



When my son Alec and I decided to travel west by car this summer, one of the places I desired to stop at was Whitewood Saskatchewan to visit George Chopping and his museum. The name of George Chopping (pronounced the same as chopping wood) was known to myself from my earlier days of collecting Fruit Jars, from references in the Unitts book "Bottle Collecting in Canada" and his recent ad in the last edition of Canadian Bottle and stoneware collector magazine.



Whitewood Saskatchewan is some 70 Kilometers west from the Manitoba border on Highway #1, the Trans-Canada highway, and some 2550 kilometers from Toronto as the car drives. Old Georges Museum is on the North side of the highway which crosses Whitewood's northern limit. As you pass the usual Prairie gaggle of service stations and highway stops Georges is just before you leave town heading west. You can't miss his large newly re-painted sign.

We arrived late in the afternoon of our third day of traveling west, rang the front door bell and found George's note on the side door directing us to the local truck stop where we found him having coffee. After introductions, a coffee and a general chat on the state of the bottle collecting field, George invited us back for a tour of his collection.

George's museum is housed in a large rambling late nineteenth century yellow brick house. The house is filled to the brim with antiques of all description collected over a lifetime from all corners of the prairies. The real heart of the collection for a bottle & stoneware collector resides in the basement where George keeps his extensive western bottle and crock collection. I really had no idea of the scope, variety & scale of western collectibles in these categories. We viewed Manitoba Hutchinson sodas with mug bases, Baltimore loop seal closure and even a crown top adaptation to a hutch moulded bottle.

We saw no fewer than nine variants of Hudson Bay Company Medicinal bottles, three sizes of skull poison (real moulded skulls, not just embossed) in cobalt blue, a wide variety of prairie ginger beers and soda siphons, and small town medicines. The stoneware in the west tends to be later in date than most of the earlier salt glaze items we are used to seeing on Ontario, but this doesn't distract from the fascination of seeing Jugs from small prairie towns that time has forgotten or that don't even exist anymore (and George has lots of them).

We then entered the area that houses the pieces George dug from the Beausejour glassworks site in Manitoba in the late 1970's. This was a real learning experience for me as this glass house spans, in its brief history, the era when hand blowing gave way to the machine made glass. George has examples of pieces from both periods and a variety of colours, including a distinct shade of bluey-green-yellow (hard to describe) glass that is solely a Beausejour colour. The one of a kind "success" brand fruit jars (wheat sheaf emblem) in quart and pint were assembled by George from pieces dug in the site and have this distinct colour. These jars were a rare treat, as they are a real piece of fruit jar mythology and history. George's take on these jars is that they never made it into production because of the small narrow threads would not snug up a standard fruit jar ring, which were quite crude at this period and therefore a good seal could not be achieved. The later "Acme Seal" jars produced by machine at this site have more pronounced threads.



Behind the Victorian house George is assembling a wild west style town from salvaged buildings and architectural pieces, and is a work in progress. George led us into a small low building made from found material (mainly small trees, it is the prairies after all) which he had hauled in from 12 miles north of Whitewood. To enter this tiny cabin we had to stoop as the ceilings were about five feet high (we're both about six feet). This was a real prairie settlers cabin appointed with period furniture and wood stove. Sitting in this cabin around the old table with George was for any student of history a step back in time. You could almost feel and see the people of the time and the hardship of living through a prairie winter in such confined a space. Absolutely marvelous.



I was lucky enough on our travels to secure a copy of George's book "Bottles of the Canadian prairies, (403 pages, hardbound) published in 1978. Only a thousand of these were ever printed and I hate to admit I was unaware of its existence until our visit. The book is chocked full of great photos of prairie bottles and crocks and would be a must for any complete library on Canada bottles.

Well our time with George was at an end. (we stopped briefly for a couple of pictures on the return trip) and I rated it as one of the highlights of our western road trip. George is as friendly and engaging an individual as you'll meet anywhere and he extended his best prairie hospitality. The items on display are numerous and offer a slice of prairie history not to be missed. If you are traveling west across the long flat prairie this is a must stop for any collector.