



Norm Jay holds one of his favorite pre-Prohibition era trays, showing a scene of an Indian standing in a canoe, from Rock Island Brewing Co., Rock Island, Illinois. The tray is extremely rare and in stunning condition.

Norm Jay might be able to teach Warren Buffett a thing or two about the art of the deal. He's put together quite a few in his time, both during his long and successful career in sales, and in amassing an extraordinary collection of outstanding breweriana, artfully displayed in his comfortable Wheaton, IL home.

Although Jay's collection is broad and deep, he has approached collecting strategically, like a salesman carving out his own niche and recognizing the value of focus and specialization. "I purposely steered clear of ball knobs, enamel glasses and labels," he said, "because I had friends who were heavily into them and I really didn't want to compete. That's a reason I started collecting pre-Prohibition mugs:

Norm Jay: Mastering the Art of Collecting

by Ken Quaas

in part because they were rare and valuable, and [also because] I didn't see a lot of other guys collecting them."

Mugs & More

In fact, Jay's collection of brewery mugs—both ceramic and glass mugs with pewter and porcelain lids—are both beautiful and astounding. In fact, his collection numbers about 490 unique mugs, interestingly exhibited throughout his home. These drinking vessels, as much as anything in Jay's collection,

speaks to a bygone era in brewery advertising that ended with Prohibition.

But Jay did not stop at mugs. Far from it. He also has a spectacular array of openers, lithographs, signs, trays, and even brewery-branded pub tables and chairs. His basement "man cave," complete with a 1930s era bar obtained from a now-demolished bowling alley in Cicero, IL, is a fitting home to much of his collection. It seems as if Jay both knows and relishes the details of every piece in his collection as he deftly guides a visitor through his personal museum. "I guess I should've been a history teacher," he said



To best display his vast array of mugs, Jay acquired some antique barbershop shaving mug racks. These beautiful wooden wall units were compartmentalized to hold the personalized shaving mugs of each of the barber's patrons – much like the mug clubs at modern brewpubs.

with a smile, “because I just love this old stuff.”

Nashville Roots

It feels highly appropriate that a man who was born the same year Prohibition was repealed should have such a fine collection of promotional beer items—a collection that is now some 46 years old. And it all started a bit by chance.

“We were living in Nashville at that time,” Jay recalled, “and I was traveling as a salesman for Johnson & Johnson. The son of one of my friends collected memorabilia from the old Gerst Brewery. He asked me to look out for those in my travels and I started to find them and pick them up for him. It wasn’t long before I got bit by the collecting bug myself.”

Indeed, Jay assembled his own collection of Gerst items, amassed from his time traveling. Several of his Gerst pieces are the only ones of their kind known.

Eventually, the Jay family

moved back to Illinois, and he took a new sales job. This time his travels allowed him to indulge in a new passion: beer cans. He was actively collecting cans at the height of the 1970s can craze. “I’d go somewhere and bring back a six pack of full cans,” he said. “Then I’d sell them empty. But those cans didn’t empty themselves,” he laughed. “It’s a wonder that I still have my kidneys!”

A Notable Chicago Collection

As is the case with many can collectors, Jay’s passion soon evolved into a greater interest in breweriana.

While he continued collecting Gerst, he expanded into Chicago brewery items (some of his favorites are from the Independent Brewing Company) and other high-quality pieces. “My philosophy has always been to buy the nicest stuff in the

best condition that I can find,” Jay said. When you experience this remarkable collection, you can see this approach has served him well.

Over time, Jay has become a well-known and respected statesman in the breweriana collecting hobby. Through shows and flea markets, he became friends with other avid Chicago-area collectors like Adolf Greinke, Bob Kay, Dave Lendy, and the late John Murray and Jim Shoulter. Jay served as an officer of NABA for many years—service highlighted by a 4-year term as president (1998-2002), following in the footsteps of predecessors Murray and Shoulter.



This black and white lithograph, which depicts the Sands Brewing Company, is the only one known. Just to the left foreground in the illustration of the brewery, note the landmark Chicago Water Tower (still standing in the heart of downtown Chicago). Famously, the Water Tower was the only area structure to survive the Great Chicago Fire (1871).

This litho dates from the year before the fire.



One of the many rare and beautiful pieces Jay owns from Gerst Brewing Co. in Nashville: a 1904 calendar lithograph featuring a courting couple from the Victorian era.



This stunning self-framed tin is one of many in Jay’s collection. It shows an unusual cock fighting scene that fits with the slogan, *The Beer You Can Bet Your Money On*. R.I.B.: Rock Island Brewing, Rock Island, Illinois.

Thrill of the Hunt

Despite collecting for nearly half a century, time has not slowed Jay nor his interest. He continues to attend local shows and national conventions, and is an active member of NABA, ABA, ECBA, and BCCA. Most importantly, Jay enjoys the many friendships he has made through collecting and still thrives on the thrill of the hunt. His passion shows when he relates a story generated by the discovery of a rare, pre-Pro tray in one of the many antique shops he haunts, this one in Indiana: "I had to be careful," he smiled. "I didn't want to show [the store's owner] how much I really wanted it."

Spoken like a man whose mind remains focused on crafting a deal. One look at Norm Jay's jaw-dropping array of antique brewery items leaves no doubt: this skill has served him well in carefully acquiring and curating a masterful collection.

A large self-framed tin touts Topaz Beer as being "Good to the last drop." This pre-Pro sign, from Chicago's Fortune Bros. Brewing Co., is the only one known.



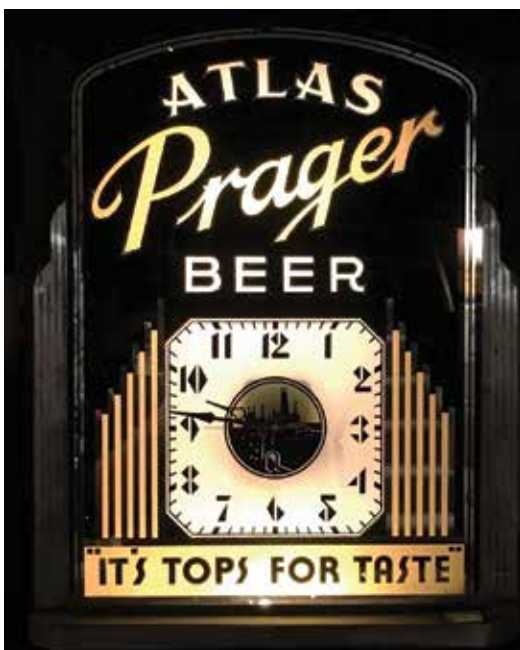
A colorful porcelain and metal flange sign advertises the "Cereal Beverage" that Edelweiss Brewing in Chicago made during Prohibition years.



Above: This 1930s reverse-paint-on-glass lighted clock back bar sign from Keeley Brewing Co. in Chicago keeps time "just right" on Jay's desk.



Left: One of Jay's most recent discoveries came from an attic in Indiana via an antique store he frequents there. This pre-Pro tray is from Schaller Brewing Co. in Cincinnati.



This large backlit Atlas Prager (Chicago) reverse-on-glass clock, resplendent in its art deco styling, greets visitors at the lower level of the Jay's museum-like home.



These Prima signs from the pre-Prohibition Independent Brewing Co. are just a few of the many items from Jay's favorite Chicago brewery.