

The Potomac Pontil

The Potomac Bottle Collectors – Serving the National Capital

March 2006

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Meeting March 28

Please join us for a lively discussion of antique bottles. Andy Goldfrank has been very busy digging holes in New York City, and he expects to have plenty of new finds to discuss. Other members are also encouraged to bring in recent finds for show & tell.

Announcements

We will not have a show in June. Our goal had been to reserve the site of last year's show for the same weekend this year. This proved impossible because members of the American Legion have higher priority in reserving the space. We would not have a guaranteed rate if we chose to accept the hall for a different weekend, nor could we reserve the hall in advance for future years. These problems made it clear that we needed a new show venue, but members were quite ambivalent over whether we should attempt one last show at the American Legion hall in Cheverly, Maryland. At the February meeting, we voted narrowly against attempting a show in June. We are now interested in finding a new location for a future show.

Northern Virginia Relic Hunters will have show April 8 and 9 at Dulles Expo Center in Chantilly, Virginia. One show option is to join forces with another club in future years. Members may want to visit the relic hunters show to consider this possibility. However, some members have already voiced reservations about teaming up with the relic hunters because we may have different views about the sales of guns or digging in historical battlefields than those espoused by a club for relic hunters.

The shards of a cornucopia/urn flask below were dug by **Andy Goldfrank** and submitted to our "shard of the year" contest. See page 5 for the contest results that were announced at our February meeting.



Thank you to **David Hopkins** (shown at right), who spoke about ancient glass at our February meeting. David presented an excellent slide show as well as displaying examples of glass dating back as far as the First Century, A.D. Most of the glass shown was looted from tombs around Iraq, a practice that David abhors and that is now generally illegal.



Patrick Thomas Fasano models sweater and hat from club



Michter's Rises from the Whiskey Graveyard

Special to the Potomac Pontil
by Jack Sullivan

Michter's, a classic name in American whiskey – a brand that once provided collectors with a colorful range of jugs, pitchers, and figurals – has arisen from oblivion and once again being sold. The circumstances, however, are considerably different.

Hailing itself as “The Whiskey That Warmed the Revolution,” the original Michter's was harking back to 1753 when two German Swiss Mennonite farmers, John and Michael Schenk, began distilling whiskey in the Pennsylvania village of Schaefferstown, near Reading. That was 23 years before the fight for American independence. The story goes that the Schenks' products were served to George Washington and the troops at Valley Forge.

After the war the distillery was enlarged and Michael's son-in-law Rudolph Meyer took over operations, producing rye whiskey for the Philadelphia market. From 1827 to 1860 the distillery was managed by Elizabeth Schenk Dratzer, a granddaughter of the one of the founders, and her husband, John. The Dratzers sold the business to another relative, Abe Bomberger, in 1861. Known thereafter as the Bomberger Distillery the operation was run by family members until Prohibition, when it was forced to shut down.

After repeal in 1933, the Schaefferstown facility came under the control of several distillers, including Schenley, Lebanon Valley and finally in 1978, Pennco Distillers Inc. of Philadelphia. It was then that the name “Michter” was applied as appropriate to the historic nature of the firm and its location in the Pennsylvania Dutch country, about 150 miles from Washington. Because the market for rye whiskey was dwindling, the owners added sour mash pot still whiskeys to its products. It was a “boutique distiller,” making use of copper kettles and traditional methods of distilling. Its output was aimed at connoisseurs. One expert rhapsodized over Michter's as “a delicious and distinctive whiskey with a full, smooth palate, sweet but clean, and flavorful almost gingery, crisp, dry finish.”

In 1980 Michter's was named a National Historical Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior as the oldest

distillery site still operating in the United States. Although Michter made good whiskey, it relied heavily on sightseers to survive. The plant was a popular stop for tour buses in the Pennsylvania hills. Visitors probably were unaware that the distillery shut its doors each year after the tourist season and that much of its product was delivered to other brands such as Old Overholt and Wild Turkey.

In addition to selling its whiskey to tourists, Michter's also put out a line of interesting jugs, water pitchers, and other collectible items (Figs. 1-4). At a time when Beam bottles were a craze, the company followed suit with its own line of fanciful figural ceramics. They included a football player, Chinese pagoda, covered wagon, and Noah's ark. Michter collectables can be found daily on Ebay.



