

Fish 'n for Bottles ...

An Ongoing Narrative and Living Tribute to Yankee Native, Nature Lover and Grassroots Bottle Enthusiast, James A. (Jim) Rogers

By Dr. Peter L. Colman

Had you been cruising one of the old boundary roads of the Connecticut River dividing New Hampshire and Vermont, let's say, sixty years ago, you just might have caught a glimpse of a short, sturdy young fly-fisherman, chest-high in the cold current, his fly-rod rising and bending like a birch sapling in a gale storm ... And as you watched in wide-eyed amazement, as I did so many times as a young boy, you might see the same silent figure orchestrating a flawless forty-foot cast ...

The glistening green line would seem to catch fire in the morning sun, rolling and gliding with wild precision, charging and retreating against the breeze until, in one final, friendly assault, fisherman, fly-rod and line become one. The translucent leader was all but invisible, gently delivering the small white deer-hair fly on to the glassy surface of the of a dark pool just inches from the opposite shore.

Fast-forward to an identical day twenty years later. The same fisherman, known affectionately to his best friends as 'Jim,' was working the same river, accompanied by his young son, Jay. They had often seen an old abandoned house near the river where they fished. They saw it again that morning. Jim parked the sleek white '59 Ford a few hundred yards away and inched silently toward the waking waters. Once there, father and son worked the early morning current until they had their limit of full-colored native 'brookies' and rainbow trout. It was a good day.

New England natives who know my uncle refer to him simply as 'Jim.' He's more comfortable with that.

Jim has been an avid sportsman and outdoorsman for most of his nearly 89 years – from New Hampshire's vast mosaic of mountains, fresh-water lakes, streams and rivers, to its breathless salt-water inlets and shoals ... Countless friends and neighbors (and even total strangers), fellow fishermen, and a nameless throng of his native Manchester's grass-roots citizenry can remember Jim's uncommon friendliness and infectious passion for every simple pleasure and adventure that his native New England has to offer.

Many of his dearest friends have moved on now ... Today, those who know Jim best have little or no recollection of his unpretentious, adventurous past. They know him now as he is - that rugged, tenacious, unselfish and incurably amiable little white-haired gentleman who travels

the country-side in an over-sized van, pulling a small trailer packed with cardboard cases of beautifully labeled bottles and jars, all meticulously, modestly under-priced and lovingly wrapped and coddled like bright new-borns in a miniature nursery.

But Jim is never alone in his impassioned quest for the next discovery or the newest addition to his repertoire of quality antique bottles and related memorabilia. Sitting right next to him is his beloved wife, Joyce, Jim's sweet, petite, bright-eyed companion whom he pursued and wooed while serving with the U.S. Army in England, and later in France. Joyce, who, during Jim's initial romantic blitzkrieg, did all she could to defend against his harmless, strategic advances, until the tenacious young recruit finally managed to counter her every evasive maneuver, capture her heart, and, ever so gingerly, coax his stunning brunette bride to a humble church altar. By Joyce's own confession, and with a playful twinkle in her dark eyes, she still maintains to this day that she 'went kicking ...' Maybe.

After the war, Jim returned home on the Queen Elizabeth. Some months later, his new bride hitched a ride on a German freighter and happily joined her proud young hero on America's shores. After a few, shall we say, 'memorable' forays together in the New England wild (one of which found them spending a wet, stormy night sleeping under a tree, only to awake half frozen the next morning a few yards from their cabin ...). The newly-weds spent a short period of unforgettable 'bliss' with Jim's family in their small Manchester home, the new couple finally settled into a small cottage, nestled in the small pines, overlooking old Grenier Field (now the Manchester/Boston Regional Airport).

They're still there. And so are the pines. And the red and white beacon on the hill. And they're still venturing hand-in-hand into the wild in search of new adventure, and old friends, and old bottles! And an occasional trout stream or well-stocked lake or pond ...

