

# CONNECTICUT BOTTLE HISTORY

By Bill Baab

As told by Norman C. Heckler Sr.

[Editor's note – due to some errors in the story that was printed in the November/December issue, we have elected to run an updated/corrected version. Thank you and enjoy.]

WOODSTOCK VALLEY, CONNECTICUT - I don't recall the year but I started collecting and digging for antique bottles sometime in the late 1950's. I didn't know about privies at that time and I sought out surface dumps. Actually, there are very few privies in this part of the country. I dug for over five years and hit some wonderful dump sites in this local area.

I don't remember the first bottle I dug, but I do remember the first important bottle I found. I was digging with a young friend, Donald Froehlich, when we came across a small surface dump on an abandoned stagecoach road deep in the woods. We quickly found a Westford, Connecticut Sheaf of Wheat flask in the half-pint size. It was different from anything we had dug before and I remember telling Donald that I would like to have that flask. I still own it.

In those days we had no way of pricing bottles. There were no useful auction records, few books and no one that we knew to guide us as to value.

Soon after our early episodes of digging, I teamed up with a local young farmer, Bob Warren, (now an attorney in Springfield, Massachusetts) who had an interest in bottles. He had looked at McKearin's 1941 edition of *American Glass* and wanted to collect Masonic bottles.

We found a dump in a cellar hole in North Ashford, Connecticut with a large assortment of bottles. I had a severe headache that day and remember sitting on the edge of the rock cellar hole wall and watching Bob pulling out bottle after bottle. I inadvertently put my right hand down on the wall where I was sitting and touched a bottle. We were both surprised when it turned out to be the best bottle of the day, an Old Sagem Bitters and Wigwam Tonic barrel. Some time after I traded it for some aqua pontiled medicines.

Bob and I eventually encountered other diggers and dealers including Art Henderson, Gordon Davison, Carroll Hussey, Bob Heath and Audrey Coniff. They were all more knowledgeable than we were and guided us to lots of other people who weren't

collectors but did have bottles. One of those people was Charles B. Gardner of New London, Connecticut who was already a well established collector of bottles and firearms.

Bob Warren and I began to set up at small antique shows to sell some of our now massive amounts of bottles. We met a man, Leon Yaun, at one of those shows and he and other antique dealers would buy these "pretty" things. We had no idea of value, so we would guess. Leon would buy from us, go out and sell his purchases and return to buy more. We were making money! Digging!

As it became more difficult to find dumps, and during the winter months, Bob and I would tour the New England states to find bottles. At this point, we had begun to buy to resell and maybe keep something for ourselves. We would spread the bottles out on the living room rug and take turns picking from our daily finds. Bob was a farmer and I, a schoolteacher, so our bottle traveling was pretty well limited to the weekends.



**Norm Heckler examines an artfully decorated National Ear of Corn Bitters. (Photo by Janet Finch)**

One of the first bottles I bought was a huge kidney demijohn from a logger, Robert Eastman, of Conway, New Hampshire. It had a huge pontil scar that had a projection like a small knife. We put that big bottle in Bob Warren's Corvette and brought it home. I admire it still today. During our wanderings, Bob and I went to an antique shop in Bolton, Massachusetts that we had heard about. It was the shop of Robert Skinner, an engineer who worked at Raytheon during the day, but loved and bought antiques during the

evenings and weekends. This was during the mid to late 1960s. We visited him and bought from him on a weekly basis. We became good friends. At some point, Skinner decided to go into the auction business to sell some of his fast-growing inventory. He asked me to catalog the bottles and glass for his auctions. Bottle auctions became popular at Skinner's and I went to work for him full time in 1973. The Gardner and Blaske sales followed in quick succession and put Skinner on the bottle map.

Bob Skinner died unexpectedly in 1984 and I left to start my own business in 1987. My entire family works as part of Norman C. Heckler & Company to include my wife, Liz, oldest son, Norman, Jr, and twins, Jason and Matthew.

Our personal collection consists of Connecticut flasks, colored blown-three-mold decanters, pattern molded bottles and flasks particularly of the Midwestern variety, freeblown tableware and more. Liz collects witch balls, applied face bears and other glass. We also like period furniture and accessories for our circa 1757 historic home.

It has been a great ride! I'm still passionate about glass and have made hundreds of friends and acquaintances all over the country in our wonderful hobby.