

The Life and Times of Mel Babitzke

The first attention I paid to great advertising and promotion occurred as a teenager while working at the local British American (BA) dealer in Gleichen, Alberta. The dealer decided to add Royal Triton oil to the BA line-up of products. This oil was dyed purple in color! In addition, Lodge spark plugs were available in pink colored porcelain. Of course every teenager had to have pink spark plugs and purple lube oil in their vehicles! The spark plugs showed up particularly well in Chrysler and Ford flathead engines. For perspective, gas at this time was \$0.31 per gallon!

I also spent every summer with my uncle on his farm North of Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, which is also where I was born in 1941. All I ever wanted after my first summer was to farm, however my uncle had other ideas. At the time, the economics of farming was in a low cycle. As a result, my uncle offered to pay the costs to attend the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in Calgary. I managed to set aside my desire to farm and selected Power Engineering as my major.

The oil industry in Western Canada was booming with the construction of numerous natural gas processing plants plus pipelines being built to supply natural gas to Eastern markets.

This created many job opportunities for Steamers and other specializations. When I was approaching graduation, BA was conducting interviews for plant staff for a facility at Pincher Creek in SW Alberta near Waterton Lakes National Park. I was employed at this facility from 1961 to 1968. At the end of my time with BA, rumors were rampant about a Gulf Oil takeover. This situation caused me to box up a random selection of BA branded items, marking the beginning of my love of collecting oil and gas collectibles. My first box of items was put into storage for nearly ten years afterwards.

After 1968, I was hired by Banff Oil Ltd. to work at their facility at Rainbow Lake. In 1972, I was transferred to a new facility West of Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. This offered many new opportunities to wander the Edmonton/South territory looking for collectibles! During one of these excursions, I met a man named Ron Carey, and he was also on a collector tour of the area. Neither one of us knew why we wanted to gather up old oil cans other than we both thought they made great looking shelf decorations!

The next move initiated by my industry had me relocated to the Okotoks area of Alberta. I happened to live only twenty kilometers from Ron Carey's residence, which led to almost weekly visits with Ron. We stoked each other's passion for collectibles, and I was impressed by Ron's vast knowledge. Looking back, Ron was a very large influence on the future trajectory of my pursuit of this hobby. To this day, I tremendously value the time I spent with him both as a consultant and friend.

My connection with Ron also gave me front row seats to the unfolding of his development of Gasoline Alley at Heritage Park in Calgary. He began by utilizing a barn that was onsite at the park to found the beginnings of Gasoline Alley. This undertaking became an enormously popular attraction for Heritage Park. Ron directed this success into the world-class facility that continues to attract visitors to this day. During this period, I began to dedicate fully to the development of my collection. This involved going farther afield ultimately leading to travelling to most of the communities in Western Canada, and also Ontario and the United States. I greatly enjoyed these excursions due to the fascinating people I met along the way.

In the end, I found myself reconnecting with my desire to farm. I returned to my farming roots through the decision to grow and produce horse and dairy quality hay. I spent much of my retirement trying my best to outfox the weather to enable the production of great quality hay, and developed a positive reputation in the area as a reliable producer. This passion fueled me, and my efforts towards collecting took a backseat, as my life came full circle to what my uncle had originally inspired. As I look back now, I do have to admit that collecting was much more fun than growing hay!

I now find myself moving into the next stage of life through the sale of my collection for others to enjoy. I look forward to discovering the next source of joy life has in store and happily report that I have no regrets.

42 YEAR OUTSTANDING COLLECTOR AUCTION

