



A fruit jar covered with Brownies

There was a tough fight. Mike Beardsley lost. . . and he Balled

Boxing match introduction by **Ralph Finch**

Mike Beardsley of Chittenango, N.Y., comes from a family of jar collectors. His late father, the great Leigh Beardsley, once dealt with some of the best jars ever found or sold, and his lovely mother, Mary, has a great collection of early baking soda jars. With that background, Mike has sent an interesting letter of his most recent find:

"Boy, I turned up something that is right up your alley, I think. Is this very unusual fruit jar box beyond cool—if it is real? The graphics are insane—little brownies running off with Ball or Mason fruit jars and prying the lid off the box. It was likely symbolizing jar breakage in shipment, which I guess Best Package felt they solved. Bizarre.

The problem is, I can't find any information about the company, the logo, etc. I even thought this might be a Victorian 'fantasy' piece, but a stencil clearly created the design, and I can't see anyone going to that much trouble for a joke.

I'm in a heated battle for this beat-up box (one side is cracked, no lid, etc.). I'll let you know if I am lucky enough to get it. Have you ever seen this before? It sure blew me away.

Later, Mike added:

I contacted Jerry McCann and Greg Spurgeon. Both confirmed that this is the real deal. Jerry had never seen or heard of the box, but he knew of Ball's efforts to make Best Package shipping boxes.

With such cool (and humorous) graphics, I'm kind of surprised that more of these did not survive.

When I was a kid, I had an old book that featured the antics of the Brownies, so I recognized them right off the bat.

This item is in a local, rural auction. I was kind of hoping that the box wouldn't draw much attention.

Fat chance! Last night I got outbid at \$500. Yikes—it seems like a lot for an old, busted box, but it may be kind of a 'Holy Grail' for a Ball collector. I took a pause at bidding, but I'm not throwing in the towel yet. I'll let you know the outcome of the battle of the box—hope it doesn't turn into a blood bath.

I replied: Maybe not a blood bath, maybe just—jarring. And, on Jan. 1, Mike started the year with a downer, explaining:

"Just to close the loop, I lost out on the Ball Brownie box. I went to \$1,800, and it sold for \$1,920 with buyer's premium. Not bad for a beat-up fruit jar box!"

On Jan. 6, Mike concluded:

"Here are a few more shots of the Ball Brownie box. Once the bidding got heated, my auctioneer friends felt that they should take some pictures of the ends of the box. The box end is interesting in that the jar shown is a Mason jar—not a Ball jar.

Jerry (McCann) found that the Minnetrista Heritage Collection does contain one of these boxes, so this one was not unique... only insanely rare.*

Canadian author and illustrator Palmer Cox introduced his cartoonish 'Brownies' in 1887, and they stayed popular into the 1920s.

Eastman Kodak named their first portable camera after them. Apparently, Elizabeth Ball (daughter of G.A. Ball), was a fan of the Brownies, and their drawings have been found in her papers. Her fondness of the Brownies may have inspired Ball to put them on one of their Best Package boxes. The message to the public may have been that the Ball patented boxes would protect your jars even from the mischievous Brownies.

This box was discovered in a cellar in Cazenovia, N.Y. The homeowners had dumpsters waiting in the yard to throw out anything that the auctioneers didn't take. The auctioneer has a great eye for the unusual, especially advertising. He was surprised at the thinness of the box walls and wondered how this could have provided much protection to the jars?

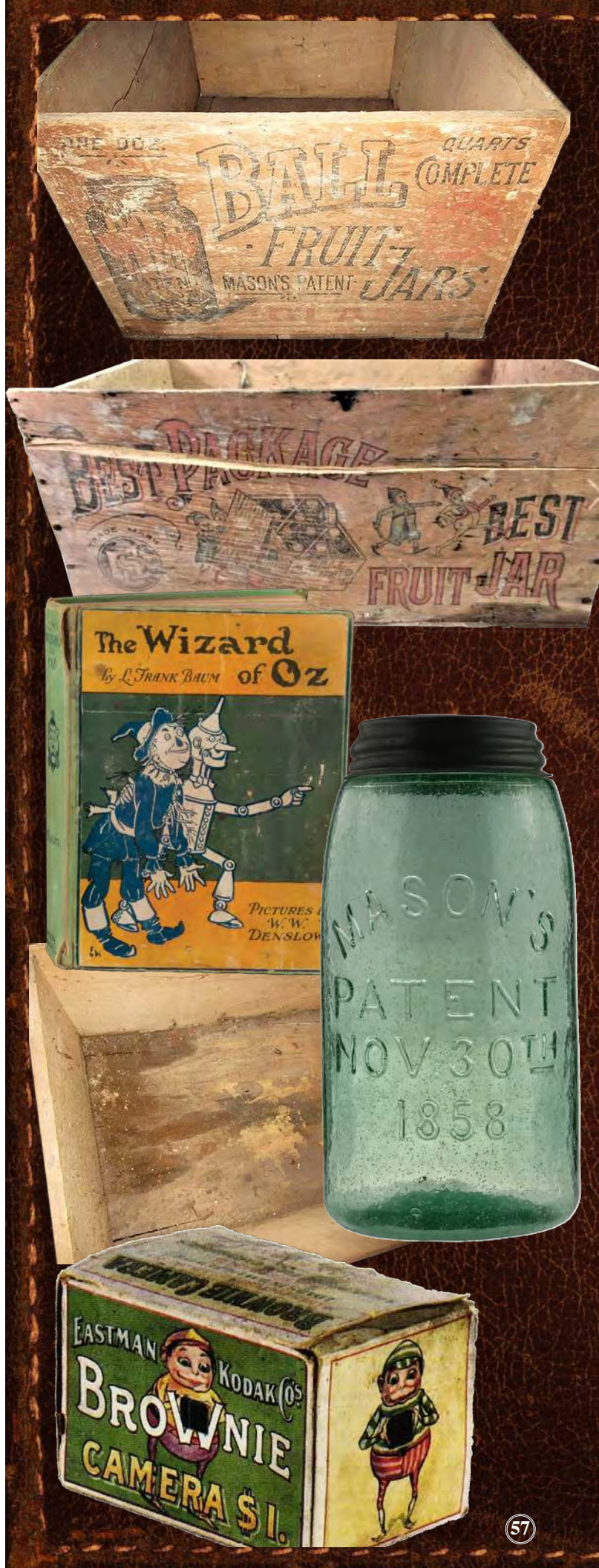
Needless to say, the auctioneers were blown away at the final sale price. I bid \$1,800 (with buyer's premium), and \$1,920 won the day. The box is being shipped out of state. My auctioneer friend wouldn't share what the winning bidder submitted to secure the box, but he did say that I had a long way to go to beat his bid.

