Everything Old Is New Again

Alfred Hitchcock and a Well-Traveled Book

Part 1

You are something special if you can guess where this one's going!

By Bob Strickhart

To make the appropriate connections, I really need to set the stage. Yes, I'm the Bitters Columnist. It would follow then that the focus should be on bitters bottles specifically, and yet a good portion of this article is devoted to historical American flasks. You could, however, easily substitute bitters for flasks in this story. It wouldn't affect the end result as it is more about the act of collecting, rather than the bottles we collect.

So, if it makes you feel better, just replace "Corn For The World" with "Drakes Plantation Bitters."

I've wanted to put this article together for a long time, but I wasn't too sure how to present it. The nudge that put me in front of the keyboard came from a conversation I had at our club's show (New Jersey Antique Bottle Club) in May with long-time bottle collector Barry Hogan.

By the way, this was the first time we had our show in May: we were forced to cancel our February show due to Covid. The show was nicely attended, we had a few more than 100 tables and best of all, it's an outside show. The weather cooperated for the most part and Kevin Kyle, our show chairman, with the help of his super-organized and lovely wife Sharon, did a great job, and should be commended for allowing us to hold our show on his family farm in East Windsor, N.J. I think this show is going to grow and be a truly great annual event as Covid becomes less of a concern and our number of fine dealers continues to grow. Be sure to look for it next year.

OK, back to the story.

I'm not sure how we came around to it, but somewhere along the way, Barry mentions an old book that is one of my all-time favorites. The book is titled *Antiquamania*. Written by Kenneth L. Roberts, it was published by Doubleday, Doran & Co. of Garden City, N.Y., almost a hundred years ago in 1928.

Barry related that he attended the opening of the newly added bottle room of my long-time friend and mentor Tom McCandless many years ago, when Tom handed him his copy of this book. Barry, in typical Barry fashion, related how he found a comfortable place on the rug and proceeded to read the book, all 200-plus pages of it, as people sort of "stepped over" him in Tom's new bottle room. That he completed the book in one, let us say "sitting," is totally understandable as it is an intoxicating read you just can't put down.

I fully understood Barry's fascination, as it was pretty much the same for me when Tom handed me the same copy that Barry read some years later. I, too, read it in one sitting, although it wasn't on Tom's carpet, and I have actually re-read it several times, not something I usually do. I loved the book so much that I went through a book finder and eventually procured my own copy. According to the inside cover page of the copy that I eventually purchased was evidence that this book was once the property of James Thompson and it was a gift from Edgar Hoffman in 1943. Some of the old-time collectors might recognize the name Edgar Hoffman, as he apparently was a well-known bottle collector in the 1940s era. There's that thing called provenance again. Ah, that bottle family!

The book is a collection explaining, illustrating and "elucidating the difficulties in the path of the antique dealer and collector, and presenting various methods of meeting and overcoming them" as seen through the eyes of Prof. Milton Kilgallen. When you read this book, and I sincerely hope you get the chance to enjoy it if you haven't already done so, you can't help but think that there is nothing, and I mean nothing, new under the sun. Even though it was written in 1928, it is clear that everything old is indeed new again. The stories written nearly 100 years ago are as pertinent today as they were then.

Barry laughed out loud when we both agreed on one particular chapter as being particularly memorable. The chapter is simply titled "The Bottle Mine" and here's where we can bring Mr. Hitchcock into our discussion.

Alfred Hitchcock is certainly known for his great suspenseful movies even though they are now decades old. They are that good! I was quite young, but I do remember seeing *Psycho* in the movie theaters when it first came out, and *The Birds* left so much of an impression on my sister that she felt a tad uncomfortable around a flock of pigeons in the park after seeing that movie.

If your memory is good, or you like reruns of older TV shows on the Me TV channel, you will remember one of my all-time favorite shows on the tube back in the 1960s. It was simply called "The Alfred Hitchcock Hour." Each episode started with a silhouette of the rather rotund Hitchcock eventually being replaced by his actual self, all to the macabre music titled *Funeral March of a Marionette*, a short classical piece by Charles Gounod. Then, Alfred would look at the camera and say "Good Evening." With his typical dry English humor, he would then lay out the twisted story you were about to see while taking a swipe at his much hated but essential commercial advertisers. At the end of the episode, you would once again see Mr. Hitchcock, summing up the story, and giving a bit of his tongue-in-cheek humor "till next week."

