LEGENDS OF THE JAR!

[Editor's Note: This article is a result of long time collector and author Bruce W. Schank reaching out to very long time collector *Mr. Mason*, Don Burkett.]

Don Was born September 8th, 1930 at the very residence he resides at today. Amazingly after College and a short lived first marriage he came back to where it all started and has remained there to this day. Don is a graduate of Adrian College and has a Masters Degree from Eastern Michigan in Ypsilanti, MI. Don taught junior high for the first eight years of his teaching career and then Government studies his last 25 years in a High School setting. Don told me that teaching was an extremely good life for him.

Many years ago Don decided to go to a religious festival one Sunday in Chautauqua, NY with his mother and Glennie. While there, his mother said "there's a flea market, you should stop." Don surprisingly said, "What's a flea market?" So they all went in and walked around. There just happened to be a man with a trailer with boxes of fruit jars and he was selling them. Don's thoughts went back when as a rambunctious kid he'd go to his grandfather's dump and break fruit jars and bottles by throwing rocks at them and here they are now worth money. Well, that was enough to set the future Mr. Mason on the straight and narrow in regards to such atrocities since he was now quite interested in them.

Interestingly, the first jar Don ever bought was a badly stained aqua Trademark Lightning quart with no bail, metal tie or lid for $2 at a show in Tecumseh, MI in the fall of 1970. He cradled that jar in his arms and carried it all the way home. He still has that jar to this day and that is the only non-mason embossed jar in his collection. This jar though was the initial trigger that embarked him on a now famous 39+ year collecting and selling journey.

At this same juncture Don came across a few Bottle magazines that talked about Bottle shows. After going to a few shows he thought that it would be possible to collect every fruit jar that was ever made and then quickly realized this wasn't going to happen. In 1972 he finally decided to collect only jars embossed with the word Mason on them. Don of course is famous in the hobby to this day as "*Mr. Mason*." A term by the way given to him by Vivian "Granny" Kath in November 1977 because he had been sending her so much information and rubbings on varying Mason embossed jars.

When I arrived at Don's home he immediately began apologizing that his jars were not displayed as nicely as other collectors. I suppose it was due to the fact Mason Bright who lives only a hop and a skip away from him has a basement done so professionally it seems as though you are in a museum. I wasn't bothered by Don's basement whatsoever though. As a matter of fact, it was really neat and kind of quaint and reminded me of the old days gone by when I was able to find a hole-in-the-wall in my area with myriads of bottles and jars all over the place and in which I'd explore for hours picking up hundreds of items looking for just one small treasure to go home with.

Don has literally hundreds and hundreds of jars and what's really unique is the fact that every single jar has at least the word Mason embossed on it. It doesn't matter where as long as the word Mason is embossed someplace on that jar it's a keeper to Mr. Mason.

One particular jar that struck my attention at the onset was a fantastic deep cornflower blue Mason's CFJ Patent Nov 30 TH 1858 quart. Don told me the story of how that jar was in an auction in his very town of Monroe and the amount went to a whopping $24. Well, he managed to be the high bidder on that jar and on his way home he was thinking to

himself, “Oh my, what have I done. What am I going to tell Glennie?” Back then Don just didn’t have a whole lot of money and $24 was a large amount to divert into a single fruit jar. Glennie being the wonderful person that she is was very happy for him that he had gotten that superbly colored jar indeed.

Don told me that one of his most exciting jar acquisitions was a Mason’s T Patent that he acquired from Jerry McCann at a bottle show in Grand Rapids many years ago. Don was at his table and a kid came up to him and said “I want to show you a jar.” Don looked at it and said “what the$%*#! He just about bust-a-gut and asked the kid where he got the jar from and the kid said “in a box across the room.” Don ran right over there and began rummaging through the boxes looking for other good jars and came back to his table and asked the kid if it was for sale but the kid hemmed and hawed and said no. Don’s heart sunk as he said “Oh My!” Then out of the blue Jerry then came over to his table and told him he’d sell him the jar at a fair price. Don was so happy and grateful.

