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A GLASS ACT

Collecting isn't an empty pursuit for bottle hall-of-famer

By Mark Petix
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What do Hank Aaron, Johnny Unitas and Poway's Cecil Munsey have in common? They're all members of a hall of fame: Aaron for baseball, Unitas for football. And Munsey for collecting antique bottles.

Like the sports greats listed above, Munsey is among the best in his field of choice, which since 1963 has been that of collecting glass bottles of all shapes, sizes and uses.

He has colorful containers that once held patent (and potent) potions, such as Jayne's Expectorant and Sutherland's 7 Sisters Hair Grower. Also, Dr. Fish's Bitters, and Howdy's, an orange drink produced by a company that would later become 7Up.

For 20 years, Munsey, a curriculum advisor for the county Department of Education, has been in search of rare and unusual glass bottles. He and thousands of bottle collectors nationwide have proven that yesterday's refuse can be today's treasure.

Like the collector who, earlier this month at an antique bottle exposition in Las Vegas, Nev., paid \$15,000 for an empty whiskey bottle. Or the collector at the same exposition who spent \$8,000 for an empty whiskey flask.

For collectors like Munsey, the treasure is in the history behind the bottle. What was common once, like the amber-colored 7Up bottles produced in the mid-1930s, is now a keepsake.

"I collect history," said Munsey, standing by the large glass case built to hold most of his collection — a gathering of old soda-pop bottles, medicine jars and other glass oddities.

"I love it," he said. "The stuff fascinates me."

Munsey's hobby began in 1963, when he was a teacher at Florence Elementary School in San Diego.

Some of his students had found some old glass bottles and asked Munsey about their history. They were so interested, Munsey said, he scrapped plans to study Mexico and studied bottles instead.

It was then Munsey discovered a problem.

"There was very little information on the subject," he said. "No books at all on collecting."

Munsey dug in, writing to museums and collectors for information on bottles. He also began attending bottle conventions, and started his own collection.

In 1970, what Munsey had learned became "The Illustrated Guide to Collecting Bottles," a hugely successful book that has sold more than 400,000 copies.

Since then, he's written three more books on collecting — including guides to Coca Cola and Disney memorabilia — and many magazine articles.

Earlier this year, Munsey's work in the field earned him a spot in the National Bottle Museum Hall of Fame in

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The recognition is nice, Munsey said, but he's involved in collecting just for the fun of it. He and his wife, Delores, enjoy traveling to shows, looking for rare and just interesting bottles.

He said looking for new bottles is most of the fun. Which is why you'll find collectors not only at shows, but poking around old dump sites, cluttered garages and under old homes — anywhere bottles and glass may gather.

"Basically it's sand, soda and lime, with some kind of oxide added for color," she said. "But there are so many things I like about it — the color of the glass, sometimes the history."

Munsey pointed to a clear club soda bottle embossed with the official seal of the vice president. Embossed around the neck of the bottle, produced by Canada Dry, were the words, "Bottled Specially for the Vice President, the Honorable Lyndon Baines Johnson."

The bottle was one of several hundred excavated by a collector from the dump on Johnson's Texas Ranch. The bottle is a small piece of history that Munsey thought worth having.

"It's not worth a lot, but I like it," he said.

