

Dick Watson: A True Friend of the Bottle Collecting Community

By: Joe Butewicz

I am often reminded of a wonderful evening that the New Jersey Antique Bottle Club spent with Dick and Elma Watson at the Watson's home in Medford, New Jersey. Elma has departed this world since then but her memory is alive. Dick often mentions her and we chat about her as if she was still with us. The Watson's were gracious hosts on December 17th, 2000 when the bottle club celebrated its holiday meal in which members bring a covered dish or dessert to share. It was a special night. Elma had the neatest antique decorations on a variety of artificial trees set throughout the house. The seasonal decorations and collections alone were very interesting. Adding to our enjoyment were the collections of tobacco cutters, patent metal fruit cans, fruit jar patent models, duck decoys, oyster cans, parade torches, political memorabilia and did I mention Dick collects antique bottles?

After the meal I requested an interview with Dick that night. I must mention Dick had eye surgery a week or two before our event. While still recovering from the surgery Dick was noticeably bothered by the eye that just would not stop tearing. In addition this condition was obviously altering his sense of depth perception. Throughout the entire evening Dick was cordial and pleasant. He was not going to let the eye surgery hamper his good time this enjoyable evening. He never seemed inconvenienced by our group's presence or by my request for an interview when he should have been resting that stubborn eye.

The interview took place in spare bedroom that doubles as a guest bedroom and is the repository show case of Dick's super political memorabilia collection. Many of the campaign items predate the Civil War. There was so much to see and learn about in this room that Dick spent about 30 minutes educating me in how a traditional political campaign parade was put forth. Personally, I found the parade lanterns and parade torches most intriguing as well as the entire notion of the parade being run at night without the big powerful street lights we take for granted today.

I learned there is a great difference between parade torches and parade lanterns. Parade lanterns resemble a slightly ovoid shaped beach ball built on a collapsible thin wire frame with a paper covering on which the candidates names are stenciled. There is a small 3-4 inch diameter hole in the bottom where a small fire pot was clipped onto the wire framework. A similar sized hole was framed in at the top to vent hot gasses made by the actual fire inside the lantern. The resulting effect was a large glowing lantern with the candidates names printed on the paper. I tried to imagine how these great big campaign 'jack-o-lanterns' looked lit up at night. Dick laughed and said "I would have liked to see what they looked like when they caught on fire" as they often did on a windy night. Oh what a parade it must have been. Parade torches were actual scale model rifles carved from wood with a kerosene pot fastened to the barrel. The kerosene pot was about the size of a grapefruit and it mounted to the rifle barrel end by means of a swivel attachment that secured the pot to the rifle. The pot has a roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ inch cloth lamp wick that is adequate to produce a bright flame, no glass chimney required. I could just imagine the rows of campaign soldiers marching down Main Street with their campaign torch rifles aglow in the night parade. It was great to see the actual torches as well as

period posters showing them being used in parades. As with the lanterns there were pre, period and post Civil War examples.

What's your favorite piece? "There is no favorite piece - can't really say I have a favorite."

How long have you been collecting parade torches? "I started collecting over the last 12-15 years. I'm still collecting them but will only add something special. This is possibly the largest collection of these parade torches in the country today."

What got you started collecting parade torches? "Well I had a desire, they were patriotic and Elma liked them. I also had a friend who collected them and was able to acquire from him. He sold his entire collection to me at the Cherry Hill show just a couple of weeks before he died of cancer. He had been terminal for some time but these were the last things to go. The torches illustrate craftsmanship and history tied together to make something appealing and something interesting. As period pieces, they also have historical and technical importance. Along with the rest of the political memorabilia they give us an idea of the how and why of those times."

What came first Elma or the bottles? "Elma."

How and when did you start collecting bottles? "I started collecting bottles in 1959. At that time we were looking to furnish our house with antiques and that would be this house that we built here. Construction was nearing completion and we started looking for antique furniture for our new home. A local antique dealer informed us of an opportunity at the old Van Sciver place in Audubon. It was a 3 story, 4 chimney Colonial brick farmhouse in Camden county near my mother-in-laws house. We were expecting our son, who is now 45, and we were staying with my mother-in-law. Her home was closer to the hospital than where we lived.

The antique dealer mentioned that the contents of the house were to be auctioned since the property was being sold. While inside the attic of the old Van Sciver house, I noticed several peach baskets full of old fruit jars against the attic wall just under the cupola. Right on top of one of the baskets of jars was an aqua quart sized eagle/grapes flask. I inquired of the price and was given it for free. I found out what it was and got interested.

I wondered if the flask was a reproduction. I had heard that such flasks had already been reproduced by the Clevengers. Not knowing anything about historical flasks I wasn't sure if this was one of those reproductions or not. I finally showed it to Sam Laidacker and he verified that it was an original American historical flask.

