

PROVENANCE LOST

by Jeff Mihalik

provenance noun

prov-e-nance | \ 'präv-nən(t)s , 'prä-və-,nən(t)s \

Definition of *provenance*

- 1 : ORIGIN, SOURCE
- 2 : the history of ownership of a valued object or work of art or literature

I was reading the article written by Q. David Bowers' as he was documenting the history of T. W. Dyott and his glassworks. As a coin collector, I am very familiar with Mr. Bower's research articles on coins, paper currency, and other exnumia through the many magazines and books he has published. His documentation of historical events and the people involved with important numismatic events has brought to life the political, social, and often moral happenings of the times.

Since most coins were issued and then put into circulation, their ownership history often begins when the coin is taken out of circulation and becomes "collected." This provenance (*definition 2 above*) of collectibles begins not when an item is first produced but when first collected. We see this type of provenance (history of ownership) with many types of collectibles, especially when rarer items are offered for sale. This provenance can increase the value of the item due to many reasons.

Often a collector gains confidence in the authenticity (and often quality) of the item when it has passed through a well-known (i.e., knowledgeable) collector. In addition, owning an item from the person you may have admired for their contributions and importance to the specific hobby will make ownership that much more enjoyable. We see this type of provenance being appreciated and sought out with coins and stamps, similar to bottles. With bottles, examples of the Greer collection will often command a higher premium (and rightfully so) due to the rarity, condition, and quality of the items he collected and the prestige of owning a piece out of his collection. Mr. Bowers (and many other coin experts) have contributed to the coin hobby to bring to life the history of an item's origin and source (*definition 1 above*). When I read one of his articles in the coin magazine, I wanted to seek an example for my collection.

After reading Mr. Bowers' recent bottle article in *Bottles and Extras*, and then thinking of his many historical renderings that bring coins and bottles to life, I started to think about the importance of provenance and how much provenance for many bottles is being lost. As a hobby, bottle collecting is a much newer and evolving hobby compared to coins. Still, much of the history of glass manufacturing, the people and historical events surrounding the bottle design (say with historical flasks or figurals), methods of manufacturing (pontil, blown-in mold, bottle machine, etc.), transportation, distribution, and sales, have, for the most part, been well-documented and continue

to be researched as new information is made available. Unlike bottles, coins typically have a solid and known origin (i.e. date and mint mark). On the other hand, bottles may sometimes have a known origin (glasshouse maker's marks), but in most cases, the exact date of manufacture and place of origin is rarely certain.

Therefore, I believe that knowing and documenting as much of the provenance of a bottle is extremely important to help place the artifact in context. However, in the bottle world, this aspect of the provenance of a bottle seems not to be highly regarded and, in many cases, is not sought out, documented, or kept. What I am referring to is "where a bottle was found, who may have used it, and who may have dug or otherwise found the bottle." The "where a bottle was dug" can provide much important information as to who may have first purchased the bottle, why they used it, when they may have bought and used it, distribution patterns, and much, much more. The "who dug it or found it" is a story in itself. To have a bottle story about the people who found the privy the bottle was in, excavated it, and first appreciated the bottle once brought back to the light after 100 plus years, is as much a part of the provenance of a bottle (and I would say more so) than whose collection it was in over the years.

Ok, I am not unbiased on this topic. I have accepted that "being dug by Jeff Mihalik" will not increase the value of a bottle or make it more sought after than a similar example. Still, I believe the history of where a bottle was dug (or found), by whom, and when are all important pieces of the provenance that should be preserved when and where possible. I am not going to document every catsup bottle, but for rare examples and or where a lot of prior history may be known or available for research, it should be documented and kept as part of the history of a bottle. **[Photo 1]**

[1] Wouldn't this bottle be more valued if all the provenance is known?



I will be the first to admit that I could do a much better job and have the responsibility to do so. To be clear, I am not talking about digging bottles from a home where George Washington lived (or any other historic property that is off limits for what could be a variety of reasons). However, there is much local history that is poorly documented and remains unresearched. We diggers (and others who have a story to tell regarding acquisitions) owe it to ourselves, the hobby, and the bottles we cherish.

