishes. There are few duplicates in his collection."

Mr. Brown listed examples made by the Louisville Glass Works and Kentucky Glass Works as among



his personal favorites since he resides a short distance from Louisville.

Examples, according to a list of the collection kindly sent to the writer by the museum, include aqua and amber 2-quarts-plus flasks with an American eagle on the obverse and FARLEY & TAYLOR RICHMOND KY., on the reverse; three vertically ribbed flasks (half-pint, pint and quart) with an American eagle and LOUISVILLE KY. GLASS WORKS on the obverse and vertical ribs on the reverse; several scroll flasks embossed LOUISVILLE KY GLASSWORKS, and four examples (aqua quart, light blue pint, aqua pint and aqua half-pint) of the LOUISVILLE KY GLASS WORKS on the obverse and a plain reverse.

Mr. Brown's interests extends to coins, tokens and cut glass from the Brilliant Period.

"I once had the finest collection of large U.S. cents, but sold them at auction," he said. "I collected Condor tokens from the United Kingdom dating to 1787 and 1790-97. There was a shortage of small change back then and the British mint OK'd the use of the tokens for coinage for awhile. Once the mint started coining small change pieces like the ha'-penny, the tokens became illegal.

"I have 5,000 different of the 6,000 pieces known to exist," he said.

"The Robinson S. Brown collection of historical flasks provides a fascinating visual record of American popular culture and decorated motifs as applied to glass," said Scott Erbes, curator of decorative arts at the Speed. "Mr. Brown is a great connoisseur and his collection is outstanding in its depth and in the quality of examples he sought and acquired."

Founded in 1927, the Speed Art Museum has more than 13,000 pieces spanning 6,000 years in its collection, ranging from Egyptian art to contemporary art. Included are collections of 17th century Dutch and Flemish paintings, 18th century French art, Renaissance and Baroque tapestries and African and Native American works.

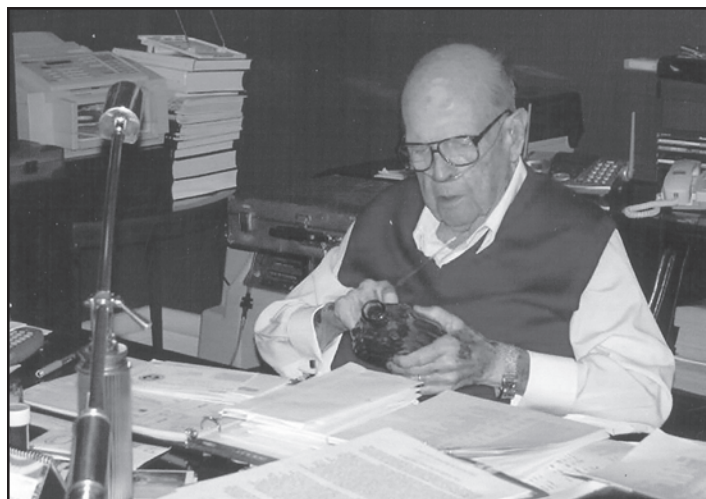
The museum is located at 2035 South Third Street and features a hands-on art learning center for families, a café and gift shop. More information is available by calling (502) 634-2700.

Check out the museum's web site at: www.speedmuseum.org.



Photos:

Above, right: Masonic Symbols / American Eagle, about 1817-1820 Keene Glass Works, Keene, New Hampshire. McKearin/Wilson GIV-1. **Previous page, above:** McKearin/Wilson GVIII-1. **Previous page, below, from left to right:** McKearin/Wilson GIX-45, GVI-5 and GIII-4, all from the Robinson S. Brown, Jr. Collection of Historical Flasks, Speed Art Museum. *Courtesy of photographer Kenneth Hayden, Speed Art Museum.*



Above: Mr. Robinson S. Brown, Jr. taking a look at one of his flasks. **Left:** Peter Morrin (left), director of the Speed Art Museum and Norman Heckler (center), appraiser of collector Mr. Robinson S. Brown, Jr.'s flasks take a moment to pose.