"Uncle Jim," I asked recently, "You've been an ardent fisherman most of your life. When did your passion for fishing for old bottles actually begin?"

"Well," he replied, "My interest in old bottles actually started on a fishing trip. I was with some good friends, Roland and Bea Dion. We were trolling one day for lake trout on Winnepesaukee. My friends are the ones who introduced me to old bottles. They said that some old bottles could be worth quite a bit



Jim and his father



Joyce Rogers

of money. I had never thought much about it before that time. What really caught my interest was just the idea of finding something old. The older I get, the more I enjoy just finding a real old, unusual bottle. But the fact that old bottles could be worth something caught my interest too.”

“Do you recall the very first time that you actually went digging?” I inquired.

“The very first time?” His response was immediate. “It was during another fishing trip. That was the same day I found my very first bottle. I found it while digging with my son, Jay, up behind an old house up on the Connecticut River ... That’s when it all started.”

“So what happened?” I continued to do a little digging of my own, as my curiosity began to rise.

“Well, it was a pretty good day for fishing,” Jim remembers, “So we came back to the car early. We followed the tracks toward where the car was parked. But then I saw the old house through the trees. I left the tracks and wandered toward the old house we had seen from the river ... I knew there had to be a dump nearby, and sure enough, I stumbled upon it in the brush between the house and the river.”

“That’s when I found it.”

“Found what?” I could stand the suspense no longer.

“A historical flask ... My first bottle was a historical flask. That was the first bottle I ever dug. It was amber. Boy, I wish I still had that flask. I think I sold it back then for about \$200. It’s probably worth a bit more now.”

My Uncle Jim is a native of Manchester, New Hampshire. He is my mother’s brother. But since my biological father (now deceased) left home 55 years ago, Jim has been more of a father to me than an only son could ever dream.

Jim’s natural impulse is to avoid the smallest semblance of praise, exaggeration or notoriety. He cautioned me to refrain from drawing excessive attention to his name ... I promised him that I would be discrete.

So while I will make every effort not to ‘make his head swell,’ as he is fond of saying, I cannot resist simply mentioning a couple incredibly inconspicuous, but colorful details in the home-spun tapestry of Jim’s life ...

Though ‘Uncle Jim’ continues to humbly shrug off the connection, I suspect that the family name derives from an illustrious namesake of Scotch-Irish extraction ... none other than James Rogers himself, the iconoclastic New Hampshire

woodsman, self-made soldier and legendary leader of the heroic, rag-tag militia known in New England lore as ‘Rogers’ s Rangers.’

The fact that James Rogers and his Scotch-Irish peers settled in the early 18th-century (1719) in what was then Londonderry (Nutfield) , on the western banks of the Merrimack River, and there established the primitive colony of farmers and tradesmen, is anything but coincidental.

Local historians record that (Lieutenant-Colonel) James Rogers, the ancestor of the Rogers clan in New England, migrated with his six sons from Methuen, Massachusetts in 1742, ‘up Black Brook to the ‘Great Meadows,’ naming the first settlement Montalona, after their old homestead in Ireland. The earliest settlement, known as ‘Starktown,’ would later be renamed Gorhamtown, and then Dunbarton, not far from the old Montalona Road, where I was raised as a child, in the old Morse/Elliot home, built by David Elliot in 1822. How coincidental.

What is not coincidental is the fact that a certain unnamed descendant of the infamous Rogers clan spent most of his adult life putting down irrepressible roots in his native soil, happily resigned to enjoy the forests, seacoast, lakes, rivers and ravines surrounding his native Manchester?

There is no question that Uncle Jim is a descendant of the same hearty Scotch-Irish clan that populated the Merrimack Valley as early as 1719.

Nor is it surprising that a dyed-in-the-wool Yankee son should spend his entire life indulging in the beauty of the New England landscape while, at the same time, expending unimaginable energy, well, shall we say, ‘exploring’ (‘excavating’ would be more accurate) its unpretentious, but celebrated past in an impassioned quest for hidden home-spun treasure in the unlikely form of antique bottles ... Or old friends. Both are becoming scarce these days.