Figure 1: Whiskey jug and jug salt & pepper (above)

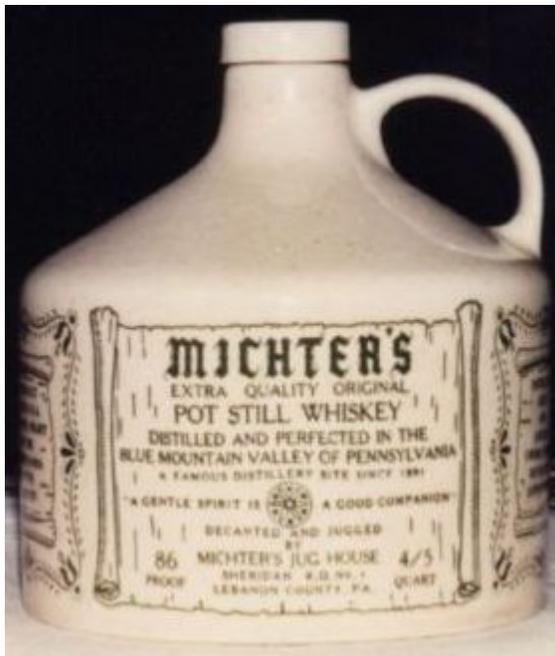


Figure 2: Single “Pot Still” jug (left)



Figure 3: King Tut pitcher (right)



Figure 4: Hex sign pitcher

My particular favorites are a set of blue stoneware jugs with a dove of peace on each and the inscription "1753." They come in four sizes, including (shown here) a mini and a 4/5ths (Fig. 5). All have an interesting stopper designed to hold a candle. The jugs were made for Michter in the early 1980s by the Hall China Company of East Liverpool, Ohio.



Figure 5: Two jugs "1753"

But neither a small coterie of whiskey fanciers nor Michter's line of ceramic goods could keep the bankruptcy lawyers at bay. In 1988, the distillery shut its doors for good. When I visited Schaefferstown in 1993, the neglect was already evident. The trademark jug on top of one of the distillery building was already rusting away, as was a forlorn sign welcoming non-existent tourists (Figs. 6,7). The distillery had been removed from the rolls of National Historical Landmarks. Michter's obituary was all but written.



Figure 6: The abandoned distillery



Figure 7: Its rusting sign

But the distillery had a hidden asset: barrels of prime whiskey aging away in its Federally-sealed warehouses. As various interests vied to tap into them while trying to avoid old company debts, time slipped away. Late in the 1990s the Michter brand and whiskey supplies finally came under the ownership of Chatham Imports, a New York firm that is a major importer of alcoholic beverages. After several years of preparation, the brand reappeared while the distillery was left to mold. Michter fans, recognizing that the warehouse supplies were limited, began to worry.

They need not have. Michter is a joint venture between Chatham which markets it and Kentucky Bourbon Distillers of Bardstown, Kentucky who make the whiskey. Its first releases

were a 10-year-old bourbon and a 10-year-old rye, presumably from the Michter barrels. One critic has compared them to fine cognac – in taste, aroma and price. To these Chatham added a small-batch, unblended Michter's "American Whiskey." By law this product cannot be labeled bourbon because it is aged in used bourbon casks, instead of new, charred white oak barrels. The used barrels impart a distinctive vanilla flavor.



Figure 8: Bourbon mini bottle

Although the new Michter's does not offer a line of collectibles, it does feature mini-bottles of its brands (Figs. 8). David Spaid, editor of the *Miniature Bottle Collector*, has advised: "If you add in all the old Michter's bottles when they were under different management and in a different place, you've got a special little collection all its own." The same could be said about Michter's ceramics.

Material for this article were drawn from a range of sources including *The World Guide to Whiskey* by Michael Jackson; *Dictionary of the History of the American Brewing and Distilling Industries* by William Downard, and the Internet.

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

April 2 - Millville, New Jersey
South Jersey Bottle and Glass Club Show & Sale, (9 AM to 3 PM), at the Elks Lodge of Millville, 1815 East Broad St., Millville, NJ, Info: **Bob Tompkins**, 1731 Hubbard La., Vineland, NJ 08360, PH: (856) 691-5170, or **Merrie Kernan**, PH: (856) 451-8904.

