

THE ANTIQUE BOTTLE COLLECTING HOBBY: THE WHEN, WHERE, WHY AND WHO

By Bill Baab

Hobbies have always been an important part of the lifestyles of people from all walks of life.

Before I entered my early teens, I collected U.S. postage stamps. Over the years, I added coins, insects (butterflies, moths, beetles), snakes, sea shells, birds' eggs, juvenile series books (Tom Swift, Horatio Alger et al), the works of English war correspondent and author G.A. Henty, the Golden Age of Mysteries books (1920-50), and an interest in the history of Augusta, Georgia.

Today, I am still interested in U.S. postage stamps and the postal history of Augusta as sidelines to my main hobby dating back to 1969: the collecting of antique bottles, mostly from Augusta.

The antique bottle hobby is said to rank worldwide in popularity as No. 3 behind the collecting of stamps and (No. 2) coins. There are bottle collectors throughout Europe, the United Kingdom, Canada, South and Central America, Australia and New Zealand. And in each one of the 50 states.

Where did it start?

In this country, there are two possibilities: California and New England. In the former during the early 1950s, folks began exploring the 1840s-60s California Gold Rush ghost towns and antique bottles and some pottery were among the artifacts that survived. One-hundred-fifty-year-old trash dumps and outhouse pits called privies produced most of the finds.

In the latter, the New England industry that produced historical flasks and other examples of early American glass started in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Many early glass factories were established in the Midwest and Northeast. There were a number of men in the early 20th century who started what turned out to be outstanding collections.

Many bought and sold these early containers of whiskies, sodas, patent medicines, preserves and condiments through auction houses, thus spreading their availability to the public at large. Owners of antiques stores started stocking old bottles along with pottery such as whiskey jugs and the hobby began to take off.



However, in the early days there was no one organization to promote the hobby such as the American Philatelic Society for stamp collectors. That started to change with the organization on Oct. 15, 1959 of the nation's first club devoted to the collecting of antique bottles.

John and Edith Tibbitts, who lived in the heart of the Gold Rush Country in Sacramento, California, organized the Antique Bottle Club of California in their home. Word spread and collectors from North, South, Midwest and East joined like-minded people in the Far West and the ABCA began to get too big.

"We grew to over 3,000 families from coast-to-coast," Tibbitts said later.

So some of the club's eventual officers began to speak of forming a Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs, the idea being the uniting of the dozens of individual clubs across the country. That took place in 1969 and later the name was changed from Clubs to Collectors.

The first national show and convention was held in St. Louis during the nation's 1976 Bicentennial Celebration. The National Antique Bottle & Jar Exposition set the standard for the rest of the expositions and national shows to follow. It was decided to hold expositions every four years and the 1980 (Rosemont, Illinois), 1984 (Montgomery, Alabama) and 1988 (Las Vegas, Nevada) Expos followed.

But many collectors grew restless in between the expos and the idea of holding national shows every year in the respective geographical regions was acted upon. The first national show of the new era was held in 1991 in Memphis, Tennessee.

One of the most popular shows was held in 2016 in Sacramento, the place where the hobby got its jump start. "Back to Our Roots" was the theme. In 2017, the National Show and Expo was held in Springfield, Massachusetts, and in 2018 it was held in Cleveland, Ohio on the shores of Lake Erie.

So here we are in Augusta, Georgia, the first time for the show in the Peach State, so collectors in the South should make the most of it. The Aug. 1-3 event will be held in Augusta's Marriott Hotel and adjacent convention center.

