

Collector Logic

by Steve Ketcham

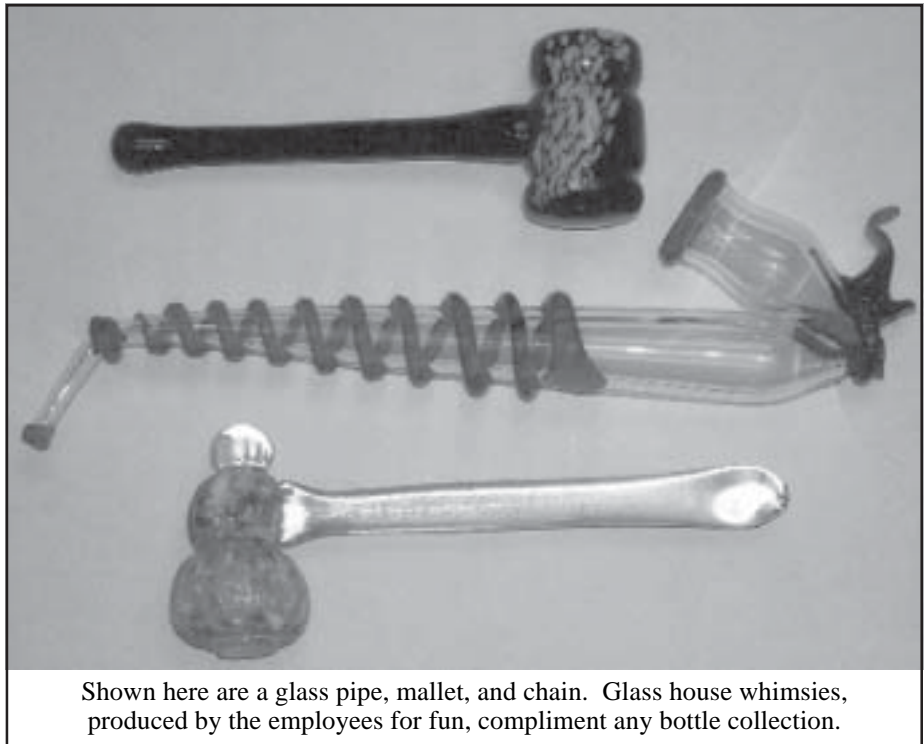
It isn't very logical at first glimpse. These great accumulations of the stuff of the past seem whimsical and arbitrary to the outside world. Yet within the collecting realm, neat and orderly patterns are found. These patterns are sometimes easily seen and quickly understood by those who also collect. But even we collectors tend to too quickly classify others by what they collect. We pigeon-hole and even stereotype in order to make our view of other collectors somehow logical. This can limit our view and our understanding of our fellow collectors almost as much as if we were non-collectors.

The reality is, we collectors are not single-minded or monogamous in our collecting habits. Few of us collect just one item. If we look closely, though, a subtle, logical connection exists among the various types of items which ultimately form our collections.

If I could read the minds of most of my fellow collectors, I'm sure the words "bottle collector" would register with most of them when I come into view. (Other adjectives may also come to mind, but we needn't dwell on those here.) But the fact is, my bottle collection is much more than a singular accumulation. It is the foundation of a half-dozen other collections which are equally interesting and historically important. Each collection is an entity unto itself, but each is also logically related to the collecting of antique bottles. The logic which binds the collections together may not be obvious, but it is there.



Just about any beer bottle collector would be happy to place an early tray like this one into the collection.



Shown here are a glass pipe, mallet, and chain. Glass house whimsies, produced by the employees for fun, compliment any bottle collection.

I bought my first antique bottle in 1967. By 1968, because I was an impoverished college student, I was digging for old bottles in early dumps where the bottles were free for the taking. When I could afford it, antique shows and shops, estate sales and garage sales, and even auctions were my haunts. These venues presented interesting, logical collection connections which caught my eye and launched new, related collections.

Digging provided all kinds of old bottles, from quack medicines to food, beer, and liquor bottles. In shopping the shows and shops, I discovered items directly related to my bottles. Hundreds of nostrum makers, for example, gave away almanacs and trade cards which advertised their bogus cures and remedies. These colorful old cards and booklets carried fantastic claims and customer testimonials regarding the supposed curative powers of the products, and they also featured factual information about the companies. Before long, a trade card and almanac collection was born which provided me with a greater appreciation and understanding of the bottles I found.

