

Tom McCandless: Keeps on Truckin'

By: Joe Butewicz

September 27th, 2005 was beautiful early fall day. It was dry, sunny, breezy and bright. The temperature wandered between 65 and 70 degrees and it is difficult to imagine there could be a more pleasant day. On this day the South Jersey Heritage Bottle Club held its 2005 Annual Show and Sale at Batsto Village in Wharton State Forest, New Jersey.

Batsto Village has become a nationally recognized historic site long after land use of this area was made common by Native American Indians. In 1766 Charles Read built the Batsto Iron Works along the Batsto River. During the Revolutionary War years, these iron works manufactured supplies for the Continental Army. Over the years as I sit at the show, I often imagine the local resident workers casting cannon balls for the Continental Army or the Native Indians hunting, fishing and clamming in and along the Batsto and Mullica Rivers.

This bottle show is one of many collector's favorite show of the year. For starters it's an outdoor event which is always special. That's why we loved York, even with its high heat, humidity and rain! Unlike York, The Batsto show is always on a Sunday near the end of September when the local weather can be spectacular. On a sunny day the glass looks so much better outside. Another huge benefit is Boy Scout Troop 192 who will take your breakfast and lunch orders and deliver warm hot dogs with toppings for a buck each. Wow, I could sell antique bottles here every day! Finally show chairman Paul DelGuerico does a great job of pulling it all together.

Note: This year Paul informed the dealers that Batsto Village would no longer supply sales tables and would actually not mind if we didn't do the show any longer. Paul, I'd like to thank you for your efforts in continuing to run the Batsto show in the face of adversity. I feel I can speak for all the dealers and collector's when I say we are behind you 100% and we will do what ever it takes to continue to keep the Batsto show on the radar screen.

Getting back to the show and this interview. I finally arrive and begin setting up next to Tom McCandless. I had previously mentioned to Tom that I would like to interview him for an article in our club news letter and AB&GC Magazine. As I finish my table set up I ask Tom:

When you're done eating your bagel do you want to do a quick interview?

"Yeah sure, it will take about two minutes. I can tell you everything I know in two minutes. I'll tell you an interesting story. I went to an antiques show in 1965. Jack Whistance was set up. He had a Brown's Celebrated Indian Herb Bitters Indian Queen, and a Mohawk Whiskey, another maiden for \$65 each and I bought this one for \$12." Tom hands me an aqua open pontil labeled lemon juice bottle that is for sale on his table. We look at the bottle and admire its label, whittle, beautiful a blue aqua color and overall character. What's not there is the price increase as compared to an Indian Queen, but this bottle represents a pleasant memory along the bottle collecting journey, not a hard lesson

of which category went up the most in price. “Well, I didn’t have the \$65 at the time. That was a long time ago...forty years ago.” Meanwhile, Charlie Dascenzo walks by and Tom says to Charlie: “I’ve been here all day and it’s only quarter to eleven.” Tom tries to recall where that show was and asks Charlie to name some towns North and West of Somerville. Like an alphabet, Charlie begins to recite: Bridgewater, Pluckemin, Far Hills... “Far Hills, that’s it! That show was held in Far Hills. I should have bought everything Jack Whistance had for sale at the time. He offered me a blue Firecracker flask (pint) for \$2000. Burt Spiller bought it for \$1800 and sold it a few years ago for \$46,000 plus commission, that’s over \$50,000. That’s one of my biggest mistakes...ha ha. Well I was comfortable with what I bought over the years. I never took anything away from the family.”

Any other big mistakes in purchasing, like not buying the Firecracker?

“No, not off hand.”

How long have you been collecting?

“I bought my first flask in Connecticut at a road side shop with proceeds from a dump I was digging in Hopewell.” It was an aqua pint with George Washington on one side and a ship on the other side. It was \$35 and Marion said to me: ‘you spent all of that money and you don’t even know if it’s a reproduction.’ Well it was a good one. I still have it along with two others in color, amber and a blue one.”

So you were digger for some time?

“A little bit, yes.”

Was there any event in particular that started it all?

“How I got started was Marion and our neighbor Pat Cramer, she was an antique dealer, they talked me into going to a show in Flemington in 1964. I picked up a book there about digging the ghost towns in Nevada. I said to myself ‘well I know where the old dump for Hopewell was.’ It was behind the old quarry. I went there and found a Warner’s Safe Cure right on the surface. I went home and looked it up it was worth \$6 and I was hooked. Ferraro is the name of the people that wrote that book. I think they are still active.”

