

## An Affordable “Go-With” Collection

by J .Marie Stevenson

It's not unusual to visit the home of stein collectors to find that's not all they collect. We just can't help ourselves from finding other objects of interest as we search through those antique malls, shows, and auction previews, can we? Such is the case of Frank and Anna Francese. Their home is chock-a-block full of steins amassed over some forty years but one can't help but notice their significant display of liquor decanters and wine bottles, mostly figural in design. About the same time they started to collect steins, Frank and Anna found themselves attracted to decanters representing antique cars. They also picked up a charming leprechaun electrician wielding a light bulb! Thus another collection was started on a whim with little thought to researching this hobby as they have with their stein collecting. That is, until now.

Frank and Anna invited me to their home, plied me with Italian cuisine, and convinced me to contribute an article on their “go-with” collection. As I stared at the packed shelves, I realized that this would be a formidable task! The decanters and bottles were displayed in haphazard fashion in no particular order but I quickly saw that many could be categorized by subject as well as distillery. In fact, this extensive collection represents the arts, history, folklore, geography, sports, technology, animal life, humor, commemoratives, and more! The variety is astounding (figure 1).

Clearly some research was needed and I located helpful reference books on the subject. H. F. Montague in his book *Modern Bottle Identification and Price Guide* esti-



figure 1

mates that since the early 1950's more than 7000 different bottles have been produced representing over 400 brands. Cardona and Parfitt in their book *Figural Whiskey Bottles* state that during the mid-70's over 20 companies were producing figural decanters. Many connect figural bottles with the James B. Beam Distilling Company, and indeed, Jim Beam whiskey decanters are a prime collectible in this field. Molly Higgins in her book *Jim Beam Figural Bottles* recommends the International Association of Jim Beam Bottle and Specialties Clubs which appears to be quite similar to SCI with annual conventions and local club gatherings.\* However, there are many other brands producing collectible bottles including Lionstone, McCormick, Wild Turkey, Ezra Brooks, and Hoffman to name just a few. American whiskey producing companies are highly represented but many decanters come from foreign countries promoting wine and liqueurs and their own whiskey products.

The history of the Jim Beam collectible bottle is helpful in tracing the growth and development of this hobby. According to Higgins, The James Beam Distilling Company decided to promote its whiskey by offering it in a glass cocktail shaker for Christmas 1953. The venture was a success, so in 1955 they approached the Regal China Company outside of Chicago to design and produce other decanters. David Nissen designed the first example which was in the form of a white china ash-tray. The Regal China bottles were clearly marked on the bottom with C.Miller, representing Catherine Miller, considered an artistic visionary for Regal. This was incorporated into the stamp as a symbol of quality. The association between the distillery and the china company lasted almost 40 years until 1992. In 1993, the International Association of Jim Beam and Specialty Clubs asked Wade Ceramics Ltd. of Stoke on Trent, England to produce its 1993 convention bottle. Wade continued to produce subsequent convention bottles. Perhaps SCI should note that according to Higgins “In 1996 the International Wade Collectors Club and the IAJBB&SC pooled their efforts and made membership available to one another. For the last few years the conventions have coincided....”

In examining the Francese decanters *not* produced by Jim Beam, I found very few with markings identifying the maker of the container itself. One notable exception is the Hamm's Beer Bartender which is marked Ceramarte Brazil (figure 2) as with some of the Budweiser mugs. The Ezra Brooks 1976 political campaign elephant and donkey are marked Heritage China (figure 3). It would appear that the same ceramic manufacturer might produce for more



figure 2



figure 3



figure 4

than one liquor company. For example the Connecticut Governor's Foot Guard by Grenadier had a similar mold and identical base to the George Washington figural but came from different distilleries (figure 4). In one instance a bottle produced for Lionstone is marked Made in Japan. In general the books I researched categorized bottles by the company who produced the contents and did not identify the ceramic companies.

Frank and Anna demonstrate that bottle lovers can move in many directions in amassing a collection. One could elect to be a "Beamer" focusing on all types of Jim Beam decanters or just those from the yearly conventions. Another choice would be to develop an eclectic display representing many brands. Other options might include collecting a specific category such as vehicles, telephones, animals, American history, international figures, and the like. Note that different companies produce similar categories. For example, Jim Beam produced the 1931 Model A Emergency Ambulance in 1985 (figure 5), and Aesthetic Specialties, Inc. produced the Model T Telephone Truck in 1980 (figure 6). Lionstone produced the Cavalry Scout and the Cowboy in 1969 (figure 7), while McCormick sold Daniel Boone, Calamity Jane,

figure 5



figure 6



figure 7



figure 8



Bat Masterson, and Wild Bill Hickock in the mid 1970's (figure 8).

There are many series available and Hoffman's Mr. Lucky would be a prime example. There are 130 decanters in the series (figure 9). The Jim Beam telephone series would be another (figure 10).

figure 9



figure 10



Price is always a factor in amassing a collection and these decanters are remarkably affordable, usually well below one hundred dollars. Most of the bottles are 750ml., once referred to as "fifths," and range in price from \$25 to \$75. Some are produced as "minis" and are half the price. Cardona and Parfitt state that gallon-sized figurals are a rare find so one could assume they would be of higher value. Rarity, as with steins, also affects cost. For example, the Jim Beam Holiday Nutcrackers of 1989 and 1991 in color are valued at \$50. If, however, they are in brown or gold and signed by Barry Berrish the price would double (figure 11). The Jim Beam 1930 Model A Fire Truck has a book price of \$225 or more (figure 12).

figure 11



As with steins, condition is an important factor in determining value. Contrary to popular opinion, broken seals or missing tax stamps do not affect the price of a decanter because it is expected that the contents will have been removed. Leaving liquids in a collectible bottle causes crazing and eventually cracking to say nothing of the potential flammability of the alcohol and the stress of excessive weight on display shelving. (I noticed that Frank and Anna had a number of unopened bottles and suggested that our local chapter schedule a party! However we learned that the corks can also dry out over time, letting in air and leaving the contents undrinkable.) If purchasing a collectible bottle from a liquor store it is advisable to decant it before display. Obviously decanters purchased at flea markets, auctions, estate sales, or through the mail must be empty as it is illegal to sell alcohol in these venues.

The question now arises if stein collectors would be interested in expanding their horizons to include the purchase of a figural decanter. I, myself, have become intrigued with the notion. If you like regimentals, you can certainly find bottles with a military theme. How about sports? Characters? Nature? Souvenirs? The possibilities are endless and the price is right! Happy hunting! And if you happen to be in Rhode Island perhaps you can visit Frank and Anna and volunteer to empty a decanter or two but make sure the cork is still on tight!

REFERENCES:

Cardona, Melissa and Parfitt, Ginny, *Figural Whiskey Bottles By Hoffman, Potters, McCormick, Ski country and More*. Atglen, Pa.:Schiffer Publishing, Ltd, 2005

Higgins, Molly, *Jim Beam Figural Bottles: An Unauthorized Collector's Guide*, Atglen Pa.:Schiffer Publishing, Ltd. 2000

Montague, H.F., *Montague's Modern Bottle and Identification and Price Guide*, Overland Park, Ks: Montague Enterprises, 1984

\*International Association of Jim Beam Bottle and Speciality Clubs, 2015 Burlington Ave., Kewanee, Ill. 61443

figure 12