Oh well, it was fun to learn about this box and to dream of perhaps owning it—so much for dreaming."

A few years ago, Mike recalled his family's early jar collecting days:

"Decades ago, my Dad (Leigh Beardsley), and I discovered the first Griswold Fruit Jar (RB 1156), the first Mansfield 'Hat on a jar' (RB 1618), and my wife and I turned up the first X-Ray Fruit Jar (RB 3383). We were 'scouts' for Alice Creswick, as it were—and a pristine S. B. Dewey Fruit Jar from Rochester, N.Y. for 50 cents. Shortly after, his dad got a Dr. Ramsey jar.

Dad was true to his word about not being a fruit jar collector. He never saved a single jar for himself. The really wonderful collection of colored Mason jars was a collection that I put together over the years. I finally reluctantly parted with a black glass, a breath-taking Real, etc. That collection and an F. A. Bunnell Empire jar from Syracuse were the only jars I kept for myself."



And Mike added:

"In my humble opinion, your writings are the best part of AB&GC magazine. Love your humor, insights, and your easy-going style which are a true pleasure. I hope the new group realizes what you have meant to the magazine over the years and what a strong fan base you have among collectors!"

Editor's note: Chittenango, now with a population of 5,081, started in 1825, joining Buffalo on Lake Erie with Albany, the capital of New York, and the Hudson River. The Erie Canal passes just north of the village. When incorporated in 1842, the village contained 900-1,000 inhabitants, 180 dwellings, three churches, the Yates Polytechnic Institute, a large woolen factory, two large water lime factories, one flouring mill, three taverns, and ten stores. Has anyone dug behind where those taverns were?

And: The Chittenango Pottery Co., largely owing its early success to its location near the Chittenango Landing, was established in 1897. After burning down twice, the present, now-abandoned brick structure, was erected. After years of neglect and disrepair, the building was demolished in 2015. The Chittenango Pottery and nearby St. Paul's Church are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Also: Chittenango holds a three-day annual festival called Oz-Stravaganza!, formerly called OzFest, to celebrate the literary works of author L. Frank Baum, who was born in Chittenango on May 15, 1856. The children's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published on May 17, 1900. The weekend-long festival, usually held during the first weekend of June, has a parade saluting the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*.

To this, I asked Mike: Did you ever participate in the parade? He explained:

"No, but our kids have when they were small. It is quite the event. Chittenango used to be the annual gathering spot for all of the surviving Munchkins. It was fun to have them here signing autographs (for a price) and kissing babies." (pre-COVID).

We tried to get Judy, but she moved; same with Jack and Ray. Snobs! The Munchkins are all gone now. We thought about stuffing one or two and mounting one on the front of a Buick convertible in the parade, but New York State regulations prohibit parade Buicks. Drat.

The event doesn't have the sizzle it used to after they cut out the beer tent. No sense of humor. Nothing like a bunch of drunk little people and Ozofiles."

Mike, I once went to Greenville, Ohio—maybe 15 years ago—to the Annie Oakley Festival weekend. It really was nice, a big-time, small-town festival.

I have collected a few stuffed items but no Munchkins; taxidermy items seemed big in Victorian England.

Also: Mike, your story reminds me: My sweet Janet, as a child, got thrown out of Brownies! Honest. It's a sweet story, something about a philosophical debate over the proper way to make marshmallow cookies (s'mores).

***FYI:** From the Internet: The Minnetrista Heritage Collection in Muncie, Ind., preserves (pardon the pun) and provides access to all sorts of "materials documenting the history of the Ball Co., Ball family, and the East Central Indiana region. Comprised of 15,000 objects and 1,800 linear feet of archival materials, Minnetrista's museum collection includes Ball company records and an extensive holding of Ball jars and Ball products."

