

# Tom Caniff, a Great Hobbyist, is Gone

*Sad notes, compiled  
by Ralph Finch*

Tom was an impressive collector, an intense researcher, a fire department chief, a fruit jar expert, and a keeper of pets, including stuffed toys, turtles, snakes and cats—a LOT of cats. There were few animals not found on the Caniffs' Noah's Ark.

Over the past decades I have written more obituaries than I can count, but this one hurts. For me, over the past 50 years, Tom has been a friend.

Tom, of Steubenville, Ohio, died May 24, in the same healthcare facility he shared with his wife, Deena. They were married just under 49 years. He had a wonderful and dry sense of humor and, while he rarely laughed, he always had a mischievous smile. As are many in the hobby, Tom was um, unusual.

Tom was a FOHBC 2008 Hall of Fame inductee, which he so well-deserved. The Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors notes on their Hall of Fame listing for Tom that he had written *The Label Space* (1997); *Fruit Jar Annual Volume 6* (2001), and *The Guide To Collecting Fruit Jars* (2001). And in all of this, his wife, Deena, assisted him with her photographic skills.

Tom entered the bottle collecting world in 1975, became active in Midwest collecting circles, and has been the president of the Jefferson County Antique Bottle Club in Steubenville. For two years he was the co-editor of the Federation newsletter (1978-80), was the Northeast Region newsletter editor (1981-83), and a juror of the Federation's annual newsletter contest in 1995. He was vice president and president of the national Jelly Jammers group (1990-93). He was the recognized authority on the various Flaccus family companies and their food-packing competitors along the Ohio River.

As mentioned, Tom—a fireman for 28 years—had become the department's chief. And some 35 years ago, while I was at work and planning in a few hours to drive to the Steubenville bottle club's show, Jerry McCann—who was waiting at my home—noticed a small problem. My house, just outside Detroit, had caught fire! Although my local fire department took care of things, I called Tom for help, but—Holy Smoke—he said the 297 miles difference was just out of his territory.



Over the years his jars have been sold, and only recently Greg Spurgeon's North American Glass firm sold the Christmas lights from the Caniff collection. But, a fireman to the end, Tom was cremated. And old friends add:

[Adam and Phyllis Koch – Akron, Ohio] “We were sorry to hear about Tom's passing. So many memories of the Steubenville bottle shows with Tom and Deena hosting an open house to share their collections. And it was never just Tom, it was always Tom and Deena. They were strong supporters and members of the Steubenville and the Ohio bottle clubs. He was a great researcher and shared that knowledge with other collectors. Our condolences to Deena and family and his many friends who will miss him.”

[Jerry McCann – Chicago, Illinois] “Tom had a passion for the story, the history behind the glass containers we collect. He doggedly pursued his research applying the journalistic rule: verify, verify. Although his education did not include formal education beyond high school he was extremely well-read and curious, well beyond the narrow areas of glass collecting. Unlike his contemporaries—Alice Creswick, Dick Roller and Vivian Kath, who had devotees who regularly provided resource material—Tom worked quietly in the background confirming their ideas or offering alternative information.

In the area of paper-labeled fruit jars and commercial containers, his work was seminal and stands alone in the hobby. Researching companies represented by their product labels was labor intensive and difficult. Yet he found much information to help collectors interested in their history. As a fellow collector he was always a friend first and a competitor last. His gentle curmudgeon presence at a bottle show was always welcomed. It will be missed.”

[Greg Spurgeon, North American Glass] “Tom collected what he truly liked and didn't accumulate objects based on whether they'd be considered “investment-grade.” Having visited his home several times, it was a pleasure to view and handle his extensive displays of the “eclectic.” Looking over these collections, expertly curated by Tom, was always a fun and educational experience.

During those visits we'd also learn that Tom was a master in fine-tuning his colorful fleet of “livestock” in order to strike a proper balance between cats and turtles.

Tom possessed enviable skills as an orator. His topical presentations at the Muncie Fruit Jar Show meetings were not to be missed. You just knew that his impeccable wit and dry sense of humor were lurking and about to come out at any turn. Tom was ever humble and wouldn't think of claiming to be the expert on anything. Even though, of course, he very much was. His eagerness to dive into detailed research and share that work in a skillful way has enriched several generations of collectors. Our hobby has been given a better chance to endure and prosper, thanks to his life-long efforts.

[Editor Note] See *Jarring comments from Tom Caniff—Tom, at 80, takes the lid off and looks back on a lifetime of interesting jars and old friends* in the December 2021 issue of *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector*. See in the FOHBC.org Members Portal.

