



Where do they get all these old bottles?

By Don Fritschel

“Where do they get all these old bottles?” The most outlandish answer to that question I have ever heard occurred right in front of my sales tables at the Las Vegas bottle show. A well-dressed man and his wife, obviously not bottle collectors, wandered into the showroom and casually viewed the hundreds of bottles for sale. The woman looked at her husband and repeated the question. The man lowered his voice and replied, *“Don’t you know? The government gives them the bottles so they don’t have to go on welfare.”* He was dead serious, and his wife’s expression had changed to *“Now that makes sense.”* Fortunately, they moved on before I said something I would regret.

But the question made me think about all the sources for antique bottles, such as digging, dealers, auctions, shows, etc. And then, I began to think of where and when I got some of the premier bottles in my collection. Some of them have stories to tell.

How many collectors know the exact date they fell in love with bottle collecting? I do. It was a Sunday, Mother’s Day 1974. My wife and I, along with two young children, were part of a group of Vermont’s townspeople who had permission to enter a military-restricted area once a year to “verify” the intersection of three townships. That morning, about 15 high-clearance vehicles drove through the gate and eventually found a cement obelisk in a densely wooded area on the side of a small mountain. It was promptly painted, and a party atmosphere prevailed for the next hour. Later, on our return trip to the gate, the caravan stopped beside a rock-lined cellar hole with century-old trees growing out of it. Several of our neighbors jumped into the hole and began furiously digging with shovels and rakes. I thought it was the funniest thing I had ever seen and began taking pictures of the scene. And then, one of the diggers held up an old bottle, embossed “Jericho Drugstore Jericho, Vt.” There was no drugstore in the nearby village of Jericho, but the town historian, who was part of our group, explained that the drugstore had burned down in 1906 and was never rebuilt.

Then, another bottle appeared. It was embossed “Dr. W. S. Nay Underhill, Vt.” [Fig: 1] Our historian friend explained that Dr.



[Fig: 1] “Dr. W. S. Nay Druggist Underhill, Vt.” clear drugstore bottle.

Nay had been a pharmacist in Underhill, about three miles from where we stood. Someone offered that Dr. Nay had written the 1937 Vermont classic, *“The Old Country Doctor,”* which described growing up in this area during the early 1900s. A realtor in the group then quietly spoke up, *“I was the last baby that Dr. Nay delivered.”* I was stunned. Wow! History from the ground. We were hooked and spent every weekend for the rest of the summer digging bottles. And when we dug shards of historical flasks, the excitement only increased.



[Fig: 2] “Smith’s Green Mountain Renovator East Georgia, Vt.” medicine bottle. Courtesy FOHBC Virtual Museum.

Soon, the digging stories began to emerge. One of my favorites involved three diggers who raked through the excavations each evening at the site of Burlington’s future underground shopping mall. One evening, a worker from the job offered the three diggers a bottle he had uncovered with his bulldozer that day. It

was olive-amber, pontil marked and embossed: “Smith’s Green Mountain Renovator East Georgia, Vt.” [Fig: 2] They offered to buy it from him, but he didn’t want money; he wanted a jug of cherry brandy. No one had more than pocket change, but when they pooled several handfuls of change, the man said, “*That looks about enough,*” and he walked off with a pocket full of coins. The three friends stared at the bottle and finally agreed to do the only fair thing they could think of. One of them took the bottle home, the flip of a coin winner!

My business travels took me to several towns that had actual bottle shops. One of my favorites was Jim’s Bottle Shop in Ardsley, New York, near White Plains. Jim Whetzel’s shop always contained a very nice assortment of affordable bottles, and I always left with one or two nice examples. It was Jim who gave me the wise advice, “*Always buy the best examples that you can afford.*” I listened to him, as my collection has several gorgeous, sapphire blue, open pontiled umbrella inks and a selection of colored Harrison’s that had once resided in his shop.

Another mentor was Buzzy Owens from Rutland, Vermont. Since my wife and I had a weakness for Saratoga-type mineral water bottles, Buzzy recommended that we collect Saratogas from Vermont since there were far fewer to collect than the many embossings from New York. And you may be able to collect all the variants. Buzzy had taken a full year off from work to dig bottles throughout New England. He knew his bottles! He told us about the elusive “Campbell Mineral Spring Co. Burlington, Vt” bottle, the only aqua one from the Green Mountain state. A total of ten had been found, and he knew the location of each and every one of them. He owned two of them, one of which I was eventually able to buy from him.



[Fig: 3] Entrance to Terry McMurray Drugstore Museum. Courtesy Terry McMurray website.

