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All bottled up: Collectors share more than an affinity for milk bottles

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Don Lord sits next to a small portion of his milk bottle collection at the Fraternal Hall on Saturday morning. (Gary Feinstein/The Sentinel)

California milk bottle collectors from throughout the state gathered at the Hanford Fraternal Hall on Saturday, but what they exchanged went far beyond the vintage glass bottles that filled the tables. For many of the collectors in attendance at the annual show, like Don Lord of Hanford, the show served as an opportunity to reconnect and share stories with those they've met over the years.

The California milk bottle shows began in 1994 in the backyard of Fred Hayes' Sacramento home and have continued as a result of the dedication and passion of an unorganized group of collectors including Lord, 77.



Hayes, 79, said he began collecting milk bottles as a hobby more than 20 years ago, but after meeting people like Lord, he's stuck with it.

"I learned milk bottle people were good people," he said.

Lord is debatably the foremost expert on California milk bottles and self-published the first and only book specifically about the collectibles in 1984, "California Milks."

His collection began more than 40 years ago when he was the assistant to the regional production manager of Foremost Dairies in San Luis Obispo and was given the job of closing one of the company's plants.

Lord was told to throw away everything that was left but when he came across six old milk bottles in one of the cabinets he took them home and began a collection and a hobby that he would pursue for years to come.

"I should've thrown them away because I've probably gone through 50,000 bottles since," Lord said.

Since then he's had more than 6,000 bottles at one time, but slowly began scaling back his collection in 2001 when he donated his best bottles, 192 bottles worth more than \$100,000, to the University of California, Davis.

After a long career in the dairy industry, Lord retired from the California Milk Advisory Board in 1978 and he and his wife, Sue, moved to Hanford in 1984.

Sue Lord attends the shows with her husband and has grown to enjoy it just as much as he does.

“It’s like a reunion when they get together; it’s a lot of fun. The hardest part is just taking it all down,” she said.

Lord said he now relies on his friend and fellow collector, Gene Martin, to help him organize the annual event.

Martin’s collection has grown to include 1,100 bottles at one time, but he said he’s reached his peak and has been selling them off ever since.

“It’s been a work of fun and love with these guys,” Lord said about the relationships he’s developed with his fellow collectors.

Last year’s show was dedicated to their friend, Harold Gouge of Lemoore, who died at the age of 60 in 2007.

“This is our second show without him,” Martin said.

Martin still gets choked up talking about him because people like Gouge were the very reason he's kept up his collection.

Bottles were exchanged for anywhere from \$10 to \$300 at the show, but there were many more handshakes, hugs and laughs exchanged.

On Saturday, Martin had one vintage bottle for sale with a Donald Duck design for \$300. He said distinguishing marks like that make the bottles more valuable.

It's clear to see that the California milk bottles have become secondary to the relationships that have developed as a result of their collections.

"Sometimes you sell a lot of bottles, sometimes you sell a few, but it's more about the people and getting together," Hayes said.

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