

Southern California History

By Jim Sinsley

The beginning of bottle collecting started for me about 1965. I had been a true collector since early childhood when I developed an interest in stamps and coins, thanks to gifts from relatives.

A few years after getting married in 1961 to my modern-minded bride, Barbara (Barb), I was hired by my father's real estate company to clean up in and around an 1884 house in Tustin, Orange County, California. The company had purchased it from the original owner's estate, wanted to rent or sell it and wanted no junk around.

I decided to start in the house to get everything out to where I could see what I was dealing with. I started in the attic and worked my way downward. I found myself attracted by certain things.

Since my wife and I had aspirations of acquiring an ultramodern residence with Swedish Modern furniture (glass and chrome, black leather (Naugahyde) and walnut beauties), I couldn't understand my attraction to things like glass containers. My wife's dad was sort of a collector of antiques which my mother-in-law hated, and my own Dad kept nothing that wasn't useful. My Mom had only a collection of china cups and saucers she had been given. They were housed in our only antique, a bow-front secretary that was a family piece and not even ours. It belonged to an aunt and we just sort of stored and used it.

After a day's work at the old house, I called Dad's boss and asked what I should do with all the stuff I found and if I could keep any of it. He said he didn't care what I did with it as long as it was gone and the property free of weeds and junk.

I packed up a few items that were of particular interest and headed home. I unloaded the stuff into the garage of our rented home and my Dear Wifey came out to see what I was doing. The disgust on her face was quite evident and she wanted

nothing to do with any of it. She now knew how her mother felt when her dad brought home one of his "treasures."

Moments of Discovery

In the dingy attic of the Tustin place, I had found some interesting looking glass containers. They looked like bottles, but not like anything I had ever seen. One was vivid green in color, a flask with a crude-looking top. Another was very heavy with a short neck and a metal thingy inside (a Hutchinson soda). They were covered with dust and years of grime.

As I was washing them off on the lawn, a rock hound neighbor who lived across the street came over. He recognized the old bottles and said, "Hey, there are people who collect these. They find them out in the desert where we collect minerals." He asked me where I found these and, after hearing my explanation, said: "I was told that sometimes they find bottles under houses."

I returned to the Tustin property and the first thing I did was find an opening in the foundation wall and crawled under the house. Only a foot inside, I put my hand on what felt like a bottle. I slithered backward into the light. What I'd come out with started my collection big time. It was a Warner's Safe Kidney & Liver Cure. Now I know that today, this is a low end item, but imagine it with respect to a brand new collector who didn't yet know he was a bottle collector. I pulled two dozen or so more bottles from beneath the house, including what turned out to be a fairly rare Los Angeles Hutch soda with an anchor embossed in a slug plate and a Los Angeles wine bottle.

Unfortunately, I didn't know about privy digging at that time.

I shared my finds visually with the rock hound, who told me about books written on the subject. The local library was a dead end, but then I found a copy of John C. Tibbitts'

1200 Bottles Priced, Copyright 1964. That was simply stunning. Spiders were not the only thing under the house that bit me. I was bitten by the Bottle Bug and suffer from its effects to this day.

I placed a few of the more interesting, heavily embossed bottles including the Warner's on the kitchen window sill. I enjoyed looking at them each day after getting home from work, not knowing why. I just did.

One day I looked and they were not there. I panicked. I asked my Wifey. She said she was tired of them and had taken them out to the garage. I asserted my manly authority, waiting until she had gone someplace, and brought the bottles back into the kitchen. A week or so later, they were back in the garage. This scenario continued until I brought home a purple Kerr Economy fruit jar and placed it on the sill next to my "junk." That did the trick. That "junk" was now fine there except all had flowers stuck in them.

We compromised. I could leave some of my "stuff" (notice the change of term) there and she would use them as flower vases as *Her* fruit jar had too big a mouth to hold flowers. One day, I brought home a small sun-colored amethyst jar with glass stopper that I paid \$1.50 for, my very first bottle purchase, and put it next to the other "stuff."

