

Jarring Discoveries,

By Mike Beardsley
Chittenango, New York

The Fruitful Early Days of Collecting

Likely nothing bores today's younger collectors more than hearing old-timers spin yarns about the "Good Old Days" of collecting. No, amber Millvilles weren't lurking at every flea market, but make no mistake, there were some pretty amazing discoveries to be made and deals to be had by individuals ready to dig in, work hard, and EDUCATE themselves about this fledgling hobby called bottle collecting. For certain, antique glass collectors had acknowledged historical flasks, etc., as desirable for decades. Still, the pursuit of a broader class of bottles, fruit jars, insulators, etc., intensified in the 1960s and never looked back.

My dad (Leigh Beardsley) and I got thrust into the antique canning jar craze in a left-handed way. We were avocational New York State archaeologists intent on building a large collection of Indian artifacts from Central New York. Along the way, dad thought collecting an arrowhead from every state would be fun.

We put an advertisement in *The Antique Trader* saying that we'd trade arrowheads from New York for arrowheads from other states. That ad changed our lives. Yes, we got some "takers" and did some trading, but we also were contacted by folks who had arrowheads to trade, but they didn't want our New York State arrowheads in return. They wanted antique bottles and jars. Dad and I thought that was very strange, but we wanted arrowheads. So, we raided my two grandmothers' cellars in Bradford County, Pennsylvania, securing some old Mason jars, boxed them up, and sent them along. Wonder of wonders, by return mail, came some really nice artifacts. We were thunderstruck. My dad was an eager entrepreneur, and it didn't take long for a light to come on indicating that something big was happening in the collecting field... just not in our area.

Old canning jars actually had value. We bought whatever books on jars we could find, subscribed to OBX (*Old Bottle Magazine*), and started running ads in the local Pennysavers that we'd clean out unwanted fruit jars from basements and actually pay money for them. The phone kept ringing for the next 15 or so years. Competitors said we were lucky. Someone once said, "luck happens when preparation meets opportunity." If our competition only knew the hours spent pouring over the Blue Books, lugging and cleaning literally thousands of dusty jars from dirt floor basements, and trying to keep aware of opportunity when it knocked.

What follows are recollections of a young high school student (me) who loved archaeology but who also loved the thrill of the hunt. Walking onto a newly plowed field was very much like walking down dark cellar stairs. You never knew what might be waiting for you. These were such exciting times in our household. I kept daily journals. Our whole family participated, making priceless memories.



OK, We Blew That One

We got a "basement call" from a homeowner on Mary Street in Auburn, New York, our hometown. It was one of our first calls, and we were excited. We retrieved several bushel basket loads of old Masons. One was different. It said Mansfield, and it had a picture of the jar on the jar. Try as we might, we couldn't find it in any of our reference material. A guy named Alex Kerr in Los Angeles also ran ads for jars, so we called him. I was doing homework at an old black desk in the kitchen when dad reached Alex. After pleasantries, dad told Alex about the jar. Alex asked if it was for sale. Dad said yes and covered the receiver. Dad told me he was going to ask for the absurdly high sum of \$12.50. I said OK but told him we would pay the postage. Alex jumped on

Mansfield Glass Works jar. 



Antique Bottle & Glass Collector

Two very early Rochester, New York antique bottle show photos—likely 1969 or 1970. Leigh Beardsley seated and that's me in both photos looking very studious—nerdy might be more like it!




the jar. We were thrilled...for a little while. The jar eventually turned out to be the super rare RB #1618 and was worth a LOT more than \$12.50. Hey, live and learn. Alex remained a friend for years after that and always loved to remind us of that purchase!

That ain't no Fruit Jar!

Not long after the Mansfield debacle, we got a call leading us to an old, rambling farmhouse in Sherwood, New York. The jars in the basement weren't much...old but common. We loaded the Econoline, and the nice lady came out and asked us if we wanted a glass of lemonade before heading home. We went into her old farm kitchen with its dark brown wainscot cupboards that seemed to be eight feet tall. The woman opened the cupboard door to fetch glasses. My ever-sharp and opportunistic father spotted an unusual-looking jar sitting alone on the top shelf. He asked about it and had to help the woman get the jar down as it was beyond her reach. Was it for sale? The woman hesitated, then said yes. We left Sherwood with the darnedest-looking jar you ever saw. It had a long, narrow neck and a bulbous body. The embossing said, "Fluid or Dry Sealing Adjustable by Atmospheric Pressure Griswold's Patent 1862." Dad and I were excited...we felt we found another unlisted jar—no calls to Alex this time.

