



# Toothpick holders catch

By John DeGraff

**A**ntique bottles, pottery, postcards, you name it, I have collected it.

I also collect toothpick holders, especially the horizontal types known in the hobby as “sanitary” holders because their design allows one to pluck out the toothpicks from the center of the holder. The containers sport advertisements of hotels, restaurants, airports and mineral waters, among other topics.

I have some pretty unusual examples from different parts of the world, but before I get started, the history behind the holders and some of the photos used with this article come from the book,

“China Toothpick Holders,” written by Judy Knauer. I have her permission to use excerpts from the book and the other material with this story.

Ms. Knauer also founded the National Toothpick Holder Collectors’ Society which boasts more than 400 members, including myself, from the United States and Canada. More on the society later.

I think what got me started collecting the holders was finding one with a hotel name, city and country in an antiques mall in Santiago, Chile. Once I spotted it, I had to have it! Instead of it





# bottle collector's fancy

just becoming yet another souvenir, it has become yet another “addiction.”

What separates me from the average toothpick holder collector is the fact few collectors involved in the hobby have little interest in the sanitary type. It lays flat and one picks up the picks from the middle, leaving the ends untouched, hence the term “sanitary.”

Of course, there is always interest in holders made in majolica and by Heisey. But most collectors’ interests fall on china holders sporting the names of hotels, restaurants, resorts and different

beverages such as mineral waters and wines. Many are manufactured in the United States, but others come from Germany, Italy, France, Cuba, Israel, Venezuela, Mexico and other countries. These are my favorites.

During my early collecting days, I came across an amazing example of a holder on eBay. It was designed to resemble the Hindenburg Zeppelin. I bid what I considered was an over-the-top bid, but finished as runner-up behind the winner. Just hope it ended up in a museum because that’s where it needed to be.

Image above: A mixture of china “Sanitary” holders on the third row and (on the bottom shelf) nine triangular-shaped holders from Portugal.





Early Box of toothpicks imported from Germany.

Toothpick holders became popular in the U.S. about 1885 and although their popularity waned about 1910, many continued to be manufactured or imported through the 1930s-40s. Many glass holders were produced in the U.S., but the vast majority of china holders were imported.

Germany and Japan produced them in vast quantities, often specifically for the export trade. A visit to homes of elderly relatives today and you are likely to find a toothpick holder carefully preserved in the backs of the china closets. They were once that popular and each home had at least one.

Toothpick holders were often made as a component of a complete table service. Many were manufactured by factories in Limoges, France. The holders were usually passed around at the end of meals. Back then, a



A variety of "Sanitary" types of toothpick holders





Closeups showing attractive sanitary hotel holders



More closeups of sanitary holders.



More closeups of sanitary holders, so many fancy designs it keeps it interesting

well-set table would have included spoon holders, salt dips, knife rests, butter pats and celery vases. Just think how that compares to the way we set a table today!

Many toothpick holders were made as a part of a condiment set which typically includes salt and pepper shakers and a toothpick holder, all seated on a small tray. Sometimes a mustard jar was included.

It was quite proper in those days gone by to pass the toothpick holder around the table so guests could use the toothpicks to clean their teeth. Later, it was determined it was proper etiquette to shield the operation from public view with the discreet cover of a linen napkin.

In today's world, it is likely to make toothpicks available to guests in need, once they move away from the dinner table. In some Asian countries, picking one's teeth after eating is quite expected, but both hands must be used – one to operate the "pick." The other to politely cover the mouth.

Historically, the actual toothpicks used as tooth cleaners ranged from pieces of bone or quills from feathers. Wealthy people used picks made out of gold, silver or ivory, many inlaid with precious gems.

It is said that the Prophet Muhammad had a servant whose title was "Master of the Toothpick" and whose job was to maintain that valuable instrument.

A visit to the National Toothpick Holders Collectors' Society website will be a real eye-opener to Bottles and Extras readers who may find themselves interested in joining. Suffice to say that while many of the more elaborate holders bring top dollars, many more are reasonably priced. Just Google toothpick holders and enjoy what appears on your PC screens.

Of course, I am always interested in purchasing additions for my collection so if there are any sellers out there, text or call 1 (508) 643-1111 or e-mail me at [tonto521@gmail.com](mailto:tonto521@gmail.com)

