

Antique Bottle Mania

Sandy Friedman
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Visit with Steve Charing at his home in Clarksville in Howard County, and you'll get a history lesson with a twist. Actually, it's a twist of a soda bottle top or a whiskey bottle top or a milk bottle, or a medicine bottle or even a barber bottle top.

You see, Mr. Charing is an avid collector of antique bottles of all shapes, sizes and colors. His home is filled with hundreds of interesting bottles that he and his roommate have collected.

"Over the years, I became appreciative of bottle collecting, not because of its beauty and interest but because it is a connection to history," he said. "These antique bottles from the 19th century, for the most part, were the vessels and containers that people used as a way of life all over the Earth."

During his education in antique bottle collecting, Mr. Charing developed an interest in barber bottles. He said he remembers them from the barbershops of his childhood in Brooklyn, N.Y., even though those bottles from the 1950s were not antiques.

Currently, Mr. Charing has a collection of about two dozen antique barber bottles from the late 19th

century and early 20th century. They are all in very good condition because they were not found in the ground like other kinds of bottles. These highly colorful and decorative bottles were used for hair tonics and lotions in barber shops.

"I got involved with barber bottles because I grew to see how beautiful they are," he said. "The color arrangements are fantastic, and they are not all that expensive."



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He said well-heeled men would have their own personal ornamental bottle at the barber shop with their name on it as a status symbol, to show how seriously they took their hair treatments.

Mr. Charing is also developing a collection of vintage bottles from Howard County. He estimates he has about a dozen milk bottles and soda bottles from Ellicott City, Elkridge and West Friendship.

A tour of his home reveals a virtual museum of bottle collecting. There are vivid blue poison bottles of all shapes, sizes and textures; medicine bottles, some still bearing snake-oil labels, others for rheumatism, or insect bites. There are soda bottles, pickle bottles, ketchup bottles, fruit jars, brandy and whiskey bottles

and jugs, and a run of all the different colors of so-called fire grenades.

In the 1840s and 1850s, Mr. Charing explained, people used to fill up fire grenades with water or chemicals and throw them at a fire since they didn't have hoses or water pressure. Fire grenades are very valuable and rare, since the bottles were made to be destroyed.

Building a collection is something Mr. Charing says takes a lot of research, education, patience and sometimes luck. Of course, you can always do it the old-fashioned way at an archaeological dig sifting through the dirt for old discarded bottles.

But if you prefer to stay clean, you can attend the hundreds of bottle shows across the country, or click on your computer mouse to find antique bottles on online auction houses like eBay. They are also occasionally found at flea markets and antique shops, but Mr. Charing warns that antique stores often don't know the true value of antique bottles.

Sometimes, antique bottles are passed down through the generations, with people not even realizing how valuable a bottle is. Mr. Charing tells the story of a man who brought a whiskey flask to a collectors show in Baltimore to find out whether it was worth keeping. To his astonishment, the appraisers valued it at \$12,000.

Mr. Charing is not alone in his interest in antique bottle collecting. He says he believes it is the third most popular hobby in the United States, behind stamp and coin collecting. In the bottle-collecting community, Baltimore is recognized as a mecca for wheeling and dealing.

In the 19th century, Baltimore was known as a strong bottle-making center. In the heyday of glass making, from 1860-1890, it was the third largest industry in Baltimore, with the Baltimore Glassworks located in Federal Hill. With all of that manufacturing, it was natural that collecting bottles became popular in the area.

The Baltimore Antique Bottle Club was established in 1970 and has been going strong since, with a current membership of 160 people. The organization is proud to host the largest one-day bottle show in the world, with more than 300 dealer tables filled with bottles, jars, jugs and other antiques.

Last year, more than 1,300 people from all over the country visited the show, with hundreds lining up

before the doors opened. "When you have quality dealers that come from all over the United States and three foreign countries, you're going to attract a crowd," Mr. Charing said. "It's the only show I know of that has a waiting list of dealers to get in!" The next show will be held Sunday, March 5, at the Essex campus of the Community College of Baltimore County from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Besides providing a place for dealers to buy and sell antique bottles, the show offers the non-profit Baltimore Antique Bottle Club a way to fulfill its mission of supporting the hobby while educating the public. The club provided Mr. Charing's introduction to bottle collecting, something he came to reluctantly.

In 1997, Mr. Charing decided to accompany a friend who was very interested in bottle collecting to a meeting of the club. After attending several meetings, he decided to help out by selling raffle tickets.

"I made nice friends at the meetings, but I said I'm not a bottle collector and I really didn't have any interest," he recalled. "It just didn't strike me at the time."

In 1999, when he retired from the Social Security Administration, circumstances came together to force Mr. Charing to make a life-changing decision. The club was desperately searching for a new president, and no one was stepping forward. After much cajoling, pleading and convincing, Mr. Charing agreed to be president, although he warned the club that he had no knowledge of antique bottles or bottle collecting.

That year, Mr. Charing took it upon himself to learn about antique bottle collecting. He pored through all kinds of books to get a basic understanding of bottles, but still maintains that he's no expert.

After hesitating to take the presidency of the club, Mr. Charing ended up staying on in the position for five years. He has learned enough to know the different categories of bottles, how to tell their age, whether they are real or reproductions and how lucrative the collections can be.

"If I had invested in bottles," he said, "what I had done with the stock market over the past six years, I would have done a whole lot better!"

For information on the Baltimore Antique Bottle Club, visit the group's Web site at www.baltimorebottleclub.org.