

Norman Heckler: Hey, Its Only Been Six Decades

By: Joe Butewicz

I had previously asked Norman Heckler if he would grant an interview that could be published in our New Jersey Antique Bottle Club news letter and in the Antique Bottle and Glass Collector magazine. I was relieved when Norm agreed. I know his parents are elderly and that concern is taking up much of his time and energy. Norman is also working toward purchasing a tract of land that is adjoining to his existing property in Woodstock Valley, Connecticut. Norm is a busy guy and I felt the request may fall at an inappropriate time. I discussed the matter with several collectors that know Norman and all confirmed that he is a busy man. The necessary push was provided by John Pastor. John said: "We all know Norm has a lot going on right now but you should at least ask him. If he has the time and you can catch him on the right day, I'm sure he will have no problem with giving up some of his time. If he's too busy then you can set something up in the future when things settle down." This sounded reasonable. I got my nerve up to ask if Norman would grant the interview.

I was an invited guest at the monthly auction Norman had planned for September. I called on the telephone to confirm my attendance at the auction. Norman Sr. picked up and I asked if he could spare some time for the interview after the sale. His reply was: "As long as you're not in a hurry and if you can hang around until the dust settles after the sale, I'll be happy to give an interview." Great, I thought. What a day it would be, a live bottle auction and the chance to interview Norman Heckler Sr.

Finally September 17, 2005 came and it was a beautiful fall day, a wonderful time to be in New England. It was three weeks before Norman Heckler's famous Columbus Day weekend auction and hayfield sale. The weather was cool and the tree leaves were already turning color for the Fall. I arrived at the barn in Woodstock Valley and anxiously awaited the preview. The barn door opened and inside we all went. Before the sale Norman called everyone to attention to announce the auction rules and to clarify some situations in which his name had been brought forth.

Undoubtedly the topic generating the most interest was that he will be selling a part of his collection. He approached this situation with a great deal of humor. A short story about a telephone call from Jim Scharnagel got everyone laughing. Norm explained that Jim called asking all kinds of question about why he is selling part of his personal collection. Everything from 'Is it because of Iraq' to 'Is it because of the hurricane Katrina' was asked. Norm had a good time with this story and he got a good laugh from us all. He went on to explain that the 200 acre property he has his eye on is an expensive piece of land and he is selling some glass from his private collection to help finance the purchase of this property with his sons. The reason is strictly business and he remains a dedicated collector.

Before the auction starts, Norm takes a look around and comments that some of the dealers in the audience have been coming to his sales for many years. He looks over at

Jack Krumdick and after a brief verbal exchange they both establish that Jack has been coming to Norm's sales since 1966 and he is now 83 years old and still attending. What a nice prelude to the upcoming sale, it really established a pleasant mood.

The sale starts and finishes and I buy only one lot of historical flasks. Seemed like the audience had very deep pockets that day. That's OK, especially for the auctioneer, better luck next time for the under bidders. The sale ends and I hang around waiting for the dust to settle. Its really fun to just relax and help the other dealers along while they are packing up. Many of the guests have several or more hours to travel so getting on the road quickly is important in order to beat the rush hour traffic that begins to build later in the day, especially on Friday. Everyone is grateful for any help offered whether its in the form of packing or moving and loading boxes. I don't see Norm for awhile and I reason he must be inside his home, the office or on the telephone. After awhile he appears and says "let's go down to the office".

As we begin to make our way to the office, Rick Ciralli jumps onboard and wants to record the interview. We both agree. Once inside the office I grab a seat near the door. There is a ledge there where I can document the interview with pen and paper. I settle in and as I look up at the wall I see a matchbook dated April 14, 1973 that reads C. B. Gardner Banquet. Wow, this is a neat memento I thought. Rick wants to use it to light a cigar and I quickly produce some wooden stick matches so he and Norm can light up. We preserve the 1973 Gardner Banquet match book.

Of course the telephone rings and it's a caller with questions about auction #75 which is an absentee auction scheduled to close on Oct 19th. Norm answers all the questions quickly, yet politely and professionally. If you've ever seen Norm work while multi tasking, you can't help notice his ability to rapidly answer questions politely when he needs to move on to something else. This comes up often at his sales and he has the most enviable ability to shift gears smoothly and quickly without ruffling any feathers.

I look about waiting for Norm to finish up and I see all kinds of goodies. There is a nice small group of about a half dozen pontil era fruit jars in mint condition. A sparkling Potter and Bodine from Philadelphia catches my eye. I notice a green tombstone shaped Wood's Elixir, a bottle I have always wanted to own. There is a super light olive green colored Kelly's cabin whiskey. Finally from the November sale, of Norm's personal items, is the most beautiful Mount Vernon urn and floral cologne I have ever seen. It was the cherry on top of a banana split.

The phone call ends and the interview begins:

How long have you been collecting?

"I started collecting in 1959."

Was there any event in particular that started it all?