But just because the same river or stream has been fished many times in the past doesn’t mean that there aren’t still good fish to be caught, or good buried bottles to be unearthed ...

And that is precisely what Uncle Jim has been doing since his retirement from civil service over 35 years ago ... Spending a good deal of his ‘free’ time, digging and scouring the New England country-side in search of old bottles and related



Jim digging for old bottles

memorabilia ... including everything from tin advertising signs and rusty pistols, to pottery shards, perfume bottles, poisons, painted applied color labels pop-bottles, inks, milks, and a ubiquitous assortment of ales and strap-flasks, pharmaceuticals and cures ... and a thousand other unidentifiable rogues.

And, yes, there's an occasional 'prize catch,' such as the rare amber New Hampshire Stoddard flask with the embossed American eagle on one side, and Old Glory on the other! Back in the day, that bottle, alone, would fetch \$700. In a New York minute. Or before. Unless I'm mistaken (I am certainly not a connoisseur of flasks), bottle enthusiasts and collectors today would be crawling over one another in a raucous feeding-frenzy, begging to lay down a mere \$700. just to possess (or be possessed by) the same flask.

Did I mention the 'sleeper,' the 'SURE' fruit-jar that Jim happened upon some years ago buried in an old non-descript basket of throw-away clear jars he bought at a local farmers' auction for five dollars?

But any fisherman (or woman) knows that regardless of one's expertise or depth and breadth of experience, there's always that rare catch that somehow got away. Though Jim is not one to hold on too tightly or selfishly to anything he catches, there were, as I recall, at least two such incidents in the nearly four decades since Jim started collecting bottles seriously.

On a routine 'fishing' excursion some years ago, as Jim tells it, he stumbled upon a round display table with miscellaneous offerings, all of which were fixed at a relatively low price ... and were available for the buyer on a 'first come, first served' basis.

There were many fellow-fishermen in the glass-strewn river that day, and a desperate flurry of activity, each collector bent on finding that elusive prize ...

As Jim waded cautiously, inconspicuously, toward the table and its curious assortment of orphan specimens, his eye caught a suspicious hue ... a small rose-colored flask. He hesitated. Was it genuine, or was it some kind of bizarre, generic fact-simile of something else?

Something unusual, no doubt.

He stood there for a brief moment in curious reflection, poised to pluck the small flask from its place just a few feet away, and lay down the \$4. But at the same instant, in a flash, an arm reached over his shoulder and snatched the little beauty from his reach! All is fair in love and bottle-collecting. 'Finders keepers ...'

Uncle Jim recalls his feeling at the time.

"That could have been something good, I thought, something valuable ...

I wasn't certain. But I had a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach that I had let a good one go. He was right. He later found out that the individual who had netted that bottle later sold it for more than \$4,000.

The day that Jim told me that story was the same day we had shared a booth at the old York, Pennsylvania fairgrounds. If you've been there, you'll remember the same wooden stalls and the uneven dirt and sawdust surface cattle were generally

kept and sold. Well, the cattle and other livestock had long since moved on, but the enormous flesh-eating green flies had remained to haunt the premises.

In the weeks prior to the show, I had obtained two beautiful specimens from a Chicago collector. I had never seen or owned any real good examples of Mid-western Ohio glass. These two were both beautiful 16-swirl, dip-mold 'club' whiskeys from Mantua (Barberton County, near Akron). The Mantua Glassworks, I understand, was only in operation for two short years back in the early 1830s. One of the bottles, both with deep pontil scars, was aqua; the second was clear, and, as I would soon discover, more desirable.