Hitchcock could easily have authored "The Bottle Mine." It has his oddly twisted fingerprints all over it. But I'll let you be the judge of that.

For all of you readers now comes a treat. A bit of Kenneth L. Roberts as he explains the dilemma some bottle collectors encounter, edited and condensed for space and convenience.

"The Bottle Mine"

"Antique collectors develop strange and sometimes unpleasant traits. Certain forms of antique collecting, furthermore, seem to bring out these traits with unusual virulence. The collecting of curly maple frequently makes a collector wholly unreasonable and irresponsible. The collecting of Currier & Ives prints occasionally brings out his stubbornness and miserly traits. The collecting of pewter is apt to accentuate his indecision and vacillation. The collecting of early pine is likely to develop his intolerance and conceit; while the collecting of fine Chippendale furniture is more apt to bring out his boastfulness and arrogance.

"Worst of all, however, in the development of hidden and unsuspected traits is the collecting of early American glass and bottles. Such collecting, in many cases, works as insidiously on the character of the collector as did the hellish liquors that were so often contained in the bottles.

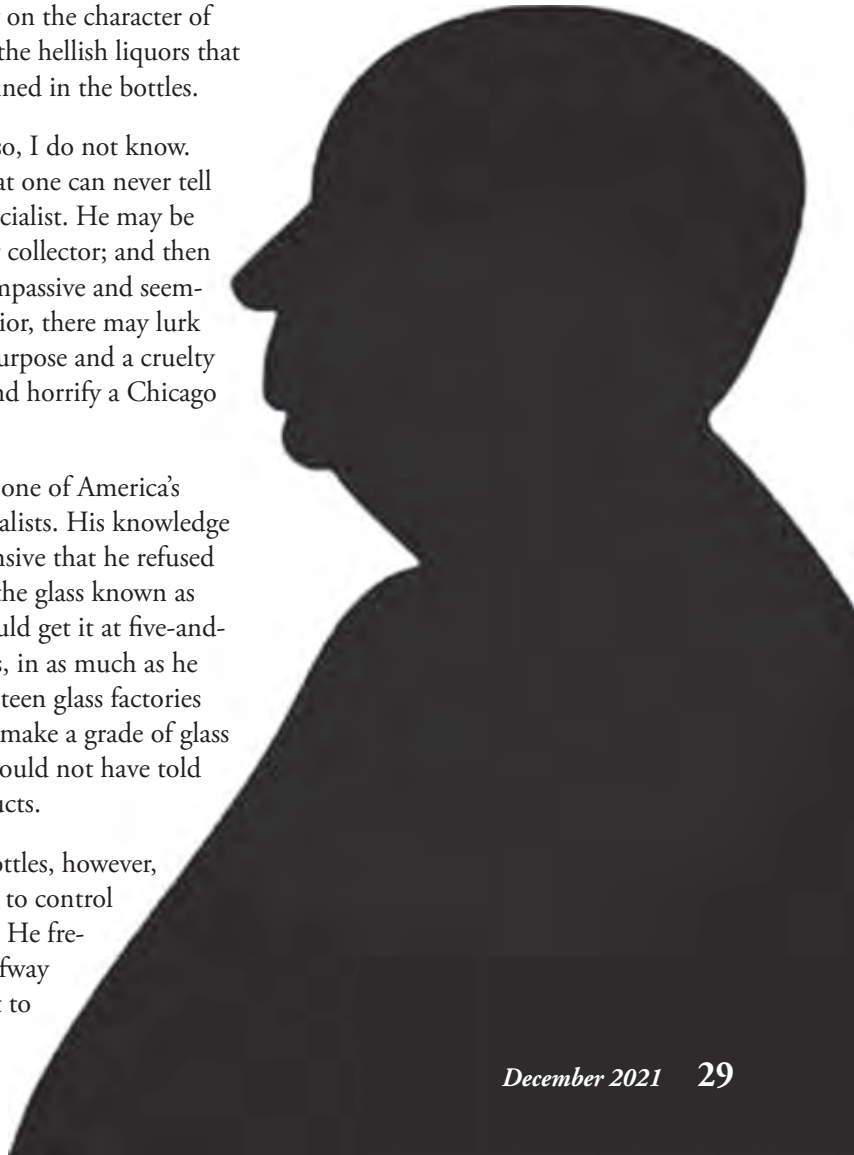
"Why it should be so, I do not know. The fact remains that one can never tell about the bottle specialist. He may be normal as any other collector; and then again, beneath an impassive and seemingly harmless exterior, there may lurk a relentlessness of purpose and a cruelty that would shock and horrify a Chicago Detective sergeant.

