

Digging Up The Past Yields Century-Old Time Capsules

BY LINDA B. CONDRILLO
Specially Written for This Is Westfield

Barry Batzel has been collecting old bottles ever since he was a teenager growing up in rural Pennsylvania. Now a field construction supervisor for the Town of Westfield, Mr. Batzel has had the good fortune of being at the right place at the right time to unearth some fascinating pieces of local history.

In 1999, while overseeing a development project at the end of Prospect Street near Sedgwick and Hamilton Streets, Mr. Batzel noticed a two-foot layer of burnt coal beneath his feet. The refuse had almost certainly been settling there for close to 100 years. Mr. Batzel realized that this was not going to be any ordinary work day.

At lunchtime, he put on a pair of gloves – not only to protect his hands from what he suspected lie beneath the century old ashes – but also to ensure minimal breakage of what could be found intact while sifting through the debris of bits and pieces of the past.

Mr. Batzel told *This Is Westfield*, “Most of what I have collected over the years has come from job sites. When I’m at a site, I’ll occasionally see some broken glass mixed in with coal and ashes – which is usually a tell-tale sign.” He added, “Sometimes, it just breaks my heart to know what we’re filling in.”

Mr. Batzel has retrieved so many bottles over the past years that he has run out of room to display them.

Spread out on his windowsills, perched behind covered curio cabinets and scattered in no particular order, are a fascinating mélange of decanters, vials, jars and jugs.

Often irregular, misshapen and asymmetrical, many of the inkwells, perfume bottles and poison vials boast striking hues.

Mr. Batzel remarked, “I like the colored ones the best – the amber, green or cobalt pieces – especially when the morning light hits them.”

The words “James C. Casey Pharmacy,

Broad and Prospect Streets, Westfield” are visible on Mr. Batzel’s assortment of opaque aquamarine medicine bottles. Another, characteristically cloudy from being under ground too long, reads “Gale’s Pharmacy, Westfield, N.J.” One-quart milk bottles bear the imprints of “Maple Farm Dairy, Westfield, New Jer-

sey.” He also has bottles from two other now defunct local dairies, Aug. Danker and Lawrance Powers of Westfield, New Jersey.

One of Mr. Batzel’s favorite milk bottles has a special lip designed to catch the cream that would rise to the top. The word “whip” is written in curly script and can be seen on the neck of the bottle, the origin of which is unknown.

To identify and price some pieces in his collection, Mr. Batzel relies on the well-known resource “Kovels’ Bottles Price List” by Terry and Ralph Kovel. He noted, “Of course, the local bottles aren’t found in that book.” He added, “I really should go to the Westfield Historical Society to see if they can help.”

Mr. Batzel’s collection also contains a stone-ware jug from the Amour and Company of Chicago, which might have originally been filled with root beer. He’s also found whiskey flasks, although he noted, “It’s uncommon to find anything metal because it rusts away after time. Sometimes, a cork will be partially intact, but that’s rare.”

And just what does one do with bottles that once contained Kickapoo Oil Elixir of Opium and Munyon’s Homoeopathic Home Remedies? Or remnants of a classic example of a quack cure called Kilmer’s Swamp Root Kidney Liver and Bladder Remedies?

Mr. Batzel said, “I’ll probably sell some of them someday. I’ve had to put many of them away in boxes. They tend to take up too much room and collect a lot of dust.”

Thanks to Mr. Batzel, an interesting medley of uncommon times capsules are safely resting above ground once again.



Photo by Linda Condrillo

BOTTLE OPENER...Recovered treasures that were buried in Westfield’s ashes provide a varied and colorful display from a century ago.

Mom’s Humor; Scan, Bag and Pump

BY HELEN HEIDI
Bernard Heeney Creative Writing Contest

Along with Oregon, New Jersey is one of only two states that ban self-service gas pumps. But soon, we may be doing everything else ourselves.

In and around Westfield, more and more of the “service” industries expect customers to scan, bag, swipe and stir.

Now, I love efficiency as much as the next busy mom, treasuring any opportunity to save time and effort. I bag my own groceries, for example, according to where they go in my kitchen. My “like-with-like” method accomplishes more than merely satisfying my control-freak tendencies. It translates into a faster exit from the store and a quicker unloading at home. I also love ATMs. The machine has everything right at your fingertips.

I never, however, liked salad bars. When I go to a restaurant, I prefer to have the trained professionals wave their wands over my plate, artfully arranging the main and side dishes. If I’m forced to create my own magic, I always have the feeling that everyone else’s plate looks more coordinated, more enticing and more flavorful. Being served is one of the reasons I choose to go out.

Grocery bagging, banks and salad bars are classic examples of traditional self-serve practices. The self-checkout line at the grocery store has transferred a major responsibility from the retailer to the consumer. The whole food-procurement effort has never been a favorite chore of mine. I’ve often spent a solid two hours purchasing, packing and unpacking, only to find that there’s nothing in the refrigerator for dinner. I’ve never been able to get through self-service checkout without a time-wasting glitch: a missing produce code, a bagging alarm or an unscannable item.

