

Bottle Collecting! Since When?



by Cecil Munsey

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“He’s added another choice item to his collection!”

That’s the title of a wonderful advertisement for the famous whiskey, Calvert Reserve [Fig. 1], a Canadian whiskey bottled in the U.S. – “one of the best-selling Canadians. Made from the grains of four regions of Canada and named after Lord Cecil Calvert who founded the Maryland colony in 1632.”

The year the ad was part of Calvert Distillers Corporation’s advertising program was **1945** – the year

that World War II ended and the first year of the Cold War – 14 years before bottle collecting officially became an organized national hobby. It would be just another of the series of dog-related ads for Calvert whiskey, painted by the famous commercial artist Tom Covell, if it were not for the very valuable antique bottles pictured on the display shelf in the background.

Were bottles collected as early as 1945? Earlier? The answer to those simple questions is a conjoined, yes!

1850s – 1920s

Recalling my incomplete knowledge of bottle-collecting history, I was surprised when my wife discovered the Calvert advertisement, featured in this article, in a box of advertisements at a recent antiques show. I know from research that people saved bottles for hundreds of years and seriously collected old bottles categorically at least as far back as the 1880s. Those late 19th century collectors, in fact, focused on just such bottles as featured in the “collection”



[Fig. 1] “He’s added another choice item to his collection!”

shown in the Calvert advertisement – historical and pictorial flasks, free-blown bottles, violin flasks, hand-blown handled glass jugs, perfume bottles, figural bitters and whiskey bottles. The mid-20th century (1945) depiction of a bottle collection in a cabinet is reminiscent of the 1901 “*Cabinet of a Bottle Collector*,” drawn by Charles Dana Gibson, of “Gibson Girl” fame, [Fig. 2].

Still another cabinet-display of bottles is one featured in a recently discovered photograph [Fig. 3]. Pictured is the bottle room in the huge three-story Tudor style house built by industrialist and glass pioneer William S. Walbridge. The photograph was taken just after his home [Fig. 4], in Toledo, Ohio, was completed in 1917. Walbridge descended from an old New England family and was born in Boston in 1854. He began his work career in his family’s furniture business there but in 1898 sold his interest and joined the Toledo Glass Company as treasurer. Once in Toledo, he began to collect bottles. Over a period of nearly 40 years he led and was otherwise involved in businesses that were the forerunners of Owens-Illinois and Libbey-Owens-Ford, working with people such as Michael J. Owens and Edmund Drummond Libbey (whose sister he married) when they were laying the foundations for the glass industry in Toledo. Bottle collectors may recognize him as the author of the 1920 book, *American Bottles Old & New – 1607 to 1920*. Walbridge lived in the house he built with the bottle room until his death in 1935 at the age of 81.

Some of the earliest bottle collectors we know because of the books and articles they wrote about glass and bottles. The “highlighted bibliography” presented with this article gives a fairly complete reference listing of those

early author-collectors:

- (1) Deming Jarves, 1854 and 1865
- (2) S. Sauzay, 1871
- (3) Edwin Atlee Barber, 1900
- (4) Frederick Willia Hunter, 1914
- (5) William S. Walbridge, 1920
- (6) N. Hudson Moore, 1920
- (7) Johnson O’Connor, 1923
- (8) Stephen Van Rensselaer, 1926
- (9) Mary Harrod Northend, 1926
- (10) Harry Hall White, 1926
- (11) Rhea Mansfield Knittle, 1927
- (12) Lura Woodside Watkins, 1931
- (13) Ruth Webb Lee, 1931
- (14) Frances Rogers & Alice Beard, 1937
- (15) Peter A. Brannon, 1937
- (16) George S. & Helen McKearin, 1941

1920s – 1930s

Most of the serious individual collectors of bottles, known to me, were a clique not

a club and they first operated in the early years of the 20th century. The first important collector, I met by way of reading his 1926 seminal work, *Early American Bottles and Flasks*. The author was, of course, Stephen Van Rensselaer. The late Charles B. Gardner, a famous bottle collector I did know personally and who wrote the introduction to my 1970 basic text for the hobby of “...Bottle Collecting,” said the following about Stephen Van Rensselaer in 1969:

“When I started to collect bottles in 1929 the first thing I did was to secure a copy of the 1929 revised edition [of the Rensselaer book] which is ‘The Bottle Collector’s Bible.’ Personal contact with Mr. Van Rensselaer increased my respect for his knowledge of the subject.

