

# LEGENDS OF THE JAR!

[Editor's Note: This article is born out of a of a lifelong friendship between author and long time collector Bruce W. Schank and former long time collector Bob Clay]

This humble author met Bob Clay quite by accident. I came across one of his fruit jar sales lists, called him and bought one of his jars which I still own to this day. From that first encounter, Bob and I became close and have been friends going on twenty five years now at least if not longer. Our friendship is probably right out of a Readers Digest story because in all of those years we have known each other, we have never met face to face. Sounds pretty farfetched you say but I tell you it's true.

Bob being an Okie and I a Jersey Boy, well neither of us ever got around to making the long trip. Even a centralized point for a meeting never materialized for one reason or another. In the old days we sent a lot of paper back and forth to each other...yesiree, snail mail was king of the jungle in the old days. Our friendship has endured all of these years now despite periods of inactivity. In fact, right now our friendship is even stronger than ever due to email and really cheap internet long distance. ☺

Bob was born in 1953 and never wandered very



far from the ole homestead where he resides to this day. Bob was raised and still lives in Okmulgee, a small community about 40 miles south of Tulsa in Green County, OK. Bob has a Graphics Design degree from OSU. Bob worked for Ball Corporation for almost 20 years and collected fruit jars for over 30 years. At one time he had a pretty fair sized collection of Ball jars before deciding to sell them, (A tad over 3000 in 1990.) Bob had some of the most desirable and rare ball jars known at one time and his colored ball jar collection was practically untouchable. And yes I'll admit right here, right now that I was always a bit envious of him. I mean who wouldn't be seeing all of those gorgeous colored jars he had acquired.



Bob claims to have been addicted to fruit jar collecting since 1975 as the result of a Christmas gift his sister gave him that year of a plain old ordinary 3L Ball MASON quart jar. Bob began working for Ball in August of 1975 at the former PINE plant that Ball bought in 1929 in Okmulgee and then subsequently ran it until 1994.

Bob's sister thought it appropriate that he should have an old jar the company had made nearly ¾ of a century earlier. Man oh man if she only knew then what she had started?

By 1980, as Bob would put it, he was completely eaten up with fruit jar collecting. Since he worked for Ball, his primary focus was Ball jars, but anything odd he came across was fair game. By the mid 1980s, Bob began attending shows and selling jars to support his ever growing habit. Bob told me; "this hobby can be more addictive than any drug known to mankind. At least with drugs or alcohol, support groups are easy to find. I subscribed to every publication I could. I read everything I could get my hands on. I got to know as many of the 'big names' in the hobby as I could. My best mentor was Dick Roller, (considered by many as America's "premiere Fruit jar expert") at the time and I helped him as much as I could with the Ball section of

his book, the Standard Fruit Jar Reference. I couldn't begin to list all the people that have helped me along the way though."

Working for Ball opened up many doors for Bob. He got to meet such notable people as Bill Brantley, author of A Collector's Guide to Ball Jars. Bob also met with Mr. Edmund F. Ball several times. Bob told me, "He (Edmund Ball) even came to my home to view my jars. Plus Ball did an article on my jars in their quarterly corporate magazine, The Ball Line. (vol. 36, number 4, 1981) Actually working with the forming machines as they made jars has really helped me understand how the manufacturing processes worked a hundred years ago."

Bob related to me an interesting story about a black Ball Mason quart jar he bought in 1987 from Bob Rhineburger. This particular jar sat on Bob Rhineburger's table all day at the January 1987 Indy Show without a buyer. Bob's friend John Granda fortunately called Bob to tell him about this jar and how it was THE darkest jar he had ever seen or come across and how everyone complained the asking price was \$450 yet the embossing was weak. Well, Bob trusting John's color sense called Mr. Rhineburger and asked him to bring the jar to the St. Louis Show which he did. Bob figured he could make his own determination about the embossing and the color. Well, as soon as Bob laid eyes on that black quart Ball Mason jar it was an instant sale. According to Bob he was even criticized at the



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time by some people. How could he pay that much for a jar with weak embossing? Bob's reply; "it's Black for cryin out loud and you can still see it's a Ball jar!" This same jar eventually went to the Cay & Erv Bettinghaus collection and then subsequently to this humble author's hands through Greg Spurgeon's NAG auction.