"I broke two of my wife's antique pontiled vial bottles that were sitting on a window sill. They were plain but interesting c1820-30 bottles. They were free blown pontil medicine

type bottles in aqua. I broke them by accident and Liz cried. Now I had to make restitution and I have been doing it ever since.”

What happened next?

“I ran into a young gentleman by the name of Donald Froehlich. He knew where there were some bottle dumps. I went out and dug on an off for the next 20 years. On one of the first digs I found a half pint Westford sheaf of wheat flask. It was a smooth base example with a double collar. I still own it. That surface dump was located on Turnpike Road in West Woodstock. In the early years I was also digger with Robert Warren, now a fairly successful lawyer in Springfield, Massachusetts.”

Do you still keep in touch?

“Oh yes – good friends.”

If you had to pick one category, historical flasks or bitters, which category do you feel best represents the hobby?

“I won’t pick a category. Flasks are still the blue chip stock in our hobby. However, there are numerous categories that make our hobby work. James Hagenbuch, has developed and perpetuated, in the business sense, the sodas, the bitters and the many other categories. Joe, I like the fact that there is no one category (that represents the hobby). Jimmy made it. He made the categories important to the hobby.”

As far as your personal collection goes, is there anything specific that you have tried to acquire?

“Initially in the 1950’s and 60’s it was historical flasks as I could afford it. I moved from beginning to medium to an advanced collector. By 1980, I had advanced to a place where I could purchase what I wanted in the Connecticut flasks.”

Including the Jared Spencer’s?

“Yes.”

In 1980 was your favorite piece one of the Jared Spencer variants?

No. In 1979 I had all of the Connecticut glass I could acquire easily. In 1980 the George Austin sale came. Sheldon Ray and Jim Mitchell were in charge of this. During that estimated \$500,000 sale which went from Pine Plains, NY to a high rise in Boston, Massachusetts, I was able to purchase 7 or 8 of the most important Connecticut bottles that I own.”

What were they?

“They were all flasks but not a Jared Spencer. There was a pint Lafayette Liberty Cap without stars which is a GI-87a and the only known example. There was a crossed keys half pint in yellow olive and others.”

Since you couldn’t pick a real favorite from the Connecticut Glass then, do you have a favorite piece today?

“Yes, I have a favorite piece of glass. Yes, and one would already figure it is a piece of Connecticut glass since I have been so conditioned and tuned to seeking those objects.”

What is it?

“I believe it was in 1984, I went to the Louisville Show. I was doing 20-24 shows a year. I went in to the show set up and the first thing I saw was this decanter. I asked about the decanter, don’t remember the dealer anymore. “Not for sale – I’ll keep you in mind. I can’t sell it. It was given to me for doing some yard work for this woman...” was the reply. I looked at it and noticed I had seen something like it in Corning. It was made using a two piece mold, not a three piece mold. It was forest green as opposed to the lighter colored example at Corning. “Can’t sell due to a problem in the family.” was the last response from the dealer who owned the decanter. I went home with my tail between my legs.

Soon after I got a telephone call:

Dealer: The decanter is for sale. I’m going to take bids.

NH: How?

Dealer: I’ll take it to a certain date. What do you offer? I won’t divulge any bids.

NH: I won’t say. I want to be the last to make an offer.

Then another telephone call on the date for a decision:

Dealer: I need your bid now.

NH: I’ll give \$8,000.

Dealer: That’s a fair offer. But I need to talk to 2 or 3 other people.

NH: That was not the agreement we had! I’m not happy! But get back to me.

...and it came on the night of Thursday before Good Friday, he called me:

Dealer: You know Norm I have a bid, and it’s the highest bid, and it’s a Connecticut bid – well its your bid. You’ve got to bring the money in cash to Louisville and I would like it now.

I called Skinner’s on Good Friday morning and I talked with Rick, the accountant. I asked: “Do you have cash? I need \$8000.” “Yes, come and get it” was the reply. I made air fare arrangements and had the cash pinned inside my leather jacket. I was very nervous carrying that much cash that way. I spent the Saturday before Easter in a motel without my family. I woke up on Easter morning and went to see the man. He lived in a very bad neighborhood. I knocked on the door and the dealer answered. He said: “Do you want to come in here? We all have measles or mumps. Do you have the money?” “Do you have the bottle?” I asked. He presented a Styrofoam container with the decanter inside wrapped in bubble wrap. I looked at it and said: “this is fine, do you have a box?” I pulled out the \$8000, got the bottle and went back to the airport. That was Easter day.

Was this event possibly your best or most memorable acquisition as well as your favorite piece?

“Certainly it was one of the most interesting acquisitions, the most difficult of any important piece I own. There are two known examples. The Corning example is in aqua

or sea green. The example I own is forest green. It's from about 1830 and has *Murdock and Cassell, Zanesville, Ohio* embossed in the glass."

This piece is later than some of the New England glass production. What is the appeal?

"It's a universal appeal." Norm takes a book down from the book shelf in the office. The book is titled *Zanesville, Ohio and the Glass Industry, an Enduring Romance*. The book is written by J. William Barrett II and the decanter is on the cover. Norm later takes us in to view the piece and it is stunning. He's correct, it does have universal appeal.

