

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

October 2012

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Meeting – October 30th at 8 PM

St. Mark's Orthodox Church, 7124 River Road, Bethesda, MD 20817.

Please Bring your summer finds for show & tell.



Here are some views of our September picnic. Thank you to all who attended.

Meetings: 8:00 PM on the last Tuesday of each month January-June, October-November; picnic in September.

President: Andy Goldfrank

Vice President: Al Miller

Secretary: Jim Sears

Treasurer: Lee Shipman

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Charlie Baldwin and the Torpedoes

By Jack Sullivan
[Special to the Potomac Pontil]

From the title, one might be deceived into thinking this article is about a rock band. It is not. It is about a man named Charlie Baldwin who has collected some 700 torpedo bottles from all over the world, including a striking pair from the District of Columbia.

Torpedo bottles have always held a special fascination for me because of their unusual, seemingly impractical, shape. Their



Fig. 1: Johann Jacob Schweppe

Schweppe, a Swiss watchmaker and amateur scientist, moved to London in 1792 to develop his business, but it failed. In 1831 the English king tasted the fizz water, liked it and gave it his official blessing. Carbonated mineral waters became very popular and soon other enterprising Brits were adding bubbles to ginger beer and other flavored drinks. They faced a big problem in trying to keep the gas in the bottle. Corks were the primary method of closure and as they dried and shrank, the carbon dioxide in the bottle was released. The beverage went flat. Solution: keep the bottle on its side and the liquid against the cork, constantly saturating it and preventing shrinkage. Viola! The torpedo was born.

Enter Charlie Baldwin of Middletown, Connecticut. To put it in his own words: "Over twenty years ago my wife Stacy and I found a strange shaped bottle at an antique store in Glastonbury, Connecticut. It was aqua, dirty and nasty and overpriced. But it came home with us. I showed it to my cousin. He said it was only the second one he had ever seen. Something snapped and, as they say, the rest is history." Shown here is a "taste" of what he has collected since that time (Fig. 2).

round bottoms make it impossible for them to be set upright unless put in a medal or wooden stand. At the time of their origin, however, they were eminently practical. By the middle of the 19th Century methods of closing bottles had yet to be perfected, but Johan Joseph Schweppe (Fig. 1) had developed the first practical process for manufacturing carbonated mineral water, based on a process discovered in 1770 by British scientist Joseph Priestley.



Fig. 2: Baldwin's Cabinet

I first met Charlie at a Baltimore Bottle Show several years ago. He was in the company of Roger Hardesty, an Ohio bottle collector who himself had amassed a sizable number of torpedoes over the past two decades, a collection he ultimately sold to Charlie. At dinner with the pair and their wives last March, I learned about Charlie's mind-blowing assemblage of bottles and asked if he would share photos of his District of Columbia torpedoes with the readers of the Potomac Pontil. He agreed and sent front and back photos (Fig. 3, 4).



Fig. 3: Charlie's DC Torpedoes-top



Fig. 4: Charlie's DC Torpedoes-bottom

Our Potomac club bottle book lists both torpedoes. The McKeon is found in the dark green and at nine inches. His McKeon and McGrann torpedo, here in cobalt blue, is known in that color and in a dark green. The size can be 8, 9, or 9.5 inches long. Through the courtesy of Mike Ciancosi, shown here are similar bottles for comparison purposes in both blue and green, from Mike's collection (Fig. 5,6).



Fig. 5: McKeon Torpedo #1



Fig. 6: McKeon Torpedo #2

From Mike's website notes it appears that McKeon & McGrann may have been in the mineral water business together and perhaps separately during the 1850s. A John McKeon was listed under "mineral water," in 1853, located at Southside B North between 2nd and 3rd West. McGrann was listed as a saloon owner, but at a similar or nearby address. Both of them were Irishmen; McGrann likely was born there

Since we were on the subject, Mike also was willing to let me show for the purposes of this article, two other DC torpedoes in his collection. The first is from Henke & Maack (Fig. 7). The Potomac Bottle book says that this item may be found in the dark emerald green shown here and also in a cobalt blue. Its length can differ from 9 to 9.5 inches. Mike's research indicates that the firm was in business in the District during at least the early 1850s. He found a reference in the National Intelligencer newspaper to Henke & Maack. They are listed among companies that took out a license for a wagon under the laws of "Wash Corp" sometime during the summer months of 1850.



Fig. 7: Henke Torpedo

The final torpedo from Mike's collection was issued by J. Rother (Fig. 8). It is a spectacular amber color and in pristine condition. Information on Rother appears scanty. My Internet trolling, however, uncovered a second Rother torpedo (Fig. 9).

This one appeared anything but pristine. Cleaned up, it sold at auction for \$7,000 in December of 2010. As a result, it would appear that prices for torpedoes quoted in the current "Antique Bottles from the Washington, D.C. Area" may need updating.



Fig 8: Rother Torpedo #1



Fig 9: Rother Torpedo #2

Just as impressive as Charlie Baldwin's DC torpedoes was learning his collection includes 13 torpedoes from Baltimore. He says his Baltimore torps, "all in beautiful colors," are his favorites. Some of our region's collectors may want to talk to Charlie next year at the Baltimore show. He expects to be there with his lovely wife, Stacy (Fig. 10) and he is generous with his time when the talk is about torpedoes. And just perhaps, if he likes this article, he may be willing to send me images of that Baltimore bounty for future Pontil viewing.



Fig.10: Charlie & Stacy Baldwin

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

04 November 2012 (Sunday) Elkton, Maryland - The Tri-State Bottle Collectors and Diggers Club 40th Annual Show & Sale (9:00 am – 2:00 pm) at the Singerly Fire Hall, Routes 279 & 213, Elkton, Maryland, Info: Dave Brown, Tele: 302.738.9960, dbrown3942@comcast.net



Oct 28 Glendale Heights, IL
 Nov 9-10 Jacksonville, FL
 Nov 10 Royal Oak, MI
 Nov 11 Albany, NY
 Nov 17 Milford, OH
 Nov 18 Oakland, NJ
 Dec 01 Auburn, CA
 Jan 13 South Attleboro, MA
 Jan 26 Anderson, CA
 Feb 22-23 Phoenix, AZ
 Feb 24 Enfield, CT

Nov 4 Elkton, MD
 Nov 10 Beilleville, IL
 Nov 11 Pittsburgh, PA
 Nov 17 Florence, AL
 Nov 17 Terre Haute, IN
 Nov 25 Bethlehem, PA
 Jan 4-5 St. Petersburg, FL
 Jan 19 Jackson, MS
 Feb 15-16 Columbia, SC
 Feb 23 Grand Rapids, MI
 March 3 Baltimore, MD



An Ebay search on the terms "ruffle," "collar," and "iron" yielded the item shown here. Dodd's ridged plate appears a bit more practical than the version seen on Ebay because it could be moved with a stove lid lifter, but the Ebay listing does seem to confirm our identification.



Dodd apparently found his "fluter" without the curved upper portion. Keep digging, Dodd!



Dodd Delph brought these three rusted iron items to the club picnic seeking information. He had dug them up at the same site and believed they went together, but he was unsure of their purpose. One item was clearly a base, and the other two had holes that would accommodate a stove lid lifter. The best guess of the club members was that the ridged plate would be used along with a sad iron to press ruffles into Victorian collars.