



The case of the ‘missing’ flasks of the St. Louis Bottle-Jar Expo

by Bill Baab

The 1976 National Antique Bottle & Jar Exposition – St. Louis, Missouri

There is no doubt this show set the standards for those to follow. There were 140 outstanding displays of bottles and fruit jars, many of which had never been in the public view; 280 sales tables, and 4,000 collectors. Hal Wagner was chairman and Jerry Jones co-chairman of the event. The program featured articles by some of the legends of the hobby, including Helen McKearin, Alice Creswick, George Herron, William E. Covill Jr., Dr. Cecil Munsey, Dick Roller, John Wolf, and Paul Ballentine. Ken and Shirley Asher, *Old Bottle Magazine* publishers, devoted 17 pages to photos of the displays, unfortunately, all in black and white, because the color was expensive to print back in those days. There was a surprise awaiting visitors—a commemorative Expo bottle in the shape of a scroll flask with the Federation’s distinctive eagle on one side and crossed flags on the other. How many of these bottles sold during the Expo still exist?

From FOHBC.org – History – National Shows



Photo: Jim Bender



Photos: Jim Bender

I enjoy collecting non-historic bottles and flasks, including antique bottle club and FOHBC-related items marking events and anniversaries. The first Federation show was held in 1976 during our nation's Bicentennial Celebration. Billed as The National Antique Bottle & Jar Exposition, it was held in St. Louis, Missouri, attracting thousands of collectors. One of the show's souvenirs was a 7-inch-high scroll flask, but you'd never know it. There was no mention of it in the souvenir program. The only reason I know about it is because I have an example in my collection.

In trying to research it, I became frustrated and decided to contact some of the collectors who attended the show: Tom Hicks, Richard Siri, Michael Seeliger, Ralph Finch, and Jerry McCann. Neither Hicks nor Siri remembered such a flask, Seeliger never responded, but I struck "gold" in Finch and McCann 45 years after the Expo.

The St. Louis Expo was organized by Chairman Hal Wagner and Co-Chairman Jerry Jones. The former decided to have "a commemorative Expo bottle in the shape of a scroll flask with the Federation's distinctive eagle on one side and 1976 and crossed flags (among other embossing) on the other." I tried to learn the identity of where the flasks were blown, how many were produced, and how much each would cost a souvenir-hungry collector? Ralph Finch recollected show officials "over-estimated the demand and recalled he was given a case after the show to sell them for Hal and (wife) Vern Wagner."

"I was told by a member of our Detroit bottle club that he had the flasks in all of the colors they came in," Finch said. "I didn't remember that there was a color range," he said, adding, "I always thought it was not a good idea for any show. There were always bottles left over, and it was a bad investment all the way around."

"My best recollection is that the flasks were blown by the Clevenger Brothers in New Jersey, using a stock mold with a circular slug plate," McCann said in an email. "By the mid-1970s, the Clayton, N.J. glassworks was owned and managed by Jim Travis of Millville, New Jersey. Hal Wagner ordered the flasks as a profit-maker to support the Expo. They were not expensive, costing in the \$15 range. Unsold inventory bounced around from Federation officer to officer, not because they did not sell (they may not have), but probably because Hal was too optimistic as to the post-show market."

On a whim, I contacted Tom Haunton*, an expert on "Jersey glass," and got more than I bargained for.

"There is a good reason why Jerry McCann would think Jim Travis made the bottle at Clevengers," Haunton said. "The flask was made at the Downer Glass Works of Downer, N.J., located about five miles from Clevenger Brothers and operated by Tom Zinsky, assisted by his father, Anthony. Downer made most of its blown glass pieces between 1974 and 1982, after which it was mostly cast pieces such as paperweights, cup plates, and some specialty ware."

"The Downer scroll bottle is an actual copy of the Clevenger commemorative scroll bottles," Haunton continued. "During the years before the American Bicentennial, the wait to receive a Clevenger commemorative bottle order had reached six months. Zinsky had the idea that he could complete orders in a much shorter time. He went over to Clevenger's, bought a scroll bottle, then cast a mold from the copy (they used to cast their own molds). Tom's dad was a foundry worker. The first molds were bronze and later iron. Tom's dad would make drawings, then cut out the plates and make the inserts. The insert plates were cast at a foundry, then brought down to the machine shop to have them cut off into a long, sausage-type thing from which the pieces wanted were cut. Tom's original bronze scroll to make the FOHBC scrolls was probably junked before 1980. Zinsky made the FOHBC scrolls in a wide variety of colors. Former FOHBC historian Jim Bender of Sprakers, N.Y., owns somewhere around a dozen different color shades."

Phyllis Koch, a member of the Ohio Bottle Club, suggested contacting Jerry Jones, who now resides in Coldspring, Texas. The former vice-chairman at the Expo admits to once owning a cobalt blue example of the flask. "It got lost during our moves over the years," he said. "Hal (Wagner) had ordered an entire color run of the flask."

The author's collection contains the following FOHBC-related flasks:

Handled honey amber, 9-inch-high flask embossed in a circle around the FOHBC eagle, the latter an early "trade-mark" of the Federation.

Unembossed olive green ribbed flask, 6 1/2 inches high. Marked in white ink on pontiled base HV 84 FHBC 36. Glassworks unknown.

Unembossed honey amber ribbed flask 6 1/2 inches high, marked in white ink on pontiled base 72 and 12. Glassworks unknown.

Cobalt blue flask, 7 inches high. Embossed THE FEDERATION OF HISTORICAL BOTTLE CLUBS in a circle around an eagle bearing an indecipherable banner in beak. FOUNDED 1969. Embossed on the other side A CELEBRATION OF AMERICAN GLASS JULY 7-10 1988 LAS VEGAS, NEVADA.

Olive green flask, 7 inches high. Embossed on one side ABCA 10TH ANNIVERSARY 1859**_1969. In the center is embossed a large bottle form flanked by a pick and shovel. Embossed on the other side SUCCESS TO THE RAILROAD (with embossed early train engine in the center). **Error should be 1959. Antique Bottle Collectors of California, the predecessor to the FOHBC.

Olive green flask, 5 1/2 inches high. Facsimile of slug plate bearing FOHBC 1969-1994 in tiny lettering (25th anniversary of the FOHBC).

*Haunton is the author of *"Last Links to the Past, 20th Century South Jersey Glass, Volume 1, Clevenger Brothers. 2001.* He is working on another book in which he says, "Downer will be covered."

Thanks for Your Memories!

The following contributed to the contents of this article: Jim Bender, Ralph Finch, Tom Haunton, Jerry Jones, Phyllis Koch, Jerry McCann, Ferdinand Meyer V and Mike Newman.



Photo: Mike Newman

