



*Federation of Historic Bottle Collectors*

President :

## *President's Message*

**October-December 2003**

Ralph VanBrocklin  
1021 W Oakland Ave., Suite 109  
Johnson City, TN 37604  
(423) 913-1378  
thegenuine@comcast.net

### **THE DISAPPEARING AMERICAN BOTTLE SHOW**

Holding the National Show in Louisville, once the site of one of my favorite shows, could not help but lead me to reflect about the loss of that yearly show and, from there, to reflect about our hobby and the changes we are experiencing in it. In this area, alone, we have lost Nashville, Memphis and Louisville as vibrant shows over the past few years. Others are clearly at risk. Even Knoxville, which once sported over 400 tables of bottles, is now in danger of simply becoming another general antiques show.

There is no doubt that this is a different world than it was a decade ago, and that the forces in collecting have changed, as well. With the significant impact of the specialty auctions beginning to be felt by the late 1980's, we began to see many of the very best items disappearing from the shows and being offered in a forum that promised to maximize return to the owner. As the hobby matured, so too did the collector—from simple acquisition to dealing and profit. Sometimes this profit was to further the collection and other times just as a way of supplementing income. No matter the motive, the hobby changed and continues to change.

The biggest impact on the availability of items at our shows has come to the fore in the past 4-5 years -- online auctions. EBay and other online auctions have given everyone an avenue to sell and buy that is convenient and simple. No more long drives, no more hotel and fuel expenses and no more guessing what an item might be worth. I'll be the first to admit that I have put a number of super items on my shelves thanks to EBay and although I do sell through that venue, on occasion, I do not let that be my only venue for collecting and dealing, just as I never let the major glass auctions become my only source of participation in the hobby. For to do so comes at a price and poses consequences that I am unwilling to accept.

To me, one of the most important aspects of collecting is the interaction with others who hold similar interests. The ability to visit with my friends and to meet new folks who love glass and stoneware is the foremost reason to attend the shows (although some would say that that does not hold true with me in the first few hours of a show when I'm "scrambling" for that new acquisition!) I would hate to lose that to impersonal venues such as auctions and online sales. Donald Binz's proposal for establishing an online bottle show (see Letters to the Editor) is interesting and might even come to fruition one day, but I'd hate to see the day it does, as it would signal one more nail in the coffin of the American Bottle Show.

As digging has slowed, even that source of items has dwindled, and the excitement that the opportunity to purchase a freshly

#### **So, what to do???**

- Don't sit back and expect that someone else will perform the tasks that allow you to enjoy the hobby. Don't take your club and your local show for granted -- they may disappear faster than you could ever imagine. My intention, when I complete my two-year tenure as president of the Federation, is to be much more active in the programs of my local club and in helping the show chair. All of us need to step up to the plate and take some responsibility for the health of our shows and our clubs. It can be done and, if you value the human aspects of this hobby, it must be done!
- Provide an interesting display and/or an appealing table at the shows you attend. Show your collection to others, promoting the history of the items and introducing new collectors to the possibilities in the hobby.
- Lend interest to the shows you attend by holding some of your better items for the shows rather than running them on EBay or through the major glasshouse auctions. In particular, why not give that choice item which you have clearly established a current market value for a chance to be admired and purchased by one of your friends who prefers buying at shows to all other venues. It is great for the happy purchaser and an easy way for the seller to help improve the overall health of the show and the hobby.
- If the auction method seems preferable due to uncertainty of value, consider selling it at an auction held in conjunction with one of the shows. There can be no denying that a live auction at a show adds appeal to that show. Your item still helps the health of the show, even if it does not grace a sales table.

These thoughts may not be the final answer to the marketplace forces which are changing our hobby. But, they seem like a logical and relatively simple initial step to improving the health of our remaining shows.

Let's not lose our shows..... The friends you make at them may just prove to be the best friends you ever make in your life!

*Ralph Jay Van Brocklin, DMD, President, Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors*

dug bottle generates cannot be counted on any longer. As the easiest sites to dig are exhausted and as the opportunity to dig in many other areas is curtailed by regulations and more "liability-conscious" owners and developers, this source of items looks to be an unlikely savior of our shows.

Compounding the loss of appealing items at the shows is the failure of younger club members to step in for the established members as they decide that planning, organizing and running the shows is more taxing than they wish to shoulder. (Parenthetically, this is the same problem a number of officers of clubs which have failed have expressed to me as the primary reason that they disbanded.) If an insufficient number of members indicate an interest in running the club and staffing/putting on the show, the result is the same -- they cease to be.