Hooked On Bottles

Nineteen-year-old Gary Daniel hasn’t a lick of interest in construction jobs. In fact, he isn’t even the sidewalk superintendent type. But no one is more pleased than he to see huge steel jaws tearing holes in downtown New Orleans for a new structure. Gary collects old bottles. He’s found these relics of the past in various parts of the city, but admits, “My collection’s best prizes have come from downtown excavation sites!”

Blown glass or crockery bottles were among early America’s most expendable commodities and were given no more lofty a place than the garbage heap. Thus, today’s collector of old bottles, aware that today’s high rise apartment site might be yesterday’s trash dump, is always poised to dig.

Daniel, a sophomore and business administration major at LSU, estimates he’s spent at least 1,500 hours in the last six years digging for his more than 900 bottles. He says, “New Orleans is a choice place for bottle collectors. Often you have to dig deep to find ‘em, but the bottles are older because our city’s older than most.

“People who go rummaging through the Old West’s ghost towns, for example, may find more bottles, but they’re not as old or valuable as ones a collector’s likely to find in this city—simply because those towns were settled much later.”

Daniel, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Guy S. Daniel, explains that the word “valuable” is actually a thrown-around term with bottle collectors. Antique shops are now putting price tags on the glass throwaways of yesteryear. Prices are usually determined by age (the older, the more valuable) but the actual value of a particular bottle is dependent on the collector’s whim.

“I’m mainly interested in bottles with embossed (raised lettering) New Orleans addresses on them and dating before the Civil War,” says Daniel. “My favorite—and to me, my most valuable—bottle is one my dad found in the back of the Municipal Auditorium. It has ‘S. Pablo’ and ‘No. 70 Elyssian Fields’ on it.

“I learned that Pablo bottled mineral water and soft drinks. He started his business in 1849 on Elyssian Fields, and in 1855 he moved to 334 and 336 Royal. In 1856, the city came along and changed those addresses to 270 and 272 Royal. Also, during the ’60s, the Pablo business changed its name to the C.C.S. &M. Company (Crescent City Seltzer

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Daniel uses magnifying glass to examine a perfume bottle he uncovered. Because of type of construction, he feels it was made around 1800.

Crockery bottle, probably English made, was found in the Bayou St. John area.

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and Mineral Water Manufacturing Company) using the 270 and 272 addresses on its bottled products for another few years until the city changed addresses once again!

“It’s not unusual to find bottles with addresses that no longer exist,” says Daniel, owning that he enjoys looking up information about his finds in the old New Orleans city directories.

“My most unusual bottle, though,” adds Daniel, “is not one of my oldest. It’s a Buckley & Woodlief light blue, heavy glass bottle which I estimate was manufactured before 1905. I arrived at that date by working with directories. The bottle’s unusual because it has a telephone number (339) embossed on it—it’s the only one we’ve ever found with a phone number on it.”

Most bottle collectors’ likes and dislikes show in their collections. After a person amasses bottles for several years, he can begin to favor one or another grouping of bottles—ones with embossed lettering, for example. Until the turn of the century when paper labels began taking over the same functions, companies would order their bottles embossed with the firm name, address and with persuasive slogans for their particular product.

Some collectors limit their collections by color. Actually, the color of a bottle was insignificant until the 1880s when food manufacturers began to use clear glass. During and before the 1880s, in fact, people believed the darker the glass, the better its quality. The “black

Dinah and Curt Daniel examine portion of their brother’s bottle collection. Some of Gary’s interest in bottles has rubbed off on them. The family’s home on Rapides Drive is virtually overflowing with bottles found by Gary.
These small ink bottles are among Gary Daniel's collection of approximately 900 bottles. The rarest of these, upper right, was probably made in late 1700s.

glass” of this era (actually, any shade from a dark olive green to olive amber) was produced by adding iron slag during manufacturing process. Other metallic oxides were added to produce blue, green, purple, etc.

Mrs. Guy Daniel, who allows her son’s bottle collection to invade their home at 1345 Rapids, Gentilly, admits she favors the beautiful colors.

“When the sun shines through those bottles sitting on the window ledges in the den,” she says, “it’s as though the windows were stained glass. The reflections are beautiful.” Mrs. Daniel also uses an occasional colorful old bottle to perk up some dried wild flowers for an attractive table decoration.

No matter what his preference, the bottle collector is certain to learn much Americana. For instance, he’ll find at least one “bitters” bottle, remnant of the bitters industry which flourished in the mid-19th Century. Bitters, a popular drugstore beverage with a high alcoholic content, was drunk by even the most genteel ladies of the day—as a miraculous cure-all! The historic Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 put a damper on the bitters industry by forbidding the manufacture, sale or transportation of adulterated or fraudulently labeled foods and drugs sold in interstate commerce.