The Laconia, New Hampshire Bottle Show was coming up, so

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Fluid or Dry Sealing
Adjustable by Atmospheric Pressure
Griswold's Patent 1862 jar. 

we'd take our new prize there with a price tag of \$125. It would be the centerpiece of our table. When the date came, my buddy Mark Clymer and I piled into my first car, a 1961 Dodge Seneca (Glacier Blue), and headed to Laconia. After some duck pin bowling and a look at Lake Winnepesaukee, we crawled off to sleep in the Seneca as we couldn't afford a motel. At set up the following day, I gingerly pulled the Griswold jar out of the Mogen David box and placed it on the table. Instead of cheers, we got jeers. "That's no fruit jar...probably a battery jar...certainly not worth what you are asking." I was crushed. Even Roy Brown shook his head and walked away from our now-tainted treasure. We took the jar back to Auburn.

A couple of weeks later Ralph Bond published his 1970 book of Fruit Jar Patents and guess what was in there...our freshly snubbed Griswold. Our phone lit up like a Christmas Tree from the same folks who had trashed our treasure. I don't remember what we ended up getting for the jar, but it was substantially more than \$125.

How we stopped collecting insulators in one night!

Edgar Smith was a quiet and gentle man who worked as a lineman for New York Telephone. Edgar collected arrowheads (like us); he had an interest in old bottles and jars (like us), but he especially liked insulators. My dad was the General Agent for the Lehigh Valley Railroad for Central New York. As such, that gave us tacit permission to climb the telegraph poles that ran along abandoned LVRR lines and remove the "jewels" that hadn't been previously shot up by hunters. Nothing like dragging a huge wooden ladder over rotted ties and down embankments for a mile or two!

We paid our dues to secure our Hawley's, Brookfield's, etc. In fairly short order, we built a decent collection of insulators—nothing super scarce—but we assembled some "goodies" through climbing and trading. Edgar would run ads in the Union Springs,



NY Pennysaver looking for bottles, fruit jars, etc. He got a call from an older woman who told Edgar she didn't have any fruit jars but did have some milk bottles. Edgar made the house call anyway and got the surprise of his life. Edgar bought the lady's "milk bottles" and immediately called my dad. With a degree of excitement in his voice, he explained that he wanted to come to the house immediately to show us something...NOW—highly unusual for normally reserved Edgar.



Air-Tight Fruit Jar 

Edgar carried a beat-up cardboard box into our Indian room and set it on the table. This was the same box he'd just carried from the old woman's cellar. Before opening the box, Edgar took a moment to look over our collection of insulators resting on steel shelving near the Indian room door. He wasn't acting like himself...he was smiling and almost giddy. Edgar finally opened the box and set out the lady's "milk bottles." Out came two quart Airtight barrel wax sealer fruit jars and one coveted pint Air-tight Ravenna. All three pontiled jars were as clean and sparkling as the day they left Ohio. Dad and I were stunned. Edgar didn't want money, he wanted to trade his "milk bottles" for insulators. Dad glanced at our collection and, without hesitation, said, "take 'em all." The deal was done in less than a minute. We helped Edgar load up the insulators, and dad and I never climbed another pole.

Love that Sidney Show

In the early days of collecting, it seemed like there was a bottle show about every weekend. Many small towns had their own bottle clubs and put on great events. These were particularly fruitful experiences for dad and me. We'd arrive early and set up a table but never expected to sell much. Fruit jar collecting fever was still mainly a Midwestern thing, and we were there to buy jars from the local diggers and pickers to stock our bi-monthly fruit jar mailing list. If we didn't sell a jar, that was ok. I was always super excited the night before a show...perhaps like a hunter anticipating "opening day." Dad preferred the selling, so he manned the booth while I roamed the aisles "hunting" for

treasures as folks set up their tables. The Sidney show was one of these treasured rural events.

Gary Wilson ran the show in an efficient but always friendly manner. We carried our jar display to our table then I took off to scour the hall. Minutes into my "hunt" I noted a picker with three or four bushel baskets full of jars under his table. The top of his table was reserved for "real bottles." A hand-drawn sign in pencil stated that anything under the table was 50 cents. Lying out on top of one of the baskets was a pristine S. B. Dewey Fruit Jar from Rochester, New York. I couldn't get my two quarters out of my pocket fast enough. I didn't even dicker on the price (nice of me, huh!). I proceeded back to our table proud as a peacock and told dad, "beat that"! (As a family, we were hyper-competitive. Every lunchtime, dad would come home from the LVRR station, and we'd play Jeopardy for a penny a point.) Well, beat it; dad would.

