

# LEGENDS OF THE JAR!

*[Editor's Note: This article is a result of long time collector and author Bruce W. Schank reaching out to long time collector Jim O'Connor.]*

I first met Jim way back at the Winter Muncie, Ind., show in 2008. Both he and his son John were walking the halls with a couple of outrageous colored jars in their hands. My first thoughts were, "Holy cow! One of those jars is exactly what I'd love to have." I even offered what I believed was a fair price to no avail. Little did I know at that time that I would be doing these articles and that I would get the chance to go to Jim's home and get his story. Of course, I've seen Jim at various Winter Muncie shows since then and the 2011 Mansfield, Ohio show and he always has great jars when I see him. Both Jim and his son John have fabulous fruit jar collections and between the both of them it's all quite spectacular to behold.

When I arrived at Jim's home, I didn't know what to expect. It was a modest ranch in a modest neighborhood. As I waited patiently for him, I noticed a beat up old red compact pulling up behind me and in the car was Jim. He was very congenial and seemed happy that I was there and I was happy to be there, too. When I entered his home I was nicely surprised by the first items I saw. Two nice one gallon jars, two rare half pint salesman sample jars and best of all, in the living room a shelf full of just about the best amber jars possible that you can assemble in any line-up. My head was already swimming with all of these outrageous fruit jars when he tells me his collection is really in the basement. I gulped and said okay, let me get a hold of myself and then we'll go down stairs and take a look-see.

By the way, I was really impressed by his living room floor. It was made of antique bricks and was extremely appealing to the eyes. As a matter of fact, I was floored (pun intended) by the sheer amount of antiques in Jim's home. He collects so many different things including weather vanes,



Jim O'Connor



Absolutely fabulous line-up of rare amber fruit jars!



lightning rod balls, insulators, sodas, beers, tins, bottle openers, phones, bells, toys, miniature whiskeys and more. Jim has amassed an incredible amount of fantastic treasures from yesteryears and they all blew my mind. Every nook and cranny in his home has something neat and exciting to see. All I know is I was thinking to myself that this man knows his stuff and he gets around. The sheer mass of the items he has everywhere is mind boggling.

As I walked down into his basement or should I say antique lair, I was astounded by what I saw. Stuff everywhere and anywhere and, yes, there were great jars in many cabinets strategically placed around the basement. It was really cool being down there. Everywhere I looked was a new discovery of some sort. Unfortunately I did not have the proper amount of time to digest all that I saw and all that I needed to do but I made the best of what time I did have.



**Jim's living room floor was handmade with antique bricks**



**Just a portion of Jim's basement chock full of goodies everywhere.**



**Extremely rare half pint salesman sample fruit jars.**

Jim was born Jan 25, 1939 in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. Jim also grew up there and went to St. Ambrose College in Davenport, Iowa where he received his BA degree. Afterwards he went to the Quad City School of Technology and then acquired a position at the Oakdale TB Sanatorium in Iowa City as the head of the Laboratory. He then went to the University of Iowa for graduate studies and received a Masters in Microbiology and Immunology. Then he took a position at the University of Iowa in the Pathology Dept. in the clinical Laboratory Science Program and remained there for 34 years before retiring in 2001. According to Jim, he has been running around scouring Iowa since his retirement for anything and everything and I must say, after seeing the sheer amount of stuff he has he's accomplished quite a lot.

When Jim was about 12 years old, his mother bought a Globe amber pint because she thought it was cute. She never collected



another jar besides that one. Jim would frequently go and take the clamp and lid off of the jar and he just thought it was really neat. Jim actually started collecting fruit jars when he was 30 years old, but that early experience with that pint amber Globe is what drew him in. He was mainly an insulator collector in 1968 but he thought they were becoming too expensive so he became interested in fruit jars and weather vanes and went crazy on them. Little did he know what would become of insulator and fruit prices down the road?

