

# Who am I? Really Lucky. What (else) Do I Collect?

*As a departing editor on the AB&GC staff, allow me to say bello AND adios to the few people who have been fortunate enough to have not met me*

Ralph Finch shares some autobiographical musings

Recently I received an email from someone who asked what else could I cram into the Finch Funhouse? I replied, but Janet, my personal editor, stated, “You can’t write that! It sounds like bragging.”

Most of what the hobby collects can be a hundred years old, or if we visit the right museum, can be a few thousand years old. All of this should remind us that we are but caretakers of these treasures. Yet, what will we leave behind us? What have we done beyond being a caretaker, an occasional duster of pieces from the past.

Some collectors have gathered great collections shared with others; some have dedicated large chunks of their lives to produce books, articles, newsletters, etc. for the enjoyment and edification of others who share our interests.

In time, other generations may pick up a book (or a catalog) and, for a moment, wonder just who was Watson, or Blaske, or Ring, Blakeman, the Kovels, McKearin, Wilson, balsam queen Betty Blasi, fruit jars’ Alice Creswick or Jerry McCann or Alex Kerr of target balls and fruit jars, John Wolf and his cures, and so on. And I have been so fortunate to have known, or at least met, so many of them.

And knowing Hal and Vern Wagner when they put on the St. Louis Expo, or Adam Koch when he produced his incredible Toledo Expo, and Phyllis Koch, for printing so many club newsletters or books on glass. My *On Target!* target ball journal couldn’t have survived without her printing skills.

Or knowing the great Vuono family, or the Heckler family.

And if I close my eyes I can feel the warm smile of Burton Spiller, hear the laughter of Roy Brown, and hear that southern drawl of Tom and Mable Hicks of Georgia.

And glass magician Don Spangler, whose last name became part of repaired bottle history: Spanglerized. And glass artist Bob Villamagna.

And the other early pioneers of the Federation: Norman and Junne Barnett of Indiana, Jerry Jones of Ohio, Dave and Barbara Robertus, Gene Bradberry, Randy Haviland.

And Bob Mebane, Ben Swanson, and all the California names: Frank Peters, Louis Pellegrini, Barbara Coggins, Elmer Lester, Peck Markota, Frank Brockman.

And George Herron, and William Covill.

And New Yorkers Dick Vanderlaan, Jim Whetzel (whose bottle shop in New York State dates back to the 1960s) and Jack Whistance, Leigh Beardsley and ...

I keep wanting to add more to the list. Who can forget ephemera king Kit Barry of Vermont, with his quarter-million pieces of paper? And Laurence Cooper of Portobello Road’s market in London. (And my favorite stories about Kit or Laurence? Hard to pick just one.)

As I look at this ever-expanding list of names I almost want to cry, for all the other names that should be included.

Aren’t we all obligated to leave this world, and this hobby, just a little bit better than when we found it?

Now, who am I? I’ll tell you, and, is this bragging? Maybe it is, but I’ve made mistakes in my life, so can’t I share the successes? I am proud of what I’ve achieved, and it hasn’t always been easy. But, let me begin.

“Mr. Lucky” is the name of a 1943 romance film starring Cary Grant. It also could be the title of my life (except for my many visits to casinos).

Many decades ago I started collecting

glass, and it led to travels across the country and to various countries, especially 20 trips to England. (I even went to an antique glass shop in Melbourne, Australia, and out of the blue the shop owner asked me if I knew Jerry McCann of Chicago. It's a big, and small, world.)

Then, at a meeting of the Metro Detroit Antique Bottle club, decades ago, I met the most wonderful woman in the world. (And that's not bragging, just the truth.)

And after collecting glass for well over 50 years, I have acquired good stuff. And fun stuff. And how did it happen? Hard work, meticulously searching through antique shows and auction houses, and spending a lot of money.

How? I have never spent one penny on tobacco in my entire life (antique snuff jars don't count), nor a penny on alcohol (once again, old liquor bottles are acceptable).

How one spends money is an individual thing, and I am almost 82, and have never owned a new car in my entire life. (My first car cost \$125 plus my extra pair of army boots plus taking the seller's day of KP duty.) You want a new car or an old bottle? The choice is simple.

Life's a series of choices, so to answer the question, "What do I collect?" Wow, this will be a challenge; it's not going to be easy.

