

Have you heard
the one about...

Bill
Fenton?



Diamond Jubilee Celebration
75th
Bill Fenton's 75th Year



My brother Bill ...

Bill is the youngest member of the F. L. Fenton and Lillian Fenton family. There were four girls, then I came along in 1915, then two more girls, and then Bill in 1923. Despite having that many older sisters to tell him what to do (and what not to do), Bill has survived beautifully. In his younger years, he managed to ignore all the advice and go his own way. In grade school, he would come home and tell jokes that shocked my mother and two aunts who lived with us but caused lots of laughter in the family.

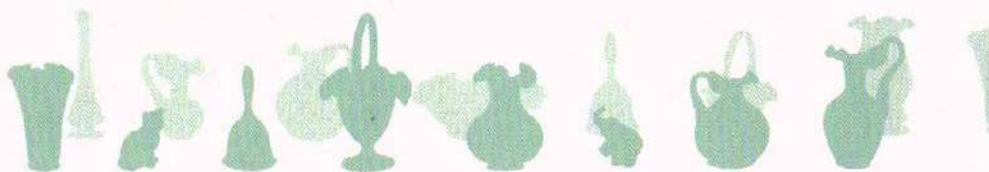
He used to get very angry when I beat him at tennis, but after he got to be almost as big as I was, he began to beat me regularly. We began to work together in 1946, and, when we began to run the factory together in 1948, we developed an ability to listen to each other's ideas and to make the decisions that needed to be made over the years.

Bill's ability to sell and his gregarious nature supplied something to our team that I didn't have. We sometimes had different viewpoints, but we respected each other's wisdom and judgment. As president, I sometimes had to make a decision that Bill went along with even though he didn't fully agree. But we never failed to continue that familial love that we have for each other. It's still there.

Bill's work with QVC has been invaluable to the glass company. We are where we are today because of his ability and intense interest in making it work. Today, we have a wonderful organization to back him up, but we couldn't have done it without him.

—Frank M. Fenton





"I wouldn't trade this for anything," Bill Fenton said as he leaned back in his comfortable chair. "It's been great, and I've enjoyed every minute of it."

Across the room from Bill's desk, a series of shelves holds the final samples of the colorful, handmade Fenton glassware to be featured on an upcoming QVC telecast. To the left, Bill has an array of Fenton glass, and he picks up a graceful pitcher. "We're going to make this next," he says, "but with a different crimp and a new decoration. I'm going to check on those later this afternoon. After that I'd like to play some golf. Say, did you hear the one about the golfer ...?"

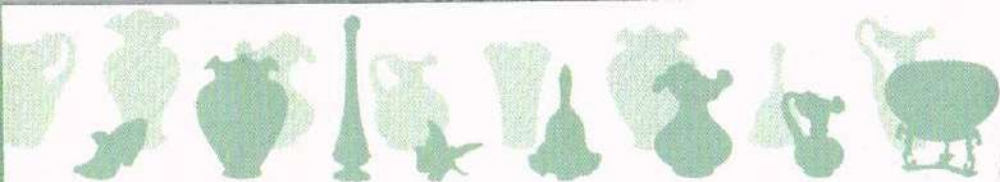
These few moments capture the essence of Bill Fenton and his career in the glass industry: positive feelings about the past and a zest for the next challenge—all coupled with a seemingly endless supply of jokes and stories plus a passion for golf.

Wilmer Craig Fenton was born on November 13, 1923, in Marietta, Ohio, the eighth and final child born to Frank

Leslie Fenton and Lilian Muhleman Fenton of Williamstown, West Virginia. Named for "Uncle Wilmer" Steer, his dad's best friend, and the Rev. Craig, a Williamstown clergyman, he soon became known simply as "Bill."

Bill spent most of his childhood years in the large family home



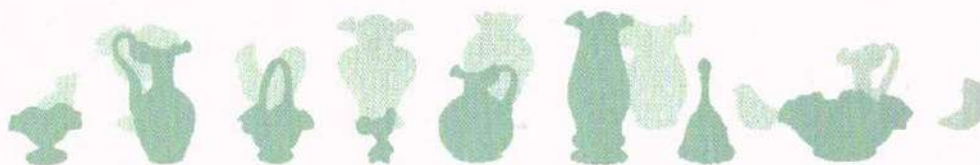


on Fourth Street in Williamstown. "Bill and I slept in a big custom made, 7-foot long double bed," brother Frank recalls. "Being about eight years older, I went to bed a good deal later, and I often found Bill fast asleep across the two pillows at the head of the bed. I'd have to move him to make room for me."

