



Richard Carney TREASURE DIVER

By Sherry Ballou Hanson



IT IS THE hunt that makes me do it," said Richard (Rick) Carney Jr. of Brunswick, Maine, in a recent interview. "Anywhere there were people, there is stuff." Carney is referring to the thousands of old bottles, crockery items, coins, rings and clay pipes he digs, dives for and collects. Carney's interest in old bottles began when he was twelve and his mother had a yard sale from bottles she had dug up. Rick was hooked, but his fascination with old treasures did not stop there.

Early on in his twenty-five years as a scuba diver, he purchased underwater metal detecting equipment to expand his search activities. Soon after, he found a class ring in twelve feet of water at Camp Fernwood on Thompson Lake in West Poland, Maine. Carney decided to track down the owner, using initials engraved on the band. Beverly Winslow Parker, class of 1944 at Saugus High School in Saugus, Massachusetts, was speechless when in September of 1994 she answered the phone and learned her long lost ring had been found. Carney's diving adventures take him all over New England now.

In addition to his collecting, Carney creates a line of jewelry from old bottle fragments, and also works on stained glass to produce one-of-a-kind window panels and lampshades. This hobby has turned into a fun and exciting company he calls "Old Bottle Sea Glass of Maine." Last October Carney and his wife Cindy had a booth at Apple Harvest Day in Dover, New Hampshire, and while taking a break from selling his wares he wandered over to the nearby Cochecho River, wondering what treasures the dark river held. He returned the next week with his gear and went in to find out. He thought this would be "black water" diving, meaning water all churned up from the current, but that was not the case. The water was clear, and right in front of him when he went under was a flawless four-gallon crock made in Bennington, Vermont, with a big blue flower painted on the side. Only the

bottom was "black," and he hauled up all sorts of treasures that day.

Diving in a river in Hudson, Massachusetts last year he was amazed to find a perfect glass gasoline pump globe with the words "THAT GOOD GULF GASOLINE" still visible. That glass globe used to light up on top of Gulf gas pumps at service stations back in the 1930s-'40s is worth anywhere from \$400 to \$1,000 to a collector today. After swimming in near shore to stash the globe, he went back out and in quick succession found an old sword and then a whole suitcase, which he took to shore and opened.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Treasure diver Richard Carney of Exeter, NH. Treasures from one dive site, notice the four pitchers lined up in the back. THIS PAGE, *above right*: The source of sea glass is this coral encrusted treasure, with blue apothecary bottles clearly visible. RIGHT: Pinkish tinged coral encrusts these treasures from the deep.



The old Riverton Trolley Park at the outer end of Forrest Avenue in Portland, Maine, has been drawing Carney back for 12 years for good reason: the park tossed all of its trash in the water, and every year the current either covers up everything on the bottom or digs deep furrows, exposing new treasure. There is a 1972 Vega automobile buried deep in the river bottom out there and Rick uses this as kind of an anchor spot to work from. Last fall on a dive there he recovered two blemish-free steamboat urinals and sold each for \$100.

His workshop is filled with brown English rum bottles and eagle flasks that will go into the shades and panels. Tiny olive

morphine bottles less than 1 inch high and Carter's aqua ink bottles line a printers' composition drawer hanging on one wall. The workshop has spilled into the basement and bottles of all types line shelves. He has collected lots of brilliant, green-blue-colored pepper sauce bottles he cuts in half to make lamp shades. Preparing last summer for one of the annual New England bottle and craft shows, Carney was embedding an old ceramic doll's head in a glass panel to hang in some lucky customer's window.

Carney may have succeeded at every man's dream of turning an exciting hobby into a life's work. "The trash is every-

Wentworth Hotel dive in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where the hotel used to dump its trash.

Inside was a collection of knives, including antique throwing knives, hunting knives and commemorative styles.

Carney considers the Piscataqua River at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the most dangerous river to dive, with its tides, swift currents and poor visibility. There is always an eight to ten knot current and he rigs himself a search line from an anchor. "Navigating underwater is like navigating blind," he says. "Always trust the equipment. You can't see anything, you're feeling around for stuff." He does have a pretty good sense of which way is up, but Carney has learned to trust his compass implicitly.