I have always thought this but recently an event frustrated me and I thought how little collectors value the whole history of a bottle. *Case in point:* I've never had deep pockets, so I always attempted to keep the best bottles I dig. This isn't always pos-



[2] Two black glass
"Lindsey's Blood Searcher"
Hollidaysburg Pa"

sible, especially when you are digging with two or three other people, have a low pick, or dig something that folks can not agree on a value. That said, I've been fortunate to get my fair share over the years and built a nice collection according to my means, and they were 99% dug bottles! As most people know, life throws challenges at you and you have to do your best to keep moving forward. So, back in the mid-2000s, I lost my job and was in transition and one of my daughters also needed some help financially, so I had to sell one of my favorite bottles as I knew I could quickly get a good sum for it. It was a black glass "Lindsey's Blood Searcher Hollidaysburg Pa." (read *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector*, October 2005) dug by Rick, my long-time digging partner, Digger O'Dell, and myself. [Photo 2]

The bottle was sold to an out-of-state collector/digger who is still active in the hobby. At the time, I'll admit I was not thinking about the provenance as I do today, and I did not attempt to provide the whole history of the bottle, although I did mention the dig and the people involved. If you have read the 2005 article, you know that two of these bottles were dug from the same privy!

Some years later, after Digger O'Dell passed away, his example of the Lindsey's found its way back to Rick and then to me, and I had that example in my collection for over eight years. Recently, I lost my job again, this time due to Covid-19, and with all the other uncertainties, I decided to sell a few bottles. I didn't want to sell the Lindsey's, but Rick, who dug the Lindsey's with Digger and me, told me how much that bottle meant to him (Digger was one of his best friends), and he wanted to have that bottle in his collection.

Now Rick likes selling bottles as much as digging them and, over the years, he has sold many a great dug bottle like a cobalt blue Pikes Peak, so it was great to hear how much that bottle meant to him, and so I gladly let him become the caretaker of this treasure. He knows all the provenance of this bottle!

A couple of months passed, and I found that I was better off than most (I started a new business and am doing well), so I tried to track down the other Lindsey's that I sold back in the day. I contacted the person who originally purchased it from me, but he had sold it some years back. I then was able to find out who that was, and with some back and forth, I found out that he also has sold it. Still, the person who bought it apparently has "deep pockets" and is some higher-end bottle collector who does not let things go and probably wouldn't want

to be bothered by me attempting to buy back the bottle. Ok, I cannot do anything about that, and it's the owner's prerogative to remain anonymous. What got to me is that the person who has the bottle now probably has no idea of much of the bottle's history: who dug it, when it was dug, and most importantly, where it was dug, and the history of the home and person living there when the bottle was used and then discarded? All I will say in this article is that there is some fascinating local history and historical people who are part of the provenance of this bottle which may now be lost to the current and future collectors. [Photo 3]



[3] The Jack Boyle canal boat is featured in this photo dated 1869. The Jack Boyle was the last passenger packet boat to use the Beaver Division Canal.

So, what can be done? Should anything be done, and is this type of provenance important to collectors? The good news is that there are collectors out there that do want to know the whole story and gain as much knowledge as possible on the background and history of a prized bottle. In the pages of the two bottle magazines, you can find many deeply researched articles that uncover and document provenance such as the manufacturing location, history of the person who sold or invented the contents, history of the influence of current events, and all the other such information that brings the bottle to life.

Great job here, and thanks for the great work! The bad news is that they are in the minority and, most likely, this will not change unless some monetary motivation exists for a collector to seek out the full provenance of their collected bottle.

I would suggest that, as a hobby, we diggers, dealers, collectors, auction houses, etc., need to start somehow to value all the provenance of a bottle and place a higher value (monetary and desirability) on bottles that have a full provenance. Like I mentioned earlier, I am biased as I do know the where (a bottle was dug) and often the who (history of the home and family at a given time). However, I think it would be awesome to see a bottle at auction come with provenance (not just from the collection of) but with period advertisements, location of use (where it was found), and all additional history (when available) of the family or person who likely utilized the bottle's contents. It seems to me that if a bottle has full provenance, it certainly should be worth more to collectors than a similar bottle with an unknown history.

If you have a bottle in your collection that you know I dug and are interested in learning more of the history, I will provide you with all the background information I have. Where information is lacking or missing, it will be up to you to take what I provide and then do the necessary research to document the provenance fully. My next article in this series will be titled **Provenance Found!**

