

## How the collecting hobby started with help from the California Gold Rush

By Bill Baab

If it hadn't been for the glass works industries and their products in the eastern, midwestern and northeastern parts of the United States during the first half of the 19th century, the hobby of collecting antique bottles might have been delayed indefinitely.

Had that industry not existed, there would have been nothing to collect since there wouldn't have been any historical flasks in existence, not to mention early glass bottles containing patent medicines and other potable liquids.

But the record shows that fairly wealthy individuals like Stephen Van Rensselaer, Charles Gardner and a comparatively few others started on the road to discovery when early glass pickings were easy and relatively inexpensive, especially during the Great Depression.

Their knowledge did not stop with the acquisitions. No, they embarked on the fun part of the hobby called research and in their days before the Internet Age original sources were still in existence. Many men who had worked in the glass blowing industry were still alive during the early 20th century and glass factory records had not yet been discarded as some unfortunately were later.

As the story goes, Mr. Gardner had a collection of antique firearms coveted by Mr. Van Rensselaer and during the former's visit to the latter, Mr. Gardner saw an array of antique glass and was hooked. A trade was made and in 1929, Mr. Gardner started on the path that eventually led to his research and development of an antique bottle collection others later described as the best in existence at the time.

But when did the hobby start to involve the masses?

History tells us that in the mid 1840s, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in California and after word spread by various means across the country, other Americans decided they wanted a share of the riches. Enter the 49ers and the Gold Rush.

Eventually, Gold Fever subsided and miners went their separate ways, not realizing they'd left behind the equivalent of thousands of dollars of artifacts in the shapes of bottles that had contained whiskey, soda water, mineral water and patent medicines buried in landfills and in outhouse (privy) holes.

Back then, those glass containers were as commonplace as today's Coca-Cola bottles and no one gave them a second thought until the 1940s and '50s. Certain individuals were fascinated by hunks of glass colored purple by the sun they had found during hikes into the desert areas and decided it might pay to check out the ghost towns in existence around what had been the gold fields.

Quite naturally they discovered the 100-year-old garbage dumps and the only stuff remaining were fragments of dishes, bones from cows and hogs and, of course, empty bottles. But what bottles! All were blown by mouth and most hailed from the aforementioned glass factories east of the Mississippi River.

The containers' crudity, wide arrays of colors and embossings were a part of the magic that caught the eyes and imaginations of the men and women destined to become the hobby's pioneer collectors.

Others in the rest of the country were beginning to find ancient landfills of their own and, by the time in 1952 John and Edith Tibbitts organized the Antique Bottle Collectors Association of California at their Sacramento home, the hobby's participants could be measured in the thousands.

Today, the hobby has spread across oceans into the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and north of the U.S. into Canada and Newfoundland. There may be millions of bottle collectors and others who also pursue the products of early potteries.

In 1969, the Tibbittses' creation had outgrown itself and so evolved into the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs (later Collectors) involving people from coast to coast. The first national bottle show of interest took place during the American Bicentennial Year of 1976 in St. Louis.

This year, the FOHBC will celebrate its 50th year with its National Convention and Expo to be held Aug. 1-3 at the Marriott Hotel and adjacent Convention and Visitors Bureau showroom in downtown Augusta. It will mark the first time the event has been held in Georgia.

The show will be open to the public for a nominal fee.

