

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, but when cleaning bottles,
we use what we must!

Bottle Tumbling

By Rod Vining

With a "Twist"



Removing a freshly cleaned bottle from the tumbler is always an exciting experience, especially when you are experimenting with new polishing compounds. I had been waiting with anticipation all week for this moment. As I removed the first canister from my bottle tumbler and walked toward the sink, I reflected on my collecting journey and what brought me to this moment.

I started collecting Indian pottery shards at the ripe old age of six in my great-grandmother's garden after it rained. By the time I was twelve, I found an old trash dump and started digging bottles. I was hooked for life. When I was fifteen, I was actively searching the woods for trash pits and old outhouses or walking the bayous and beaches at low tide. I remember being the "new collector" when every other bottle collector, except me, had such awesome collections.

There was an eccentric old man who lived nearby in one of the oldest homes in town. Vincent collected many antiques and historical items, including some really nice old bottles. What he had was always "better than anyone else." If you did not believe it already, he would find a way to remind you by working it into the conversation. Since he was at least 50 years ahead of me in collecting years, I did not mind his bragging from time to time.



"Sarracenia Life Bitters - Tucker Mobile, Ala." with a motif of three legs joined in center enclosed in a circle in olive green. Found and tumbled by the author.



Sarracenia Life Bitters—
fresh from being tumbled.

Fast forward to the late 1980s, before bottle tumbling had been standardized by “The Doctor,” we did the best with what we could cobble together on our own. Most of us who were experimenting with tumbling were willing to share our knowledge with each other, but not Vincent. He would absorb all the information he could from everyone else but never add anything to the collective knowledge base.

Vincent had a windowless room within his home with a lock on the doors behind which all of his tumbling “magic” occurred. If you happened to visit his house, you could hear the sound of belts, motors, gears, and copper churning in the canisters, but no one was ever able to behold the sight with their own eyes except him. He had an old Cuckoo clock that was modified to crow only once per day, and when it did, he would always stop whatever he was doing, or excuse himself from your company, to retreat behind the locked doors to flip his canisters. Of course, that is only an assumption on my part since we did not know what his procedures were at the time. One time I caught only a glimpse

inside the room. I could see a motor spinning canisters of bottles, and on the shelf were jars of what I assume were cutting and polishing compounds. Vincent’s tumbling results were amazing and better than any of us could achieve at the time. Too bad it was all so secret. Whenever I would try to pry information from him, he swore he would rather take it to his grave! Oh well, I just quit asking him and did my research elsewhere.

I like to think that I have made great strides in my tumbling abilities over the years. I learned to be able to remove many small chips, scratches and flaws with my Dremel tool, but it took years to find the right wheels to use for top-notch results. I replaced my old machines and plugs with the ones “The Doctor” makes and could not have been happier. I now thought I had “arrived” and I was sure that even Vincent could not have done better.

Examples of Alabama bottles
from my collection.





NO ADMITTANCE





Time to flip canisters

Vincent passed away about 20 years ago, but only recently, his relatives, who were just as eccentric as he was, sold the old home and had the obligatory estate sale. I made sure to be the first one in line. I was finally going to see what was in that room! I went straight for the room, only to find it still locked with a sign reading “No Admittance.” It took me several hours to convince the dealer running the sale to put me in contact with the current owner. When I reminded him of who I was and what a great friend Vincent had been to me, he relented to sell me the contents of the room, but I had to buy it all, sight unseen. The deal was made. I am sure I was more excited than that guy who televised the opening of Al Capone’s vaults, but I tried not to let it show.

We put the key in the lock, and I swung open the doors to reveal...an old, worn-out, home-built tumbler like the one I retired years ago. The motor would still run, but the belts were rotten, the pulleys and bearings were all rusty, and the rubber-coated shafts were all cracked.

Even the canisters and homemade plugs were worn beyond use. Well, the deal was that I had to take everything in the room, so I started loading it all up. At least the jars of 1200 silicon carbide and the aluminum oxide polishing compounds appeared to be uncontaminated. Under the tables were numerous other empty metal, ceramic, and pottery jars and urns. They appeared interesting and old enough to be “vintage.” Maybe I could put them on the dollar table at our next bottle show.

As I was leaving, the owner stopped me and handed me one last box. He said he had just found it while moving furniture and remembered that Vincent had said that he wanted me to have it after he passed away. I was so deflated at this point that I just put it in the truck with the rest of my “treasure from the vaults” and headed for home. I unloaded everything and finally opened that last box. Maybe this could be the one thing that made the whole ordeal worthwhile, but to my surprise and dismay, it was an ornate metal urn with Vincent’s ashes in it! Why would I ever want such a thing? Why would he direct his relatives to give this to me?

I thought long on the subject and remembered all the times Vincent said he would take his tumbling secrets to his grave. He had no better equipment than the rest of us at the time. He was even using the same grit and oxides; at least the jars that were labeled were the same as I had always used. I reckon his secret polishing compound was something he kept in the unlabeled jars. Suddenly, the pieces all came together, and I looked at Vincent’s urn with new eyes and cautious anticipation.

My excitement builds as I twist the plug to release the bottle from the canister. I dump the contents in the sieve and eagerly wash the bottle. As the water runs clear, I raise it up to the light to inspect the finished product. And lo and behold, Vincent can still put the finishing shine on the glass, even from the grave! Now I just don’t know what I am going to do when his urn is empty.





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