It stayed in the window, dinner remained out of my lap and I even got a kiss good night. I had found the keys to blissful collecting and marriage. Fruit jars and the color purple. So I started to look for and find and bring home jars and a few bottles.

Our First Bottle Show

A short time later, perhaps in 1964 or '65, I heard about a club that was putting on a bottle show in the little town of Julian, about 80 or 90 miles away. Bottle club? Bottle show? What was that all about? Since gasoline cost only 39 cents a gallon, we

decided to check it out. Turned out it was one of the San Diego Bottle Club's earlier organized shows.

We walked in and right away I realized that we were not even in the top 95 percent of collectors. We knew *nothing*. We cruised back and forth all day, upstairs and downstairs, and asked at least 1,000 questions. We saw a sales display belonging to George Aschenbrenner. He had an amber Lightning fruit jar for sale. I believe his asking price was \$25, w-a-a-a-y-y beyond our budget for "stuff." But we were beside ourselves and even Barb was hooked. We would collect fruit jars.

I guess because we asked so many questions, we were invited to attend a San Diego club picnic later that year. We met George and Ruth Aschenbrenner and their son, Bruce, Rurik "Rick" and Marjorie Kallis, Don and Cleone Frace, Ed McMahan, Cecil and Dolores Munsey, Jack and Connie

Wolford, and quite a few others whose names escape me.

Since we lived too far away from San Diego to regularly attend club meetings, it was suggested that we start our own club in Orange County. It also was suggested that we attend meetings of the Lo Angeles Historical Bottle Club to get acquainted with folks and ask for suggestions. We did that and became acquainted with Alex and Caroline Kerr, Jack Slattery, Don Mullaly, Phil Balkan, Bill and Virginia Rubendall, John and Ruth Ann Turk, Byron and Vicky Martin, Tom Eccles and many others.

In the summer of 1967, Barb and I placed an ad in the local newspaper inviting anyone interested in starting a local bottle club to contact us by phone. Barb, a stay-at-home mom, was in charge of fielding the anticipated few calls. When I returned home after a few days at work, she asked me if we intended to become heavy drink-

ers. She explained several callers had asked when the party was going to start and did we supply the booze or did they bring their own?

Happily, Barb was able to explain the nature of our club and a few weeks later, some 20 people attended the organizational meeting of the Antique Bottle Club of Orange County in our Santa Ana home. In attendance were Marian and Tom Orr, Phil Lloyd, Eveline Pulatti, Ron and Nancy Mansur, Sim and Ruth Middleton, Henry and Madge Wall Birdie and Nelson Lonzo, Howard Garner and others whose names I have forgotten.

I was elected the club's first president and I'd never been president of anything! It was suggested we follow Roberts' Rules of Order, but I didn't know who this guy Roberts was and wasn't used to following rules so we used a simplified, more casual form. Our club membership grew to about 400 at one point. One of our more ar-

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Here's the poster publicizing the first show presented in 1971 by The Antique Bottle Club of Orange County (courtesy of Jim & Barb Sinsley)

tistic members designed the club logo featuring a G.W. Wells / Santa Ana, Calif. mug base Hutchinson soda and an orange with leaves.

Learning Sessions

In May 1968, the club scheduled an outing to a glass-blowing shop in Tijuana, Baja, Mexico. There we learned the techniques of how bottles were made in the United States in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

One of our first club digs was in Hemet, Calif., and someone discovered the levee banks along the Santa Ana River were common dumping grounds in the days before municipal landfills. On one of those digs, we uncovered a cache of clear glass objects that looked like light bulbs. One was embossed Audubon Utility / Mfg. Co. / Santa Ana / Calif. They turned out to be bird feeders and waters for bird cages. A large quantity of Owl Drug Store bottles were found as well as many nice fruit jars.