Don’s favorite Show used to be the York, PA show. According to him you could always find a lot of 1858’s and it seemed that most people weren’t really looking for them at the time in that area. Suffice it to say, he picked up many really scarce Mason jars over the years at that show and they are all still in his collection to this day. Unfortunately, Don didn’t have the money to buy a lot of amber jars back in the earlier years and that’s why he bought so many more reasonable priced aqua, clear and blue jars that were always different variations. At the time he bought them they didn’t go for a lot of money then but now they’re all probably $100 jars and better.

Don’s acquired a lot of jars over the years through word of mouth. Between friends and acquaintances who know he’s looking for Mason jars of all kinds these people would contact him about jars in which he could

hopefully use. An example of this is while at a Findlay show one year Bill Dudley was standing in front of his table with an older couple who was holding an amber quart shoulder seal Mason's Improved Jar. Don of course was completely speechless looking at that stunning jar and all he could verbalize was "Oh!" Bill says to him, "Don, you should have this jar." "Wow" he said! He couldn't believe it that Bill would think of him like that. So in the end Don paid $400 for that jar and he was so appreciative of the fact that Bill could have just bought the jar himself and kept it. **Man, this is friendship and networking at its finest as far as I'm concerned.**

While set up at Indy one year Glennie came to Don and said, "There's a man set up on the fifth floor who wants people to come up and look at his jars." Don told her, "ok I'll get up there." About a half hour later Glennie tells Don that no one has gone up there yet to look at his jars. So he goes up and Margaret Shaw was in the room standing there holding on to a midget Albany Aniline jar. So Margaret tells Don, "You should have this jar because it says Mason's Patent on the base." Well, Don told me that drool was running down his chin as he looked at that jar. If his memory serves him correctly he believes the jar was priced at $175 and he asked her if that was her best price. The lady said, "I think so" especially in light of the fact Margaret told her she'd buy it if Don didn't want to.

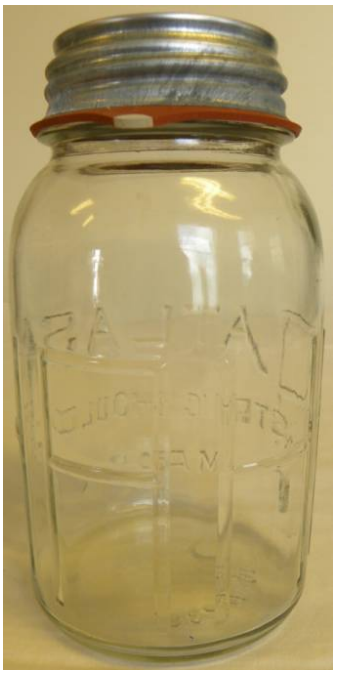
While walking around at a Montgomery, AL Show many years ago Don met Dick Harris who had a barrel there. Dick immediately said to him, "You might be interested in something I have" and he pulled out of his barrel a solid pour 1858 Mason. Of course Don went "Oh My!" yet again (*I'm seeing a pattern here folks*) and managed to get it for what Don says was a reasonable price. This solid pour is just one of the crudest pieces of glass I have ever seen and a fantastic 1858 go-with. What I find amazing about this solid glass pour is the fact it has the screw thread area included which I have not seen on any other solid pour. And the over-flow is pretty darn nice too if I don't say so myself.

Don mentioned he happened to know a young collector in Illinois in which he had purchased jars from in

1986. One day he receives a call from this young man saying he knew a person who owned a quart amber IG Mason jar. So Don quipped, “Well there aren’t any” and the young guy retorted, “Yes there is.” So he gave Don the owners name and number. Don called the owner up and he seemed like a really nice person. He really wanted to see the jar bad because he thought it was a fake jar. So the owner shipped the jar to him. He opened up the box and when he pulled the jar out with a friend at the table he said, “My God…that’s the real thing!” Don had no idea what to offer him but he threw out a price. Then the owner came back with another price a little higher and he said fine so he bought it. Don laughingly claims Phil Murphy nearly gave up collecting when he heard Don had bought the jar because Phil would have loved to have had the jar himself. And surprisingly, the jar came right out of Phil’s own backyard. And despite this being the most expensive jar he has in the collection, all Don can say about this wonderful acquisition is that he was very lucky. If the kid hadn’t called and the seller hadn’t been such a nice guy he wouldn’t have this incredible Mason jar now.

