History Told In Bottles

September 27, 1968

A phase of history not found in books is read in bottles left along the banks of Bayou Teche, high in the attics and buried near old homesites. This history goes back even further than the hundred years being celebrated as the first Centennial of Iberia Parish. Bottles were either free-blown or were blown into a mold by artisans until 1900. Consequently bottles were expensive and scarce and used and reused as containers for beer, wine and food. In many parts of the country, a customer had to bring his own bottle to the drugstore to be refilled with medicine.

George II of England taxed alcoholic beverages. Liquor purveyors then added herbs and flavors to their wares and the bottles were relabeled “Bitters.” This enabled distillers and bottlers to escape the unpopular tax. “Bitters” gradually became known as a medicine and hundreds of different brands were marketed. Users became fond of a particular brand and possibly this was the beginning of “label loyalty.”

Patent medicines offered miraculous cures for every known malady from “Consumption” to “Cholera.” Several even cured “Mal Nutrition” and “Costiveness.” The principal ingredient of most of these medicines was alcohol — up to 50 per cent. Some were for “Man or Beast” and some could be used internally or externally. One popular medicine could be used internally or externally by either man or animal. It also cured toothache.

William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody, endorsed Kickapoo Indian Sagwa after he had become famous as an Indian Scout, actor and originator of the Wild West Shows. He later promoted a coffee substitute and with a partner, Dr. David Franklin (White Beaver) Powell, he manufactured Yosemite Yarrow, Cough Cream and Wonder Worker.

Lydia Pinkham was the grandmother of modern advertising as the promoter of her vegetable compound which was a “cure” for “all FEMALE WEAKNESS.” An estimated $50,000,000 has been spent in publishing her picture so most country newspapers and print shops were well supplied with advertising cuts of Lydia. Her face was substituted as President Cleveland’s bride, Sarah Bernhardt, Queen Victoria and Dr. Mary Walker, the lady who wore trousers.

Many bottles that once contained bitters and patent medicines are on display at “Justine” on the Loreauville Road (Hwy. 86), near New Iberia. Special emphasis is placed on the collections of locally bottled soft drinks and pepper sauces, as well as medicines from old drug stores of the area.

Mrs. Yeutter feels that she has a representative collection of bottles from 1754 to the present however, most are from 1800 to 1960. These range in size from one inch through demijohns to ten-gallon carboys and from clear glass through “black” (dark green or brown).

To mark the opening of the Fall Bottle Show in the barn, a Centennial Bazaar is being held at Justine to give collectors from a five-state area the opportunity to sell, trade and to buy bottles on October 26-27. This is a “Flea Market” devoted exclusively to bottles.