

You like fluters...or crimpers?

**You like tomato ... and I like tomahto?*

*Looking askew
with Ralph Finch*

Perhaps 99.8 percent of the people reading this magazine are interested in glass, pottery, or ephemera-related items. (And, OK, one weird-o in Michigan who collects old toilet paper!)

But, if we could wander through these people's homes, I bet we might spot at least one item that would make us stop and think: "What the...? That doesn't belong here; what's the story behind it?"

If you visit the Finch Fantasy Home of...stuff, that will happen since many things cause people visiting here to shake their heads and wonder why, like a salesman's sample toilet, a 1940's children's toilet paper holder that, when used, plays *Whistle Why You Work*, an 1899 cast-iron child's tricycle, and the list goes on and on. Oh—and a 61-year-old sumo match umpire's "bat." (A souvenir of two-plus years living in Japan.)

So, I am going to ask a few collectors to look around their homes and reveal that strange item that just doesn't seem to belong.

But first, let's talk about fluters. I like them and have had one for at least 40 years. Now, since a few weeks ago, I have two.

For those who are curious—and most bottle collectors are, so be patient—we are not talking about a flute, an instrument. Nor are we talking about a flute, as in a tall-stemmed glass for drinking wine.

We mean a fluter, a specialized kind of "sad iron" used to press the fluted ruffles on linen cuffs and collars and other trim. Made from cast iron, the fluter would have been heated by coals in the hearth.

(And fluters are still popular, although now heated electrically. Ask any woman who uses a crimper to curl her hair.)

Here's a brief review of a popular item from the 1800s. When found on eBay, they are offered at \$68-\$88. Our example was made in Geneva, Ill., and when found on eBay, runs \$70-\$100.

Our cast-iron hand fluter is embossed "Pat.d Aug, 21, 1866." There's a slot in the side where a handle could be placed to lift it off the fire or stove. The rounded top part is embossed "Geneva Ill." on the handle and "Geneva Hand Fluter" on the rounded top. The base measures 3 7/8 inches by 6. Many late 19th-century women would probably have recognized this fluter as a specialized kind of "sad iron" used to press the fluted ruffles on

a.



b.



c.





d.

linen cuffs and collars and other trim. The fluter would have been propped before the coals in the hearth to heat. The piece to be ironed would be moistened and laid over the grooved base. Then, with a potholder wrapped around the handle, the heated iron would be rocked over the cloth, producing perfectly pressed rows of narrow flutes or pleats.

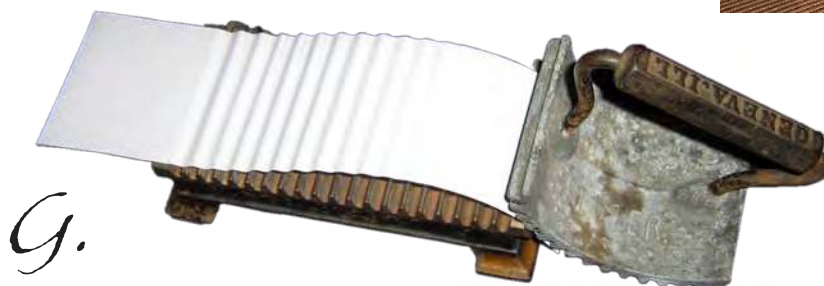
The weight of the iron and the heat would do most of the work, and compared to pleating and pressing the narrow ruffles individually, this must have been a labor-saving—yet still grueling—item.

The Internet adds: Two-piece hand fluter consisting of a wire handled, convex rocker or presser...Maker is W. H. Howell Co. of Geneva, IL; Eben Danford and William H. Howell established the foundry in 1862, and Howell continued the business in 1866. Reference books cite Charles A. Sterling of New York, N.Y., who received U.S. Patent No. 57,403 for his “improvement in fluting-machines”...However, Illinois histories in the 1870s credit Walter D. Turner (an employee or partner of Howell). The popular hand fluters were made from 1866 to 1920 and were exported around the world.

*FYI: *Let's Call the Whole Thing Off* is a song by George and Ira Gershwin for the 1937 film *Shall We Dance*, where it was introduced by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as part of a celebrated dance duet on roller skates. The song is ranked No. 34 on AFI's 100 Years of 100 Songs and is most famous for its *You like toma-to, And I like to-mah-to* lyric.

Now, I bet few collectors of antique glass also collect cast iron. That aside, what odd item do you have sitting around the house? Please email me at rfinch@twmi.rr.com. In an upcoming AB&GC, we'll take a peek again at some collectors' homes and reveal...

[Editor Note] Read or revisit *Nosy* writer Ralph Finch wants to poke around your...privates in the March–April 2022 issue of AB&GC.



G.

e.

The Finch Fluter photos, courtesy of Janet Finch, who does like to iron (but not cuffs).

[a] American Machine Co. Philadelphia, Pa, Crimper, Ruffler, Fluter Rolling Iron, Finch collection.

[b] 1877 Fluter, American Machine Co., Philadelphia, Corrugated. Pat. 1875-1877. Finch collection.

[c] Fluter came with a crank and embossed “EAGLE” and “Pat. Nov. 2, 1875.” On the base is “American, Machine Co Philadelphia, Pa.” Finch collection.

[d] Advertising trade card for the American Machine Company, Philadelphia. Three children with a table and an American Fluting Machine.

[e] Reverse of American Machine Co. advertising trade cards.

[f] Three pictures of an antique cast iron Geneva rocker fluter. “Heat This Pat'd 1866” on bottom. Finch collection.

[g] Hand fluter in action.