How much longer did you dig?

“Enthusiastically for 4 or 5 years, but it is not uncommon for me to get out looking. I was recently looking on Aunt Molly Road and the place was raked over by at least one fellow collector. As you know I also hunt for wild mushrooms. It is not like it was year’s ago. The people tend to get very suspicious. They tend to call the police.”

How about the old time collectors?

Well Charlie Gardner was a great friend. He was always receptive as far as inviting collectors into his home and giving advice. Even if it was a 50 cent bottle, he would take time to explain things to people.” Just then the scouts from Troop 192 deliver some hot dogs and some other folks come in a chat. Tom is a natural at receiving company and

instantly making them feel welcome. He looks down and says to the crowd: "That's why I wear my name badge upside down ... so I can look down and see who I am."

I remember, years ago, you gave me a stack of correspondence from Charles B Gardner. You guys were close.

"Yeah, Marion used to correspond with Charlie quite often. He used to write some funny stuff. He had a dead battery at the Rochester, NY show. I jumped his Cadillac and told him not to shut it off until he got to New London (CT). After he passed Nina gave me his copy of American Glass and it's also autographed by McKearin."

I saw that at your house years ago and it is my favorite piece because of its importance to the hobby. It's more than just glass. I think it says: "To Charlie; the original bottle Gardner."

"Oh yes Charlie had ID'd all the flasks he owned and the colors. He also added colors that were not listed and that makes it nice."

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

"One year, about 1967, I was set up at Shupp's Grove Antique Show and Sam Laidacker offered me a green Firecracker which I still have. Its worth about \$7500 now. He didn't have it with him. I went to his house to pick it up. I should have bought everything he had for sale. I bought some things and have sold some of them and have kept some."

How long had you known Sam?

"I got to know him through the Agadjanians. They wrote a book on candy containers. They both passed away, he just recently and she about 15 years ago. She had some historical flasks and he was once president of the American Toy Collectors Club. Sam was more of a dealer and writer of American Antiques Collector Magazine rather than a collector."

Anyone else?

"Marion bought me a copy of Watson's book and then I got in touch with Dick and we became friends. Marion passed away the same week as Dick's wife Elma. They passed away six days apart. That was sad. Elma had been ill; she suffered recurring bouts of cancer. She was ill but not disabled. Marion was only ill for 8 months.

It was a loss to the hobby....

"Oh yes, Marion was active in the Toy Collector's Club." Just then, by coincidence but as if on queue, Dick Watson walks up and talks to Tom about the Atsion show being held next week. Tom says: "I'll come to your house and we'll go." Tom repeats a long standing joke: "I remember Jim Whetzel left your house one night. We looked out the window 15 minutes later and he was riding by...Ha Ha."

Any other older collectors that come to mind?

Judge Blaske, I knew him quite well. George Austin had a very fine collection. Once I met Helen McKearin, who was the daughter of George McKearin. I met her once but didn't know her."

Were you close with any of the old time collectors?

"I was close with Charlie (Gardner). Charlie used to come over and stay overnight."

Can you remember the first show you attended?

"No, I really don't. In those days there were no local shows but there were shows in California. I used to get out to Shupp's Grove when there weren't any bottle shows. Then came Rochester, Genesee Valley, Guernsey Barn in Lancaster run by the PBCA, Eugene Heisey ran it." He was a good friend. He died early; he was only 47 years old. He died of a heart attack while taking a walk, he was young. He made the ceramic bottles, Indian Queens, barrel bitters etc. and of course when he cast the bottles made of slip he got from his father in laws pasture they shrank when they dried. He kept making more molds from the smaller bottles until he got to the miniatures. It was ingenious the way he did that.

At that moment a dealer and a customer walk over to try and make a deal. The dealer is trying to sell an amethyst target ball with a star on it and the customer is trying to buy a historical flask. The flask buyer produces a blank check and asks: "Do you have a pen?" Tom explains: "I always have a pen because once some guy owed me money for 6 months and he finally came to pay. I didn't have a pen so he could write the check. I had to wait 3 more months to get paid!"