"Whitney Leet was one of America's greatest bottle specialists. His knowledge of glass was so extensive that he refused to purchase any of the glass known as Stiegel unless he could get it at five-and-ten cent store prices, in as much as he knew there are nineteen glass factories in existence able to make a grade of glass that Baron Stiegel could not have told from his own products.

"In the matter of bottles, however, Leet made no effort to control himself at any time. He frequently traveled halfway across the continent to look at an amethyst or blue whiskey flask of unknown origin or unusual design; and from the prices that he occasionally paid for such flasks, one might have thought that they were going to yield a return of 25% a year for the remainder of his days.

"In his home life, he was gentle and kindly; when he embarked on the trail of a rare flask he became as hard-boiled and as cunning as a gunman under the influence of opiates.

"If a friend or an acquaintance attempted to vie with him in the purchase of a desirable flask, Leet became almost ferocious in his attitude. He never resorted to kicking or biting at such moments, so far as was known, but he had no hesitation in treading heavily on the tender portion of a foot or of thrusting himself rudely in front of other people.



"I would, however, have suspected him of no greater infraction against good taste and decency if Leet himself had not called me to him early in the spring of 1928 and told me the harrowing tale of Bill Swiggert and the Bottle Mine.

"It seems that the late autumn of 1927 had found Leet nervously exhausted from the intensive hunt for early American flasks in which he had indulged during the preceding summer and spring. Instead of hunting leisurely through the countryside, as he had been accustomed to do in his early days of flask hunting, he had been obliged to compete with such energetic newcomers in the field of battle collecting as Joseph Hegresheimer and Edwin Le Fevre, whose squirrel-like activities had forced him to use high-pressure methods of the most exhausting nature in order to keep abreast of them, to say nothing of occasionally putting himself a jump or two in advance of them.

"Haggard and worn by his strenuous toil, Leet determined to banish all thoughts of flasks and bottles from his mind for several months, and to travel to California through the soft warmth of the great Southwest, where the burning rays of the seldom-obscured sun scorched the poisons of fatigue from Eastern bones and brains; and where antiques, in the true sense of the word, are unknown.

"Occasionally, in the West and Southwest, Leet knew, one encountered a so-called antique shop. Its stock, Leet further learned, invariably consisted of the least desirable types of Empire furniture; while post-empire black walnut chairs and sofas, with bunches of grapes carved promiscuously on their frames, were assiduously sought by the so-called antique collectors who lived in those sections.

"Consequently, he embarked on his trip secure in the knowledge that he would be tempted to indulge in none of the exhausting hunts for antiques that had made life in more effete sections of America so strenuous and debilitating. As a matter of precaution, however, he carried with him an amethyst Corn For The World flask, so that it could be exhibited as a sample in any section where the need of investigating the flask situation should arise.

"It was late on a hot December night that his car coasted down the hill slopes of the mining town of Douglas. Parched by his dusty ride, Leet forbore even to stop at the hotel to secure a room, but pressed on another half mile and crossed the border into Agua Prieta to revel in the dry martinis and the brimming beakers of beer that, for Americans, surround even the most tawdry and dirty of the Mexican border towns with an atmosphere of romance and Old World quaintness.

"The Boston Bar and Café, which Leet entered, was entertaining a group of Douglas businessmen, who had laid down their bridge hands in the Elks club for a moment, according to their usual after-dinner custom, and hastened over to Agua Prieta for their second drink of the evening. Shortly after Leet's entrance they hastened back to their bridge games in the Elks club. Leet found himself alone before the bar, except for a single morose individual in flannel shirt and overalls, who gazed gloomily at a bottle of Mexican rye whiskey and occasionally helped himself to a drink from it."

At this point, once again enters Sir Alfred Hitchcock. He looks sternly into the camera and says: "Sadly our publishers have decided that enough paper has been exhausted for this evening's installment. You will have to return next month for our rather thrilling finish of our tale. Until then, Good Night."