

## Petroliana Collecting – Part 2

### *Oil Cans*

By Bill McIntosh

Collecting petroliana deals with accruing items related to vintage gas station and service garages (including dealerships). Three major segments of the hobby are (1) gas pumps, (2) oil cans, and (3) signs. In the first part of this series (Oct/Nov 2022 *Pontiaction*), I tried to give a comprehensive overview of gas pumps. This article is devoted to the subject of oil cans.

### Early History of Oil Transport and Retail Dispensing

If you ever wondered why oil production is measured in barrels, it is really quite simple. When oil was discovered and pumped out of the ground at Edwin Drake's first well in western Pennsylvania, the early oil men used wooden barrels to store their treasure. After all, the wooden barrel was used to store and transport most other liquids. Nevertheless, wooden barrels proved to be less than ideal as they were subject to leaking, breaking and spilling the contents. And while no one complained about a little beer spilling, crude oil was a huge mess.



As the demand for both gas and oil grew rapidly in the first decade of the 20th century, the introduction of steel barrels and tanks thankfully became common practice for transporting. In those early days, the concept of the stand-alone gas station had not come into being. Gas and oil were sold from the street-front porch of general and hardware stores. Soon, oil was kept by these merchants in what today are known as lubesters. Quite simply, lubesters were above-ground metal storage tanks with an external pump. When one needed oil to top off or refill a customer's sump, you put any suitable container under the discharge pipe and cranked away until you had the right amount of oil. It was then put into the car's sump via a funnel or similar device.

In my collection, I have two lubesters. One is generic, as is seen most often. Pictured here is the second one, which is branded as TEXACO with the original porcelain sign on the front.

Particularly unusual is the chrome-plated pump mechanism with the letters “TEXACO” debossed into the shaft of pump. To my knowledge, this lubester is both original and rare.



As a precursor to the oil can, companies began manufacturing and distributing glass jars specifically used to install oil into automobile sumps. The glass jar had many advantages -- accurate measurement (jars were generally one quart), product visibility, and, with a “funnel-like” top, ease of filling the crankcase. Soon wire racks were used to hold six or more quarts (like milk bottles), and the proprietor could fill multiple jars ahead of each day’s sales.



While glass jars were a great improvement over what came before, they had two major disadvantages: they could break easily and the proprietor had to keep refilling the bottles from his lubester.

### **The One Quart Oil Can**

Sometime in the 1930s the one-quart oil can was invented, and American oil companies adopted them very quickly. These

cans were branded by thousands of independent and incorporated companies throughout the country. Initially, one-quart cans started out being manufactured by soldering the seams. Later came the ubiquitous crimped edge seam cans that lasted for many decades. The largest producer of one quart cans from the 1930s to the 1950s was American Can Company, also known as CanCo. Late in the life of the one quart can, can manufacturers and oil companies introduced the composite can; it had highly specialized cardboard sides and a metal top and bottom. For collectors, these cans may prove problematic as full quarts have a tendency to leak over time.

What is both amazing and fascinating about quart can collecting is the huge number of different cans that were produced. Along with the numerous brands, the graphics were equally varied and included depictions of airplanes, race cars, motorcycles, boats, animals, and many, many others. Each can in its own way represented an advertisement for the brand of oil while frequently extolling the benefits of using that brand in your motor. One-quart cans became useful in and of themselves for promoting sales. They were displayed most frequently either in pyramid stacks in the gas station window or on racks mounted between gas pumps on the center island.

### **My Collection of Oil Cans**

By most standards, my collection of oil cans is modest; it totals approximately 150 cans with many displaying the TEXACO brand. Seriously devoted collectors with both interest and resources have collections ranging from hundreds to thousands of cans. Tim Dye, the editor of *Smoke Signals* and curator of the two Pontiac museums, is rumored to have many hundreds of oil cans. I understand his collection can be seen at the Pontiac Museum in Pontiac, IL.

Pictured here on a 25-foot-long shelf at one end of my garage are about 100 (of 150) cans in my collection. This includes quart cans, a number of other cans of varying sizes (but not quarts), and a small sub-collection of grease cans. What can I say? Anything is fair game in the Petroliana collecting hobby!







Probably the most unusual quart cans in my collection are shown below and include Falcon Motor Oil – Dependable and Tenacious; Empire State Motor Oil – 100% Pure; and Pennstate – Champion of Motor Oils – 100% Pure Pennsylvania Oil. Note the graphics on both the Falcon and Empire State cans.



I should mention that many, many companies and distributors made a big deal about their oil coming from Pennsylvania, particularly in the early years. Oil from Texas, Oklahoma, or California was considered inferior, despite the refining process that took care of impurities from non-Pennsylvania crude oil. In any case, there was quite a cachet associated with the oil coming from the original discovery source in western Pennsylvania. The company that likely made the most of this feature was Quaker State Motor Oil.



One of my favorite treasures is a trio of cans from the Riley Oil Company. They came up with a simple but effective motto: "That's Oil." The austerity of their design and the unpretentious motto always appealed to me. Note that only the four-quart can is for oil while the other two are grease and window calking putty. If you are wondering about this last one, remember that putty is oil- or petroleum-based, so it's not a big stretch.



A few of the most unusually sized cans in my collection are shown in this photo. Compared to the standard quart-sized TEXACO can, you can see that the other three are somewhat larger. These cans are from my homeland, Canada. Prior to moving to the metric system, Canada used the English Imperial System of measure. In this system, a gallon





contained five (yes, five) US quarts. Five US quarts were the equivalent of four Imperial quarts. Therefore, any quart oil cans manufactured for and distributed in Canada had 1 1/4 US quarts. Also note the rear of the White Rose Motor Oil can, where the words motor oil are spelled out in the French language. Remember, Canada is a bilingual country.



This photo shows a variety of sizes of oil cans other than quarts. Some of the most popular sizes of oil cans were both four- and five-quart sizes as they represented a complete oil change in a can. Another very popular size was the two gallon in this picture the Capital Motor Oil can. The nice part of the two-gallon size is that it offered a wonderfully large space for graphics and copy. Did you see on the Purity Oil can the built-in pouring spout? What will they think of next?

Lastly, shown below is a “pride of my collection” item. This is a “SELLOIL Display Service Cabinet” that would normally be placed between two gas pumps on the gas station’s island. It served to both display the oil brand being promoted by the station as well as a handy way to fill a customer’s crankcase without going back and forth from island to station. I have stocked both sides with all TEXACO brand oil cans -- a total of 56 cans!

The cabinet has been restored with TEXACO dress, including large decals on the sides and a popular sign on the top of each face advertising the company’s oil virtues. The cabinet has an

internal structure which is accessed by sliding open a small door on one side. Once a can of oil has been used, the can is then inserted upside-down in the internal of the cabinet. Then, any oil



that did not come out of the can will drip into a recovery pan at the bottom of the cabinet. By taking out all the oil cans on one side, the bottom part of the cabinet face can be removed to retrieve the recovery pan and the oil within.

Did you see the “punch and pour” spout sitting on top of the two top middle cans?

Stay tuned for Part 3 of this series: *Signs*.