I was a novice at the time, and depended pretty much upon Uncle Jim's expert advice and good instincts. But it was a very busy show, with a good flow of gawkers and cautious buyers. I recall that Jim was in conversation most of the day (his signature trait), and occupied with several customers. I was in the booth next to his, and on my own this time.

Mistakenly, I had determined, because of its soft blue hues, that the aqua club was the more valuable of the two. So when someone asked me what I wanted for the clear specimen, believing that it was the lesser valuable of the two, I was excited and reluctant, all at once. The day had been slow. I was eager to make a sale ... the sure sign of a novice.

"Well, it's probably worth a bit more, but I'll take \$100."



Peter Colman and Jim at the York show

"How about \$50 Cash?" came the response.

I folded. "OK, I said ('Something is better than nothing,' I thought), \$50 is fine."

After the transaction, I remember thanking the buyer. I don't remember him saying much at all. He seemed to just disappear. Later that day, during a short down-time, Uncle Jim came over to my booth.

"Hey, Pete. Didn't you sell a clear club Ohio whiskey a while back?"

"Yes, I did, Uncle Jim. The fellow was pretty pleased."

Jim then took me quietly aside and told me the story of the rose-colored flask ... the one that got away.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here," continued Jim. "I should have looked at that bottle a little closer. I'm not always sure about those mid-western clubs ... There are so many varieties. A few minutes ago, the same fellow stopped by my booth."

"He did?" I responded with a creeping twinge or regret,

something akin to locking the only pair of keys in a borrowed car ...

"Yes. He told me that he had purchased a pretty rare clear club whiskey from my nephew. He seemed pretty pleased with the purchase. What did he pay you for it?"

"\$50 Did you say?"

"Yep. I was asking \$100, but he seemed to really like it."

"Well, he did. He just turned around and sold it to someone on the other side for \$800."

I was speechless.

It wouldn't be the only time, in spite of Uncle Jim's good influence, that I would let a big one get away.

Some years ago, I had set up at a large two-day show. During a short reprieve, I meandered to an adjoining building and spied a large clear 1-gallon milk jug from a Chicago dairy. I was familiar with the brand. It was dated as late as 1952. But it had a large black rubber nipple ... I would later discover that it was a rather rare calving bottle.

I negotiated with the seller, and settled for \$12. Returning to my 'stall' with my mystery bottle, I searched in vain through my library to identify and price the jug, but to no avail. I cleaned it carefully, put \$20 on it and tucked it in the corner. Two women spied the bottle.

"Wow, I like that bottle," one of the ladies remarked.

"Are you a collector?" I inquired.

"Oh, no, not really, but I think that it would look great in my kitchen." Her companion quietly agreed. She quickly handed me the money and hugged her new find like a new-born.

There had been a gentleman milling around behind me, looking at my eclectic display. He had been listening, but had said nothing. As I stood there with my new customer, however, she with her new milk jug in one hand, and me with the money in mine, the silent observer leaned in gingerly and whispered, "Do you know what that bottle is? Do you know what it's worth?"

"No, not really," I responded, "I'm not really a milk-bottle expert. I couldn't find the bottle in any of my books ... Are you a collector?"

"Yes, he responded," in a matter-of-fact manner, "I'm a member of one of the Illinois bottle clubs ('Great,' I mused.). That's a rare bottle."

"Really?" I responded, in a mild state of shock.

"Yeah," he continued, "Everybody and his mother is looking for that bottle. It's worth at least \$900."

"Pete, don't let it get you down. It happens to everyone. It doesn't matter how long you've been collecting. There's always something to learn. It's only a bottle. There will be better bottles and better days."

I have not lived in my native New England since I left home for college in 1967, but with the exception of 15 years in Africa, I have joined Uncle Jim on numerous digs. We have also done dozens of shows together, from mid-western greats such as Chicago, Minneapolis, Mansfield, Nashville and St. Louis, to Saratoga Springs, New York and Keene, New Hampshire. Jim has traveled more, of course, while I was bust criss-crossing

the rest of the inhabited world getting 'educated.' But our first serious 'fishing' experience dates to a remote location near a former Jesuit seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts ...

