

Collector's Spotlight

by Charlie Barnette



When you walk into the office of Ralph Van Brocklin, you are immediately struck by his passion for Western glass and stoneware.

A collector for 35 years, his collecting interests run the spectrum of glass, but the focus has always returned to items from the West, with an emphasis on liquor items.

The private office houses a wonderful collection of the early amber flasks, colored western bitters and his collection of clear pumpkinseed and coffin flasks. His home study includes a nice assortment of Western beers, mini jugs and Western fifths.

"As with many in our hobby, I started out in an area of collecting quite peripheral to bottles - coins. That interest was sparked by the changeover from silver coinage to clad in 1965.

But, as an elementary school student, it was a challenge to pick up nice coins, and when my friend who got me started, introduced me to his bottle-collecting brother, it sounded awfully appealing.

After all, who could resist a hobby where you dug what you collected, and the only cost was 'an occasional new shovel!'

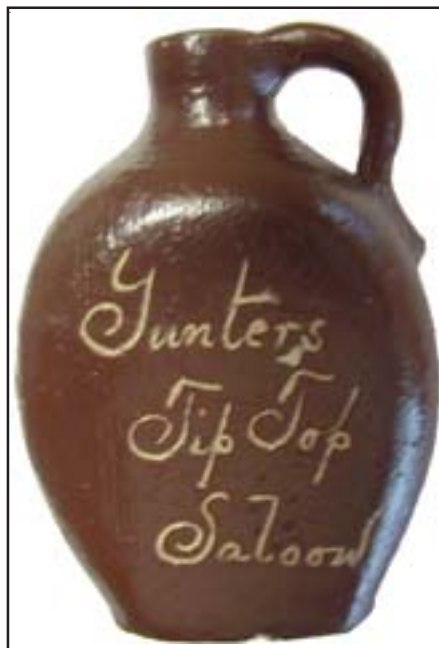
The recommendation has certainly been a wonderful one, but the advice of the cost.... Another matter!"

Ralph started out collecting what he dug and gradually began to focus on Western half-pint beers, also known as "splits". He still has his early collection of beers, a collection that still continues to get additions.

In his private study are approximately 200 different half-pint beers, in colors ranging from green to yellow to red amber. An occasional aqua and clear example is also seen.

Among the choice examples are the early applied top Swan Brewery Co XXX Ale with embossed Swan (reported to be San Francisco's earliest beer) in four different colors, and an aqua W.B. Co (Wilmot Brewing Company) with embossed Sun, also a San Francisco beer.

"I had to purchase the Swans and the Wilmont - these examples came out of a privy Randy Haumann and I missed by a little more than a probe length in a 1981 dig. We dug two dry holes inside of a



condemned building, probed the sides and felt nothing, so we went home.

Overnight, one of the San Francisco diggers, Ed Jost, popped in and hit the hole. We were sick when we saw all of the pieces at the edge of the hole the next morning! A lot of money spent for a missed hole!"

Besides the applied top San Francisco half-pints, Ralph's favorites are the picture beers.

He has examples with embossed eagles from the Eagle Brewing Co S.F. and American Brewing and Raspiller Brewing, each from West Berkeley, plus a number of variants of the Golden Gate Bottling Company, with embossed bear holding a mug.

"Although they are not particularly rare, I really enjoy the Golden Gate beers - the motif is so classically California.

I have examples of two of the three California beers with embossed bears, but I have never been able to add the one I truly desire, the Jacob Denzler with the three drinking bears.

That is a bottle I used to dream of digging when I'd drive up to San Francisco to dig as a youngster!"

Included with the half-pint beers are eight of the early San Francisco quarts, including the "A. Cappelli & Co with embossed standing stag, the A & R Postel with walking bear, the C.D. Postel with embossed wheat sheaves, two variants of the Philadelphia Bottling Co with embossed eagle on nest, and a Nick Zuck with embossed eagle.

There would be more, but he indicates, "I had to sell my initial collection of the early quarts to help finance the purchase of an extensive Western flask collection in 1996."

That comment serves to illustrate the true love of his collecting - the Western flask. His collection is the most comprehensive ever put together, including over 100 of the old ambers, and over 600 clear coffin and pumpkinseed flasks from Western states.

"Even though I started out collecting beers, and have continued to add to that early collection, I always loved the flasks - and particularly, I liked the style of the pumpkinseeds.

I remember, as if it were yesterday, seeing some of the more ardent Central Coast diggers pulling them out of holes when I was still too inexperienced to find my own, and thinking how much I'd like to find some.



Three nice "picture" 1/2-pt or "split" beers

At that time, the notion of buying them was impossible - \$10-25 was a princely sum, and the half-pint beers at \$1-5 were at least feasible."

Ralph still has a number of the pharmacies and other bottles he dug growing up in Salinas, California, on his shelves in his study at home.

"It reminds me of some very happy times, and some unusual circumstances I'd get myself into in the quest for more bottles."

The best bottle that he ever dug was absent from his shelves from 1975 to 1996 however.

"I dug whenever I got the chance throughout high school and college. Starting with dental school in 1977, and then through my period of residency in oral and maxillofacial surgery, digging was pretty much impossible, and with the exception of a year in residency in San Francisco in 1981, I was essentially out of the hobby during those years.

In 1987, I got back into the hobby, after re-subscribing to *Antique Bottles and Glass Collector* and finding in it a listing for a bottle I had always wanted - a puce Greeley's Bitters barrel. An advertisement in the magazine by Bob Barnett, a whiskey dealer from Oregon, got me started in the flasks."