Barb edited our club's first newsletter, the *Bottle Bulletin*, and it quickly became known as one of the better newsletters in the hobby. Much of its success was due to the enthusiasm and contributions of club members as well as the excellent direction provided by Barb. In those days, we shared newsletters with a number of clubs which served to keep a widespread number of people in tune with what the hobby was up to.

Articles were borrowed and reprinted from other newsletters so that our members were aware of what was going on in San Bernardino, Sacramento or San Francisco. Several members did quite a bit of research on local companies that had been in business from 60 to 100 years ago. One of those articles turned into a series on the J.E. Taylor Co., of Santa Ana. Readers familiar with fruit jars will recognize the name as being embossed on light blue-aqua glass lid and bail jars: J.E. Taylor / Pure Foods / Santa Ana, Calif. All the jars were quarts in size and were packed with locally grown fruit and shipped nationwide.

After we acquired our first exam-

ple of the jar, Barb located a son of the original J.E. Taylor and was able to interview him and obtain many items belonging to his family. Of particular interest was a leather-bound picture album containing never before published photos of the factory. That resulted in a series of articles not only of interest to collectors, but to local history buffs and historical societies.

I was interested in Orange County history and in Santa Ana, my birthplace. I began what turned out to be the largest collection of Orange County bottles and other memorabilia ever assembled at the time. That collection, I later sold to another collector, included every pharmacy and soda bottle we ever knew about. I currently own every known variant of Santa Ana sodas, a number of pharmacy bottles and one Anaheim whiskey flask.

Read All About It!

Mainstays of the hobby were the many books on bottle collecting written by John C. Tibbitts, Alice Kendrick, Donald Colcleaser, Lynn Blumenstein, Bill & Betty Wilson (later Betty Zumwalt), Pat and Bob Ferraro, George and Helen McKearin, Richard Watson, Carlyn Ring, Bob Barnett, Arleta Rodrigues, Frank Peters, Ron Burris and others. Some of those books, measured by today's standards, are quite primitive, but for us early collectors they were magic. Old Bottle and Western Collector magazines also were great sources of information.

The Antique Bottle Club of Orange County held its first show on Feb. 28, 1970 at the Retail Clerks Union Hall in Buena Park near Knott's Berry Farm. In contrast to today's shows, we had nearly as many displays as sales tables. Displays then were often elaborate affairs with props, showmanship and aesthetic appeal being almost as important as the collectibles.

Don Frace, of San Diego, often set up what looked like an 1800s drug store, utilizing one of the finest collections of medicine bottles and go-withs. Fruit jar displays were not uncommonly found in a small kitchen

display, complete with a bin table or a Mudgge Canner or perhaps a wood-burning stove.

We began attending bottle and jar shows in Oakland, Santa Rosa, Sacramento, San Diego, Los Angeles, Tulare, Fresno and Visalia in California, and Las Vegas and Reno, Nevada. We met the hobby's pioneers such as John Tibbitts, John Fountain, Peck and Audie Markota, Richard, Bev and Ted Siri, Allen Wilson, Bob and Pat Ferraro, and many others. We saw displays and bottles that are legends today. I actually saw a California Clubhouse Whiskey and a cone Bryant's Bitters change hands at two different shows. They commanded big bucks those days and would command even bigger bucks today.

One of the displays I remember most was Allen Wilson's "Nature's Tiffany" display in Oakland, Calif. It contained bottles dug out of the mud flats in Benicia, Calif., where the combination of salt water, oil and mineral deposits made for a patina that is unmatched elsewhere.

Getting Down and Dirty

My first real digging experience came when Rick Kallis of San Diego invited us down for a weekend visit. He and I dug on a vacant lot near downtown San Diego, partly under the foundation of an old building. We sort of undermined the foundation. But the building was to be demolished anyway. We dug an olive green ladies' leg bitters and I won the draw. Rick was sort of upset, but got over it and later I enjoyed surprising him with it as a gift.

Rick was one of the first to discover Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, great aides in helping to locate privies, and allowed me to buy for the cost of printing Orange County maps. I used those maps with great success. My digging buddies couldn't figure out how I was so successful in finding privy pits and I didn't reveal my secret until years later.

