

## Lost Art of Pop Bottle Hunting

Pop bottle! Beer bottle! These were familiar phrases to me growing up in the small Southwestern Minnesota community of Pipestone in the mid 60's. Much like the sound of "Garage Sale!" today, these lost adventures hold a special spot in my memories.

No, these weren't the sounds of the local beer hall or a food vendor selling his wares at the ballgames, these were the excited sounds of my older brothers when eyeing another bottle in the ditch as my dad brought the old dusty car to a screeching halt so one of us could run out in the ditch and retrieve our prize that someone else had so carelessly thrown away. Ah yes, the spoils of war belonged to the victors, as the long neck beer bottle took its place on the floor of the car along with the other half dozen or so we had already found. Our family was on another early Sunday morning road trip to visit relatives in the Dakota's. I could hardly wait to return home that evening and exchange our finds for money at the local grocery store.

I had always assumed growing up that pop bottle and beer bottle hunting was an American pastime as popular as apple pie and football on Sundays. I also had mistakenly thought my folks just started doing this as a pastime with us kids.

As it turns out, I was wrong on both counts. I discovered after talking to numerous people in the Willmar area, that they had no idea what I was talking about and questioned whether or not I was making up these stories (me, make up stories!). Also after talking to my parents about bottle hunting, my dad was doing this when he was quite young.

So the real story starts in the Toronto & White South Dakota area with my parents. My dad, Ed, born in the early 30's, grew up in the small community of Toronto South Dakota, just a stone throw away from White & Brookings. Dad's parents, Louie & Hilda, raised 3 sons and 4 daughters through tough times. Money was tight and any chance of making extra money was sought out.

Dad tells of how he first started looking for pop and beer bottles when he was 8 or 9 years old as a way to help buy himself some school clothes. Dad and fellow school chum



Purne Sand, use to ride their bicycles on the gravel road to the nearby town of Astoria which was about 5 miles away looking for bottles to pick up in the ditches. They attached baskets to the front of their bikes and put sacks in them and they also hung sacks on the back of their bikes to help carry all the bottles they would find.

Toronto's yearly 3 day "Gala Days" celebration featured a carnival put on by the traveling "Art B. Thomas Bombshell Shows" provided dad and Purne their best chance of making money. Every

Ed Texley, age 8, and Purne Sand

night during the carnival they would walk around the town and pick up all the pop and beer bottles they could find. After three days of hunting they would turn them all in at the local pool hall and split the money.

For all their hard work they were rewarded 1 cent for regular pop bottles, Coke bottles were 2 cents, beer bottles were 2 cents.

One time they saved an unopened beer bottle out in the wood shed and decided to open it on a hot summer day. When Louie came home he thought there had been a skunk in the woodshed because it smelled so bad.

Immediately to the south of Toronto lay another small Dakota community of White. Now, the gravel road between the two towns was very hilly and steep and provided some exciting driving exhibitions by my dad when we were kids, I'll save those stories for another chapter.



Left: Ed and Ardith, dating circa 1950.  
Top: Arlene Thompson and Ardith sharing a  
beer, 1957.

White happened to be the hometown of my mom, Ardith Krenz, who also came from a large family of 10 children. Similar celebrations like Toronto's also took place in White and afforded the opportunity for enterprising kids to make money by once again picking up empty bottles.

Ed and Ardith eventually met, married and started having kids, and then once again the legacy of pop and beer bottle hunting continued.

While living in the Trosky and Pipestone Minnesota areas we started hunting bottles as kids with mom and dad while on our way to visit relatives in White, Toronto and Brookings area.

The drive to White or Toronto would normally take about an hour traveling at the rate of 55-60mph. Our familiar route was Hwy 75 north out of Pipestone to Lake Benton then east on #14 toward Brookings to the Buschnell corner then north to White or Toronto. We would leave plenty early for Sunday dinner so we had time to look for bottles along

the way. Dad always drove and stayed close to the ditch so we would have the best chance to spot a bottle. Top driving speed when looking was around 20 mph and we would keep our noses plastered to the window looking for bottles. When one was spotted the cry went out-POP BOTTLE! or BEER BOTTLE! The car came to a halt and we usually took turns running out in the ditch to pick up our prize.



Texley boys, 1966, White, South Dakota. L to R: Tony, Tim, Terry, Tom and Todd

Once in awhile you could find a dead mouse in the bottle unable to extract himself once he got in. You always had to pour out any liquid that might be in the bottle before you could bring it into the car. As we searched we always came across bottles that you couldn't return for money so they were left where they were found and the hunt continued.

Some times we would get a real surprise when retrieving a bottle. You would scare up a hiding pheasant that would take to flight with just about leaving you with wet pants.

On the return home, we would drive the opposite side of the ditch if we had time.