Bill was president of his junior class, and, during his senior year, he was student body president and captain of the basketball team. In 1940, at age 16, he graduated from Williamstown High School and, as his brother Frank and four of his six sisters had done, entered Marietta College. "I rode to campus for my classes on the streetcar," he recalled.

During the summers, Bill worked in various capacities at the glass factory. On the afternoon of





**Bill's parents,
Lillian and
Frank L. Fenton**



Saturday, June 29, 1940, Bill was part of a maintenance crew scheduled to work on the factory's main furnace at the base of the 105-foot tall, funnel-shaped smokestack. The furnace had been shut off at 2 a.m. and was cooled down to the point where repairs could be made.


"I was inside the furnace," Bill remembers. "There was a loud crack, and someone—I don't know who—yelled 'Run!' I ran out of the furnace and toward a window. It was like something was pushing me from behind, perhaps the pressure of the stack coming down. I dove though the window, and bricks

When I recall the years with Dad, these come to mind... my early times in the business, his passion for golf, and his love and dedication to his family. As Dad "groomed" me to follow him in sales, we took trips to gift shows in Chicago and Atlantic City. He is an intense competitor, both in selling an order and on the golf course. In Chicago, we had great times with Ted Figler of Martin Simpson Marketing and Jack Kaufman and Ray Western of the A. L. Randall Company. Dad's concern for his family never wavered. He tried to



head us in the right direction and was always there to pick us up. At Family Signing Events around the country, collectors often convey their affection for him. I feel very proud when I respond, "Yes, he's my Dad."

—Don Fenton



and other debris came through behind me and covered me up. They had to dig me out. I had scratches and bruises and my eyes were irritated from dirt and soot, but I was lucky to be alive." Others had similar close calls to report, but one employee on the maintenance crew was killed.

One day during the summer of 1941, Bill was the sole carrying-in boy on a shop making baskets in the glass factory. His job was simple enough—convey the finished baskets on a fork to the annealing lehrs—so he was looking forward to a leisurely afternoon. As it happened, however, the shop, which was working at the farthest point from the lehrs, set a production record for baskets, and Bill's stamina was tested. "They nearly ran my legs off that day," Bill laughed. "In fact, I think they set that record on purpose just to watch the boss's son run!"

After his junior year at Marietta College, Bill entered the United States Army. At the end of basic training, he was assigned to a medical support unit. On his way to Europe, Bill and his comrades had a close call. Their vessel was targeted by a torpedo, but a smaller ship changed position in the convoy and took the hit, so their troop ship was spared.

In October, 1943, Bill was on leave from the Army when he and Elinor Pryor were married. They attended Marietta College together, although each was on a date with another person when they first met in May of 1941! They became engaged at Christmas in 1942, and, like many young couples during WWII, they decided to marry before Bill was sent overseas. They were wed on October 21, 1943, at the home of Bill's brother Frank in Williamstown. Bill and Elinor now have four children—Christine, Don, Randy, and Shelley—all of whom



Dad and I have always enjoyed a very close relationship, and we've commented on how special it is to be able to work together. We have a great time developing the QVC items. Dad has always been a very loving father. Not only did he show us in every way, but he told us often. From a very early age, I can remember Dad's sign that he loved us—three squeezes to my hand. Even today, he will hold up three fingers across the room or when I'm leaving in a car, and I know what that means. Our love and excitement for Fenton glass is one more thing we share.

—Shelley Fenton Ash





**Elinor and Bill,
October 21,
1943**

are involved with Fenton glass. Their first son, Craig, born November 13, 1946 (Bill's 23rd birthday), was struck and killed by a car on April 1, 1950.

As he neared the end of his Army service in 1946, Bill pondered his future. "I knew my mother would be pleased if I joined dad at the glass plant, but he hadn't pressured me or even said anything about it." An Army buddy from Portsmouth, Ohio, was going to start a business, and he asked Bill to come into the venture.