April 8 - Raleigh, North Carolina

The Raleigh Bottle Club "Bottle Fest" (Fri. 7 AM - 5 PM, Free Admission) at the N.C. State Fairgrounds Flea Market (From I-40E, take Wade Ave., then exit at Blue Ridge Road, turn right. Fairgrounds half-mile on right at Hillsborough St. intersection), Raleigh, North Carolina. Free appraisals, Spaces \$20 with table & bring your own chairs. No reservations required, but please RSVP to Whitt Stallings, PH: (919) 781-6339 or P.O. Box 18083, Raleigh, NC 27619-8083. Info: Website: www.antiquebottles.com/raleigh or E-mail: RBC@antiquebottles.com. (Rain date: APRIL 15)



April 23 - Harrisonburg, Virginia

The Historical Bottle-Diggers of Virginia 35th Annual Antique Bottle and Collectible Show & Sale, (9 AM to 3 PM), at the Rockingham County Fairgrounds, (US Rt. 11 South, Exit 243 off I-81) Info: **Sonny Smiley**, PH: (540) 434-1129 or email: lithiaman1@yahoo.com

May 21 - Brick, New Jersey

Jersey Shore Bottle Club's 34th Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM - 2 PM) at the Brick Elks Lodge, 2491 Hooper Ave., Brick, New Jersey. Info: **R. Peal**, 720 Eastern La., Brick, NJ 09723, PH: (732) 267-2528, Email: manodirt@msn.com, Website: <http://www.geocities.com/dtripet2000/jsbc/jsbc.html>.

May 21 - Washington, Pennsylvania

Washington County Antique Bottle Club's 32nd Annual Show & Sale (Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM) at the Alpine Star Lodge, 735 Jefferson Ave. (Exit 17, off I-70), Washington, Pennsylvania. Info: **Nigel Dunmore**, 121 Highland Ave., Avella, PA 15312; PH: (724) 587-5217; E-mail: legin1247@msn.com

June 2-3 - Lumberton, North Carolina

The Robeson Antique Bottle Club Annual Show & Sale (Fri. 3 PM - 9 PM; Sat. 9 AM - 3 PM) at the Farmer's Market, Exit 14 off I-95, Lumberton, North Carolina. Info: **Paul Valenti**, 456 Boone Road, Lumberton, NC 28360; PH: (910) 738-3074 or **Mitchell McCormick**; PH: (910) 628-6245 or **Bret Lee**, E-mail: dex@intrestar.net.

July 15-16 - Adamstown, Pennsylvania

The 5th Annual Shupp's Grove Bottle Festival (Sat. & Sun. 6 AM - dark, Early Buyers Fri. 5 PM) at Shupp's Grove in Adamstown, Pennsylvania. Info: **Steve Guion**, PH: (717) 560-9480 E-mail: affinityinsurance@dejazzd.com or **Jere Hambleton**, (717) 393-5175, E-mail: jshdetector@webtv.net.

Bosse Bottle Brings \$732 on Ebay

This teal green blob top soda bottle is pontiled and is embossed "W. BOSSE WASHINGTON DC." Our club's price guide to Washington, DC bottles values it at \$120 to \$130, but this example brought \$732. We don't know who the buyer is, but he obtained a very desirable bottle at a surprisingly high price.



Annual Contest Winners

Collector of the Year

Richard Lilienthal won this contest with a gravitating stopper bottle from Stabler & Co of Alexandria, Virginia. This may be the only type of gravitating stopper bottle to come from Virginia. Richard's example is shown lying down in the photo at right along with some of the other entries in the collector of the year contest. The competition included a Union/Eagle historical flask, an amber midget pint Mason jar, a bright green squat from J. Rothenburger of Bristol, Pennsylvania, and an unusual large, aqua, patterned jar.



Digger of the Year

Congratulations to **Andy Goldfrank**, who won this contest with a cobalt blue Royal Hair Restorer from Vicksburg, Mississippi. Andy's bottle is shown above and also among other entries at left. Other dug bottles included a Doctor Marshall's snuff, a labeled H.G. Grimes (found in the wall of an old house), a J&IEM ink, and a Cuticure Treatment for Affections of the Skin.



Shard of the Year

Andy Goldfrank won a second award with pieces of a cornocopia/urn flask, which are in the upper right corner of the photo above. Other entries included portions of an L.F. Palmer mini jug from Washington, DC, an eagle flask, a Drakes Plantation Bitters, a Udolpho Wolfe's Schapps, and a Snesil milk bottle featuring a star of David.



Go-with of the Year

Richard Lilienthal also won a second award. His porch box for milk bottles dominates the photograph above. This box from Gordon-Walker Laboratories proves that the Gordon-Walker was active in Washington, DC. Also visible in the photo above is a Portner tip tray and the Portner bottle that the tray goes with.