Many times I remember we had both sides of the floor in the back seat full of bottles and our legs would lie on top of them.

My folks were very smart and practical; you had to be with 5 boys. They always kept an empty 7-UP quart pop bottle with a cork, in the car. It was kept just in case one of us had to go to the bathroom and we couldn't stop. The bottle merely got passed around Years later when I saw my mom ironing clothes, she always had a quart bottle of 7-Up filled with water and was sprinkling it on the clothes, I always wondered if that was the same bottle. Yes, these were the good old days.

Now that we had collected all these bottles it was time to cash them all in at the local Juba's Super Valu grocery store in Pipestone. The store was located at the crossroads of Hwy #75 & 30 where the Snyder Drug store is now located. The store was open 24 hours a day, so no matter when we got to town we could unload our booty for cash.

We would unload all the bottles into a shopping cart and bring them inside. Then follow a stocker into the back room with our cart to start the sorting procedure. Remember not all bottles were returnable. Many dishonest people would try to sneak beer or pop bottles into the pile that weren't worth anything. So the stocker would sort the bottles into piles, all returnables were placed into wooden crates according to size, vendor and whether it was a beer or pop bottle. Finally at last the employee would then total up how much everything was worth. The checker up front would give us the cash for the fruits of our labors.



Juba's Super Valu Pipestone Minnesota

With our fresh supply of money, we went shopping. I remember we could buy quart bottles of Elf pop on sale 4/\$1. We usually bought root beer, orange and grape pop. We also would buy half gallon squares of Flavorite ice cream so we could make floats.

Sunday nights mom would get out all the pop and ice cream, tall glasses, spoons; plus make her famous pan of homemade brownies, the feast was on. We would have our pop floats and snacks while watching TV or playing our favorite family card game, Pokeno, which it seems like my mom always won and that still holds true to this day.

Back in those days Pepsi and Coke were the #1 bottle finds. The other familiar brands of pop that were worth money was, Nesbits, Crystal, Mason , Howels , A&W, Sunkist, Squirt, Dr. Pepper , Mountain Dew and all long neck beer bottles and quart bottles were worth money. My dad told me that only the Trosky Bar would take Cold Spring beer bottles.

The price of returnable bottles went up through the years, but you would never get rich collecting them. I had the enjoyment of talking with S.W. Minnesota Pepsi Distributor Don Haubrich of Pipestone about the history of returnables. Don told me standard glass pop bottles in his days, first brought in 2 cents, then 3, then 5, and then a huge leap to 10 cents. The wooden cases that held the pop and created a advertising goldmine back then and now a hot antique collectable were redeemed for a mere 12 cents each. Beer bottles were worth 3 cents with 12 ounce bottles called long necks and the quart bottles were called picnics.

Don also said the returnable days were numbered as cans started to replace bottles and pop bottle machines went to the back door to gather dust. In 1990-91 his bottling plant stopped giving money for returns.

As we grew older our pop bottle hunting days as a family were also numbered. As kids other interests started taking up our time. Sports, friends, and jobs seemed to take us all in different directions. Pop bottle hunting started to take 2nd place for Sunday activities.

I don't remember any real competition out there looking for bottles, although I'm sure we weren't the only ones doing it. We always seemed to bag our limit.

One of my first hobbies was collecting liquor bottles from roadside ditches, bars, just about anywhere I could find them. I look back and wonder if this wasn't a carry over from the bottle hunting days. There was always that thrill of the hunt for me.

It seemed I started out just as my dad had, a bicycle with baskets on it going down the gravel road. At one time I had quite an extensive bottle collection which also carried over to beer cans. At this time in my young life I was sharing a bedroom with my brother Todd. We battled over wall space for our collections. Me, with my bottles and cans and Todd, with his kites. My bottles eventually went to the city dump and I gave my can collection to neighbor Duane Lange.



Tony's liquor bottle and can collection, circa 1969.



Tony and Todd's bedroom, circa 1969.

It seems ironic now, but back in the mid 70's I got a job at that very same Juba's Super Valu grocery store that we had always turned our bottles in. And can you guess what one of my jobs was? You're right! Going thru the returnable bottles and sorting them. It seems like I had come full circle in life but what a family adventure it was.

I know you are probably wondering if this story is ever going to end. It will never really end as long as the memory is kept alive.

I think for my next topic I'll write about the crazy driving exploits of my dad going 100 mph over gravel hill tops (trying to see how scared he could get us) to see if we could actually get all 4 wheels off the ground; to the accidental (actually intentional) run-ins with snow drifts during winter storms. Which years later I would try to duplicate with my own family, much to the dismay of my wife but peer enjoyment to the kids.

I hope you enjoyed this brief look into the past as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Tony Texley  
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