When going out for coffee, I choose Dunkin’ Donuts. I love their brews. What keeps me going back, however, has less to do with aroma more to do with sweetener and skim.

The employees pour it, add milk and stir in my preferred half-teaspoon of sugar. I immediately get what I paid for and love that. Other outlets expect me to put in my own milk and sugar – or even worse, pour my own.

Fast food restaurants now give you an empty cup, with the understanding that you’ll pour your own beverage just like home. The operative phrase here is that I’ve left home and gone out.

This great labor pushback goes beyond groceries and coffee. Department stores ask customers to swipe their cards and don’t require personal identification. When buying clothing as a gift, retailers slip a flattened two-piece box and too-small rectangle of tissue into my bag. The building and packaging are my responsibility. Wrappers, of course, are virtually obsolete.

I even believe our parking stations contribute to the labor pushback movement. Instead of putting coins in a meter by my car, I now cross the lot to a central station and enter my space number. While it saves the parking attendants from having to check individual meters, it takes more of my time.

Most of these observations would be minor inconveniences if they were accompanied by lower prices. It doesn’t seem to work that way, though. Whether I’m pouring or they are, and there’s no discount.

While visiting a friend over a recent holiday weekend, we drew comparisons between living in Westfield and in her Boston suburb. Both communities have excellent schools, vibrant downtowns and wonderful parks. Like me, she probably bags her own groceries and stirs her own coffee. She most likely builds her own gift boxes and fills her children’s soda cups. We laughed about how easily each of us could slip into the other’s shoes. And then we stumbled upon the deal breaker.

She has to pump her own gas.



Treachery at Fair Acres

BY BARBARA BURTON
Bernard Heeney Creative Writing Contest

Turning the corner from Chestnut Street toward the stable, Lily knew she should be heading home for dinner instead, but she wanted to see Sir Galahad one last time before tomorrow’s race. “I just know he’s going to win” she murmured.

Galahad’s trainer, Hal Shrub, was in deep conversation with Winston Frew, the steward of the Fair Acres Driving Club. They were standing by the grandstand, which had just been completed in time for the 1901 race season. What were they were talking about?

After slipping into Galahad’s stall, Lily stroked the magnificent animal. “You’re a champion, Gally,” she whispered. “You are going to break the track record, I just know it!”

The horse neighed and continued to eat his oats. Lily reached up for the sugar cubes she always kept on the shelf. This time, her hand touched something unfamiliar. She pulled out a small black sack that contained white powder. It was granular with an odd flowery smell – puzzling. She better ask her father.

Heading from the grandstand towards Picton Street, she ran into Hal Shrub, who had finished with Winston Frew. Shrub trained horses for club founder Robert Fairbairn and other members of the Fair Acres Driving Club.

As usual, Shrub had the smell of liquor on his breath. “What brings you out now, Lily?” Hal asked. “Oh, I just wanted to see Sir Galahad before tomorrow’s race. Father thinks that he may have a horse to beat Mr. Fairbairn!”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” laughed Hal. “You know that Mr. Fairbairn does not like to lose! He spent a lot of money putting this track in here for the fine people of Westfield, and he wants to maintain his winning streak.”

“Yes, but Gally is special,” Lily said. “He is one of the best trotters to come out of racing

since Hambletonian himself!”

She knew not to mention the sack to Hal. “Well, I must get home for dinner,” she said. “Clare is preparing oyster stew!” Heading towards the Hollingshead family home, gas streetlights guided her with their bluish glow.

At dinner, Lily mentioned that she had visited Sir Galahad. She pulled out the sack. Her brother, Frank, examined it closely. “I am not sure what this is,” he said, “but I can tell you it should not have been in Galahad’s stall. It looks like a sleeping powder. I’ll take it to the Merck lab on Monday.”

“Monday may be too late,” said Mr. Hollingshead. “It looks to me like someone has been trying to slow our horse down. I’m getting to the bottom of this. Clare, get Fairbairn on the line!” he shouted to the housekeeper. Mr. Hollingshead went into the parlor where the telephone was located.

Townsppeople were pleased when Westfield got the needed poles and wiring. The Hollingsheads were one of the first on their block to have the contraption installed. Nothing sensitive could be discussed over the telephone. Several neighbors shared the party line and the switchboard operator could listen in to any conversation.

Her father and Mr. Fairbairn met at the Westfield Club that evening. It wasn’t until midnight that her father returned. “Lily, your detective work paid off,” he cried. “One of Fairbairn’s men examined the powder. It was Belladonna. Fairbairn has been keeping an eye on Hal Shrub, who had been drinking heavily recently. Shrub confessed that Winston Frew had paid him \$50 to give the potion to Galahad. Apparently, Frew has gotten into trouble with the bookmakers,” he said.

“Now, I am going to get a good night’s rest and I won’t need Belladonna,” Lily yawned.

Note: This story is fiction, although William Fairbairn did create the Fair Acres Race Track that operated from 1900 to 1909 near the current Washington School on Saint Marks Avenue.