Tom sells the flask and complains that: "the trouble when you sell those flasks is that there is nothing to put back on your table when they are gone." Tom's right, we both stared for a moment at the empty spot on his sales table where the flask had been.

Before I could ask another question Tom starts: "I told you about a couple of losers now I will tell you about a couple of winners. Carol Agadjanian knew a guy from near Phillipsburg (NJ) and he had some bitters. At the time I thought any bitters bottle was worth \$10. I bought about 3 bottles for \$10 each. One was an S*C Brown's Stomach Bitters, a citron triangular from Philadelphia. Jimmy (Hagenbuch) has one in his present sale and it is estimated at \$7-8,000. (It sold for \$10,000 plus buyer's fee). Well I haven't made anything on it yet, until I sell it. In the catalog it says there are only two known in this color. The one he is selling now is from the Carlyn Ring collection."

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

"I wouldn't venture to say that. I collect a variety of bottles and even a variety of non bottle things. To each his own! I could never understand how people could zero in on one category. When it gets too pricey you can switch to something else. One time my son was at the house. He said: 'it looks like you have 57 collections going on at once.' You know you can split bottle collecting into a lot of separate categories."

What are some of your non bottle interests?

“Old toys of course, stoneware especially the South Eastern Pennsylvania wax sealers with the sealing ring in the top, mouse traps (loud laugh), advertising pieces, Coca Cola trays, other trays...” Marion always had a nice collection of Christmas lights. I still have them. I’m giving them to the grandchildren slowly. I also collect tobacco tags and pocket mirrors, I have two on eBay right now.”

What do you like to do now?

“I like to pick wild mushrooms in season. Morels in spring, yes they grow in New Jersey, not many people know that, they are highly prized. Chanterelles in July, meadow mushrooms in the fall, Agaricus Campestris.”

Do you pick anything other than mushrooms?

“Berries, I like berries and wild strawberries but I can’t find them anymore...” Tom goes on to finish that conversation with a customer. Tom finishes with the customer and states: “Nice crowd today, not necessarily devoted to the hobby but.... Well, I sold two nice flasks today and I don’t know how to replace them.”

Perhaps you can take a few off the shelf?

“No....I don’t remember where I got the Traveler’s Companion but I bought the other one for re-sale at Shupp’s Grove.”

Do you have a favorite piece?

“My favorite flask varies from day to day. Well, I have a yellow half pint Albany George Washington that is just as thin as an eggshell. The color is great and it’s a miracle to me that it survived. Well its 1820’s and its just mint. There’s a pint portrait flask, it has a lot of red in it. These come to mind. I have another bottle. A hard cider flask, Harrison campaign with a log cabin on one side. It’s a dark aqua or cornflower blue and it has a lot of history. These come to mind so they must be favorites. But if you ask me on another day I’ll probably think of something else. Its nice to go into the bottle room and look around.”

I like your bottle room. It seems as though many of the more advanced collectors built bottle rooms to show their collections.

“Marion always said she was glad we put that bottle room up *before* the Gardner Sale. She said that I would have spent so much money at the Gardner Sale that I would not have been able to put up the bottle room. When we opened our bottle room in 1975 we invited a lot of bottle collectors to the house. Marion said we should invite the Blaskes from Battle Creek, Michigan. I thought we shouldn’t invite them since an invitation may make them feel obligated to come. We ended up not inviting them and 3 years later he said to me that he was disappointed and mad at me. Marion wanted to be the nice one. My plan backfired and I learned something

Time wise, which came first Marion or the bottles?

“Marion”

How were the dealings back then?

“There was nothing really different. I had no trouble.”

What was your favorite decade in the hobby?

“Oh, right now, every one that comes along. There was no bad one, but now the prices are too high. Gasoline is cheap compared to bottles. Bottles have appreciated much more.”

Ed DeHaven walks up and they have known each other since high school.

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

“No I’ll just say: If you love it, try to get it and try to buy the better things.”

At that very moment Tom’s cousin, Tom Garrity, and his wife walk up. They live in Petersburg, NJ in Cape May County which is only about 25 miles to the South. They had emailed Tom and made arrangements to meet at the show. Tom Garrity presented Tom with his grandmother’s bible dated 1879. I could not have imagined a better way to end the interview than with this special moment! Tom studied the black ink inscriptions and said: “Wow, I’ll give this to one of my sons.”