



Barber Bottles: Beauties in Glass

by Steve Charing



Barber bottles distinguish themselves from other bottle groups for several reasons. For one thing, whereas most other bottles were created with the manufacturer or a company in mind, barber bottles were sometimes made for the customer. Indeed, many were personalized with customers' names on them—something you would not see in other types of bottles. Another distinction is the wide array of colors and decorations that barber bottles are known for. Also, because of their decorative nature, it is unlikely to find barber bottles in privies or other traditional dig sites; these were generally not discarded and often passed down from one generation to another.

Barber bottles were produced from the 1870s through the 1920s. After the Food and Drug Act of 1906 made it illegal to refill non-labeled bottles, these bottles declined in production. Another reason for the decline was the invention of the safety razor in 1903. With the disposable razor, men didn't require daily or weekly visits to the

customers, particularly the more successful ones, who would regularly patronize barbershops—a common center for finding out the latest in town gossip, reading the local papers and engaging in colorful conversation while waiting for their shaves.

The bottle was finished with a pewter or porcelain top spout. These bottles can be found in all colors, with paint decoration and/or varying bottle shapes. Some are label under glass

and hobnailed types—both plain and opalescent—as well as

milkglass, Bohemian

glass, Spatter and Tiffany type cut glass. But the

standard shape is a wider base narrowing to the top

(sometimes with a slight lady's leg shape). More

generic brands were labeled: Witch Hazel,

Bay Rum, Hair

Tonic, Shampoo etc. The earlier bottles are pontiled and are very light in weight. Nearly all older bottles were blown with raw or ground pontils.

The most common mass production barber bottles with no paint can be found for \$20-30, common painted earlier examples can be found for \$60-100, more desirable pieces such as label under glass and personalized customer name bottles are harder to find commanding \$200-\$500, with some extremely rare bottles asking upwards of \$1000. Unfortunately, there are many reproductions in circulation. But don't let that deter you if you want these beauties in glass.



At right, part of Rob and Cath Goodacre's barber collection as shown on *Antique Bottle Collector's Haven* www.antiquebottles.com

barbershop. Demand for these bottles, therefore, had already begun to fall off. Nonetheless, barbershop owners kept their shops decorated with these fine looking bottles.

However, before the turn of the century, barbers mixed their own tonics and would then order the containers from glass factories. They would fill them with hair tonic, hair oil, bay rum, shampoo and rosewater. The bottles came in distinctive colors and shapes so that the contents of each one could be identified. As mentioned previously, some were personalized with the customers' names. They were intended for those