“I have to refer to the book almost daily and have found it invaluable in listing many of the bottles & flasks [I] accumulated over the past forty years.”

Other early bottle collecting luminaries include: Alfred B. Maclay, W. T. Howe, William Mitchell Van Winkle, Charles S. Boye, Edwin LeFevre, Henry F. du Pont, and yes, even Henry Ford. [Some of the people mentioned in this section, in recent years, have been inducted into the FOHBC Hall of Fame, under the category of “Pioneers”.]

1940s – 1950s

Reproduced here, as [Fig. 5], is a 1940 advertisement from *American Antiques Collector Magazine* offering some “bottles and flasks” for sale. The bottles were from the W. T. Howe collection of “100 rare historical flasks...” Accompanying material indicates that Mr. Howe took 20 years to assemble the flask collection. Besides the seemingly fairy-tale prices being asked, the advertisement adds the knowledge that Mr. Howe began collecting circa 1920, qualifying him as an early bottle collector.



[Fig. 2]

CABINET OF A BOTTLE-COLLECTOR.

"He's added another choice item to his collection!" Again, that is the title of an advertisement, for the famous Calvert Reserve whiskey, that is a highlight of this article. As already stated, the year was **1945** and the ad was part of Calvert Distillers Corporation's (New York City) well-known dog-themed advertising campaign that ran for several years.

Perspective is certainly added to the above statement when it is recalled that 1945 was the first year of the Cold War. It was the year Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met in Crimea at the Yalta Conference (Feb. 4th) to plan the final defeat of Germany. It was the year that Pres. Roosevelt died and Harry S. Truman became President of the U. S. (April 12th). May 8th of 1945 was the day victory in Europe was declared (V-E Day). Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated. At a conference in San Francisco the United Nations was established (April-June). It was during the same year that Truman, Churchill, and Stalin met in Berlin at the Potsdam Conference (July 17th-August 2nd) to discuss the reconstruction of Germany. A "B-25" bomber accidentally flew into the Empire State Building, damaging the 78th and 79th floors and killing thirteen people (July 28th). To hasten the end of World War II, on Aug. 6th of 1945, the U. S. dropped a 20-kiloton uranium bomb on Hiroshima, Japan killing 80,000 people. On Aug. 9th, the U. S. dropped a 22-kiloton plutonium bomb on Nagasaki, Japan and killed 70,000 people. On Aug. 15th, Japan surrendered (V-J Day). World War II came to an end [Fig. 6].

The population of the United States in 1945 was 140 million [today 290 million]. Life expectancy was 65 years [today 77]. The Dow Jones reached a high of 195 and a low of 155. The cost of a first class stamp was 3¢ [today 37¢]. Detroit defeated the Chicago Cubs (4-3) in the World Series. The 1945 Pulitzer Prize in music was awarded to composer Aaron Copland for "Appalachian Spring." The 1945 Oscar for Best Picture was awarded to "Going My Way." Miss America was Bess Myerson of New York. John Steinbeck's, "Cannery Row" was published in 1945. And the American Cyanamid Corporation discovered the vitamin, folic acid.

Fourteen years later on October 15, **1959**, a group of seventeen people in



[Fig. 3]



[Fig. 4]

Sacramento, California gathered to form the first bottle-collecting club in history [Fig. 7]. The new group christened themselves the Antique Bottle Collectors Association (ABCA) of California.

The members of that first bottle-collecting club organized themselves as a result of their finding hundreds of old bottles in Sacramento's urban renewal area. Bottles of the California Gold Rush and the Civil War abounded and those first bottle club members literally picked them off the ground after bulldozers rumbled back and forth preparing the earth for the rebuilding of the oldest portions of original Sacramento.