Another subterranean adventure began after the state of California purchased an entire block in Santa Ana for a large building. Old houses were

cleared away and after I'd marked every privy I could find, I organized a dig with three friends. We dug more than 15 pits that day, some as deep as eight feet, and unearthed hundreds of bottles from the late 1880s to the 1920s. In one pit, I dug about two dozen Piso's Cure bottles ranging in color from nearly clear to aqua to amber to dark olive green and shades in between. We had all agreed that we'd each keep what we dug or trade for what we wanted. I acquired all the Orange County bottles dug that day that I didn't already have in my collection.

On another day, Phil Lloyd and I arrived at an 1890s house in Orange, Calif., where I had already been given permission to dig. We probed two pits. The house was occupied by renters who claimed we'd find nothing. Sound familiar? I opened the first hole and Phil opened the second. Mine turned out to be one of the more interesting pits I'd ever dug.

The trash layers were so defined that one could almost visit with the occupants of those time periods. One layer obviously was from a fairly healthy family since there were few medicine bottles and no liquors. Another layer had more medicines along with household varieties, while yet another layer had lots of booze bottles and little else (but I did find a pair of brass knuckles, a highlight of all my digs!). Phil dug several Orange city pharmacy bottles that were unknown at the time and I was able to trade for them.

Over the years, I had debated with myself and others on whether or not to specialize in one type of bottle or another. Bitters and historical flasks were attractive, but I would have had to buy them and had no budget for such things. Of course, we collected fruit jars and Barb liked them, but one day in 1969, I caught a real break, an opportunity of a lifetime.

Opportunity Knocks and He Opens the Door

I'd arrived home for a rare lunch break and found Barb talking with fellow club member Nancy Mansur. She was telling how an article about her family's collecting had just been published in the Anaheim newspaper. They received a call from an Anaheim resident who had acquired a bunch of bottles from a family friend who lived with them, but had died. They didn't know anything about the bottles, but had been told by the friend that they were valuable.

Nancy and her husband, Ron, had been to see the collection and had made an offer for one or two of the bottles. No deal, it was all or nothing, they were told. So I asked Nancy if I could check out the collection and she offered her blessings.

I knew little about bitters, flasks and other quality bottles, and I wasn't sure if these were the real deal. I decided to make an offer based on what I could afford, quadruple it and write it on a piece of paper and hand it to the owners. To my shock, the offer was accepted. I was able to borrow \$1,000 from my Mom after I promised to sell some of the bottles and pay her back.

The collection turned out to be half bitters, half flasks. I enlisted the help of my friend, Jack Slattery, of the Los An-

geles club, who was collecting historical flasks. He authenticated them and I decided to part with the flasks and keep the bitters. Jack bought some of the flasks and referred me to other collectors who'd buy the rest.

The flasks included a GIX-38 or 39 B.P. & B. scroll in yellow olive (sold to Charles B. Gardner), a GV-8 Success to the Railroad (sold at a show), four or five For Pike's Peak (sold to John Eatwell), and others. Bitters included the Suffolk Pig, National (ear of corn), W & Co. (pineapple), a couple of Drake's Plantation, a Fish Bitters, ten-ringed barrel and several others.

I was able to pay back Mom in a month, keep the bitters and have some sales stock/traders. I gave the Mansurs a few miscellaneous bottles including a figural shaped like a billyclub as finder's fees.

A year or so before getting into the serious bitters collecting, we attended a Los Angeles club show where we stopped by the sales table of Frank Peters. He quickly became one of our favorite characters in the hobby and he was one in the most affectionate meaning of the term. He had a citron green Lightning pint we fell in love with and, despite the highest price we'd ever paid, we took it home. That purchase must have marked us as serious jar collectors because Frank invited us to attend the informal gathering of



Alex Kerr and Arleta Rodriguez were among the elite of Western fruit jar collectors (courtesy of Jim & Barb Sinsley)



From left: George Moll, Mrs. Julian H. Toulouse, Dr. Toulouse, and Jim Sinsley chat about Dr. Toulouse's new book on fruit jars (courtesy of Jim & Barb Sinsley)

other "Jarheads" held at his and Fran's Fresno home the Saturday after Thanksgiving. We packed up our daughters and celebrated our oldest girl's birthday in the Peters home.