Some collections are extensive, and some are only an item or two. It reminds me of bitters trade card king Joe Gourd of Illinois. Years ago he said he was a collector of Binninger bottles. I asked him how many he had and he replied that he was waiting for the first one, yet still considered himself a Binninger collector. (He later got up to 12.) Joe, a good and close friend, was one of the first Detroit bottle club presidents, and now owns thousands of bitters trade cards.

And how did I get started? At an antiques show. It was set up at a shopping mall. Out of curiosity I picked up a random piece of glass — I wasn't a collector —

and a pretty blond in a red sweater asked: "Do you like old glass?" I said, "Um, yes." And the next thing I knew I was attending meetings of a group of collectors. Soon, in my apartment, the group met and formed the Detroit Bottle Club.

Here we go, but first, let's list the collections now history. I started out with rare pint fruit jars, but they're long gone. Then, G9-10 scrolls in a variety of colors and Jim Hagenbuch sold them. Next, Old Sacher Bitters barrels: Jim sold them, too, and how bittersweet that was. Following were 111 Sandwich glass colognes. Norman Heckler sold those sandwich items for a lot of dough (I also collect bad puns.)

OK, target balls. The total was 250 different ones, even though a few balls were represented in several colors. Most were American, many British, plus others from France, Germany, Scotland, Sweden, Australia, Canada. Was there a larger collection known? Not that I'm aware of. In fact, I doubt it will ever be matched; I started early, when many, OK, some, could be acquired at a reasonable price.

Their value? I've paid \$30 for one, and \$30,000 for another (spending my new wife's life savings). There is little in the way of target ball, or target shooting, ephemera, but what exists, I had a good portion of it. My favorite item was a large, circa 1880 poster of famous ball man Ira Paine shooting a walnut off his wife's head, and target balls that she tosses into the air. (In Paris, I visited the hotel where he died; he was staying there while showing off his skills shooting at the Folies Bergere.)

Also, I probably had the largest collection of glass ball traps, maybe 25, and they are much harder to find than a good ball. Also, with eBay and the internet and traveling frequently to Europe, I've had advantages that Alex Kerr, the godfather of target ball collecting, did not. (Alex was a member of the Kerr glass family.)

And all this target ball stuff was sold by John Pastor's American Glass Gallery.

Now to the present. Rare painted and non-painted demijohns; etched Scottish bottles; a variety of early glass, plus 1880s alcohol lamps; ketchup bottles; glass canes (we have more than a hundred); and portrait tiles, advertising items/signs and even late 1800s wooden clothespins (thanks to the late Elma and Dick Watson).

And bricks, thanks to FOHBC's first president, Roy Brown of Kentucky, and another collector who exhibited bricks at a New York show. (I've attended several really interesting shows just for brick collectors ... heavy, dude.) If you visit, check out the few bricks decorating the flowers along the sidewalk. Also along the walk are large globs of glass in clear and aqua, rescued from old glass-house dumps.

I have a large and interesting (or so I say) collection of rolls of early toilet paper (honest). About 60 different rolls at last count — even a roll of Nazi-era toilet paper, including a reproduction roll of Nazi toilet paper! (Is there anything that isn't sacred? Or reproduced?)

And, of course, related toilet ephemera. My favorite is a 1940s' children's musical toilet roll holder that, when used, plays Whistle While You Work.

Oooops, I'd be flushed with embarrassment if I didn't mention my two salesman's samples ceramic toilets.

And even glass fly traps, maybe 125, in a variety of colors and shapes from around the world, as well as mechanism-driven wooden fly traps. They've come from the U.S., Europe and Australia.

And hair bottles and related items. There are 100 to 200 hair bottles on the shelves, but nothing major.

And things with crabs on them. (Oooops. Janet corrects me again. They are NOT crabs, but stuff with lobsters on 'em.)

And circa 1800 snuff bottles (Janet is my snuff queen).

And ketchups? OK, I'm not sure who has more 1800-to-today ketchups than I do. They are all over the house; plus trade cards, early advertising and more ephemera than Heinz had 57 varieties.

Some of my hard-to-acquire items are rare ketchup jugs, crocks and wooden shipping boxes.

Twice, my ketchups have been featured in TV documentaries in the U.S., and a third time in Russia (isn't everything red there?) And several times some of the ketchup bottles have been exhibited at bottle shows.

