

Collector's Spotlight

by Diane Cauwels



A 1919 check signed by Lem Motlow, drawn on the Jack Daniel business account.

From the minute you open the front door of the Cauwels' house you immediately know everything about the occupants. Collectors live here! Jack Daniel's old crock jugs and bottles greet you as you enter the living room.

Don and his family were living in California in 1979 and during their vacation, they took a detour to Lynchburg, Tennessee to visit the Jack Daniel Distillery. Don had wanted to see the distillery for a very long time and this vacation was the perfect time to visit Lynchburg. Little did they know that after seeing this beautiful part of the country they would soon be calling it home. Almost prophetically Don said that he really liked this area and would like to live there someday. Ten miles from Lynchburg, the family stopped in Tullahoma and felt right at home.

Four months after their vacation, Don was reading a national business magazine and saw an ad for a position that fit him to a tee. He called his wife and read the article to her. The company was located in Tullahoma, Tennessee, and two months later they were living there.

While visiting the distillery for the first time, Don saw the wonderful old bottles and crock jugs on display. He could not believe the old pieces had survived over the years and his interest in the history and collecting of the old pieces began.

Shortly after moving to Tennessee, Don saw his first old crock jug for sale at an antique shop and took it home. The quest was on! He started going to flea markets, shows, placed a couple ads in the paper and spread the word that he was looking for old Jack Daniel items.

All collectors know the search is part of the fun. Don would get a lead on a jug or bottle and chase it down only to find it was a Jim Beam or just a plain bottle with no name on it. However, when that lead turns out to be a good one, and there is a wonderful jug or bottle waiting for him, it makes all the disappointments disappear.

Don seemed to find a jug here and there, but there is a lot of competition around - so any little find is a major event. When he found his first Jack Daniel bottle he was amazed at condition and clarity of the glass, and started looking a little closer at boxes of bottles and in corners of shops, garages and barns. Soon his bottle collection was taking shape and with the jugs that he had picked up, he found he had the beginning of a collection that would continue for over twenty years.

Don bought a very rare version of the round quart bottle and was so excited that he wanted to share it with other collectors. The lady in Lynchburg that sold him his first crock jug had been a collector of Jack Daniel's for quite a while and wanted to see the bottle. In all her years as an antique

dealer and collector she had never seen or heard of this particular version, and asked Don if he would bring it to Lynchburg so she could see it. In his haste to get to Lynchburg, which was ten minutes down the road, he grabbed the bottle, put it on the passenger side front seat and headed down the road. He got two blocks from the house and when he made a left turn on the Lynchburg highway, the bottle rolled off the seat and broke into several pieces. Words cannot express the look on his face or the pain he was feeling. He could not part with the pieces of the bottle and he kept them for many years waiting for another bottle like it. This happened in 1983.

One day in 2001, the phone rang and a man from Mississippi was calling to say he heard about Don's collection and he had a round bottle that he wanted to sell. Was Don interested? As the man started to describe the lettering on the bottle Don's eyes lit up and a big smile came across his



The jug that started it all - one-gallon blue and white banded Jack Daniel jug



W. T. and C. D. Gunter round bottle & Rare amber square quart Jack Daniel



Wonderful turn of the century Jack Daniel litho bar sign. The previous owner cropped it to fit this frame, but there has not been another original seen, it was a welcome addition to the collection.

face. It was THE bottle! Eighteen years later and he finally had a chance finally replace his broken bottle! He could not believe it. The man stated his price and the deal was done. The man said he would ship it right out and Don asked if it would be a problem if we drove down on Saturday and picked up the bottle rather than take a chance of it getting broken in the mail. Our new friend said that would be just fine because he would love to show off his home which had been in his family since before the civil war.

After arriving at his house, we found ourselves about 75 miles north of New Orleans, which turned out to be quite a little drive from Nashville. There we found a second Jack Daniel quart that was different from the first one and so Don came home with two bottles. Needless to say, the bottles were wrapped, double boxed and safely put in the trunk. Don finally threw out the broken pieces of the 1983 bottle but he did think twice before doing so.

Over the years there have been many dry spells where he would not find any Jack Daniel items even though he was constantly searching. Weekend trips were taken all over Middle Tennessee looking at shops and antique malls. Antiquing and collecting are a way of life for the Cauwels, with regular trips to California, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, and everywhere in between. Don has made a lot of contacts, and once in a while they pay off. It may

take years, but they pay off.

A man in Georgia has a full and sealed pre-prohibition bottle that has been in his family many years. He got a business card from Don about 10 or 12 years ago and called a couple years ago to see if Don was still interested, adding that the family is not ready to sell it yet, but he wanted to touch base and he would let him know when the time comes to sell. He said he would put the business card back under the bottle in the closet so it would not get lost. One of these days he will call and say, "we are ready to sell" and Don will finally get the bottle. As hard as it is, collectors must be patient.

Probably the best phone call he ever received was from a lady in Florida. She said she was retired and wanted to get rid of some things and had two bottles that Don may want. The first one was a back bar bottle for Continental Whiskey. The second one was the original 1904 Jack Daniel Gold Medal back bar bottle complete with the gold flashing on every other panel. It seemed too good to be true. She asked for an offer on them and insisted he had to buy both bottles. Don was only interested in the Jack Daniel bottle but he made her a very fair offer for the two.

Of course, that lady thought Don was crazy, but he assured her his offer was genuine and he would pay for her to take them to a pack and ship for safe packing. Actually he was thinking in the back of his head about flying to Florida and picking the bottle up, but other commitments prevented that from happening. He sent the money and she sent the bottles right out. He called her when they arrived and thanked her and to keep his number in case she finds anything else. She said she had purchased both bottles for a couple dollars 20 or 30 years ago at a shop just because she thought "they were pretty".

As all collectors know, it is hard work and love that goes into putting a collection together. Sometime money has nothing to do with acquiring a piece for your collection. Many years ago Don got a call from a guy outside Nashville that said he had a few



Jack Daniel pieces that he had been thinking of getting rid of, but wanted to trade for something rather than sell them. After a trip to the man's house, Don saw a few very nice Jack Daniel's items that he wanted for his collection. This man was not a collector, but had come by the Jack items by chance and had kept them for a couple years. After a lot of haggling over one thing and then another, they came to an agreement and Don took home one of his favorite pieces. A 5-gallon Jack Daniel crock jug was added to the collection that day. The other items were incidental. The 5-gallon was on its way home with Don and he could not have been happier.

Although Don likes his entire Jack Daniel collection, his favorite pieces are the glass bottles. They have survived all these years of being stored in attics, basements, closets, or even being buried. To find a bottle that is pristine, with a few nice old bubbles in the glass is a real treat!

As time goes by, the search for bottles and jugs continues with the same fervor and dedication as it was back in 1979. Twenty years from now you will probably still see him walking around the flea markets, malls and shows looking for that elusive Jack Daniel bottle or jug.



A 1/2-pint cork top and an old 1/2 pint Jack Daniel leather covered flask.