

Random Shots

by Robin R. Preston

Meet The Collector: Ken Schwartz

"I collect western shots and any that have pictures, bottom label or colored. It's getting hard to find ones I don't have. I've got about 1,000. Not a misprint. If you ever get to the west, it's worth seeing my collection, not just shots, but western whiskies, advertising, a bunch of other stuff."

My introduction to Ken Schwartz came by way of an e-mail through the website, www.pre-pro.com. On first read-through, my eye tracked right over the first line and hung on the 1,000, and I was about to shoot back a chest-thumping reply about my own burgeoning collection, when I noticed the reference to "western, pictures and bottom labels." I quickly clicked on "Cancel" and reconsidered.

Ken Schwartz is well-known in bottle-collecting circles, less so among shot collectors, even though he is one of the hallowed circle of contributors to Barbara Edmonson's classic reference works, "Historic Shot Glasses" and "Old Advertising Spirits Glasses." My next contact with him was via snail mail, in the form of a five-page photo collage that he'd reproduced on a color laser printer [Figure 2]. At the top of the first page, Ken had scrawled: "Robin, this is my collection. Room is 1200 sq. ft. – Ken Schwartz." "Jaw-dropping" does not even begin to describe my reaction, but sufficient to say, I was impressed. This was most definitely a collection to see in person should I happen find myself in his part of the country.

Ken Schwartz lives with his wife in Redding in Northern California. I finally had the opportunity to visit him and his remarkable collection when I flew out to Reno to attend the 2006 FOHBC National Bottle Show. I made the short trip from Reno to Redding in the afternoon following the show and then headed out to Ken's house bright and early on Monday morning. Ken had provided detailed directions. After having seen the laser-print images of his



Figure 1: Inside rear cover from the 2007 FOHBC National Bottle Show program.

collection, I was expecting a sprawling, ostentatious McMansion, with a free-standing museum prominently positioned in back. In reality, he lives on a winding country road in a ranch home that's indistinguishable from its neighbors — so much so that I drove straight by without realizing that here sits a shrine. After finally cluing in to the fact that the house numbers were climbing out of range, I executed a hasty U-turn and backtracked, pulling into his tidy driveway some 100 yards back.

I rang the doorbell, and waited, wondering where the museum was: perhaps hidden by a stand of trees at the edge of the

property? The door was answered by Ken's wife, Teenie, who welcomed me into their living room. She's also an avid collector, not of bottles and whiskey-related items, but of period hatpins, beaded purses and flower vases. The pins are everywhere: jeweled treasures arranged in bouquets to show them at their best. There is also evidence of old whiskey - a sign here, a tray there, a stray bottle. Ken quickly appeared and lead me through the hallway to his study.

His work room is small – too small to swing a hand trowel, let alone a digger's probe. A geriatric computer running



Windows 98 is crammed into one corner. But the scent of glass was strong and I turned to find a ceiling-to-floor-display of labeled whiskeys beneath spotlights in a converted closet. I was transfixed by the array of familiar names and pre-pro artistry, but before I'd had time to absorb all the labels, Ken was flipping switches and ushering me through another door at the rear of his study. I was totally unprepared for the sight before me.

At first I wasn't sure of what I was looking at, in part because I'd imagined Ken's collecting room to be in a separate building rather than through an insignificant door leading off a tiny study. I was also expecting the room to be more cavernous given the laser-print images but, while it certainly is huge, Ken has managed to cover every square inch of available wall space in the interim and, after having blanketed the walls, began installing lag bolts in the ceiling joists so that he could fill the air space overhead. Huge tin litho advertisements descended from the ceiling like stalactites, while purpose-built, moveable displays now grew like stalagmites from the floor. The far end of the room held a full length, saloon-style bar, while the center was occupied by circular gaming tables. Ken rescued several arched, stained-glass windows decorated with pastoral scenes from an old mansion in San Francisco, and they sat high in the rafters at either side of room. Ken has them back-lit to further the illusion of that this was a house of worship. Bare-fleshed beauties graced the upper parts of the walls and gazed down at us like Madonnas and Blessed Saints. The room was infused with a muted amber light emanating from the columns of tightly packed and back-lit whiskeys lining the walls [Figure 3]. As I made my way into the room, I understood that I was in a Temple of Glass.

