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The National
Early American Glass Club
Newsletter

I hope each of you had a pleasant Summer, full of beautiful glass. As we draw near to 1982, please let me know if you or your group will be doing anything special so that I can advertise the other members of it in the next Newsletter. Write: John Gotjen, 7 Lyndon St., Warren, R.I. 02885.

Those of us who are active collectors of American glass tend to seek pieces of individuality or what we believe to be artistic merit. Thus we often lose sight (if indeed a glimpse is ever had) of the fact that the mainstream of glass making here has always been in the production of bottles and window glass.

For anyone who enjoys an abstract turn of mind, an old house entirely glazed with its original panes is a delight. For many others, a more compelling and diverse study is that of bottles. And even this invites specialization because of the vast number of different types made, as well as the differing uses to which they were put. One type with both a long and appallingly complex history is the bitters bottle. It was ubiquitous throughout most of this country in the last century, and its story is now told by Carlyn Ring in For Bitters Only (The Pi Press, Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, 1980. 545 pages, many illustrations. \$40.).

This book is a catalogue numbering over 2800 true bitters bottles, giving the known facts of embossing, size, color, rarity, and referencing to other books on bitters. There are also numerous fine line drawings by Diane Wheaton which should go a long way in easing the collector's task of distinguishing between similar bottles. In addition to the drawings, there is a delightful multitude of reproductions of handbills, trade cards, and quotations from labels. Moreover, a section of beautiful color photographs has been included in the book.

Any reader will be amazed, first, that so much information has been amassed and organized so well. Then the strange realization will begin to dawn that our forebears must have drunk an awful lot of the stuff. From the blacksmith who bottled the water in which he cooled his newly-wrought horseshoes, to the mixtures of stewed herbs, roots, and barks, bitters were very disgusting concoctions. Many contained a large amount of alcohol, though some boasted its absence, and most claimed to have panacean qualities. A smaller percentage can be grouped into two other categories: bitters used either as a refreshing beverage or as a flavoring. (Examples of this last type can still be bought today.)

The earliest reference to bitters mentioned in the book is one from London in 1760. By 1762 the Pennsylvania Gazette was advertising Stoughton's Bitters "made from tansy, orange, and suckeron water." This brand survived at least until 1909. Its early date and longevity, however, are exceptions. Generally, bitters makers were in business only a few years during the period of its great popularity, the 1830s to the early years of this century. This is reflected in the large number of bottles which the author classifies as Exceptional rarities (one to five known extant). Many others are known just from newspapers or city directories and are yet to be found in glass. (The book lists a bitters of which the first example came to light only in August 1980. The age of discovery is not past!)

This book should have great appeal for the collector, not only because of the listing of so many bitters bottles, but also for helpful sections such as the register of great rarities and a geographical breakdown of bitters' origins, though surprisingly, no attempt has been made to identify glass houses where they were made. This said, it must be further stated that the book suffers from a lack of attention to detail.

Instances abound in which the printed description of a bottle's embossing does not agree with the line drawing next to it. In the opening section the author gives

a careful explanation of the symbols and abbreviations to be used in the book; but later in the catalogue, she uses abbreviations not in the front.

Many times, also, where quotations from a label or advertising are given along with the author's comments, quotation marks are not employed so that the two can be confused. The author often abandons standard English for her own forms and constructions which tend to obscure meaning. For example, on page 231 we read: "A similar thermos, with a different pattern, engraved Dr. Van Dyke's Holland Bitters." This has neither verb nor predicate. And on page 237 there is: "S in Bitters with tails only Aqua Henley's, has either tooled or applied mouth." Clarity is missing here, too.

Confidence is further undermined when we read on page 365: "One found in the Ohio riverfront area of Chicago." A glance at the map shows that Chicago is not even remotely contiguous to the Ohio River. Does the author mean the Chicago River or another city on the Ohio River?

Thus, while I hate to be the one to gibbet the book, it must be said that there is much room for improvement. The small mistakes can be corrected. The English needs to be tightened up so that it can be understood by everyone. Abbreviations, so useful in a catalogue, must all be listed with their meanings. And the few large errors, like Chicago on the Ohio River and a German translation which is wide of the mark, must be attended to.

I hope these improvements will be made in the second edition; because, even as it stands now, it is a noble effort. Perfected, it should sweep the shelves of other books on bitters bottles to stand alone, for many years, a credit to its author as well as an aid and comfort to collectors.

Not many of us today would embrace John Ruskin's dictum that "all cut glass is barbarous". However, in his day he had wide influence as this amusing quotation from the autobiography of J.A. Fuller-Maitland shows -- the year is 1879 and the author is an undergraduate at Cambridge. "I am afraid my early studies in Ruskin turned me into a conceited iconoclast, and the fact that my parents bore patiently with me when I begged them to destroy a very fine set of cut-glass decanters, and an equally precious Crown Derby dinner-set, speaks eloquently for their forbearance."

The Corning Seminar is 29-31 October. Arlene Palmer Schwind is one of the speakers.

Unless you've been living under a rock, you know that Christie's is selling the Old Sturbridge Village's paperweight collection. The place is New York, the date 27 OCT.

Carl Fauster has sent in clippings showing his niece sitting next the famous cut glass punch bowl made for President McKinley which was the star attraction at the July convention of the American Cut Glass Association in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky.

Orva Heissenbuttel wrote to say she's had a busy Summer lecturing on glass at the Rio Grande College in Ohio. And this Fall she takes up her second semester of glass blowing with Kent Ipsen in Richmond, Virginia. She says: "You can talk about glass... but it's quite another thing to blow it!"

At the Glass Gallery, Bethesda, Maryland: 17-31 October, "Shrines--Glass Sculpture", the work of David Hutchhausen; and 14-30 November, "Vessels--New Work" by Thomas McGlauchlin.

The Contemporary Art Glass Gallery in New York City features Edward Nesteruk's "Internal Colored Surfaces", 12-30 September; and just up Madison Avenue for the same dates, the Heller Gallery will show Richard Ritter's "Blown Glass" and Klaus Moje's "Cut & Fused Glass".