There we became acquainted not only with the Peterses, but Alex and Caroline Kerr, Arleta Rodrigues, Ron Burris, Greg and Judy Bickford, Richard Dana, Bob Glover and many others who made up the backbone of the Western jar collecting scene. Some of my most vivid recollections are of my conversations with Alex Kerr and Dr. Julian Toulouse, not because of their celebrity status, but because their knowledge of jars and jar manufacture was right down my mechanical alley.

Alex was a junior, son of Alexander, founder of the Kerr Glass Manufacturing Co., which had a factory in my hometown of Santa Ana. Barb and I had purchased a small house in Santa Ana and our next door neighbor was Ray Gentry, quality control manager at the factory. Ray had taken me to the factory and shown me around so I had good exposure as to how those glass containers were made.

In 1968, after we were deep into fruit jar collecting, Alex arranged to have the Kerr 65th anniversary jars

produced. As a function of our Jar-head Get-Together, we all went to the plant and observed the jars' manufacture. The result yielded a bunch of clear jars with swirls of cobalt, purple and amethyst. Ray Gentry brought me a case of 12 jars with amethyst or purple streaks. I foolishly let these slip through my fingers and I don't own any of those anniversary jars today.

By 1972, Barb and I had become sort of burned out by the bottle scene and decided to move on. Our girls were growing and developing interests of their own and we had been surprised by the arrival of our son.

Some of the Folks Who Impressed Us:

ALEX KERR – Alex and his wife, Caroline, were two of the finest people I have ever met. While they had considerably more money than most of their collecting contemporaries, they maintained a persona that made them one of us. The son of Alexander H. Kerr, founder of the Kerr Glass Manufacturing Co., about 1903, Alex was a company executive. But he also owned large retail (Kerr's) and wholesale (Olympic) sporting goods companies in Beverly Hills,

Calif. Both he and his wife were expert marksmen with shotguns and hunted birds around the world. Alex was on the Olympic trap and skeet shooting team. They had the finest collection of fruit jars of that time and Alex also collected glass target balls, amassing a super fine collection. One of our most cherished memories is being invited to have dinner with them (their treat) on our wedding anniversary.

JACK SLATTERY – A member of the Los Angeles Historical Bottle Club, Jack was a Hollywood celebrity and announcer for early television personality Art Linkletter's House Party shows. He was just one of us collectors, no putting on airs. His specialty was historical flasks. His wife, Marge, made hand-painted Raggedy Ann and Andy Christmas ornaments. We bought several and still proudly display them each Christmas.

DR. JULIAN TOULOUSE – He was an icon to many early bottle and jar collectors, having long been a tenured glass engineer with Owens-Illinois Glass Co. He was the author of at least two books on glass manufacturing, including *Bottle Makers and Their Marks*. He was distinguished, learned and a terrific guy to boot! I met him only once at the home of George and Helene Moll in either Capistrano or Dana Point in 1971. She had arranged to have Dr. and Mrs. Toulouse visit their home on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean and our group came as well. The doctor signed his newly published book.

RURIK "RICK" KALLIS – Rick and his wife, Marjorie, were not only collecting associates but became close friends. They were from San Diego, but lived in Orange County for awhile when Rick taught art at Orange Coast College. He was far more intelligent than most, had a fair number of quirks and was a shrewd trader. He was interested in history and older architecture and at one time made a living restoring old houses. The Kallises restored an old farmhouse in Lemon Grove, Calif., doing most of the work. It became a site for a number of TV commercials and movies.