As you can see from the photos, considerable display space is given over to signage and bottles, but as we made our way through the room, I was treated to cases brimming with glass flower holders from early automobiles, beaded purses, antique toy cars, hat pins and half-dolls, souvenir plates, spittoons, steins and jugs. The gaming table at the far end of the room is itself a display, the glass top covering cubby holes stuffed with mirrors, poker chips and packs of playing cards that advertise whiskey. The centerpiece of the collection is, of course, the bottles. Sadly, while they do make an attractive display,



Figure 3

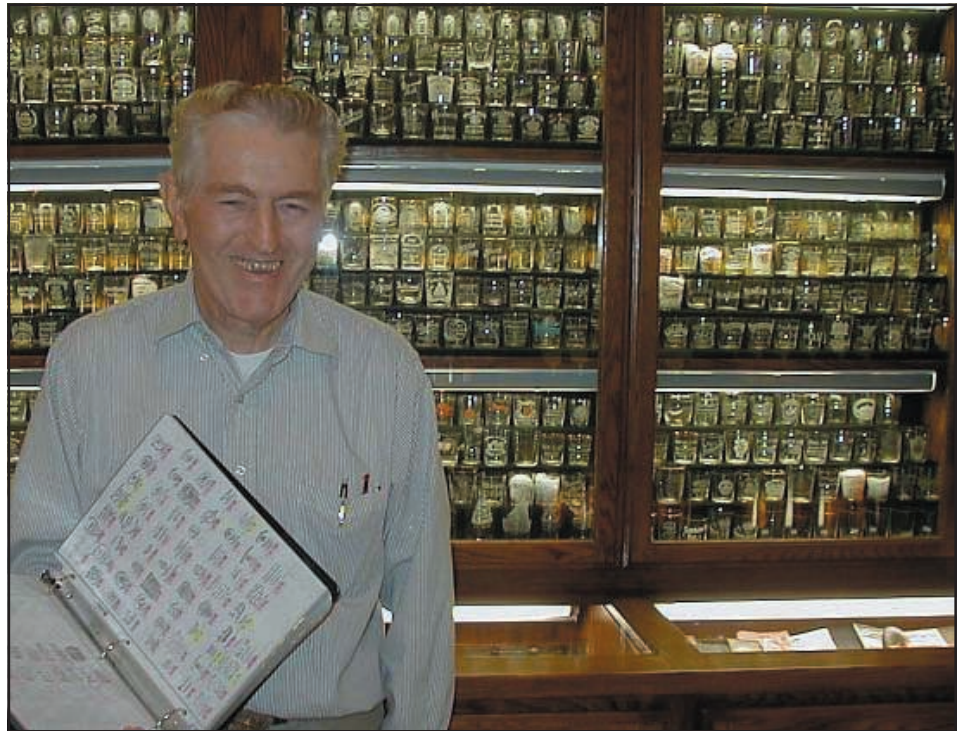


Figure 4: If you happen to run into Ken at a bottle show, you'll be struck by the fact that he seems surgically attached to a large loose-leaf ring binder. The binder, it turns out, is a record of his entire collection - not just shots, but bottles, jugs, billheads, everything. His introductory message is no exaggeration: the only way he can keep track of what he owns and what he needs is by keeping a physical record, the images gleaned from standard references with "has vs. wants" differentiated using highlighters.

the only one I recognized was The Genuine.

As I stared down at this greenish-yellow flask, Ken related the tale of how he acquired it. I absently-mindedly wondered what conceivable tactic I might use upon returning from a bottle show and then

trying to explain to my spouse that I'd just dropped a year's wages on a bottle. Maybe the Band-Aid approach would work best - as fast as possible, hoping that the pain would last but a moment.

Ken had saved the best moment until





Figure 5a: A Cupid Rye from Hyman & Son of Cincinnati.

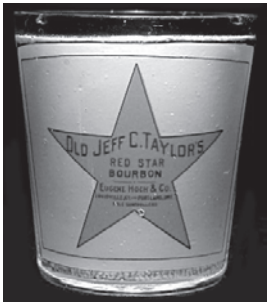


Figure 5b: A rare enamel transfer glass from Eugene Hoch & Co., of Louisville and Portland.



Figure 6: One of Ken's rare eBay wins.



Figure 7a and 7b



last, and we were now in front of the shot glasses. His collection amounts to over 850 glasses that jostle for space in three large, double glass-doored wall displays, each holding three wooden shelves [Figure 4].

"I had everything in here custom-built to my own design" Ken remarked, and his keen sense of what makes a good display was readily evident: the array of glass was stunning. Each of the shelves within the cases supported four long stepped tiers. Ken had crafted these tiers himself and covered them with black felt to provide optimal contrast between etched labels and background. Individual tiers were slightly deeper and taller than a standard glass and were capped with a fluorescent fixture that spanned the length and width of the shelf. Thus, each glass was illuminated perfectly by the light overhead and even the glasses with worn labels were easy to read. Not that there were many with worn labels: virtually all looked to have been freshly minted and I asked Ken if he upgraded frequently. "No" he replied, "but if I have one with a weak label, I indicate that with a W in my book (see Figure 4) and then replace it if I get the chance."