During those early collecting days, my job occasionally took me to Binghamton, New York. Rather than fly through the chaos of the New York City airports, I opted to fly to Syracuse and drive the 70 miles to Binghamton. I would always arrange my travels to allow time to visit Terry McMurray in Kirkwood. In addition to his collection of drugstore, apothecary, and country store collectibles, Terry always had a nice assortment of items for sale, and I always found four or five bottles to buy. When it was time to leave, Terry was always amused when I brought in my carry-on suitcase and dropped my purchases into (clean) socks for continued travel. Twenty-seven years later, Terry is still in business, known for his internet auctions of the same fine

merchandise. Contact Terry for his auction schedule or visit his website for his Drugstore Museum photographs. [Fig: 3]

Several of the premier items in my collection came from various country auctions; the kind held outdoors or maybe in a barn or under a tent. At one auction, an attractive stenciled shipping crate hit the auction block. The stenciling told that it had held bottles from Alburgh Springs, Vermont. [Fig: 4] This was the first time I had seen a shipping crate from a Vermont spring, much less one as scarce as Alburgh Springs. Another bidder tenaciously battled me for it, but eventually, my bid topped his. The crate was mine, and it was the size that could only accommodate 18 Saratoga-type pints. Alburgh Springs was the only spring from Vermont that shipped in pint-size bottles. After the auction, the underbidder for the crate asked me if I had been bidding on the crate or its contents—old sewing machine parts. When I told him I wanted the crate, he offered me 50% of my winning bid in exchange for the contents. Now, that was a win-win! And I have never seen another Alburgh Springs crate!



[Fig: 4] Example of an “Alburgh Springs, Vt” bottle. Courtesy Glass Works Auctions.

Another country auction advertised old bottles, but the bottles turned out to be quite common. All except one. It was a case gin shape, deep emerald green, with an iron pontil mark. It was strongly embossed, “Dr. Guysott’s Compound Extract of Yellow



[Fig: 5] “Dr. Guysott’s Compound Extract of Yellow Dock and Sarsaparilla” bottle. Courtesy FOHBC Virtual Museum.

Dock and Sarsaparilla.” [Fig: 5] I had no idea its value then, but I knew it must be good based on its early features. It had a small lip chip, which I felt could be repaired. I won the bottle and sent it to Don Spangler, the old master, who did such a good repair that a black light was required to find it. It turned out to be one of the highlights of my collection and a good example of “*follow your instinct.*”

One name that is not well known outside of New England is that of Peter Mallett. Peter collected bottles from Franklin County, Vermont. These include several early, pontiled medicines and rarities such as the super scarce Saratoga-type, “Central Spring Green & Co. Sheldon, Vt.” [Fig: 6] Peter was considered a leading authority on the previously noted “Smith’s Green Mountain Renovator.” It turns out that this product was bottled in the mid-1800s, just three miles from his home. In 2004, Peter self-published a 179-page book, “*Smith’s Green Mountain Renovator and the St. Albans Remedy Company.*” It was a work of love, and I was honored when he asked me to write the foreword for his book.



[Fig: 6] “Central Spring Green & Co. Sheldon Vt” mineral water bottle.

Peter owned a “Central Spring” bottle and knew how badly I wanted one for my collection. He promised me the right of first refusal if he should ever decide to part with it. That took 24 years to happen. One day, out of the blue, Peter called me and said he had an opportunity to buy a huge folio of Audubon prints, one of his passions. However, it would require a three-way trade, which included the Central Spring bottle. When the horse-trading ended, I finally had the elusive bottle I had pursued for years.

One sidebar involving Peter: He didn’t do email, so his communication was by phone or by letter. A few Christmases ago, his hand-written holiday greeting mentioned that he had spent 1943-1944 in Pando, Colorado, just over a two-hour drive from where I now live. I was jolted to the core. Pando was an area on Tennessee Pass, not far from Vail, Colorado, where the now-extinct Camp Hale was located during World War II. At its peak, Camp Hale’s 15,000 soldiers were trained in the nearby mountains for winter warfare. The 10th Mountain Division is still legendary in the annals of the war and Colorado. After receiving his note, I picked up the phone, called him, and said, “*Peter, I’ve known you for over 50 years and never knew you were in the 10th Mountain Division.*” He replied, “*No. I wasn’t in the 10th Mountain. I taught the 10th Mountain troops how to ski!*”

Sometimes bottles came to me, in my home. How many of you remember Dave Goad, the “*Traveling Bottle Man*”? Dave would

appear in the driveway in his camper truck, spend the evening swapping and selling bottles, and then disappear in the morning. He often carried some “heavy” bottles in his travels.

Occasionally, I bid in mail-bid catalog auctions and later in internet auctions. Most of the bottles I desired sold well above my financial reach. However, I remember a GX-27 “Stoddard flag” flask, olive-amber, with an open pontil, that I won in a Harmer-Rooke New York City mail bid auction [Fig: 7]. Somehow, it slipped by at a bid price I could afford, and it was one of the highlights of my collection for many years.



[Fig: 7] GX-27 Stoddard Flag flask. Courtesy FOHBC Virtual Museum.

One of the truly delightful things about this hobby is visiting other collectors and viewing their collections. I was very fortunate to view some of the great collections like Bob Mebane’s when he owned the gallon-size, cobalt blue “Harrison’s Columbian Ink.” [Fig: 8] And Sam Greer’s collection when it was on display in his office. And Charlie Gardner’s while his assortment of flasks was still intact. And Warren Haynes, Arthur Burris, Crawford Wetlaufer and Bill Agee. And don’t forget the young kid down the block who is just starting to collect bottles but can tell you where every single one of his treasures came from. Hey, seventy years ago, that could have been me!



[Fig: 8] “Harrison’s Columbian Ink” courtesy FOHBC H24 American Antique Glass Masterpieces exhibition.

So, where did the bottles in your collection come from? What stories can they tell? Help the couple visiting the bottle show with their question:

“Where do they get all these old bottles?”