The shape of a bottle usually tells the collector a bottle's previous contents. Distinctively shaped beverage bottles exclude those which held bitters, mineral water, soda pop, whiskey, wine, liquor and beer. Bottles with other characteristics held olive oil, pickles and mustard—as well as ink, medicine and hair oil.

Some collectors type their bottles by their original contents. Daniel classifies his another way. He says, “I have four main types of bottles in my collection: free-blown, three-piece, black glass and crockery.”

Free-blown bottles were common till around 1860. Such a bottle can be detected by the presence of a pontil mark, a crudely applied lip or by its shape. A pontil mark is a shallow depression or scar at the base of a bottle. It reveals where the vessel was freed from the blowpipe. Sometimes, the glass blower tried to erase these jagged pontil edges by rubbing the bottle’s base with graphite.

“It’s unusual to find a bottle with graphite still on its base,” says Daniel, “but not impossible, because my Pablo bottle is one!”

No two free-blown bottles are precisely alike, and glassblowers often produced bottles that were lipped and had uneven walls and crudely applied lips, because the lip was applied after the body of the bottle was shaped.

Three-piece bottles are those fashioned by placing molten glass in wood, clay or metal molds hinged in three sections. The molds were hinged in sections to facilitate impressing decorative designs on a bottle. With the use of a mold, the glass blower no longer had to shape a bottle by blowing and twirling it in the air, but merely took a few puffs and then lowered the glass lump into a hollow mold. The craftsman connected blowing air into the tube until the glass was forced against the mold’s sides, thus acquiring the desired shape and design.

Those bottles cast in carved wood molds usually have telltale whittle marks. The hot glass took on the mold’s knife-carved impressions, so that even today, the whittle marks remain visible on the bottle’s surface.

Black glass bottles, common to 1890, were both free-blown and three-piece. Crockery containers (still in popular use today for sparkling champagne products) were plentiful during the 19th Century when they held mainly ginger beer or ink.

A basic knowledge of these bottle categories will be of great help to the novice collector. He should also be aware of etching or opalescence on a bottle as a definite sign of age.

“Most of the bottles I’ve resurrected from Bayou St. John are opalescent,” explains Daniel. “They have a sort of mother-of-pearl luster or film over the glass that’s caused by chemicals and water acting on the old, imperfect glass. Bottles found in the earth are more likely to have etching on them. Their surface looks cracked from water and alkaline substances working on the glass for decades.”

As a final word of advice to would-be bottle collectors, Daniel says, “It’s hard work. You can go weeks and months without finding one good bottle. My father and I usually go out hunting them together, and we’ve calculated it takes about 10 hours digging to find one bottle. That’s really 20 hours for us both!

“In six years, I’ve found about 300 bottles in top condition. Jack Harris, a friend of my dad’s who got interested in old bottles by looking at our collection, began hunting in January. Although he’s only got about 200 bottles, his top 25 equal my top 25 in age and variety. So you see, even with perseverance, it’s all a matter of luck!”

### Bottle Collecting Tips

The best place to search for old bottles is in your own city. You know it best. Fellow construction and sewerage workers. Look for broken pieces of colored glass in the dirt being tossed up. Use small tools, like a screwdriver, when digging to avoid damaging bottles.

### To Estimate Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Free-blown bottles</th>
<th>Before 1860</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pontil scars</td>
<td>Before 1860</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black glass</td>
<td>Before 1860</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wooden mold</td>
<td>1880-69</td>
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Bourbon bottles are passion of this collector

Bob Sonnier, who has been an Abbeville pharmacist for the past 15 years, has a passion for bourbon bottles. He admits that, but quickly points out that his prime interest is in the containers, not their content.

"They're all full, and sealed," assures Sonnier, as he gestures toward the bottles which line high shelves running the length of his pharmacy. Sonnier began to collect the limited edition containers made by various distilleries about seven years ago.

The "bottles" include ornate and detailed replicas of everything from a fire engine to the late singer, Elvis Presley.

So why collect so many bourbon bottles? Because they're attractive, says Sonnier, and this combined with the limited number available makes the containers prime objectives for collectors. The value of some of the pharmacist's acquisitions is also staggering, particularly when compared to the original purchase price.

But Sonnier says he's not particularly interested in making any money out of his hobby. "I'll probably pass them along in the family," he says, adding, "I hope they don't sell them."