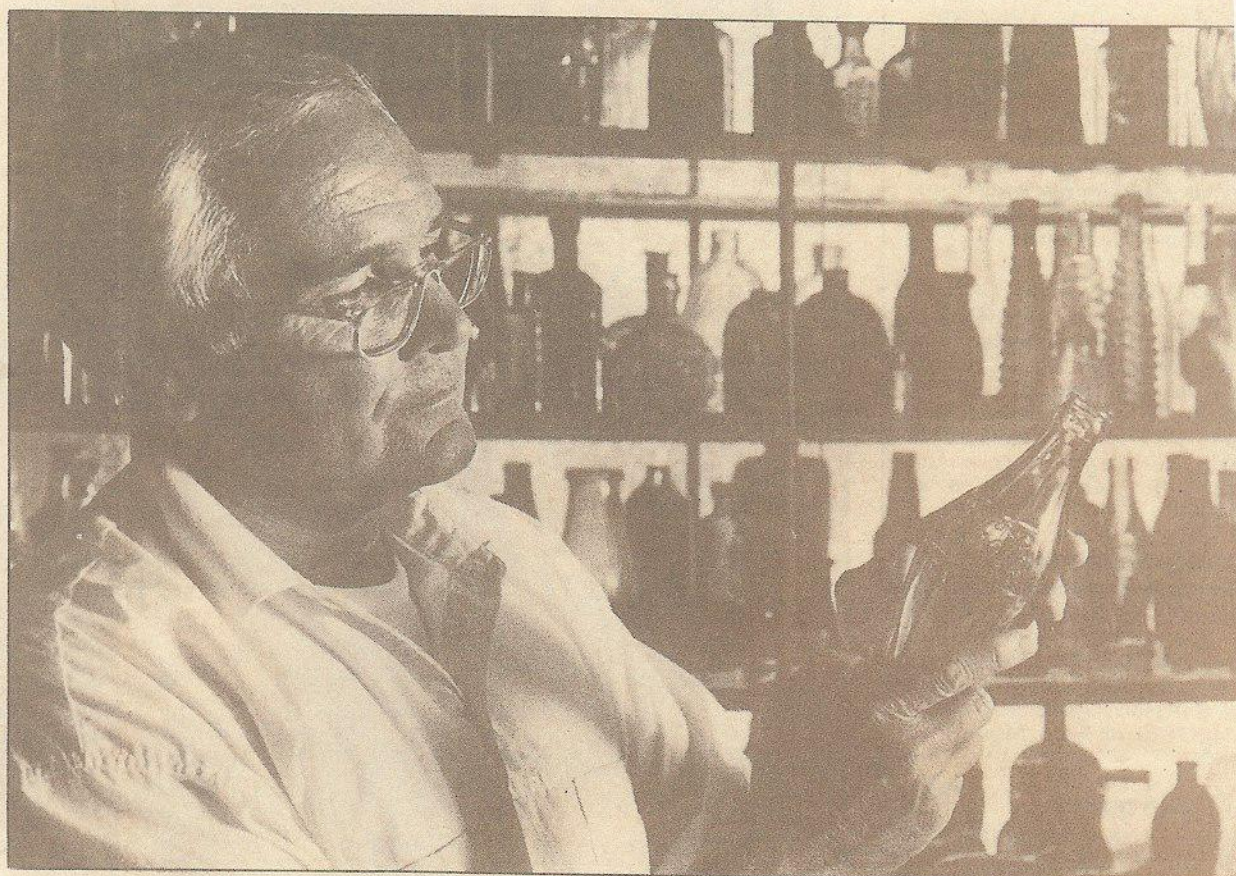
Munsey has bottles and glass dating from the 17th century, and other hard-to-find pieces from the heyday of bottles, the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

But Munsey said he chooses pieces for his collection based on their history and general interest. And he keeps them on display, where he and others can enjoy them.

"People say, 'What are you going to do when the big (earthquake) hits?'"

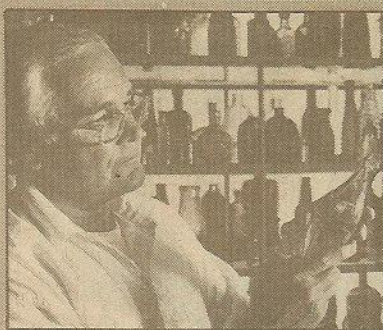
"I'm just going to sit there and watch some of them tip over and hope they don't break."





John Nelson/The Times-Advocate

"I collect history," says Cecil Munsey of Poway, shown here with a vintage Coca-Cola bottle.



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