



Beyond B-Y-O-B

Belmont Bottle Collector Builds a Bar to Showcase His Treasures

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By Janet McGovern

How the Belmont Saloon's bar from Tonopah, Nevada, came to displace a dog kennel at the Belmont, California, home of a bottle-collecting, whiskey-eschewing insurance executive is the phantasmagorical kind of yarn that in days of yore got spun out over a long and boozy evening on a barstool.

This is a 21st century bar story, though, with a home remedy to a problem familiar to anyone with a serious addiction, not to alcohol but to collecting: Where to put all the stuff? John O'Neill, 62, — a collector since his youth — had amassed more San Francisco-Bay-Area saloon treasures than he had a place for in his house and garage. His solution was to build an amazing personal museum that doubles as an awesome party space, anchored by a 21-foot-long antique bar he discovered on eBay.

"The best thing about your collection is having other collectors to share it with or other people," O'Neill says, surveying the 1,000-square-foot room framed with a backlit wall of glimmer-

ing liquor bottles and overhung with fringed banners celebrating California's native sons. "Because if it just sits here and no one appreciates it, what good is it?"

Brought up in San Bruno, O'Neill got into bottle collecting as a teenager. He joined a club which met in San Carlos where he found a friend for life in another budding bottle hound, John Shroyer. They'd travel to construction sites to dig for buried beer, whiskey, medicine and other bottles dating back to the Gold Rush era, with O'Neill eventually focusing on San Francisco for his collecting. (Shroyer, who staked out San Mateo County as his main interest, was profiled by Climate in January 2017.)

Collecting can send history hunters rabbiting off in all directions, researching an item's pedigree in old newspapers, telephone directories and other sources, or launching off on entirely new tangents. O'Neill, along the way, got interested enough in early California stoneware to write a book about that historical niche.



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He also collected Gold Rush-era cosmetic pot lids (from containers like shaving cream or toothpaste.) They were worth enough that when he and wife, Cheri, bought their first home, he flipped his lids to cover the down payment.

“I’ve never been afraid to sell things,” he says. “... I’ve sold my collection multiple times over when there was a need, absolutely.”

Not Enough Space

When the O’Neills built their house in Belmont in 2000, John envisioned displaying his bottles in a lighted cabinet that was supposed to contain his collection, according to Cheri, who had her doubts. “You have more stuff than this,” she told him. “It’s not going to be enough space.”

The O’Neills also have a large backyard well-suited to entertaining and had wanted to add a space for parties. The antiques overflow problem was solved thanks in part to a small inheritance John received when his godfather, Ed Masoni, passed away in 2007. “He told me ‘You can put it in the bank, but I’d rather have you go have some fun with it,’ says John, who opted for fun.

One evening, he was perusing eBay and found a Princess model back bar for sale, which was made by Brunswick-Balke-Collender Co., a 19th century manufacturer of classical saloon bars, billiards tables and other products. The circa-1908 bar had last been used commercially in Tonopah until 1930, after which the owners of the building it was in put the massive piece of furniture into storage in their barn.

For decades, the flamed tiger birch bar gathered dust and pigeons. Eventually the couple’s son inherited it and wanted to sell it. John considered the \$75,000 asking price too high but said he’d buy the bar if it were delivered. Sure enough, a few months later, a cattle truck rolled up at the O’Neills’ Belmont home with the bar – in sections – inside.

It wasn’t until after he did some research that John discovered that the bar he’d purchased started life in “The Belmont,” a turn-of-the century saloon that served the denizens of the mining town of Tonopah. A 1908 newspaper article raved about how The Belmont’s owner had “fitted up



The right side of the bar with the bottle displays

one of the finest thirst emporiums in the West.”

Only five months later, the Belmont Saloon had new owners, according to the Tonopah Daily Bonanza. The “mixologist,” the writer promised, “can concoct anything from an absinthe frappe to a skyrocket. A call upon them will mean a recall.” Alas, no matter how successful the business may have been, Prohibition shut down saloons in 1920. Renamed “the Belmont Café,” it lasted until 1930—and the bar went into the barn.

“I love the story behind it,” O’Neill says, showing a visitor a binder with photos and clippings about the bar. “To me, it’s all about the provenance and the stories. And I



Close-up of one of the bottle shelves

think it's fun."