1960s

The interest in acquiring antique bottles grew. In just three short years ABCA of California became a national club of 257 family memberships covering twenty-three states. "Of California" was dropped from the name and the group became ABCA (Antique Bottle Collectors Association).

As organized bottle collecting approached its second decade, thousands of bottle collectors belonged to over 100 clubs in the United States alone. Also, there were clubs in Canada, Great Britain,


Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and other places.

In **1969**, just ten years after the birth of ABCA, representatives from the

'60s
During this decade,
in Sacramento,
the first bottle shows
were held.
At those first shows
there were
no sales – only displays
Some sales took place
from the trunks of cars
in the parking lot.

American Antiques Collector Magazine • Sept. / Nov. 1940 • Page 51


[Fig. 5]



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BOTTLES AND FLASKS

TERMS: Same as for China. All are original. Defects are noted. I have many other bottles and flasks of various types. If you have special wants I would be glad to let you know what I have to offer.



142

2221	Golden amber pint "Lafayette-Covetry"—Rev. Liberty Cap with 11 stars over "S & S" 141-142	16.00
0483	Deep golden amber quart violin. A beauty. As 84	25.00
0446	Light golden amber pint scrolled violin flask. As 84	17.00
0481	Aqua scroll violin as above. As 84	3.50
0482	Pint Double eagle over panel "Cunningham & Co., Pittsburgh, etc."	2.50
0460	Amber pint flask in the shape of a violin. This is the Bitters bottle in shape of a violin	6.00
0127	Flag—"For Our Country" rev. Eagle as 27-28. Nice and clear	7.50
0451	Quart "Summer and Winter" no wording as 13-38	4.50
0414	Pint Amber with white spots "Wrockwarden" flask	25.00
0443	"Dr. Pezold's German Bitters" amber. Tall	3.00
0452	Traveler to left "For Pike's Peak", Rev. eagle over panel. Qt.	4.00
0412	Quart calabash Tree-Shed, etc. as 47-48	4.00
9104	Brown "Indian Queen" "Patented Feb. 11, 1868"	4.50
0458	As above but "Patented 1868". Amber	4.50
0459	As above but "Patented 1867". Amber. (Note 3 varieties)	4.50
0347	Brilliant emerald green pint Lancaster Cornucopia-Basket of Fruit. As 113-114 but no factory name	12.00
0382	"Success To The Railroad" olive green pint flask. The small mold type. Nice clear color. As Fig. 57	11.00
0381	"Success To The Railroad" as 57 but plain panels on cart. Rev. spread eagle similar to 34 and 17 stars. Golden amber	12.50
0150	Deep amber quart bottle. Union and clasped hands reverse flying eagle with scroll in beak. Similar to 67 & 70	8.00
107	Large aqua quart Flag "Coffin & Hay" rev. eagle on oval 73-6	10.00
0172	Spread eagle over panel, corrugated sides. Reverse same. No. 13	8.50
0124	Flag. "For Our Country", rev. eagle 25-26	7.50
3375	"Washington"—"Taylor" as 21-22. Sheared neck and pontil. Aqua	3.50
998	Blown amber long neck chestnut shaped flask with blown handle	5.00
8101	Tall blown conical bar decanter with vertical rib and droop decoration between ribs. 12" high. Quite unusual.	6.00
9336	Aqua small pint chestnut shaped flask. On one side enameled is a running horse. Rev. date "1838" and something in Dutch.	15.00
6612	Aqua pint Cornucopia, rev. spread eagle to right perched on a rock. Almost identical to 9-10. Scarce in aqua.	10.00
0746	"The Father of His Country", rev. "Gen. Taylor Never Surrenders" with Dyestville Glass Works around panel. Light green	6.00
9375	Aqua pint flask. Spread eagle, to the left 13 stars above. Reverse anchor and Ravenna Glass Co.	5.00
0111	"Hunter and Fisher". The common variety with the hunter shooting at the bird to left. Beautiful reddish amber	8.50
0141	Three section mold blown decanter with rayed bulls eye stopper. Heavy vertical rib, twisted at top with a band of bull's eye sunbursts and panel with "WINE". Little rough at lip. Rare	15.00
1126	"Jeny Lind" 98, rev. building as 68 but no words or star.	6.00
0106	"Jenny Lind" 45, rev. "Kossuth" 69. The scarcest type of Jenny Lind calabash except tree reverse	12.50
8821	Anchor—"Baltimore Glass Works", rev. a phoenix and "Resurgam" 3-61	3.50
DB4	Brilliant deep green Cornucopia—Basket of fruit. 53-54	6.00
0141	Brilliant cobalt blue 8 flat paneled decanter. Polished pontil. 11 1/4" high. Beautiful shade of blue	15.00