Another phenomenal jar in Don’s collection is a clear quart The Columbus Mason’s Patd 1858. He knew a person in Fort Wayne, IN who owned the jar but he wasn’t able to pry it from him. Then one day he was walking through an antique store in Michigan and found a ½ pint Globe jar on the shelf. He looked at the base and the jar had a price of $22.00 on it. Well, it was a no brainer to say the least so he bought it. He thought to himself, “I really like this jar even though it doesn’t say Mason on the jar.” Don called the fellow who owned the Columbus jar and brought the jar to his house. Being he was partial to half pints he was very interested in the Globe and in talking asked Don about a trade. Well, Don obviously liked the Columbus jar so he went to his house and they traded even up. Don to this day suspects he thought money wise he was getting the better while Don thought possibly the same in the opposite. But the bottom line was both ended up with a jar they really liked and wanted. Don claims this is one of the few trades he has ever made in his long and illustrious collecting career.

Art Snyder happened to have a clear quart Atlas Strong Shoulder Mason with HA grippers in his collection that Don had wanted badly for a very long time. Anna Mae Snider asked him and Al Vignon to catalog Art's jars after he passed away and Don thought to himself that he would end up going home with that jar. Don claims there are only two known examples of this rare jar. Both he and Al spent two days cataloging Art's jars separating the common from the rare and scarce. After cataloging all of the jars Don hadn't seen the Atlas jar and asked Al about it. Al unwittingly not knowing the rarity or the significance of the jar put it in a box with common jars. Don got it and when reading over Art's notes and final requests and couldn't believe that there was a special mention that this particular jar was to go to Russ Crupe. Apparently there had been a trade between the two and Art had never taken the time to get the jar to Russ. So the one and only jar in Art's entire collection that Don wanted didn't go home with him. Incredibly, only this past spring a good friend of Don's had the opportunity to buy the only other example of this rare jar and did so. Then he turned right around and sold it to Don at the Mansfield show. Of course Don was happy as the dickens to get it to say the least. It reminds me of the saying that good things come to those who wait and that was entirely true for Don in this situation. A jar in his top 10 want list came his way when he didn't even expect it to happen simply because yet again a close friend was looking out for him.



Don didn't really have any tragic jar stories to relate to me since he has never broken a jar of any major significance. Although in 1976 he says someone stole an LG midget off of his table at a show that was worth $250 at the time. That was a whole heck of a lot of money back then

and to this day he has never found out who did it.

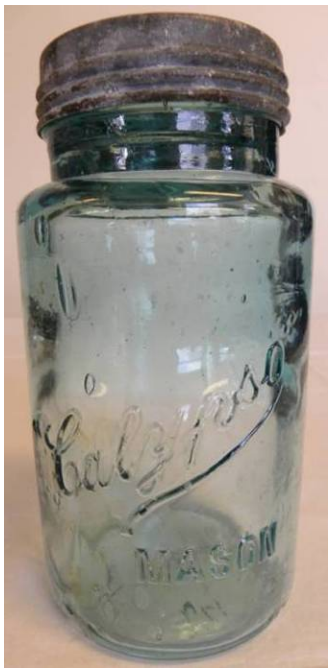
Don mentioned that collecting overall at least for him anyway has lost some of its fun and mainly because he can't find anything that he's looking for anymore. He's worried about the hobby because the main idea now seems to be who can get the best most expensive jars. And no one seems to be interested in the more "common and inexpensive" jars anymore. He remembers Granny Kath saying she didn't write for people collecting amber Van Vliets but instead for the ordinary collectors. He thinks the hobby is lacking many of these ordinary collectors now. Don says he's sorry but IHO he claims nobody is going to start out buying 1k jars if they never collected before. "If you're going to get burnt, you better to get burnt on a $5 jar rather than on a $100 jar or better." He feels you can make a pretty nice collection out of common jars and he never liked the term "junk" jars. In Don's opinion there are no junk jars just common jars or jars most advanced collectors aren't interested in.

Don mentioned that Roy Brown used to sell more good jars than anyone he can remember with the exception of Greg Spurgeon of late. Roy would have some really good jars on his sales table as well as a few common ones because he never forgot the ordinary collector. Don had a heck of lot of respect for him because of that fact.