Years later, while looking at my bottle collection, my grandfather asked me how I got started collecting bottles and I told him this story. He was astonished as he also had fond memories of the Van Sciver estate. His father lived in a tenant house on the farm and actually ran the Van Sciver family farm. He vividly recalled being tossed a penny by the squire every time he would swing open the farm gates for the squire's carriage team. A penny was a lot of money in those days. Its really amazing how life's coincidences can be so intertwined."

What became of the baskets full of fruit jars in the attic? "I didn't get them. I really had no idea there could be anything of value there. I often wonder what jars could have been there in those baskets. You have to realize it was 1959 and the jars looked like they had been there awhile. There could have been some great jars in those baskets. I don't know whatever became of them."

What happened next? "We continued to search out bottles locally and began to travel to look for them. A funny thing happened about a year after we got started. We saw and ad for an auction that featured guns and flasks and of course we anticipated antique guns and historical flasks. Upon arrival we were quick to notice that they meant guns and *powder* flasks!"

If you had to pick one category, historical flasks or bitters, which category do you feel best represents the hobby? "Generally speaking bitters represent the hobby. Even though I collect many other categories including Saratoga waters, historical flasks, pickle bottles, whiskeys, pontil medicines, fruit jars and others, the bitters cover a great many years of glass making from open pontil label only to machine made screw cap. The variety of shapes has always intrigued me."

What about the books you wrote? "In 1965 I wrote Bitters Bottles as a solo endeavor with Elma doing the line drawings. We advertised in the Antique Trader newspaper. Check lists were sent to fellow collectors and all co-operated. If you added to the check list or returned the check list you would get an updated and most current check list mailed to you."

What do you think about the new book? "The new book written by Carlyn Ring and Bill Hamm in 1988 is a world of information. It contains the most information about bitters bottles between two covers."

Seems like a big stretch from knowing nothing about the hobby to writing a book about a specific category only six years later. "I looked at major collections to gather information. We had James Thompson's book 'Bitters Bottles' (1947) to use as a guide. We were mentored by Sam Laidacker, of Bristol, Pennsylvania. Sam was an old time collector, dealer and author. He was knowledgeable in many areas of collecting. At that time my neighbor was Charles Cridland. Charles was President of the Thomas Nelson Publishing Company and his wife was an editor. The book won first place for non-fiction. The second book, Supplement to Bitters Bottles, was written in 1968. Then in 1970 I bought out dad's business and I became too busy to think about a third book."

What do you like to do now? "I love to read. This right eye problem is really a bother."

What was the first show you attended? "The first show we attended was the Akron, Ohio Bottle Club Show in 1963. They asked me to be a show display judge."

Who do you remember as the first generation collectors or founding fathers of our hobby? "Obviously there was George McKearin. I didn't know him he died just about the time I was getting in as was Dr. Osgood. We knew George Austin, Crawford Westlaufer of Buffalo, Charles Gardner, Gordon Bass, Warren Lane, Dick Wood, Earl Dambach and other notable collectors and dealers. In 1959 the average collector was approximately 50-55 years old and I was 27 and Elma 19. We were considered very young in the hobby and we were fortunate to have experienced collectors look after us.

In the early 60's younger blood began coming into the hobby and a second generation of collectors began to emerge. This group was made up of the Blaskes, Charlie Vuono and John Tibbitts who published the first bottle magazine. I like to include myself in this group of collectors. A little later Elvin Moody, Tom McCandless and the Shanks."

Were you close to any of those early collectors? "Yes, I was close with Charlie Gardner and Tom McCandless. I knew Charlie a few years before I knew Tom."

How were the dealings back then? "Well I got a Harvey's Prairie Bitters for \$250 from Gardner. I was happy he sold it to me instead of Moody. Due to activity in the hobby we got some good deals. We would often pay \$75 bottle prices for items worth \$300."

What was your favorite decade in the hobby? "My favorite decade, for addition, was the 1970's. We were doing better financially and there was the Gardner and Blaske sales. There were good Pennypacker sales and the Swank sale of flasks in Duncansville, PA."

What else was important in the hobby at that time? "Well, you had the same old friends. Your friends became every bit as important as the bottles. For example, every New Year's Eve the same 5 bottle couples would get together."

Have you ever been a digger? No, I was always an industrial electrician and did not need to spend off time at hard labor."

In closing, do you have any final thoughts about our hobby? "The key to success in the hobby is for people to be fair to each other in their dealings, as they should be. If this happens everyone will be much better off and the hobby will benefit. After all its a hobby and not a business. The few bad apples will weed themselves out. Of course it is an ongoing history lesson for all of us and that is important to me."