

COLLECTING BOTTLES OUT OREGON WAY

By Mike Valent



Mike Valent in his bottle room holding one of his prize Oregon bottles.

Settlement activity for Portland, Oregon started around 1843 on the west bank of the Willamette River. It was an important stopover point for river and land traffic en route between Oregon City and Fort Vancouver.

Oregon City started in 1843 and was incorporated in 1845. Portland was incorporated in 1851. Early Portland was situated on a 20-foot layer of clean clay atop river gravel and bedrock. The clay layer thickens as it spreads away from the river and up into the foothills. This type of soil condition provided an ideal environment for future bottle diggers: clean hard-packed clay with excellent drainage.

The clay preserved early glass in an unstained, mint-like condition. Generally, privies and wells were dug through the clay layer to bedrock averaging about 20 feet in depth. But I have been as deep as 45 feet on the clay foothills away from the river.

Early Portland had no recycling to speak of, so most trash including bottles were either dumped into the river or tossed into privies and abandoned wells. This explains why very often wells and privies are packed full of old bottles. Local scuba divers do quite well in finding rare and desirable bottles in the river. Abandoned wells and full privies were not dipped or cleaned out.

Usually, a new hole was just dug in the vicinity of the full one. Often, privies are found in chronological order in a row along the back property line of the residence or business.

Early on, Portland developed an extensive trading partnership with California. The latter needed raw materials and supplies for its booming gold fields and, in turn, Portland received drugs, medicines, whiskeys and other provisions. This helps explain why many of the early bottles dug in Portland were manufactured at the Pacific Glass Works and San Francisco Glass Works.

Urban redevelopment and freeway expansion in Portland during the 1960s-80s provided great access to the wells and privies. Whole city blocks at a time were cleared and large numbers of bottle diggers would gather in the evenings after construction crews had gone home.

One particular lot boasted an unbelievable 21 wells and numerous privies, most of them loaded with bottles dating to the 1850s to the 1880s. At night, the lot looked like a little city, alive with glowing lanterns, industrious diggers tossing dirt and numerous spectators.

I can recall digging seven nights a week and on weekends when one of those lots would open up. Looking back, I now wonder how my day job survived along with my health. Initially, the lots were not fenced or posted and most contractors were digger friendly. Of course, this changed with time.

From the 1960s to the present, I have stayed very active in my serious digging quest for old glass. Some of the more thrilling

Portland area treasures that I dug or helped dig over years of intense digging included the cone-shaped Bryant's Stomach Bitters, Dr. Boerhaave's Stomach Bitters, Cassin's Grape Brandy Bitters and Catawba Wine Bitters.

The list continues with lots of Dr. Henley's products, including "the Dew of the Alps." Joining the "Dew" were Lacour's Bitters, Oregon Unk Weed Rheumatic Cure, Dr. Wonsler's U.S.A. Indian Root Bitters, Dr. G.W. Brown's Oregon Chittum Bitters, London Jockey Clubhouse Gin, E.G. Lyons square, Fische's Infallible Hair Restorative, Dr. H. Adolphus Anti-Rheumatic Cordial, W.H. Keith's Glucoclein (the San Francisco blown variant) and numerous western sodas, whiskey flasks and cylinders.

"My Oregon Chittum Bitters is the only known example," he said. "There are no others in any condition. Mine is attic mint. I dug it 22 years ago near the bottom of a 22-foot-deep, 1860-1870 oval well in Portland, Oregon. Chittum is a plant that grows mainly in Oregon and is known for its medical properties. The bottle is a wonderful looking piece of glass with heavy whittle, drippy applied top, very crude and Western-blown."

Interest in the bottle collecting hobby exploded in the Portland area and diggers and collectors would meet at different homes to talk bottles and buy, sell and trade old glass. This set the stage for creation of a Portland area bottle club so in the late 1960s, diggers, collectors and dealers from the Portland, southwest Washington state and Vancouver, British Columbia formed the Lewis & Clark Antique Bottle Club.

The core planning group included Phyllis Brandenburg, Cal Wallis, Dewy Tuttle, Vito and Ceil Mosso, Harold Hooper, Ron and Lillian Miller, Dan and Judy Jefferies, Bill and Susie Simonton, the Lindsey family, the Scott McLean family, Mike and Mary Valent and others.

The club was formed in late 1969 and held its first meeting in January 1970. Hooper was its first president, with Roberta Martin and June Lindsey secretaries, Judy Jefferies treasurer and Bill and Randy Lindsey newsletter editors. They published "The Outen Hausen." The club's first show was held in August 1970, with big name collectors including John Thomas, Bob Barnett Eric McGuire and Wallis Stier present.

Over time, all good things must come to an end, and so it did for the Lewis & Clark Antique Bottle Club. Loss of members due to deaths, lack of interest and moves to other areas were among the reasons. The club disbanded in June 1978. The Salem area Oregon Bottle Collectors Association disbanded in 1986 for much the same reasons.

In 1992, a group of collectors including Hooper, Mark Junker, Wayne Herring and Mike Valent reactivated the Oregon Bottle Collectors Association. The new club holds regular meetings and keeps its members informed through "The Stump Town Report" newsletter. Two shows are held annually.



Valent's prized Oregon Chittum Bitters, an extremely rare bottle.