When Bill wrote to ask his father's advice, a reply was quick to come: "Don't even think about it!" There was a place for him at the factory, and the plan was simple enough: Bill would learn the sales side of the glass business from his uncle Bob (Robert C. Fenton) and his cousin, Robert C. Fenton, Jr. Unfortunately, young Robert Fenton had a heart attack in the



early summer of 1946, and Bill had little opportunity to work with him.

Arrangements were made for Bill to go on a sales trip with Ray Guyler, the top salesman for Bechtel, Lutz and Jost, a glass jobbing firm in Reading, Pennsylvania, which was then one of Fenton's best customers. In a memo to Guyler, company president O. D. Bechtel emphasized that young Bill Fenton was to get some "real sales experience."

Bill met Guyler in Johnstown, Pa., and the two men were on the road together for a week. "Ray did a great job selling customers Fenton glass," Bill recalled. "Watching him made me think how challenging sales would be." Sometime later, Bill

**Bill writes
an order for
Crawford James**





learned from Guyler that their week together had been the single best sales week of Guyler's entire career!

Bill made his first solo sales trip later in 1946. The first stop was Pittsburgh, where he unpacked his samples of Fenton glass at the old Fort Pitt hotel. "I couldn't get in at the William Penn," he remembers, "and my display looked pretty sad. Uncle Bob had told me to get set up and then make appointments with people to come in the next day. I was disappointed with the location and display and called Dad and expressed my concern about what the customers would think, but he reassured me and restored my confidence. My first visitor was Joe Horne, Jr., the buyer for Joseph Horne and Co. He said he was happy to come to the Fort Pitt for a change and was so nice and friendly. He helped me over the hump with a real big order."



After the Pittsburgh showing, Bill went on to Youngstown, Akron, Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, Columbus, Dayton, Cincinnati and Louisville with his samples of Fenton glass. In each city, the routine was the same—unload the samples from his car and arrange his display in a hotel room before inviting buyers to call on him there. "I became a salesman on that trip," Bill reflected.

**Bill in his
"Birthstone Bear"
costume with
daughter, Shelley
("Calendar Cat") at
the Fenton sales
meeting in 1992.**

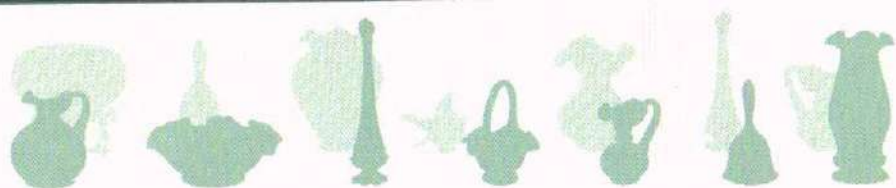


*D*ad has been the kind of father to look up to, to confide in, to look to for advice, and to learn from.

He's extremely friendly and loves to laugh with other people. He enjoys telling and listening to jokes. I think he's got a real gift at joke-telling as it relates to making people laugh. He is very caring and loving, not only with our family but also with the people who work for him and with him. Dad is very community-oriented, trying to help and do what's best for his town and the people who live there. Dad has been a great father and friend. As a father of three myself, I surely appreciate Dad more since we both have experienced the blessings of being a parent.

—Randy Fenton





Bill sang in the church choir, and Frank was the choir director. His bass voice was welcome, but Bill often told jokes and made wisecracks in the back row while Frank was trying to get the group to concentrate on the music. "I never really got mad at him for that," Frank noted. "I just accepted the fact that I would have to put up with those things if I wanted him in the choir. And he did add much to the pleasure of choir rehearsals."

When Frank L. Fenton died on May 18, 1948, and Robert C. Fenton passed away about six months later, the responsibility for leadership of the Fenton Art Glass Company fell to brothers Frank M. Fenton, 32, and Bill Fenton, 24. Frank had been working at the glass company for over a decade, and his observations had brought him considerable knowledge of manufacturing processes and work rules in the glass industry. Bill's limited sales experience was all the brothers had to guide them in this area at first.

