

Catsup Bottle Festival and Car Show helps preserve Collinsville's past

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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COLLINSVILLE – No matter where you go in the River Bend area, one landma



rk seems to tower above them all.

The landmark simply known as the **Catsup Bottle**.

The bottle – actually a water tower 170 feet off the ground – stands over what was once a factory that produced catsup and many other foods going back to the late 19th century, but the best-known product was Brooks Old Original Tangy Catsup, a product that, even to this day, is still popular throughout the area (you can still find it in area grocery stores and even buy it on-line).

The tower was completed in 1949 and painted to resemble the style of the bottles sold back then. The plant stopped making the product in the 1960s, moving operations to Indiana, but the factory was still used as a warehouse. Brooks' parent company at the time, Curtice-Burns, decided to sell the property in 1993 and fears that the tower would come down spread throughout Collinsville.

That prompted bottle enthusiasts to form a committee dedicated to keeping what became known as The World's Largest Catsup Bottle standing, and to this day, the bottle still towers over the skies near downtown Collinsville. The bottle is still celebrated to this day, with people coming from across the country to visit and see the tower in its full glory.

The Catsup Bottle Preservation Group continues to raise funds and keep awareness of the tower alive – it helped get the tower placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002 – and celebrated the bottle with its 18th edition of the Catsup Bottle Festival and Car Show Sunday at Woodland Park. The car show was sponsored by the Crusin' In Antiques group, featuring cars from several different areas such as cars from the 1930s and 1940s to the 1960s muscle car era, with trophies awarded in several categories.

Activities on the day included the Little Princess Tomato and Sir Catsup contests for youngsters, a hot-dog and tater-tot eating contest (with the dogs and tots covered with Brooks Catsup), a magic show, appearances by the collies of Collinsville-based InstaCredit Auto Mart, a hula-hoop competition and a water-balloon toss. A catsup-tasting booth and Catsup Bottle memorabilia were also available on the grounds throughout the day.

“The Festival got started in 1999 as a birthday party for the Catsup Bottle,” said **Mike Gassmann**, the co-chair of the day's activities and the preservation committee – he's known as **The Big Tomato** - “because the Catsup Bottle turned 50 years old that year. The first year, we had a little thing set up in front of the (Collinsville Memorial Public

Library downtown) and it's grown every year; we've outgrown our spaces and now it's here in Woodland Park.

When asked if the tower is, indeed, filled with Brooks Catsup, Gassmann said – with a twinkle in his eye - “who says it's not filled with Brooks Catsup?”

The tower was restored to its original working condition in 1993 and repainted in 1995 thanks to fund-raising efforts from the preservation committee. “The city of Collinsville is so blessed to have such a recognizable, iconic landmark,” Gassmann said.

“Everybody around the world has heard of The World's Largest Catsup Bottle; we do the best we can (to promote the bottle) because it garners a lot of positive publicity for our town.”

“We have between 150-200 cars here today,” said **Mike Prosser** of the Crusin' In Antiques (CIA) group, who sponsored the car show as part of Sunday's festival. “It's any model, any year – a lot of classic cars; we even have cars here from the early 30s. We'll have a good time with many types of cars; we even have military vehicles this year. We get a mixture of cars and it's a good time.

“No matter what, you still see the old classic stuff still around and people still enjoy it.”

The efforts to preserve and celebrate the Catsup Bottle originated with **Judy DeMoisy**, who arrived in Collinsville in 1993 and immediately headed up the early efforts to preserve the bottle. “I had just moved here and someone called me and told me it was going to be torn down,” DeMoisy said. “It was going to be turned into rubble and I thought, 'that can't happen!' Someone had to do it (save the bottle) and it ended up being me.

“It's been a lot of fun; our family's been involved in it, my daughter's name is Brook and it's been an exciting thing to do for the community. It draws people together; we have a really good time celebrating the Catsup Bottle – it's a lot of fun!”

The Catsup Bottle's status as a local and national landmark – pilots from Scott Air Force Base have used the bottle as a reference point – is a point of pride. “Because it is such a landmark, communities would give anything to be able to have something to celebrate. For Collinsville, it is a landmark – you know where you are when you see it,” DeMoisy said. “It's red, white and blue; it's all-American and it's just a lot of fun.”

Though the plant itself stopped producing catsup in the 1960s, the memories of people who worked and lived near the plant back then are still strong ones. “It employed a lot of people; a lot of people have fantastic memories of either working at the factory or smelling the catsup (going) through the town as it was being made,” Gassman said.

“Today, you can still get Brooks Catsup in certain parts of the country – it's produced in Canada – and if you have trouble finding it in your area, you can go on-line and order it there; we'll deliver it directly to your house.”

For more information on the preservation efforts, or to order Brooks Catsup directly (if you can't find it in your local grocery stores), visit www.catsupbottle.com