What was the first show you attended?

"Probably the first bottle show was Laconia, New Hampshire."

Who sponsored it? A club?

"No idea, but it was an individual and not a club. A wildly popular show in the early 60's and it ran for a few years. John and Marjorie Burr were the major dealers there."

Who do you remember as the first generation collectors or founding fathers of our hobby?

"Well unlike Dick Watson who had John and Sam Laidacker as his mentors, I did not know those guys. We were from different areas and we were doing business with different people."

Who were they?

"George McKearin, Arthur Barrus – he had bought a bunch of stuff from the McKearin collection, he had the stuff. Cleon Gardner (no relation to Charles B. Gardner), Charles Gardner and there were many more, Arthur Henderson, Gordon Davison, Robert Warren and the guys I dug with."

How were the dealings back then?

"Easy, I had no money! I bought things that I really liked for as little money as I could buy them for. There were no price guides for most things so it was a guess if you were making a 'good' buy. It was more like if you wanted it and could afford it you bought it!"

What was your favorite decade in the hobby?

"The 90's, no question, NO question."

Why?

"The early 90's, it was a time that spawned great interest and big bucks and brought our hobby into the limelight."

What else was important in the hobby at that time?

"I think that the 90's was the time that the great majority of the collectors came together and decided that these were times that they would join in camaraderie, not just in purchasing. Because, as always, people in general have plenty of money to purchase

things. But there was the friendship. There was the interest and there was a really good feeling in my opinion about the hobby.”

What was the most memorable auction or sale?

“The Gardner sale in 1975, especially the November or second of the two Gardner sales.”

Was Part 2 better than Part 1?

“Financially no, but it was very exiting.”

Is there any special bottle you remember from that sale?

“No, no this was not about bottles. This was about camaraderie. This was about the feeling of the bottle hobby.”

Can you describe yourself as a collector?

“I was a novice and became reasonably knowledgeable. In the late 50’s and early 60s I met Robert Skinner who was also a novice in the field but an adamant, important and serious collector of early Americana.”

Had you been employed there?

“Yes, as a cataloger and an auctioneer. It was really weird, he said: ‘Hey Norm, can you come and categorize this stuff?’”

What was it?

“It was glass. He wanted my specific knowledge but he had a good general knowledge of glass.”

Did he have a good eye?

“Yeah, the best.”

Glass only?

“No, he was good at everything. He became successful and respected in the auction business. He passed away in 1984. His auctions have continued and the auction company has remained successful.”

When did you go on your own?

“In the 1987 to 1988 period.”

What was the first sale you ran?

“The Doy McCall sale was Auction #1.”

What was the most important piece in that sale?

I believe the most important piece was a very badly damaged Alabama flask. I still think that was the most important piece, a flask with a hole in it. Norman Jr. and I went down to Selma. It was a wonderful experience. It was a place like this. (The Heckler Offices Building) He had a separate building for bottles and it was just full of great bottles. I could not believe my eyes. I was there as a Skinner representative. Norman and I put

them in the truck and drove back from Alabama. That was 1987. Dr. McCall insisted that I sell his dad's bottles, and it became our first Norman C. Heckler & Company Auction.

Since that time what are your thoughts as an auctioneer? Specifically, i.e. Do you still enjoy a live auction most of all?

"Its my job, I like people, I hope they like me. It is an important thing to do it directly. Absentee auctions just don't do it for me. Live – It is how it is supposed to be done. You have eBay, absentee auctions and live auction sales and I guess if I had to choose one it would be the live sales. I like looking the people in the eye when I sell an object. I like representing my clients directly when offering their merchandise. There is a certain disconnect in absentee sales. Its easy, its fun, but there is no personal contact."

What is the single most important Connecticut flask you know of?

"The Lafayette-Liberty Cap without stars in the pint size, is the only known example of a GI-87A, it is in my collection. The most important...the late Charlie Vuono has the expanded mouth JPF flask that sold for \$17,500 at the Gardner Sale. I was the under bidder and that is the only known example with the wide mouth."

How many JPFs are out there?

"I don't know, half a dozen, maybe eight."

What is your favorite Connecticut Glass House?

"Coventry"

Why?

"I did live there for awhile. I lived right on North River Road along the Skunkamung River which flows past the old glassworks site. They produced one hell of a bunch of bottles that are recognized as important today. And the fact is that not too many of the bottles, in comparison, from the Pitkin, Glastonbury and Willington glass houses etc. are recognized, but Coventry does seem to get great recognition from collectors in many categories."

In closing, do you have any final thoughts about our hobby?

"The hobby is alive and well. There are the old timers that are getting old and they are still strong and devotedly interested. There are the young hobbyists who are now devoted and strong. But from my perspective we need to, in every way, perpetuate interest in glass and other artifacts so that our hobby continues. None of us are doing enough. Dealers, auctioneers, scholars, and probably in reverse order, need to make sure that the items that we hold dear are important to our future generations."