But where to put a 12-foot-high bar? It created the need for a larger-than-normal room, built over two years, in an area where a kennel for the family dog used to be. The disassembled bar was temporarily stored in the O'Neills' garage, but master cabinet-maker Charles Denning restored it so it could be put back together and set into its commanding position. Denning also created mahogany cabinets to display saloon flasks and bottles along the opposite wall. He and another longtime friend, Douglas Tadday of San Carlos, crafted a reproduction pressed metal ceiling installed 18 feet above the hickory oak floor.

A Party Museum

The result is something of a hybrid saloon, which has a fully outfitted bar complete with two refrigerators, a sink and dishwasher. It's also a private museum, John serving dual roles as a barkeep/curator surrounded by one "conversation piece" after another.

There's the pistol-shaped whiskey container, a holiday giveaway from William Prosek, proprietor of the Park Saloon. An Eagle Bar whiskey flask (one of only two in existence) and matching business card from the "E Street" (now The Embarcadero) tavern. Embossed saloon tokens which were given to customers—instead of change. A 12-foot-long Rainier Beer sign (circa 1912) from another E Street joint hangs over the bar.

How about the small silver "match safe" from the Ocean Shore Railroad Saloon? San Francisco had newspaper saloons – the "Press" and "The Editorial Café" among them – and O'Neill of course has their bottles. Antique advertising signs adorn the walls, as well as several hard-to-find stained glass beer windows. He also owns three oil paintings by Ashley David Middleton Cooper, a celebrated San Jose painter who produced a lot of "saloon nudes."

"It's like stepping back to the turn of the century, and where else can you do that?" O'Neill says of his home saloon. "It's very authentic with what they looked like and were decorated in."

Though he's glad to be preserving artifacts which otherwise might be lost, for O'Neill, collecting isn't about objects: It's a way to learn about the past, even when not always uplifting. A saloon owner in those days didn't have to be educated to open one or make money. "All you had to do was buy liquor from a wholesaler, water it down and start shoveling it across the bar to some patron," O'Neill says. Most customers engaged in back-breaking labor and alcohol eased the pain. "So people belonged to social groups and went to saloons. This was their place to relax."

Lots of Liquor

Long after the Gold Rush, alcohol lubricated San Francisco life. In 1890, the city had granted the right to sell alcoholic beverages to 3,117 places, one for every 96 inhabitants, according to Herbert Asbury's 1933 book about the Barbary Coast. After the devastating 1906 earthquake, liquor license fees were increased tenfold.

The emerging temperance movement which led to the Volstead Act was the coup de grace to the saloon trade.

Though not a teetotaler, O'Neill doesn't like whiskey and may only have a glass of wine for a special occasion. "A guy that doesn't drink owns a saloon," he says, with a laugh. "... As you get older, it's harder to push back from the table. I don't need the extra calories."

The double doors of the O'Neill family saloon open out onto a tree- and arbor-lined patio where, in pre-Covid years, Cheri and John have often hosted crowds of friends for fall harvest parties. More typically, John welcomes fellow bottle collectors for club meetings; the room is also big enough to accommodate large family dinners.



Here's the pistol-shaped whiskey container, a holiday giveaway from William Prosek, proprietor of the Park Saloon.

The O'Neills have two adult children, Justin O'Neill and Christen O'Connell. As kids, they had fun going on a few digs with him but didn't follow dad into the hobby. "For the young kids today, my sense is that there's not that collecting gene," says John, who is President of the national Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors. "I think kids today really want more, like experiences, life experiences, and they're not as interested in history as maybe we were."

He's also a member of the board of the Early California Wine Trade Museum, which has an eerily familiar problem: a remarkable collection in search of a permanent home. Among O'Neill's pre-Prohibition memorabilia and collectibles is a hand-carved Gundlach Bundschu wine cask from 1890. "It's just hard to get people to find space," he says. "We don't need that much space but we need some space." (Visit earlycalwinetrade.org to learn more.)

For lifelong collectors like O'Neill, cutting back on buying can be a struggle. On the other hand, he adds, "They're just things. I hate to say this but, if I lost this all tomorrow, I'd just start over again."

... They've been a fun thing, an extracurricular activity, but family and friends are more important."