From the beginning, Jim always liked colored 1858s and that's what he started out collecting and although he also thinks Globes are the neatest looking jars, the 1858 colors just dazzle him. Then he started coming across tough jars in amber so he just naturally wanted to find more different types of jars in general that were amber in color and difficult to find. And believe me; he has lots of gorgeous amber jars in his collection that would make anyone envious including yours truly. Amazingly, for most of Jim's collecting life he was a "closet collector." He never belonged to a Bottle Club but he did set up at a few different shows namely the Cedar Rapids Show. He told me he also collected anything that caught his fancy for many years. He's owned a lot of really good bottles in his day but

He met Leon Shores way back in the 70s and bought a good many good jars from him including the Gem gallon, an all original Van Vliet quart and a few nicely colored 1858 quarts. For about five or six years whatever profit Jim would make at bottle shows, he would turn it immediately around and buy a good jar from

Leon. He also knew John Christianson with whom he had some dealings. He did get a bottle magazine back then and he would see ads about different shows and always wanted to go. He told me that when the kids were young he really couldn't afford hardly anything let alone drive eight hours to a show and stay overnight. The two main shows Jim now attends are Muncie and Mansfield. Although he's been coming to Muncie for the last 10 years, Jim told me he wished he had known about it sooner because that is where you see unbelievable



Unusual amber colored candy jar and cobalt grenade.



Cabinet full of Iowa City bottles.



Wonderful colored jars including a very scarce amber quart Mason's Improved Jar.



jars and best of all meet really nice people. He's made many friends due to Muncie.

What I find amazing is how Jim has picked up so many good jars over the years for practically nothing such as amber HG and quart N.C.L. Co jars for \$60 and \$50, respectively. All of his N.C.L. jars came out of farm house auctions in the Wellman and Kalona areas. Jim would go there and stand all day long waiting for a particular jar to finally come up for sale which usually was at the end of the day. One day 35 years ago, Jim saw a ¼ pint National 1876 jar in someone's house. He tried to buy it then, but the owner wouldn't sell at that time. So he put his name in the jar and over the years stopped by many times inquiring about it. Finally, three years ago the owner decided he would sell it, only by this time he had spoken to so-called experts and knew what the jar was worth. Jim claimed he hemmed and hawed but realized that if he really wanted it he'd have to pay so he did. After all, according to Jim there are only four known examples including his jar? One must remember, it's not always about price but about opportunity.

**I**drooled as Jim told me about the olive-amber pint 3L Balll Mason with amber swirls he bought one time for only \$40. He said there were two of them there and his wife wouldn't let him buy the second jar because he was spending too much money. Later defying his wife, Jim called the guy back, but the owner of the jar decided he wasn't going to sell it any longer. He told Jim, "Nope, nope, I'm going to keep it. I kind of like it." As he told me about the jar I gasped and started feeling ill thinking about that wonderful second jar and the unbelievable missed opportunity. Maybe that's why I personally don't involve my other half when it comes to buying jars because it would only put a chink in my style. The hobby is best off left up to the collector as far as I'm concerned. I've learned the hard way too that once an opportunity has passed you by it usually doesn't materialize again.

Jim told me a long but very interesting story about an amber N.C.L. midget he acquired many years ago. He was at the Rochester, Minnesota Flea Market (which is just down the road from the Mayo Clinic). Jim walked into a shop and saw a midget 1858 jar in a case. He couldn't tell what it was so he asked the owner if she could open the case so he could look at the jar. The midget was amber and as he was looking at the jar he thought to himself, "This jar is going to turn out to be a repro midget." Then he felt embossing on the back of the jar so he turned the jar around and low and behold N.C.L. embossed on the back. The owner had \$300 on the jar and Jim asked what her best price was for the jar. The owner said she could take \$250 for the jar and Jim said fine. As he was writing out the check he asked her if she happened



One of Jim's many cabinets full of great colored jars.



A few of the many insulators in Jim's collection.



Very nice Leader jars.