As the show was winding down, two older spinster sisters approached our table, carefully looking over our jars. I thought we might make a sale. Can I help you? Well, they were looking for a specific jar like the one they had at home. They didn't see it at the show. They remembered that it had the name of a Doctor on it. My dad asked, Dr. Ramsay? Yes, that was it. Dad got their telephone number but then asked if they were going directly home after the show, as he didn't want this fish to slip the hook. Yes, but they lived 45 minutes away. No problem. The ladies eventually left the show with dad in hot pursuit. I was left to pack up the booth and then sit with the boxes on the curb long after the show had closed. I helped take down the tables, fold the chairs, and anxiously waited. About two hours later, Dad returned clutching his Dr. Ramsay prize...mint as could be. Dad's Doctor trumped my Dewey, but it was a day we never forgot!



S B Dewey Jr. Rochester N.Y. jar



Doctor Ramsay's jar 

Another “under the table” find

For decades, the Syracuse Regional Market has been a haven for “antiquers,” collectors, pickers, etc. Opening at 7 am on Sunday mornings it has been a Syracuse staple providing good buys to early risers. I’d eagerly leave my house early in anticipation of the hunt...sometimes with my very young children in tow. One such day, I got to the market and realized I’d forgotten to stop at the bank the day before. I had my checkbook and 75 cents to my name.

A lady had a bushel basket of old amber Clorox bottles under her table marked \$1 each. I noticed a curved, blown glass handle sticking out from the Clorox bottles. A little pawing and I uncovered a perfect pontiled Chestnut Grove Whiskey nearly obscured by the pile of Clorox containers. I offered the woman my 75 cents. Nope, she was firm on her dollar. When I pulled out my checkbook, I thought she’d spit. She didn’t want my check, so with a chilling scowl, she scooped up my three quarters. I grabbed my son and the whiskey and made off down the aisle. I thought it might be presumptuous to ask her for a bag.



Chestnut Grove Whiskey

a fast one on us, but I thought we might have gotten the last laugh. Back home, mixed in with the E-Z Seals were three very scarce Family Fruit Jar pints. Hah! Art had totally missed these gems. For once the “good guys” won.

Struck by Lightning

Cleaning out basements wasn’t all glitz and glamour. There was always an abundance of dirt, cobwebs, spiders, and such. Many of the jars were full leading to lugging heavy boxes up rickety wooden cellar stairs. Some of the lids had often corroded and “popped,” leaking their reeking rotted contents onto your hands and clothing. Often shelves had collapsed causing us to root the fallen jars out of the dirt floors.

Once home, the real fun began. The family would gather around a large galvanized steel tub in the backyard. Each of us would sit in a folding lawn chair surrounded by boxes of full jars waiting to be opened and cleaned. Like witches concocting a brew, we’d dump the contents into the tub. We’d try to guess what spoiled fruit or vegetable (or meat) we were discarding — tomatoes, relish, plums, beef, peaches, etc. It wasn’t long before our tub was brimming with a smelly colorful concoction worthy of Hocus Pocus.

Cleaning out a hundred jars or so loses its luster in short order, especially on hot days. Only the neighborhood flies seemed to enjoy themselves. But once in a great while, you get a pleasant surprise! Near the tub was our water hose



Trade Mark Lightning jar



Scamming the Scammer

I’m sure that we all have friends that we enjoy but who always seem to need to try to “one up” you. Well, one of my dad’s railroad buddies was just such a dude. He was always better at golf or found better antiques etc. Well, Art decided that he would become a picker for dad and me as we scoured Cayuga County for more Atlas & Ball wire bail jars to satisfy our “Moonshine Connection” commitment. Dad and I sent literally thousands of jars to moonshiners in North Carolina via a furniture hauler. We didn’t make a lot per jar, but in quantity, it really added up, plus it gave us an outlet for the many jars we got by cleaning out basements. Art would call us when he had built up a load. One evening dad and I arrived and Art’s garage floor was covered with hundreds of clear E-Z Seal jars...the mother load. That’s when Art dropped the hammer on us. He decided he needed a bigger cut of the action and increased the price he was asking for the jars by .25 cents per dozen. Dad wasn’t happy, but we were over a barrel. We needed the jars to fill the next truck, and it looked like the always cagey Art had stung us again. But wait. As I was loading the mountain of terminally boring E-Z Seal jars, I noted that a few of the jars looked different. Yes, the jars were clear and had wire bails, but they sure weren’t Atlas. I didn’t want to draw attention, so I quietly kept boxing up all the jars while Art and dad talked. Once back in the Econoline, I told dad that Art may have pulled