Don would say to beginning collectors what a lot of other advanced collectors would say, "buy the best jar you can with what money you have." If you're buying jars with the thinking of selling them one day that's one thing but Don says he didn't buy his jars with the idea in mind of selling them one day at all. He loves all of his jars from the $5 ones to the thousands of dollar ones and the cheaper ones are just as much a part of the collection as the rest. And although the more common ones don't mean as much to him as the "better" jars they are still an integral part of his collection because they say Mason on them. Don says newer collectors should specialize whether it is color, or closures or whatever the rhyme or reason and doing so will make it far easier to realize your goals.

Don also told me collecting has given him and Glennie a wonderful opportunity to travel, know a lot of people they wouldn't otherwise know and make some of the best friends they have ever had and solely due to collecting fruit jars. Don says Glennie being the wonderful person that she is has put up with his collecting all of these years now. No doubt Don has made many good friends over the years but one person in particular is Mason Bright. If he ever needed anything and for whatever reason Mason would be there for him. He met Mason many years ago at Flat Rock and they talked for hours about fruit jars. Nancy and Glennie hit it off immediately and became good close friends.

Don is without a doubt an advanced fruit jar collector. His goals are currently to simply find some of the toughest Mason jars that he hasn't come across in the 39 years he has been collecting and that's a daunting task to say the least. He has an astounding 16 different jars with letters in a shield but he still needs nine more. You don't ever see these jars for sale anymore Don claims and he realizes he might just never find them. There are also many numbered jars he is still looking to acquire. One such jar, a Mason's 119 recently sold for way too much money than he was willing to part with to get that particular jar.



Don says he really can't expand all that much now because he really doesn't have that much more room left down in his basement. He's 79 and it's tougher to do the things he once did easily since he's losing sight in his left eye which is compounding things for him. He worries that he might not be able to drive in two or three years and that will cut into his fruit jar activities in a huge way. He also claims it's getting tougher to find good jars for resale now. He's sold many good jars over the years to supplement his income and that is slowly getting harder and harder to do. Sales have been tough of late and he says people just aren't buying the more common jars anymore as they once did. He has some really nice $5 and $10 jars but they're not moving. Despite all of these things, Don is still an indomitable positive and cheerful person.

Sometimes it takes unfortunate circumstances in order to accomplish extraordinary positive things. This was just one such circumstance of many lately that I have encountered. My wife was away on an emergency and I was feeling a bit down. Yes, once again your humble author was temporarily Mr. Lonely. I was feeling a bit down and the weather was really lousy on a Friday morning in late October and through my fogged and gloomy thought processes a brilliant idea came to light. Why not take a trip and visit with some other collectors especially some old timers. With the persuasion of a very good collector friend, I made the 545 mile, 9 hour trip to visit with *Mr. Mason* and another well known collector and I must say wholeheartedly I am that much the richer now for the experience.

When I arrived at Don's home I was nicely surprised to see the idyllic picturesque setting in which he and Glennie lived in. It was somehow exactly what I expected of a small town Midwestern home setting. Don and Glennie Burkett are just simply some of the most dear and wonderful people I have ever had the fortune of meeting. I spent the entire day with them and had such a good time. Their hospitality was more than I ever could have expected. Don (*Mr. Mason*) absolutely has a fabulous collection of Mason jars and so many rare, scarce and sleeper jars among them that it's impossible to even begin to mention them all. Rummaging through his basement I felt like a brand new collector again looking for special treasures only Don's basement is chock full of incredible treasures everywhere. He has probably the most complete sets of numbered and lettered 1858's in the country along with just about every kind of jar imaginable that has the word Mason embossed on it. Don also has a large amount of Toledo, OH sodas and many more items all over the basement making it a truly memorable venture.

Don has a superior knowledge and intuition of fruit jars that only comes from hands on and time in. He is so beloved by the collecting community it amazes me and IMO is unparalleled. I won't soon forget my visit with *Mr. Mason*. It was worth all of the time, effort and driving to be with a man I as well as many others consider a "Giant" in the hobby. Don is someone who has truly shaped the Fruit Jar collecting landscape over the years and continues to do so even to this day.