A similar evolution took place in relation to the beer bottles I found. Early brewers also believed in the power of advertising. While a few used trade cards, many more gave away more useful items which were imprinted with ads. For example, etched glasses, cork screws, and pocket match safes were often available from the brewery. Beautifully lithographed signs, serving trays, and tip trays featuring pretty girls, wild animals, and factory images were provided to saloons and individual customers. Once

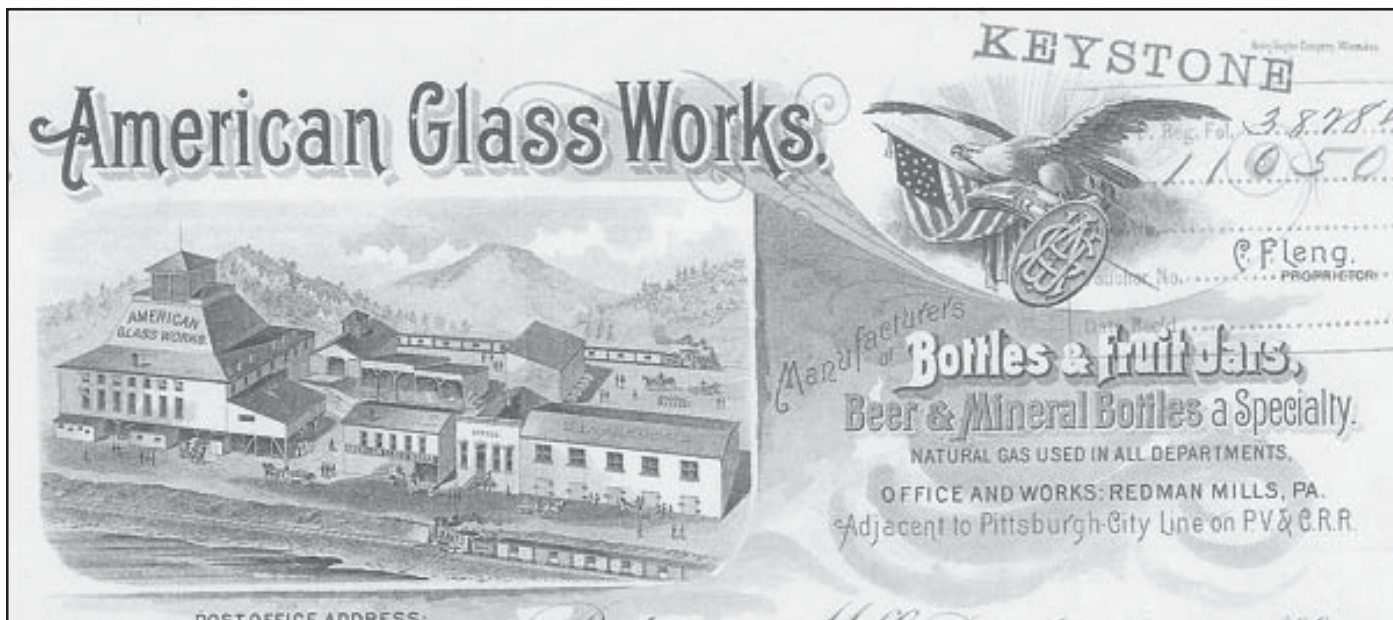
these items came under my radar, a confirmed breweriana collector was born. I have happily sent in my dues to the National Association of Breweriana Advertising since 1974.

Brewers weren't the only ones placing ads on signs, trays, and etched glassware. A collection of etched, pre-Prohibition shot glasses compliments a whiskey bottle collection nicely. I'm not averse to a nice whiskey advertising tray on the wall, either.