to rinse out the newly emptied jars. One afternoon we'd been working on a rather large batch of Lightning jars containing what appeared to be elderberries. A few of the quarts seemed to take forever to rinse out. Could the berries have stained the glass? Holding the jars up to the sun's rays, we were enchanted to find several of the Lightning's were amber glass. No, not super rare, but a real shot in the arm after dumping untold numbers of common clear, Ball blue, and 1858 Mason jars. We'd dance a little jig and then get back to the task at hand.



Torrey's Egyptian Fruit Jar

than to make any money. One box of jars remained unopened. The “expert” explained that those were “just stoneware jars that nobody wants.” He brought them to us just to relieve the widow from having to discard them. After the expert left, we opened the box. Yes, most of the jars were common stoneware unmarked wax sealers, but in the corner of the box was a jar with a beautiful black glazed finish. Lifting the jar out of the box, we were excited to note delicate gold lettering on the jar’s shoulder that spelled out the words Torrey’s Egyptian Fruit Jar. The jar was mint, super rare, and scored off the charts on the coolness scale. It was the only Torrey’s that we ever turned up. Dad’s generosity in paying more than he should have for the collection was rewarded by an “old stoneware jar that nobody wants,”...per the expert!

Take Me to Church...Cathedral Pickle Luck Strikes Twice

The Onondaga Lake Park Antique Show was always one of my favorites. Being an outdoor show, it was always subject to the weather whims of Mother Nature, and “mom” rarely showed favorably on the event. I’d paid for early admission and sloshed around the booths in a downpour. One fellow was setting out

They're Just Stoneware Jars, No One Wants Them

A fruit jar collector in the area passed away unexpectedly. We didn't know him very well, but his wife contacted us to buy his collection. Unbeknownst to us, a "local expert" offered to price the jars for the widow prior to our seeing the assemblage. The "expert" drove the collection to our home and unloaded the boxes. Yikes, Mr. Expert had pretty much marked the jars at full retail. Dad explained that there wasn't much room for any profit at those prices, but the "expert" stood firm. We ended up buying the collection more to help out the widow

some bottles. I quickly spotted a gorgeous deep green, iron-pontiled cathedral pickle in the pint size. Not wishing to draw attention to that one bottle, I grabbed a junk bottle on the table and asked for a price for the pair. The dripping dealer wanted \$20 for the two. I suggested \$18. Sold. I vanished into the storm (smiles). Two months later, I attended the Syracuse Antique Show at the New York State Fairgrounds. I had to work in the morning, so I arrived after the show had been open for almost four hours. I was feeling glum since all of the good buys had likely already been scarfed up by my bottle friends. In fact, I almost didn't attend the show.

Cathedral Pickle Bottle 

Two hours into the show and I'd found nothing. My fears were realized. But wait, in a booth in a center aisle I spotted what looked to be the neck of a bottle sticking out about one inch above a stack of metal lunch boxes. The antique dealer had used the bottle to prop open the lunch box lid to show the thermos inside. I lowered the lunch box lid to reveal a riveting, deep green cathedral pickle...this time about 1 ½ quart. This pontiled gem had been hiding in plain sight all day long behind Fess Parker (Daniel Boone). At \$35 it made my antique show trip more than memorable.

Calling All Jar Collectors, Alice Creswick's notebook: "X-ray reveals unusual jar" Here is an odd little jar reported by Mike and Nancy Beardsley of New York State. It's called an "X-Ray Fruit Jar."

[illegible]

X Marks the Spot

My wife Nancy and I attended a small antique show at a Catholic Church School in East Syracuse, New York. We'd only recently gotten married and I was trying to get Nancy hooked on the antique thing. I'd taken her to bottle shows at the York Fairgrounds, Rochester, NY, Syracuse, etc. Because we were newlyweds, Nancy tolerated my fascination with all things old. Growing up on a small farm, Nancy's family had no time for frivolous ventures like going to antique shows. Back at the St. Matthew's show, about five tables in I spotted a most unusual jar. It looked like a glass pillow resting on a large brass lid. I turned over the "pillow," and the lid read "X-Ray Fruit Jar." I was stunned. Nancy, however, didn't really seem to share my enthusiasm. I explained that we had a slew of fruit jar books, and no fruit jar ever started with an X. She remained unmoved, stating the obvious—"it sure doesn't look like a fruit jar," she said. And she was right. The jar was odd, but hey, it called itself a fruit jar...who was I to argue?