In 1970 I was in my first year of seminary, north of Boston, near one of the oldest historic locations on the east coast. I spent my free time from a grueling schedule exploring the neighboring woods. To remain less conspicuous, I wore light work-boots, an old camouflage work-shirt, and carried a small army-green backpack, complete with a well-concealed short-handle potato-fork (which doubles as a clamming-fork in New England), a pair of work-gloves, an old kitchen knife (for probing), and a container of water.

In no time, I found myself in a deeply-wooded ravine behind an old home. I was standing at the foot of a shallow dump filled with ash. The house on the 200-year-old property had routinely emptied its fire-place on the spot. No sooner had I started to dig, ever so quietly on hands and knees, when a chorus of barking



Jim at the Keene show

dogs erupted a short distance away. Fortunately for me, the dogs were loud, but harmless. But cover had been broken. I left my hardware where it was and walked up to a small building adjacent to the old house and knocked. The caretaker answered. I explained who I was and what I was doing.

"No problem," he said. "Explore all you want, whenever you want. Just be sure that you don't leave a mess ..." ("How does one 'leave a mess' in a dumping area? Someone might ask ... For those who dig in search of bottles, the answer is simple. Irresponsible 'treasure-hunters' are prone to abuse the privilege, leaving scattered debris and ugly craters in their greedy wake, effectively spoiling what is a legitimate exercise for others.")

That first day, I unearthed a simple assortment of olive-oil and other early 20th-century food bottles ... Noting real old or valuable. When I returned to the dorm, I called Jim. That very next weekend, and for the next several weeks, Jim and I (and even my Mom) made several trips to the spot and dug like moles.

As a young man, I was accustomed to hard manual labor. I had been working seven summers for a local fence company to pay for my education. Digging for bottles wasn't too bad compared to working 12-hour days in the sun with a post-hole digger and steel bar. But I had never seen anyone dig with such

patience, passion and persistence as Uncle Jim. And he was in his early 50s at the time. "PPO," he would say – Persistence Pays Off ...

Together, during those weeks, we exposed the lower edge of the entire dump; digging a four-to-six-foot trench from surface to top-soil, to a length of nearly 100 yards ... The area looked like a war-zone, complete with a network of trenches. But after all that work, we still found nothing exceptional. What we did find were hundreds of small thick dark green wine-bottles (complete with heavy deep 'kick-ups') of 1920-1930s vintage (no pun intended).

We have kept and stored hundreds of those same bottles, should any of our readers be entrepreneurial enough to make their own wine, and be looking to stock their wine-cellar with authentically old bottles ... Just think of the trouble we will have saved anyone having to do all of that searching and excavating ... Think of the savings!

After weeks of digging, we thanked our host, cleaned up the area, filled in the serpentine trench, collected our modest spoils of war, and turned to leave.

"Wish we had been able to uncover the original dump." Jim said nonchalantly to the curious caretaker.

"The original dump?" he responded.

"Yep," continued Jim, while his apprentice nephew listened intently.

"Oh, that dump," he offered. "That dump is somewhere over there, just beyond where you fellows have been working ... They bulldozed that area some years ago ... That old dump is probably under 15 feet of dirt ... Too deep to get to now. But it's there somewhere. Don't remember exactly where now. You two have sure worked hard though. Never seen anyone work so hard."

Uncle Jim is a great fisherman. He loves the sport. He used to keep most of the catch. But some specimens he just loves to hold and admire. What keeps him in the sport is the thrill of the catch ..., and meeting other collectors ..., and comparing fish stories. But he does have a few 'keepers,' a few choice trophies on the wall. Sooner or later, he'll just give them to someone for the pure joy of it.