And so many books on antiques, and signs, everywhere: cardboard, metal, painted glass. My favorite is the large wood sign over my desk, over my computer, the one that fuels much of my writing: "FERTILIZER OF ALL KINDS." (Forty years ago I had my photo taken in front of a sign at a farm in rural England. It read: "Chicken Manure, 3 Pence a Pound." It seemed like a bargain, but I don't know how I would have gotten it through airport customs.)

Oooooops; it just popped up in my head: Old toasters; they are hot.

And did I mention glass twine holders?

And a charming grouping of eclectic Victorian pitchers (wanna see a picture of the pitchers?)

Here a tweet from a Finch: A large antique birdcage filled with birds carved out of wood.

And the house has a variety of leaded glass, in windows and lamps, of which Janet made. About 35 years ago, Janet was hired to make a lamp shade to hang in my previous home's kitchen. It now hangs in our current kitchen.

But of all the great glass, of all the travel, of all the great people and of all the won-



derful rewards the hobby has given me, the best part is re-meeting Janet (then Loik), who in 1977 I interviewed about her collecting, which included target balls. I knew her in the 1970s and '80s and thought she was delightful. We then went on to our separate lives. Almost 30 years later, with both of us divorced, I called to say "Hello." We had several delightful phone conversations and, to make a long story short, Under the Whispering Gallery of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, \*England, I proposed to the most remarkable woman that I have ever known. Six months later, in Las Vegas as Elvis walked her down the aisle, we were married at the Graceland Chapel, and the hobby continues to be wonderful. After re-meeting Janet, I discovered that I was the happiest and luckiest man in the

world. I love her, and not only that, so does everyone who meets her.

(\*I make a distinction, since we also have been to London, Ontario, Canada. The first time followed the time I mentioned to Janet that at the rate our friendship was going, we'd soon be in Paris. And we were. There is a small city called "Paris," not that far from London, Ontario.)

Do I have other interests that are NOT glass or hobby related?

Travel is a big one. It would take me a few minutes if I had to list all the countries I have visited. The big ones, of course, Canada, France and Great Britain. I've had the good fortune of having visited England at least 20 times. And most all the countries around the Medi-



terranean, and around central America and around the Caribbean, including Haiti. And believe it or not, fifty years ago Haiti was a treat to visit ... even if it remains hell to live in.

And Mexico. And on the other side of the globe, Russia was a delight, Australia, too. And more than two years in Japan, courtesy of my uncle (Sam). Oh, yes, Cuba, before it collapsed, was fun.

Another big interest is the theater. We've had season subscriptions to at least four theaters. I have enjoyed "The Phantom" at least 55 times, in Detroit, London, Toronto and Melbourne, Australia and even Vegas; even a local high school's production. I've seen Les Miserables about 30-plus times, and hope to enjoy it again.

There is a large drawer bulging with hundreds (and hundreds) of tickets to live theater shows from across the U.S., Canada, England and even Australia.

One favorite ticket stub is 61 years old, when I saw the Mills Brothers (popular forever is the U.S.) in a theater in southern Japan. And the Trio Los Panchos, too. And I am the only person in my group of friends to have seen live one of the Spice Girls: Melanie Chrisholm, also known as Mel C ("Scary Spice"), appearing in Blood Brothers in London.

Had I not a weakness for musical theater, my glass collection would be at least twice the size it now is.

And we have theater posters on the bedroom walls (along with souvenirs of Japan, including photos, maps, posters, and photos of Toshiro Mifune, even a shot of me standing at Toshiro's star on the Walk of Fame in Hollywood. (He appeared in more than 150 feature films.)

Two and a half years living in southern Japan allowed me a chance to grow up, and to appreciate life.

Again, life is a series of choices. I've spent a fortune on glass, and my former best friend spent a fortune on tobacco, not counting the money spent at hospitals trying to save his life. He's gone now, and never went to many places; and I have great memories, and great glass.

But ... friends have been so important to my life, and almost all of them have come through the hobby. I've met most of the "big names" in the hobby, people whose collections were later auctioned off in bound-printed catalogs. I've been fortunate to have been to the homes of many of them, or even had them in my home. So many collectors, and so many of them are now gone.

Let's lift a glass (old or new) in remembrance of them all.



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