I sent pictures off to consummate researcher and friend Alice Creswick. A few weeks later came the word that my wife was right. In spite of the name, our "X-Ray" was not a fruit jar in the truest sense. It was actually made to hold fruit and then sit on top of a container full of the same fruit on a country store shelf. Drawn by the fruit in the X-Ray jar, the customer would buy said fruit and dip their fruit purchase out of the larger container. As such, the "X-Ray Fruit Jar" was more of an advertising piece, promoting the fruity contents for the store owner. Hey, I think it's still the only jar beginning with the letter "X"!

Christmas Surprises

About April of 1980, our family was at the Rochester Bottle Show. For me, Rochester was like Christmas, your birthday, etc., all in one. This time Nancy and I were pushing our one-year-old son Brandon in a stroller as dad and mom worked our table. It wasn't Brandon's first bottle show. He was born in March of 1979, and we actually stopped at the Syracuse Bottle Show on the way home from the hospital. At three days old, he was a shoo-in for the award for the youngest attendee.

Back to the Rochester Show. After our marriage, I moved from my boyhood home in Auburn, NY, to Chittenango, NY, near where my wife grew up. In trying to educate myself about the history of my new "hood," I learned that there had been a Saratoga-like resort just south of town that touted the healing powers of its "white sulphur water." George Waddy's booth wasn't far from our fruit jars. Among George's many wonderful Saratogas for sale was his newly acquired quart Chittenango White Sulphur Water bottle. I was smitten—a very cool bottle from my new "hometown." But, it had the absurd price of \$425—over the moon for 1980.

I was told that it was the only one known and had been found in the wall of the house being renovated at the corner of Race and Russell streets in Chittenango. Somehow legendary trade card dealer Kit Barry had acquired the bottle and then sold it to George. Nancy and I pondered the purchase. Hey, that was about 5% of my annual salary at the time. But, buy it we did, to "bring it home to Chittenango." We were thrilled. About a week later, George called me. I think he had seller's remorse. He asked me if

we ever decided to sell the bottle to let him have the first crack at it. I promised George that I would.

Fast forward about three years, I'm guessing. My mother and father-in-law were hard-working farm folks. Antiques were foreign to them, and I'm sure they thought Nancy and I were absolutely nuts to pay so much for a bottle, especially an empty bottle. It was nearing Christmas, and my in-laws were invited to a holiday party at a co-worker's home in Cazenovia, N.Y. During the gathering, my father-in-law spotted two quart Chittenango White Sulphur Water bottles resting on a piano, mint as could be. Come to find out, the party host had recently sold their family's summer camp on the Erieville Reservoir. The bottles turned up as they were cleaning out the house, and the other family members said the host should take them since she lived closest to Chittenango. Were they for sale? Yes.

No amount was discussed. My in-laws got the phone number, and two snowy nights later, I was sitting in the living room of a modest ranch house with the two Chittenango bottles on the coffee table before me. Dad and I always believed in making fair offers and sharing the wealth. After small talk, I offered the woman \$400 for the two bottles. She started to cry. She explained that her son had desperately wanted the new Commodore 64 Computer for Christmas, and she hadn't yet told him they simply could not afford it. Well, now she could, and she was overcome. She told me she was going to ask me for \$20 for the bottles. As I headed out into the snow, I had a lump in my throat but a big smile on my face.

So, now there were three Chittenango White Sulphur bottles known, and we owned all three. True to my word, I called George Waddy and sold one to him, and I sold the other to a gentleman in Rochester, N.Y. Even though the two Erieville bottles were a prettier shade of green we kept the original Chittenango bottle and have it to this day.

Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger once said, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." Yes, we've certainly been lucky...but...you have to put yourself in a position for luck to find you.

Attending bottle shows; visiting antique shops, flea markets, and garage sales; putting ads in the newspaper; networking; etc., all heighten the odds that good fortune will shine upon you. Even after all these years good bottles and jars are still "coming out of the woodwork" (sometimes literally) and they will be discovered by those best prepared to discover them.



Chittenango White Sulphur Water