Maine steamboat landing finds on a recent dive include a brass faucet fixture and other items dumped off steamboats that departed from and landed at this site.





A large, fully intact bowl and several bottles from a dive in the Connecticut River.

where, peoples' trash for 200 years. I don't look at it that way, but in 1850, whoever threw out that jug said 'this is garbage.' The best of his treasures are on display in glass front cabinets in the home he shares with his wife.

Word got around after the Saugus High School ring find, and soon Carney was getting calls to find lost items. In 1998 when Frank Chandler of Boston first heard the diver speak of having a sixth sense, Chandler had serious doubts about this guy from Maine being able to find the platinum and gold wedding band he had lost the year before in Salmon Lake in Belgrade, just weeks after his wedding. However, he invited Carney to his July Fourth gathering on the lake in 1999, where Carney found the ring on his third try. Chandler was dumb founded.

Carney does lots of research about wrecks and dump

sites and will even go up to someone's door and ask if he can dig at the site of their old burn pile or privy. He pours over old maps and records to get background information on what he might find in specific locations. His oldest discoveries are from the 1760s and he has brought up lots of 1790s bottles, dishes, crockery and clay pipes down in Phippsburg, Maine, on the Kennebec River. Phippsburg dumped the town trash there near Parker Head

The lobster is right at home among these treasures of the deep.



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Steamboat Landing, across from Center Pond, for 200 years.

“I was the first person in 150 years to go into Wiscasset Harbor,” says Carney in wonder. He started bringing up perfect bottles from the 1760s to the 1790s, and big, colorful chunks of glass untouched since the 1850s. He dons heavy Kevlar gloves and stuffs his treasures into a mesh bag or pouch to haul up to his boat, aptly named Finders Keepers.

Carney dives all year, most of the time by himself. “Winter is my favorite time,” he says, “no boats, no people, and I know my comfort zone.” But as Carney says, diving is inherently dangerous, especially in winter. One wrong move and a diver could end up under the ice. On a recent dive on the site of the Essex Steamboat Museum, he was diving around pilings, but came up to check on his friend, whereupon their regulators froze up. The air was 40 degrees F, but the water was 34 F. That was the end of diving for that day.

“It’s a whole different ballgame diving in a dry suit,” says Carney, who wears this heavier outfit from December until May. He has to wear extra weights to stay on the bottom, which makes the whole outfit cumbersome. He switches to a 7 millimeter weight wet suit in late spring and 3 millimeter suit for summer. “I don’t take chances, I know my comfort level. If the hair suddenly stands up on the back of my neck, I get out of there.” He mostly dives alone because others don’t want to take the time and trouble. Visibility is often poor due to current, and to his own activities which stir up the mud. The torpedoes he uses to propel himself through the water often do double duty, blasting holes in the river and ocean bottoms to reveal treasures.

Carney is radiant as he describes a huge treasure find in 2004, in the Presumpscot River in downtown Westbrook, Maine. This was a summer dive and he discovered a solid wall of bottles, glass, crockery, dishes and other items that banked the curve of the river; that wall is 40 yards long and 15 feet high in 22 feet of water. And up the coast in Rockland Harbor a diver can swim in any direction and never run out of treasures



to bring up, as all of Rockland’s trash and that of local shipping was dumped in this Maine harbor.

He also digs old land dumps and privy sites. Before the advent of indoor bathrooms, people tossed trash into the outdoor privy during winter when they could not get out to the burn pile. Eventually these privies were capped off. After 100 years in the soil, all that is left is metal and glass. These days many of his most perfect specimens are found in lakes and ponds where they have lain undisturbed.

Ask Carney his most valuable find and he will tell you immediately. In December 2008 he brought up an old amber-colored Farley’s ink bottle worth \$800. He won’t reveal the site of this dive but this was one time he dove with a buddy, who brought up another Farley bottle in a rare green shade. Value? “Thousands of dollars, thousands!” Visit Carney’s website www.seaglassofmaine.com for further tales of his memorable finds, including the time he disturbed a cat fish as big as he was. “It didn’t swim away like other fish; instead I swam away!” ■

Richard Carney on his boat after using four tanks on a Connecticut River dive.