One of the main reasons for visiting Ken was to sit down with him and hear a little about the history of his collection for a future edition of Random Shots, so I asked how and when he'd got bitten by the shot-glass bug. The question seemed a little ridiculous, given that we surrounded by priceless pre-pro treasures of every description, but he was good natured in his reply. "Well I got started with bottles with Warner's Safe's.." (I'm paraphrasing extensively here) ".... and then I bought many of my shots from John Thomas. Most of my shots came from other collections. I got a bunch from Bergseng. He was from the Portland area. I bought many from Barnett over time". During the course of our later discussions, Ralph Hollibaugh's name came up several times as being a source of some of the rarest shots exhibited here.

Q: "Do you find many glasses at shows?"

A: "Many've come from shows but it's getting difficult to find glasses that I don't already have any more. I got three at this one" (referring to the FOHBC National in Reno). Indeed he had. The best was an unknown Cupid Rye that he'd snatched from under my nose during the first afternoon [Figure 5a]! Ken also mentioned that he had picked up several glasses on his way down to the show: one turned out to be an exceptionally rare enamel transfer from Portland [Figure 5b]. The man clearly has a golden touch when it comes to hunting glass.

Q: "How about eBay?"

A: "I don't mess with eBay — don't have the time." Upon my return to Philadelphia, I checked my databases and noted that, indeed, Ken had only won four glasses on the auction site in the past five years. The last had been a few weeks ago: a rare Cutter variant that had triggered a bloody bidding war the moment it listed [Figure 6].

Q: "What's your favorite glass?"

At this point, we both stand and step back over to the lighted displays with their rows of delicate enamels and label-unders. Here were the many of the glasses that appear in HSG and OASG: the labels that were painstakingly copied free hand by Barb Edmonson. Here's a Royal Stag, a Rothenberg Mendle's Gamecock, an original Truog-designed Crow Whiskey from Lapp Goldsmith of Louisville [Figure 7a-c]. These are the glasses that inspired us as neophyte collectors. I'd be hard-pressed to name a favorite among such a group and decide to let Ken off the hook and instead ask which was the most valuable.

He had to think about that one.

A: "I picked up most of good glasses in the early days so I'm not sure which cost the most...."

He pulled the black-etched Old Buck from the display case [Figure 8a].

"I traded Richard Siri three Cutter back-bars for that one."

I'm not sure what the current Cutter-to-Buck conversion factor is, but I suspect we're talking hundreds of dollars.

"Maybe the Thomas Taylor or the Pioneer Bear? They were expensive" [Figure 8b, c].

My pick would probably have been one of the many rare label-unders. He had two different Red Top Rye variants: the last time I'd seen one of those, it was being felled on eBay for \$660 and change. Then there was a Lovejoy & Co. from Hawaii. Not a fancy glass, but I'd hate to have to calculate a snipe



Figure 7c.



Figure 8a.



Figure 8b.



Figure 8c.



Figure 9.



Figure 10a.



Figure 10b.



Figure 10c.



Figure 11a.

maximum for that one given its rarity.

The most valuable glass of the valuable group turned out to be the “Bear Grass Old Bourbon”, from Braunschweiger & Co., of San Francisco [Figure 9]. Ken, like other collectors I know, records details of prices paid for glasses on their base using white adhesive labels. I turned the glass over and grimaced. I agreed that this was a one of a kind and I gingerly replaced it in its secure home.

By now, I'd become bewitched by the sea of glass. There was just so much on display and I lamented how pitiful my own collection seemed in comparison. For reasons unknown, the real lookers quickly drift from memory, leaving only the stains of the faded Wolf Distilling, the cracked Gilt Edge and the Old Durham Whiskey whose label had to be summoned by a clairvoyant. Ken fully understood the emotion, and recalled the urge to smash every last shot and bottle in his shrine after visiting his contemporaries and seeing the scope and quality of their collections.

It's actually difficult to find words that adequately describe the scope and comprehensive nature of Ken's collection. He focuses primarily on California and Oregon, but he's not averse to filling out a display case with the more desirable picture glasses from the eastern states. Notable among them is a Fleming's Old Export (Pittsburgh), a Castle brand from Simons Co. and a Winner Rye from Magullion, both of Boston, and a Dakota Bell from Diemert & Murphy of Moorhead, MN [Figure 10a-c].

My eye was also drawn to the many older glasses. Chief among them was an exquisite Harvest Home from Sadler & Co. and an Atlas Bourbon from Mahns & Kaltenbach [Figure 11a-b], both San Francisco companies.

