

# The Incurable Cure Collector

by Bill Baab  
Photos by Bill Baab

Pity poor J. Carl Sturm. He is suffering from an incurable disease self-inflicted some 45 years ago. While probably not fatal, unless he works himself into a high dudgeon over something unattainable, he has to face the reality of it being with him the rest of his days.

It's ironic that he collects antique bottles whose embossing and labels promise the takers of their contents cures of everything imaginable, from alcohol to tobacco and worse.

Each morning he arises from his bed and walks into his Central Florida living room, back-lighted shelves loaded with bottles in aqua, amber, cobalt, clear and shades of colors in between come into his view. All serve to remind him of the affliction that started in 1959 when he was serving in the U.S. Navy and stationed in Hawaii.

"My wife, Joy, and I decided to go for early American furniture and wanted to acquire a few bottles to match the decor," Sturm said during an interview.

"I didn't realize it then, but collecting antique bottles is a disease that grows and grows."

He began his collection by purchasing medicine bottles with the word "Dr." on them and then Bill Agee published his book, *Collecting the Cures*.

"So I switched to cures and later saw a cures wanted ad from John Wolf, who was in the Army. We corresponded."

"We had an amicable competition going before eBay," said Wolf, who owns 1,850 cures from all over the world. "Carl had an earlier online connection, so he started before I did."

Sturm was limited to collecting only cures while his wife was alive, so "anything else I bought had to be for resale. She died in 1992, giving me free rein, and I started collecting half-pint flasks. In ten years, I have amassed 563 different flasks, including 300-plus half-pints, the majority of them the historical variety. But I'm still missing quite a few of those listed in (George and Helen) McKearin's *American Glass* book."

Sturm collected black glass bottles for awhile and some outstanding 18th century examples adorn a dining room table in his

home.

A fascination for the Spanish-American War led to him collecting artifacts including half-pint flasks embossed with the likenesses of the Battleship Maine and Adm. George Dewey.

"I also collect go-withs, including trade cards, almanacs, letterheads, shot glasses with the word cure embossed or etched on them, cure tokens and glass house paper. I began collecting tobacco tags and tobacco-related items a couple of years ago."

Sturm estimates his collection now totals more than 1,600 bottles.

His favorite cure?

"That's like asking which of your kids is your favorite," commented Joan Goree, his longtime duplicate bridge partner.

Nonetheless, Sturm leans toward a cobalt Mexico (Mo.) Institute bottle claiming to cure whiskey, morphine and tobacco habits.

"It's the only known example listing three habits and it's probably my favorite. I bought it at a St. Louis bottle show and paid \$60. I'd tried to buy it the night before because I was afraid someone else would see it, but the dealer wouldn't sell until the next day. I was lucky."

Another is the amber Joseph Michener & Sons Occidental Diphtheria Cure from Philadelphia, Pa. "Another exists, but not in a cure bottle collection," he said.

Other favorites include an aqua open-pontiled James A. Newton's Cure for Croup, a 6-1/2-inch Radam's Microbe Cure and a wordy bottle embossed Dr. W.W. Clark, M.D., Oil of Arnica, Cures Catarrh, Chilblains, Frosted Parts, Corns, Bunions, Sore Throat, Sprain, Bruises, Pain, Rheumatism, Etc. Sturm admits being intrigued by the "Frosted Parts" claim.

The Newton's Cure came from the 25-foot level of a Memphis, Tenn., well dug by Gene Bradberry and Ed Provine. "I bought it from Gene in 1973 for \$20."

The 75-year-old Sturm, a Peoria, Ill., native, joined the Navy as a seaman recruit and emerged as a lieutenant commander 28 years later. He served during World War II, Korea and Vietnam and retired in Memphis.

He and his wife visited friends in Florida 30 years ago. "I went out to play golf and when I returned, she said, 'I've found the house we're going to buy!'"

He and Joan have been partners in duplicate bridge for about ten years and each is a bronze life master. They try to make bottle shows that fall on weekends of week-long bridge tournaments.

His sons, Tim (who resides in Orlando) and David (living in the Chicago area) also have been bitten by the bottle bug.

"I've lucked into a lot of things all these years, like seeing an item for sale at \$1,500, turning it down and then finding one for \$600," Sturm said.

"I think the bottle gods are looking after me."



Florida man's eclectic collection includes many items relating to the Spanish-American War.



**PHOTOS: Above Left:** The Winans Bros. Indian Cure is one of the most bizarre in Carl Sturm's super collection. **Above Right:** Just a glimpse of part of Sturm's fabulous cure bottle collection; all have embossings painted for an easier read.. **Above:** Half-pint flasks (L-R): GII-43, Kensington Glass Works, Philadelphia, embossed E. LURIBUS UNUM, ONE OF MANY. GI-81, Stebbins & Chamberlain, Coventry Glass Works, Conn., embossed DEWITT CLINTON, C-T. GXIII-30, Lockport (N.Y.) Glass Works, embossed WILL YOU TAKE A DRINK -- WILL A DUCK SWIM (embossed duck). GXIII-76A, unknown glass works. This half-pint is unlisted. GXIII-76 is a pint. GX-12, unknown glass works, thought to be Danish, 19th Century. GXIV-7, unknown glass works, probably Lockport or Lancaster, N.Y., embossed TRAVELER'S COMPANION. **Below Left:** These three rows of 42 half-pint flasks represent only a fraction of Sturm's vast collection. **Below Right:** Cure bottle crates share shelf space with more flasks, Spanish-American War items and reference books.

