Bottles in colors ranging from light aqua to olive green and dark amber crossed the block.

Bidders check out the auction offerings before the sale got underway Saturday morning.

More than bottles crossed the block. This reverse painted glass advertising sign for Allen’s Lung Balsam went out at $858.

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SPRINGFIELD, MASS — A year’s worth of anticipation for the yearly convention of the Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors was released when the convention kicked off its four-day run, August 3. Bottle collectors from all over the United States came to the federation’s convention in Springfield (a first in this city), at the MassMutual Center and Sheraton hotel. The convention takes place in the Northeast once every four years as the convention alternates between the Northeast, the South, the West, and Central US locations to make travel fair to all its members.

It is no surprise that in our interviews, several people noted the bottle-collecting community is a close-knit one. Without diminishing the importance of that statement, the same can be said for most of the subgroups in the collecting community. Collectors are just that way. Though the main reason to attend this convention could center on the chance to acquire a rare bottle, the camaraderie and friendships made and rekindled here year after year are equally appealing.

This year’s events featured an auction conducted by Glass Works Auction, a 100+ table glass show, meetings and seminars on bottles and glass, a room-hopping session, a banquet and club contests, including a Battle of Springfield bottle competition in which dealers vie to bring the best bottle. The winner (Rick Ciralli this year) receives a trophy (glass of course) and bragging rights for a year.

Collectors and dealers gather yearly and share news of their lives outside the bottle world, such as babies, weddings, travels, and sometimes the group gathers to remember their own beginnings. Collectors Timothy and Christine Hill were members at the convention. He collected historical flasks and she sought out veterinary bottle advertising.

This year’s convention auction featured part one of the Dick and Elma Watson collection. Jim Bender, who co-chaired the convention, said the first thing the Watsons’ home, Bob Strickhart, convention co-chair, said in the auction catalog foreword which included a full page of remembrances of the couple, “Oh yes, the glass was truly breathtaking, but more importantly, I knew immediately I was among friends and was truly welcomed. I quickly recognized that it was never just Dick Watson or Elma Watson, it was always Dick and Elma Watson. Together, two normal everyday individuals built a world-class bottle collection and contributed to the bottle hobby in uncountable acts of support. Together they made a remarkable team, and they quickly became key members of what I call my bottle family.”

“If growing up with bottle collecting parents is not unique, it is certainly unusual. After all, how many kids in the neighborhood had a ‘bottle room’ in their house?” recalled the couple’s four children in the catalog write-up. “Their interest in an old bottle embossed with grapes quickly blossomed into what could be described as a slightly less than all-consuming passion. Hundreds of times throughout the years, we have witnessed the joy that accompanied their latest find. All those in the bottle collecting world know the same exhilaration.”

Jim Bender, who co-chaired the convention, said the first thing he did was to tell Bob that they should pay tribute to the Watsons at the convention — an easy sell. A banquet was immediately arranged and on display were many photos of the couple with many collectors sharing stories. With the family’s blessing, the co-chairs also figured an auction here of the couple’s collections would be the icing on the cake.

Just over 100 lots of the couple’s famed bottle collection made their market debut at the convention. Crossing the block were Saratoga-type mineral waters, foods, bitters, medicines, inks, flasks, blown glass and whiskies. A couple of lots went for over $5,000, but the couple would have been pleased that there was plenty for the average person to bid on.

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Bob Strickhart, who co-chaired the convention along with Jim Bender, holds up a Canadian bitters bottle from the booth of Dave Olson, Conway, S.C.

Milk bottles often had themes. Promoting the war effort was this World War II-themed bottle in the shared booth of Jim Burns, Oneida, N.Y., and Mike Melanowski, Albion, N.Y.

Buyers check out the offerings from the more than 100 dealers set up here.

Norman C. Heckler & Co, Woodstock Valley, Conn.

Said to be a “never-failing remedy for all impurities of the blood,” a bottle of Whitcomb’s Bitters was on display at Andy Lange, Plymouth, Mass. The cost when it was manufactured? $1 a bottle.

Jeff and Holly Noordsy, Cornwall, Vt.

J.R. Gibson, Monee, Ill., and Bill Vanderveen, Orland Park, Ill.

Bob and Cathy Barenski, Baltimore, Md.

Among the educational displays at the show, set apart from the selling floor, was the Rick Ciralli collection, Bristol, Conn., with a fine grouping of olive green flasks.

Showing off a George Washington flask for sale, Rick Ciralli, Bristol, Conn., specializes in antique and historical bottles.

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