

An Interview with Mark Vuono

In the July 9, 2018 issue of Journal of Antiques & Collectibles, New Jersey's Bob Strickhart wrote this (edited) interview, where Mark explained: "I was born in Stamford, Conn., and have spent my entire life there. At the age of 23, I started a retail jewelry store which I can proudly say has been in continual operation for over 44 years. Treating customers fairly and honestly is the key to success."

How were you first introduced to the flask collecting world, and what made you so interested in historical flasks?

"I really had no choice in learning about historical flasks. My father, being a social studies teacher and loving American history, had the summers off from teaching and would travel around various locations hunting down antique shops and shows in search of flasks. At the tender age of nine, I really had no choice but to follow in his footsteps."

Tell us a bit about your father, Charles, and your sons, and how long this collection and fascination with historical flasks has grown through the generations.

"My father picked up his first flask in the summer of 1958 in an antique shop in Vermont. He had no idea what it was but realized it was a quality piece of glass. After doing research on it he went back the next summer to try and buy it only to find out the dealer had died and the contents of his shop were being auctioned. At the auction, he did buy two quart New England flasks for \$9 each. Not really knowing too much about them, he bought them for their size thinking bigger is better. Those two flasks are still in the collection today!

"Both my sons Andrew and David are very much interested in the flasks, as well. Both are very well versed in knowing the various McKearin charted numbers of the flasks and have turned it into a third generation collection.

"My wife, Annie, has supported me throughout my collecting endeavors. I guess our forty years of marriage can attest to that. Sometimes she scratches her head with what I buy but she certainly appreciates the flasks and especially all the friends we have met along the way."

I'm sure there are many, many memories of your collecting days with your dad. Can you share one particular favorite with us? And while you're at it, any favorite collecting stories that include your sons?

"As you can imagine there are countless stories to be told about adventures collecting flasks with my dad. One memorable one is as follows: both my dad and I were good friends with the late Bill Pollard from Virginia. Back in 1970, Bill stumbled upon a pretty good collection of bottles. Bill, who was just starting his business at the time, was short of funds to buy the collection in its entirety. He contacted my father, telling him the situation and my father agreed to split the

collection with him. The only glitch was that the collection was inherited by the owner's son who was not quite ready to sell them yet. Bill promised he would call us when the son was ready to sell.

"Well, out of nowhere, Bill called my father on the Friday night of Memorial Day weekend at 5 p.m. saying the son was ready to sell the collection. The collection was located at a rural western Maryland farmhouse. We were to meet with Bill that night so we could split the collection up among us in the morning.

"Needless to say we were "off and running" at 5:20 to meet up with Bill at the location he requested (my father never was one to let grass grow under his feet when a good flask was offered). Upon arriving at the farmhouse early the next morning, we were treated to a fresh bacon and egg breakfast. After breakfast, Bill and my father started picking bottles from the collection. My father had first pick from the flasks and Bill had first pick from the bitters. To this day, I can remember their first picks. My father chose the GI-115 short-haired Wheat Price & Co. flask and Bill chose a Dingen's Napolian Cocktail bitters. Everything was going smoothly with the dispersal of the collection until the son left the room emotionally crying

in seeing his dad's collection being broken up. That kind of put a sad touch to the whole weekend.

"As far as an adventure with my son Andrew is concerned, I can relate this story: it was back in 2009 when I received a phone call at work from a lady asking me if I knew anything about historical flasks. When I responded that I knew a little about them, a great sigh of relief came over her and she stated that she had "found me." As it turned out, my father had sold her father flasks back in the late 1960s. Her father passed away and she was settling his estate and wanted to sell the flasks. Her father lived in southern Texas and told her before his death to contact my father and I should she ever decide to sell them. His daughter was living in Dallas at the time and had picked up the collection from south Texas. After sending pictures of the collection to us and agreeing on a price, my son Andrew and I flew to Dallas and picked up the collection. It was a memorable trip and a great father/son bonding experience."

I know you've gone to great lengths to build the collection, which is in my mind the finest collection of historical flasks to be found. What is the furthest you have traveled or wildest story you can share about adding a piece to the collection?