From 1987 through 1996, Ralph collected figural bitters and Western whiskey flasks, with the bitters purchases slowing as the Western whiskeys began to escalate in price.

"When I first started getting Bob Barnett's lists, I'd buy pretty much every pumpkinseed and coffin flask that I did not already have. By starting at that time, I was able to amass a big portion of the collection I have, which is fortunate, considering that bottles I was buying then for \$15-75 are now \$75-1000 plus."

The cabin and barrel bitters were a safe facet of Ralph's collection, until a collector named Chuck *W i l k i e* convinced him that he ought to start collecting

the amber flasks.

"I really was quite content with the clear flasks and my bitters, and had not really even considered trying to collect the amber Western flasks. Then Chuck called me about a J.F. Cutter "Star and Shield" he had, and more-or-less twisted my arm to at least look at it.

I don't know if that was a good thing, or a bad thing. I just know that it started an obsession which I still cannot shake!"

Over the next couple of years, Ralph added amber flasks whenever they became available.

Next was a AAA Old Valley in orange amber (again from Chuck), then a couple of different Lilienthal & Co flasks, an amber The Arlington Bakersfield California pumpkinseed, a large embossed Millers Extra, and a C.P. Moorman.

"I absolutely fell in love with the color shades and the crudity of the glass. Suddenly the bitters were not such a priority."

About 30 flasks into collecting the amber flasks, the "available" bottles were acquired.

Until 1993, his amber flask collecting was limited to trying to upgrade and add colors.

In 1993, the Scott McClain collection, which was purchased by Wendell Clodfeller, was offered, and it added some choice Oregon flasks in both color and clear.

This added fuel to his collecting fire, and he began to inquire of one collector, in particular, about one bottle in particular.

"In 1975, my digging partner and I hit a hole in a locale known for many years only as 'downtown Prunedale' (aka 'none of your business', as Prunedale was a newer and rural locale).

Digging in a 12-inch wide trench bordered on each side by pavement with a newly laid sewer pipe strategically placed over the hole and making access almost impossible, I pulled out a citron-colored example of the top Western flask, and the flask from which my eBay moniker comes, 'The Genuine'.

I have to admit that I thought of the bottle as 'pretty', but really had no idea what I had dug.

My partner, on the other hand, was going nuts!

That bottle sold for \$800 to Mike Homer, the premier flask collector at the time. It allowed me to pay almost two quarters of tuition at UCLA, so I was happy...until I started collecting the Western flasks, that is!"

Ralph began to write periodic letters to Mike about re-acquiring "The Genuine". None were answered, until



Three rare green Western "squares"



Display in one of the office's windows

Chevalier Old Castle Bourbon, a horizontal Wormser and a Wormser Fine Old Cognac.

A total of twenty new flasks came from the collection, as well as a number of flasks in different colors than ones he previously had.

He is particularly fond of the two Hollister California Phoenix flasks (a coffin and an union oval) and the yellow-green Hildebrandt, Posner & Co pumpkinseed that came out of the collection.

Ralph has added to the collection in the meantime with the purchase of the Ben Loader collection and the purchase of the two Visalia ambers from long-time Central Valley collectors Bill and Betty Seals.

The variety of flasks and the color runs of certain of the flasks make a lovely display in the back-lighted cases in his office!

No fewer than a dozen large and small pattern Millers Extra flasks adorn the shelves, ranging from green into yellow, and then up into chocolate amber.

There are eight of the C.P. Moormans, all crude and all shades. Duplicates of several of the major flasks exist, although he insists, "I am not as obsessed as I once was - I've sold a couple of my Jesse Moores, Crown Shoulder Cutters and Old Castle Bourbons. And my duplicate Angeli flask is presently being offered in Pacific Glass Auctions."

Other bottles in the lighted cases and in the shelving of the windows of his office include a nice assortment of Western bitters, including a couple of different colors in the Laquors and the Wormser barrel.

His 'green' squares include a N.B. Jacobs, several Hostetters and a 3-bottle



Panel of choice jugs, bottles and mini-jugs in Ralph's study at his home

about two weeks before the Nashville Expo, when..."I got home from the office, and walked out to the mailbox to discover a letter from Mike Homer.

The text began, 'Today is your lucky day. But I do not want to sell just 'The Genuine' - I want to sell the entire collection.'

When I saw the price, I just about had a heart attack! But, when I sat down with the list, and started figuring conservative value, the price was reasonable, and then it was a matter of how to raise the funds to do the deal.

Luckily the Expo was just after receipt of the offer, and thus, the perfect venue for raising money with the sale of colored bitters and other good glass.

I sold enough to come within \$5000 of the asking price, and the deal was done."

Purchasing Mike's collection added all of the key flasks that had eluded Ralph, including "The Genuine", an Angeli, a Jesse Moore, a Crown-Shoulder Cutter, a

frame of green large and small embossed Renz's with a Lyon's in between.

A run of Reynold's Celebrated Herb Beer, an applied-top beer bottle from Salt Lake City, graces one of the top shelves in his lighted display.

The cylindrical fifths at his home, and in his office, "actually belong to my son, but he does not have space in his room for them. So, I get to enjoy them!"

Add to all of this around 300 Western and Tennessee shotglasses, an occasional Tennessee or Southern 'Saloon' flask (including the Big Springs Saloon strap-sided flask from his home in Johnson City, Tennessee), a few large-size Western jugs and over 300 miniature advertising jugs...and you get the picture!

A lovely and quite comprehensive collection.