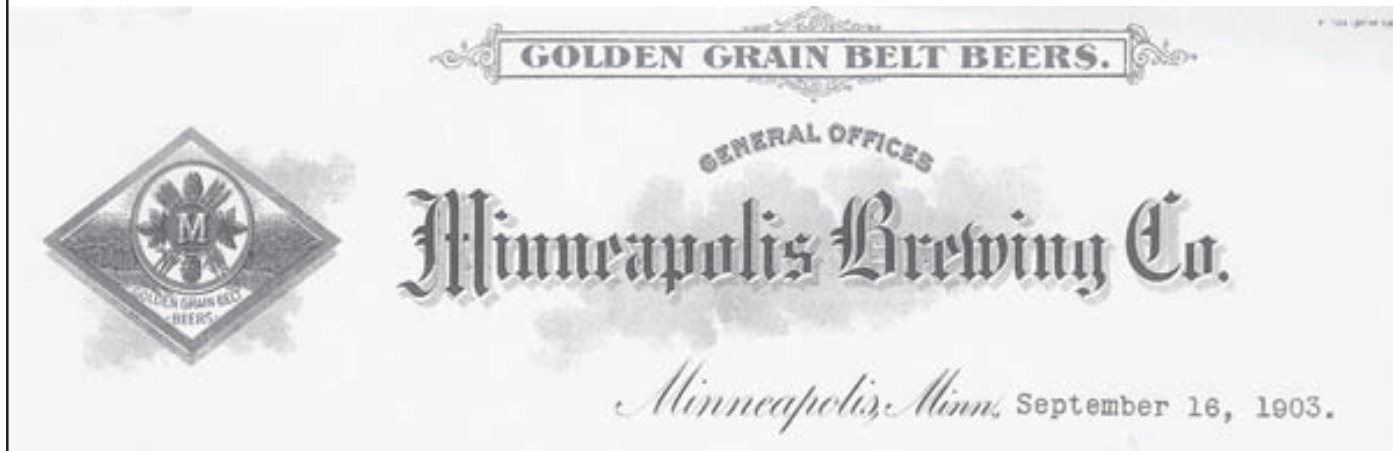
Distillers and liquor dealers didn't just bottle their potables. They also filled stoneware jugs with their wet goods for those customers with larger-than-average thirsts. Happily, many such concerns throughout the Midwest ordered their jugs, complete with dealer advertising stencilled upon them, from the potteries of Red Wing. Once a whiskey bottle collector finds a jug stencilled with the same name found embossed on one of his early flasks, a stoneware collector is born. A few jugs on the floor below form a perfectly logical compliment to the whiskey bottles on the shelf above.

It is impossible to collect antique bottles without paying attention to the companies and the employees who made the bottles. While glass houses seldom advertised to the general public, it is still possible to locate their promotional materials. Early glass house catalogs are a real treat to find and provide a wealth of information to collectors of all types of glass.

As was true in the potteries, the employees of many glass factories were permitted to make lunch-hour pieces for friends and family. The glass blowers



Letterheads from concerns such as glass companies and breweries add depth and context to collections of glass bottles.



formed glass chains, pipes, mallets, and decorative paper weights for personal use. Glass canes, sometimes in red, white and blue, were made to be carried for special events such as Fourth of July parades. These various pieces, known to collectors as glass house whimsies, form a unique and logical adjunct collection for many bottle collectors.

Yet another collectible which connects logically to bottles is early photographs. Many companies, from breweries to glass houses, proudly posed their employees outside the factory for a photo. Still other photos, taken inside saloons across the land, give insight to just how the bottles and advertising served their time on the walls and shelves of yesterday's watering holes.

A listing of go-with collectibles would also have to include letterheads. These fancy printed pieces were designed to convey the grand nature of the companies which used them. They featured fanciful logos and factory illustrations meant to impress all who viewed them. They also listed company officers and brand names,

information which is useful to collectors of all kinds of products.

Collectors, like onions, are many layers deep. We are far more complex than the labels we place on one another. On more than one occasion, the local bottle clubs have dedicated a meeting to the theme of "Other Collections." The variety of items which appear at such meetings, as well as the information which is shared there, leads to discussions lasting well past the evening meeting. I suspect many collecting clubs have held similar meetings.

The next time you are tempted to pigeon-hole a fellow collector, approach



This etched glass from the Gluek Brewing Company logically compliments the collection of early Minneapolis beer bottles while providing a glimpse of a brewery building which has long since disappeared.

him or her instead and ask, "What else do you collect?"

Then, listen to the logic and learn.