"Distance was never an issue as far as a flask was concerned. Whatever it took to attain one we liked, the trip was made. One of the wildest adventures my father and I had was back in 1972 when the Albert Swank collection was being auctioned by Gerald Patton in Duncansville, Pennsylvania. Mr. Swank assembled a fine collection of flasks back in the 1930s and '40s, many of them being sold to him by Gerald Patton. Previous to the auction, the region was struck by Hurricane Gloria. Roads were impassable, with even sections of the interstates closed. That didn't stop my father and me from getting to the auction, though. Driving through various detours and roadblocks, we got as far as Tyrone, Pennsylvania, about a half hour

away from our destination, when we met our first *REAL* obstacle. There appeared to be a small, fast-flowing river going over the road from the flood waters. I was driving at the time and stopped. I looked at my father and he said, 'Drive through it!' Obeying his command, I proceeded. We were about halfway across, with the water being halfway up the car doors, when the car started to buck a little. My father yelled out 'floor it' which I did and we just made it across to the other side safely. Upon arriving at the auction, I saw the great flask collector Ed Blaske from Battle Creek, Michigan, in attendance at the auction preview. I just mentioned to him that 'come hell or high water' we made it!"

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When I think of historical flasks, the name McKearin automatically comes to mind. As a sort of Flasks 101, can you estimate how many flasks are currently in your collection?

"That is a good question and I cannot honestly answer it. Over the years, this third generation collection just enjoys collecting and appreciating them without really counting them."

Do you have a favorite flask?

"Being from Connecticut, I would have to say my favorite flask is the expanded-mouth Connecticut-blown JPF Connecticut Eagle flask. The embossed JPF initials

under a heraldic eagle stand for Joseph P. Foster, who was the superintendent of the Pitkin Glass Works in Manchester, Connecticut. The reverse depicts a cornucopia with the word CONN beneath it. My father actually purchased this flask when the famed collection Charles Gardiner was auctioned in 1975. It was depicted as the frontispiece on the cover of the catalog."

What would you say is the rarest piece in your collection? Is there an interesting story to go along with it?

"That is a difficult question to answer as there are several pieces having unique molds to date. I think what is the most desirable flask would be a better question. That being said, I feel the green colored American System flask depicting a paddle-wheeler on the obverse side with the words "The American System" encompassing it. The reverse depicts a large sheaf of rye encompassed by the wording "Use Me But Do Not Abuse Me." It is one of the most historical flasks. Also, a flask commemorating Henry Clay's "American System Movement" given to the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut, by Thomas Wayland. It was de-accessioned from the museum and auctioned in 1980 at which point my father purchased it."

I know you're not just a flask collector, but you are also a fine writer on the subject of flasks and do extensive research as well. Many of us in the bottle family think of you as a mentor. Did you have a mentor? Did your dad?

"That is an easy question for me. My father was my mentor. I was basically under his guidance and tutelage since I was nine years old. As far as my father's mentor(s), I would have to say the early collectors Charlie Gardiner and George Austin. They basically helped him along in his early stages of collecting."

How many bottle shows a year do you attend?

"I attend approximately ten shows a year. I feel it is important to try and support the local clubs who sponsor the shows. As many of you know, a lot of work and effort goes into these local shows. By attending them, not only do you enjoy the camaraderie among your friends with the same interest, but you learn new information as it develops throughout the hobby. Many new leads have come from attending the shows and on occasion a good flask may be attained from them."

What are your thoughts about the hobby's changes over the last three decades?

"Well, like anything else, the internet has changed the hobby immensely. In the 'Old Days,' a lot of hard work went into trying to obtain a good flask that was being sold privately. Many Polaroid photos were sent via snail mail and many letters were written. You really had to earn that flask if you wanted it. Today everyone wants instant gratification, which is understandable with today's technology."

"I feel the health of the flask community is relatively strong. At the shows I see many new faces interested in flasks and eager to learn about them. Quite a few of the new collectors I see are in their

late twenties and early thirties buying what is affordable to them. In time, like anything else, they will be able to afford some of the higher-priced flasks when they become available. In general, I feel the flask community displays quite a bit of vibrancy."

Any final thoughts?

"Enjoy the hobby and purchase items that you really like and can afford. It is also important to be well informed about what you are purchasing and also to share your knowledge among other collectors. After all, this is what the hobby is all about!"