Any of Jim friends, particularly those who have known him, or have met him at any one of the nearly 425 (last count) antique bottle shows, know that he and 'Auntie' Joyce, his beloved English bride of a mere 65 years ... are a prize couple themselves. They both love collecting bottles. But they value their friends much more. They always have. They always will.

Any one of those friends (and even a few strangers) could happily recount any number of warm memories or anecdotes from their incidental encounter with the infectiously amiable and incurably generous little gentleman with bright white hair, and his first-love and life-long companion, Joyce.

But what is most memorable is Uncle Jim's natural tendency to share any and every knowledgeable detail about virtually every bottle in his eclectic display, past and present ...

His is not a treasure-hunter's trove of one-of-a-kind specimens, but a modest, grass-roots display that was constantly

growing and changing in color, depth and variety, much like the color and flow of a remote river glistening in the morning sun on an autumn day ... A soft, inviting display of simple rugged beauty from which the common bottle fisherman could pluck a freshly-stocked native species, and bring it home to handle and to admire.

In truth, by his own admission, Jim has never purchased an expensive or extensive collection of antique bottles in nearly 35 years of collecting. He has only ever purchased one small collection in all that time.

Now, at the risk of coming dangerously close to violating my verbal vow to avoid embellishing Uncle Jim's flawless reputation for honesty, integrity and generosity ...

I will ignore the temptation to leave unmentioned, but rather reveal (ever so discretely), a very delicate, but delightfully visible trait in the character of James A. Rogers. (And here I run the risk of putting Uncle Jim in the possible, but highly unlikely position of losing his heavenly reward ...)

I am praying that he will be as forgiving as he is generous. I also pray that he will indulge my sincere intentions in the name of love and gratitude. Or just overlook my indiscretion and move on, as he has so many times before.

The trait to which I refer is generosity.

What is it that just compels an individual to give of himself, or herself, for the good and pure joy of pleasing others?

Whatever it is, or wherever it comes from (and I believe that I am in a good position to know), Uncle Jim has it. He always has. He always will.

When my wife, Judy, first contacted June Lowry about writing this article, she was just short of ecstatic to learn that we knew Jim and Joyce Rogers. When we told her that I was Jim's nephew, and that I wanted to write an article for *Bottles and Extras*, she gave her enthusiastic approval.

One of the first comments June made to me in our first telephone conversation about Uncle Jim went something like this:

"Years ago, at the York, Pennsylvania show, I introduced your Uncle Jim to my daughter. The first thing he did was to give her a few bottles. She still has those bottles today, twenty-eight years later!"

As mentioned earlier, Uncle Jim and Auntie Joyce are not strangers to the antique bottle circuit. One of the real benefits of collecting, sorting, trading and selling, is that there is always something to discover; and there is always something new to learn. But more importantly to Jim and Joyce, it has been a life-time of opportunity to make and meet new friends, and to renew old acquaintances.

But there is something more. Something more personal. Something that is not as evident for those who find themselves incapable of resisting what can easily become a lifeless, joyless business ... a desperate cycle of simply buying and selling, trading, bargaining and finagling, all in the name of replenishing and refreshing a depleted inventory, just to resume the irresistible, but endless routine again and again.

What will always distinguish Uncle Jim from the average

bottle collector, aside from his genuine love and appreciation for the bottles themselves, is the sheer joy and satisfaction he derives from sharing his knowledge with others, particularly those who are young.

There are many stories I could share here to illustrate this infectious, endearing tendency. But I will restrain myself, and share just one.

Recently, Uncle Jim received a call from a local gentleman who had been digging in his back yard, and had unearthed a small variety of inks. He had made a few inquiries, and had been told that Jim would be the man to consult about their age, importance and value.

Jim agreed to travel to the man's home. When he arrived, he was presented with a rather gruesome pile of stained, discolored inks, covered with chemical residue and filth from a well-buried dump. Jim easily identified the glass as inks, but was unsure of their precise condition, color or values. What he did know is that they were a mixture of cones and umbrellas. One of them was pontilled ...