He practically put himself through college by digging old bottles and selling them. He liked to crawl beneath train stations where he found large numbers of bottles.

FRANK PETERS – I guess I gravitate toward characters like Frank because I find them more interesting than "normal" people. Frank and his wife, Fran, were avid collectors who lived in Fresno. Fran collected perfume bottles, the real fancy ones, and Frank collected fruit jars. He dabbled in insulators and sold all manner of things at shows, but was a primary source for books on antiques and collectibles. Whenever he was in the southern part of the state, we'd play hosts, but he would never sleep in the house. He insisted on sleeping in his pickup camper which was overcrowded with stuff, but he said he was most comfortable there. (He could fart whenever he wanted and not feel embarrassed!). As a thank you gift, he once gave us an insulator with Santa Ana embossed on it.

The New Beginning

When we sold our collections, I truly thought I was through collecting anything. For about 17 years, I didn't think about bottles, fruit jars, coins, stamps or anything else that wasn't "useful." I'd turned into my Dad!

In 1979, we moved from Southern California to the panhandle of northern Idaho, I went fishing, camping, dirt bike riding, skiing, etc., in my spare time. About 1988, I found myself at a yard sale and found a pretty purple insulator. My 17-year-old son, Devon, was with me and told me we needed it to go along with *HIS* Santa Ana insulator. I said, "What Santa Ana insulator?" He said, "the one I use for a door stop." I said, "We still have that?" He said, "I have it, it's mine!" I said, "No it's not, what makes you think it's yours?" He said, "You didn't even know I have it so it's mine. Buy me this one to go with it!" I said, "This insulator is priced \$1 and *NO* insulator is worth more than 50 cents!"

I bought it for him anyway. Devon has never let me forget that

statement since I have paid quite a bit more than 50 cents for *A LOT MORE* insulators. So we attended many more yard sales and picked up more insulators. On a trip back from Southern California, we stopped for a bite to eat in a little burg in central Oregon. Next door was an antiques/junk shop and my Wifey went inside as I stayed out with the grandson. She came out and told me they had a Drake's Plantation Bitters for sale.

"So?" I asked. She asked how much it was worth and we argued. For some reason she wanted me to buy it, but I was afraid of the flood that would come. Well, it's been flooding ever since and man, am I wet!

Today, we have an impressive bitters collection, even better than the one in 1972, and a fair collection of low end historical flasks. We have a small but impressive fruit jar collection and about 1,000 insulators.

Since, 1990, we have been active in the bottle and insulator collecting hobbies, attending every show and function we can. We have been to New England for Columbus Day activities at Norm Heckler's (three times), even being invited into the Heckler home, a highlight for us nobodies. We viewed the collections of

Gale and Bill Backhaus in their home, had our WAW-WAW story told by Ralph Finch in *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector*, and bought wonderful bottles from Murry Yanofski, Ed and Kathy Gray, Jim Hall, David Sidelinger, Ole Severson, George Waddy and John Hathaway at the magnificent Keene, New Hampshire show.

We have met the likes of Bill Ham, John Thomas, Brad Francis, John Hiscox, Elvin Loader, Marc Lutsko, Jay Marks, Jim Mitchell, Rick Miller, Randy Mitchell, Nick Merten, David Meintz, Greg Price, Bill Tanner, Roger Terry, Ralph Van Brocklin, David Bethman, Jeff Wichmann and many others at three FOHBC Expos and other venues over the years.

In 2007-2008, I sold my bitters and Warner's collections and just sold (June 2009) my last saleable bitters on eBay. I'm still married to Barb and we have kept the flask and fruit jar collections and I am concentrating on insulators. That brings us up to date and I will be a collector until I die.

Collectors collect! That's what we do. Barb and I have enjoyed the hobby and treasure the friendships we have made. We would enjoy hearing from anyone. Jim@SinsleyStuff.Info



Collecting insulators yet another area of collecting enthusiastically approached by Jim and Barb Sinsley, circa 1996 (courtesy of Jim & Barb Sinsley)