Village of Ballston Spa, New York, a ninety-year-old Victorian-Gothic mansion was donated to the FOHBC to become its national headquarters and museum. James W. Verbeck, a well-known lawyer who developed a considerable reputation, built the Verbeck House in 1889. He also built a large bank account for successfully handling liability suits against the very powerful and rich railroad corporations. Verbeck and his wife raised five children in the mansion. The last of the children, Dr. George Verbeck, died in 1977. The property was willed to Abba and Katharine Newton, granddaughters of the original owners. It was the Newton sisters who donated the three and one-half story house to the FOHBC in memory of the Verbeck family.

1980s

During the 1980s FOHBC struggled with the operation and management of a national bottle museum. Local collectors in the Ballston Spa, New York area and others interested in the historic building, housing the National Bottle Museum, interested in the historic building, housing the National Bottle Museum, volunteered to operate the museum. The group named themselves "National Bottle Museum Society."

By this decade, bottle-collecting events were still called "bottle shows and sales" but sales tables far exceeded show tables.

Eventually the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs (FOHBC) was unable to maintain and control the operation in New York State. As a result it was decided to sell the donated mansion and postpone owning and operating a bottle museum until a more feasible plan was developed.

1990s – 2000s

The FOHBC went back to a geographically dispersed but national operation. In 1992 the "Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs" changed its name to "Federation of Historical Bottle Collectors" (still FOHBC).

In 1993 FOHBC sold the mansion in Ballston Spa and the National Bottle Museum Society moved to a building nearby. The society continued operating as the "National Bottle Museum@." The group had registered the name and was given the relics that had been collected.

In March of 1995, FOHBC acquired *Bottles & Extras*, a national magazine devoted to the collecting of bottles.

country's bottle collecting clubs gathered in Sacramento, California and, with the help of ABCA, formed the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs (FOHBC).

The tightly organized coalition of bottle clubs further organized the hobby that at the time was touted in several national magazines as "the third largest collecting hobby and the fastest growing one."

1970s

Just a short ten years passed before FOHBC realized its dream of what was to be a permanent home. On March 3, 1979 in the

'70s

By this decade bottle shows had become shows and sales.

Sales tables and display tables were abundant at every bottle show and sale.

'90s and '00s
The last decade of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century were the years that national auctions became the source of the most valuable and expensive bottles. During this time-period the Internet became the place many collectors frequented to buy bottles – the predominant source was/is the Internet web site eBay.

Bottle Collecting! Since When?

To answer the question posed in the title of this article is probably not possible if a specific date is required. From the classic 1901 drawing of the cabinet of a bottle collector by the famous artist Charles Dana Gibson and the recently discovered 1917 photograph of William S. Walbridge's bottle room and even the 1945 painting of a bottle collection by Tom Covell, all combine to make us secure in the guess that bottle collecting is over one hundred years old.

Cecil Munsey, Ph.D.
13541 Willow Run Road
Poway, CA 92064-1733
858-487-7036
cecilmunsey@cox.net



[Fig. 6]

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Photograph Credits:

[Figure 1]: Covell, Tom. “He’s added another choice item to his collection!”, 1945.

[Figure 7]: Eisenstaedt, Alfred. “V’J Day at Times Square, New York City, 1945,” LIFE.



[Fig. 7]