"Well, "the man began, "I don't know much about these things, but I'm sure they're worth something to someone who knows. What I would really like is to get about \$400 for them to buy my daughter a go-kart."

Jim suspected they might be worth that much, so he paid the man the asking price. He was more than pleased. When Jim returned home and superficially cleaned the inks, he discovered that one of them, the one with the pontil scar, was of a breathless sapphire-blue color ...

Jim called a friend who specialized in inks. Jim's friend offered him considerably more ('sight unseen') for the one umbrella ink than Jim had paid for the entire lot. But then he did something quite extraordinary. And here is where I am going to be guilty of telling stories out of school ... He actually returned to the gentleman's home, explained what he had found, and promptly added a significant sum to what he had paid previously.

There's a simple reason why Jim would do such a thing. That's just the kind of man he is. So at the risk of causing him unbearable shame and embarrassment, I am simply going to repeat what he told me himself:

"The only thing to do in life is to do the right thing."

In recent years, Uncle Jim and I have had less time to do any real fishing ... fishing for bottles, that is. But there is just one final extraordinary dig that I must mention.

We were back home in Manchester for a short time after our return from Africa when Jim called.

"Hey Pete, I was thinking of digging a spot an hour or so south of home ... I've been there just once before. It's in a wooded area behind some homes, under some pines. If we're real careful and quiet, we might have some luck. The old dump is shallow and filled with glass ... If I recall from the first exploratory probe, many of the bottles still have their original labels! What do you say, do you want to give it a go tomorrow morning real early?"

It sounded a lot like one of those early fishing trips to me,

only we weren't packing rods and flies this time.

"You're on, Jim."

We packed our gear, left before dawn the next morning, parked in an open lot and scurried with our forks and shovels through the low brush and tall trees, looking like squirrels in search of acorns, until we found the spot beneath a fresh swath of grass. We slowly and methodically removed the turf, exposing a virtual storehouse of glass.

We worked quickly through several feet of old, but common food bottles, many of which still bore clean paper labels ... I began to dig with a bit more enthusiasm when the tip of the shovel I was using gently brushed a bright aqua shape ...

"Stop!" Jim forced a loud, but restrained whisper ... "Look down at your feet. Look at the tip of your shovel. Laying there under the blade near the end of my rubber boot was a semi-exposed form. I gently plucked it from the clinging gray ash and wiped its clear surface.

I turned the bottle slowly in my trembling hands. It had the natural feel of a native brookie fresh from the river ... The broad base rose up internally, revealing an unusually pronounced pontil scar the size of a Liberty quarter:

S. O.
RICHARDSON
BITTERS
SOUTH
READING
MASS.

The bottle, I would later discover, is not unknown to collectors. The color is bright aqua, like pure water under a blue sky ... Three inches wide and two inches thick, standing 6.5 inches tall with a one-inch neck and a perfect ringed lip. The surface is filled with natural striations and rough markings, and an occasional air-bubble ... A beautiful specimen.

But what makes this bottle so very special is not the glass ... It's the fact that I found it while 'fishing' with my favorite Uncle and dearest friend.

How those tiny, faint scratch marks got on the shoulder of this prize ever got there, Heaven only knows (and Jim's not telling) ...

I have strayed slightly from my promise not to mention anyone by name, but the beautiful, priceless bottle I'm holding right now is the perfect replica of the man who's been looking over my shoulder for nearly 60 years ... The same one who taught a young boy to fish ... The one who just 'caught' his first historical flask behind the old house on the Colebrook River.

"Hey, will you look at this!" He gasped, as he lobbed the tiny amber flask to his son nearby ...

Just like that first fish, that first flask, this fisherman is unforgettable. Irreplaceable. A once-in-a-lifetime find. A real keeper.

But these are secrets and memories that are just too personal to share with total strangers ...

At least Uncle Jim feels comfortable keeping it that way.