Ball STANDARD I'd ever cast eyes on. My

mouth dropped a little bit and I tried to hide the tiny bit of drool escaping the left side of my lips. "Nice jar Bill," I said to him...and he reached down into a box and pulled out another which was more olive amber this time, but still a fabulous color. As my knees weakened, he pulled out a nice olive

One of Bob's fondest jar memories is of the 1988 St. Louis show. By then Bob had made up his mind that he was going to get rid of the bulk of his collection of over 3000 jars and whittle it down substantially to about 100 of the best jars and sink the proceeds of those sales into colored Ball jars, which were somewhat more reasonably obtainable at the time compared to other rare colored jars.

Bob tells the story as follows: "So I pull into the hotel in St. Louis with a pickup load of jars, cash in my pockets and thoughts of a wonderful evening and day ahead. I wasn't in my room 20 minutes when the phone rang. It was an old friend, Bill Dudley that had just checked in and wanted to visit. He said he brought a jar or two I might be interested in. So I walk down to his room and the door is slightly ajar so I open it and go on in. On the far side of the bed sat Bill, with a sly grin from ear to ear. On the bed sat the most beautiful amber quart

green with amber swirls and another and then still one more. So he sat them all on the bed grinning like a Cheshire cat the whole time.

At that moment I was begging God for mercy and I think someone helped me into a chair there. In less than a minute, he'd made the whole show a moot point. It couldn't get any better than this, (at least for me anyway.) It probably took me about 20 minutes before I could even ask, "How much?" Knowing there

was no way I was prepared for this. But Bill let me give him the cash I had for the moment and after the next day's sales, I was able to pay him the entire amount. I was able to come home with five fabulously colored Ball STANDARD quarts, all at one time. It was only after getting them home that I realized that four of them had been made in the same mould. (Roman numeral VII.)



One of the things Bob has always found to be odd; both

back then as well as today are some people's reactions to his paying what amounted to a good sum of money for a 'lowly' Ball jar. Bob said; "Ball jars have never had the 'status' that even colored 1858s have had to collectors, let alone the early closure collectors" Bob states and "even though lovely to look at, it was still "just" a Ball jar. Back in the 70's, Ball jars were, to most collectors, "riff-raff" jars. I can remember a friend buying a root beer amber Ball MASON quart for \$70 at a show! Just not much interest in Ball stuff, it was just "too common. First, some people said I was just nuts and after awhile, they began saying I was trying to drive prices up for everyone and then sometimes even sharper criticism floated around. But as with any collectible, I simply bought what I liked and only paid prices I considered to be fair for myself. When it came time to sell my collection, suffice it to say, quality over quantity made a worthwhile investment. " :o)

Bob has always been willing to share the knowledge he's gained in nearly 35 years of collecting. Bob claims that if he has done anything truly worthwhile at all for this hobby it's that he took a stand against sellers on eBay that were selling reproduction jars as authentic jars. In 2001 Bob had several 'info-auctions' and wrote articles about the fakes we often see on eBay for sale. Bob and a few others were called the 'eBay jar police' for several years for actually getting a few sellers busted off eBay for their lying habits.



Although Bob has now sold off his vast incredible collection, he still has a few jars floating around his home...but nothing good to speak of he claims. Bob is a very humble guy and told me, "although I considered myself a serious collector...wanting to know all I could possibly find out about any particular jar I had, I do not in any way consider myself a 'legend' in the hobby. That descriptor I reserve for the many outstanding collectors and mentors that have passed before me and mentored many of us." Yet, Bob at one time 'IMO' was one of the

foremost Ball Jar collectors in the country. Bob was also one of the pioneering spirits that brought Ball jars to the public attention and notoriety it has today. Throughout the 1990s, Bob dispersed his collection; bought the best colored Ball jars he could find only to disperse those also. Bob seems pleased that I now own several of the jars he once treasured.

In summation: Bob says; "We are merely caretakers of a bit of history for the time being. What are really important are the many relationships you gain simply because of a melted hunk of soda ash and sand. The people you meet, the friendships you make, the bonds of being around similarly crazed

people, the knowledge you gain and the fun you experience FAR outweigh the jars themselves...no matter how fabulous the collection. Then you understand the TRUE joy of this hobby...and owning neat jars is only a side benefit." ...the lowly fruit jar.

Collect what you love, love what you collect and you can't go wrong! :o) Bob Clay"