Ken has several signed Truog originals, including the Crow Whiskey and Atlas Bourbon mentioned above [Figures 7 and 11], a Rothschild No 6 from Philadelphia, a Buente Shipping (featured in the last edition of *Random Shots* and now known to come from St. Louis, Mo.), a World's Fair Whiskey from Grommes & Ullrich of Chicago and a superb Crown Jewels from Mette and Kanne (St. Louis) [Figure 12a-c]. New collectors will be heartened to note that even world-class collections can find a place for the most common of all glasses; Hayner cylinders, red-etched Woodland Whiskeys (Crigler & Crigler of Covington), and a Schweyer & Co. (Chicago). All of these glasses can be obtained in lusciously mint condition for \$25 or less, and their artistic appeal rivals that of glasses costing fifty times more.

But the core of Ken's display is west coast and it is in these glasses that the tremendous depth and rarity of glasses in his collection is best appreciated. Some of the finest include the four different Old Judge variants, two in white, two in color (Rothenberg, San Francisco). Then there are three different Ell-Ell variants (Lemle-Levy, San Francisco), two from The Castle (Stange, San Francisco) and two variants of an El Monte from Reynolds, also San Francisco. Needless to say, Ken also has managed to accumulate a remarkable number of glasses with enamel labels or with labels under glass. My favorite has to be the Puck Rye and a label-under with clear Prohibitionist sentiments. As the tippler drains the glass, he's faced with a prisoner's uniform and a hangman's gallows and the grim warning that they are to be found “At the bottom of every whiskey glass”. Some of the best of the best of Ken's glasses are gathered on the third page of this article.

Ken's collection also includes a treasure trove of information in the form of letterheads, paper advertising and bottle labels. These are neatly organized in a dozen or so binders that are stacked precariously on a trunk just inside the door. I was anxious to see what I might plunder for use in the online databases and started thumbing through the plastic sleeves. A world-class collection of glass deserves to be supported by an ephemera collection of similar quality and I was not disappointed. Ken has accumulated an impressive number of billheads and letters from many of the Old West liquor dealers, many of which were photographed for inclusion in the updated version of John Thomas' *Whiskey Bottles of the Old West*.

Ken explained that the binders were very popular with guests at his annual open houses, when he and his wife host groups of 50 glass addicts and their spouses in conjunction with the California Antique Bottle Club Show, held each January at the Shasta County Fairgrounds in Anderson, Calif. (see below for information on Ken's open house to be held at the end of this month).



Figure 11b.



Figure 12a.



Figure 12b.



Figure 12c.

At the end of the day, I was struck by the remarkable generosity of Ken and his wife in giving of their time and energy in sharing their home and collection with total strangers. In addition to the regular group gatherings, Ken mentioned that 25 or so individuals just stop by to tour the Temple each year. Ken had given over his whole day to me, patiently endured my inane questions, helped me hunt down glasses that I needed to examine to clarify details of their etching (see the sidebar on documenting the collection), and had allowed me complete access to everything. I dread to think how long it took him to re-align the shots after I'd rummaged through the cases taking measurements for the database!

Before I left that evening, Ken and I stood before the walls of amber glass and I commented on the immensity of a collecting vision that would drive him to create a room like this. "Oh I didn't do it for me," he explained, "I did it for you. I built it so that I could share the collection

with other people." Collectors like Ken Schwartz are a rare breed. If you happen to be in his neck of the woods, drop him a line and set aside a day to stop by and visit. It will be one of the most memorable days of your lives.

The California Antique Bottle Club's 32nd Annual show takes place on Saturday, Jan 26, 2007, from 9am to 4pm. Contact Mel Hammer, (530-241-4878) or Phil McDonald (530-243-6905) for more details. Ken's open house will be held on Friday evening (January 25), starting at 6 pm. Ken can be contacted at 530-365-5046 for details and directions to his house.

Robin is an enthusiastic collector of pre-pro shot glasses and maintains the collector's website, www.pre-pro.com. He recently moved from Philadelphia to Atlanta: he can now be contacted at P.O. Box 888503, Atlanta, GA 30356, or via e-mail to oldwhiskey@pre-pro.com.

All of Ken's glasses and an expanded version of this article are showcased in Collector's Corner at www.pre-pro.com (<http://www.pre-pro.com/KWS/index.htm>). We're able to feature his collection because he pulled all of his 860+ glasses from their display cases, washed each one and then photographed them for inclusion in the database. The database currently serves as an online reference source for pre-pro shot glass collectors, the goal being to eventually turn it into a book. The results of Ken's efforts filled a 700 Mb CD-ROM and, after processing them, swelled the main database by over 640 entries (now 3,220+ as of writing). Ken's effort was unusually heroic. To have your own glasses documented for possible inclusion in the database, please contact the author. Even a single new glass is welcome!