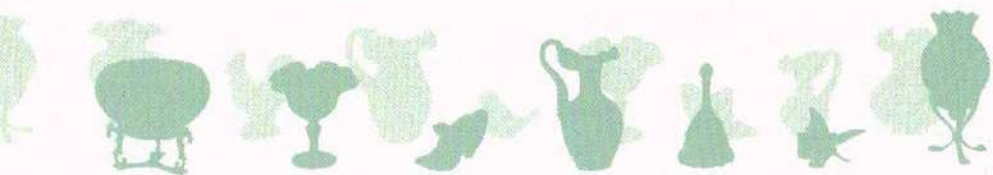
Communication between the brothers was easy—not just because of their family ties. "We had adjoining offices," Frank recalls, "and the door was always open between his office and mine. We could see each other and our telephones were hooked together, so we would motion one another to pick up when one of us thought the other fellow ought to listen in on a call. I could nod or shake my head as Bill spoke with a customer or supplier, and he would know what was on my mind."

For some thirty years, from the late 1940s to the late 1970s, Bill and Frank were, as Bill fondly puts it, "partners." They had differing responsibilities as Frank looked after the manufacturing side and Bill took care of sales, but both were active in planning the new colors and new shapes which became part of the Fenton line. "In one sense, it was pretty easy, because our Hobnail was selling so well in milk glass for so many years," Frank said. "But Bill and I were always thinking about new items and colors."

My Dad has always been a very loving, giving father. When I look back to childhood, I see Dad as very loving, sometimes strict, but always fair and wanting what was best for us. He was like a rock at the foundation of our family. When I watch him on QVC, I am sometimes overcome by my feelings of pride in him. Besides being hardworking in his business, he has always been very active in the community. I'm sure the world is a better place because of him. As an adult, I enjoy a real friendship with Dad. His sense of humor is well known, and he is fun to be around!

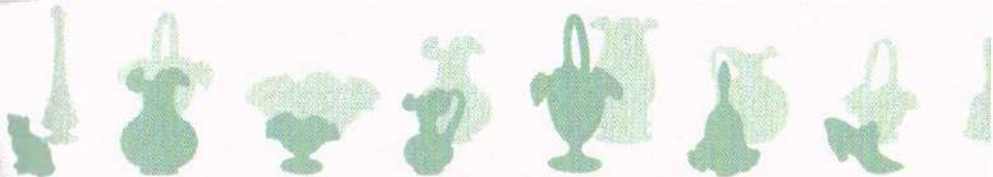
—Christine Fenton





**QVC host
Steve Bryant
with Bill in
October, 1997.**

From 1948 to 1978, Frank was president of the Fenton Art Glass Company, and Bill was vice-president. Many changes and innovations took place during this time, ranging from expansions and modernizations in the factory to the addition of a complete decorating department and the advent of the Gift Shop. Bill was involved in all of these, and his efforts shaped the success of the company. Today, he is president of the Fenton Gift Shops, Inc. and the Fenton Foundation, Inc.



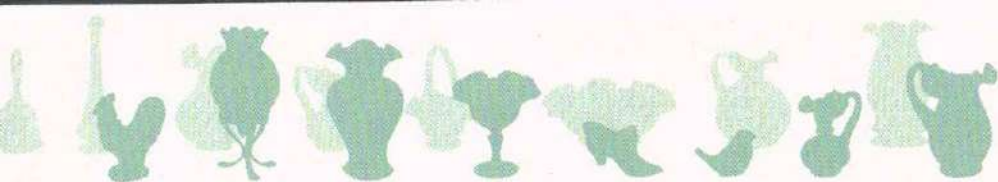
Bill was instrumental in building a close-knit network of Fenton sales representatives across the United States. His frequent letters and sales bulletins were filled with product news and sales tips, and Bill's personal notes, golf stories and puns often provided a good chuckle. Whatever the task, Bill found a way of making it a fun experience.

In 1978, Frank relinquished the office of president and became chairman of the board. Bill became president, and he held this office until 1986, when he became chairman of the board and Frank retired to the post of historian. Frank's son George became president. Bill's son Don had been named vice-president—sales in 1985, and Frank's son Tom was then vice-president—manufacturing.

Over the years, Bill has been active in many community organizations and business groups. His involvement ranges from the Williamstown city schools and Marietta College to the First United Methodist Church and West Virginia United Methodist Charities and the Marietta Memorial Hospital Health Foundation. He served as president of Glass Crafts of America and on the board of the Wood County Visitors and Convention Bureau.

In the mid-1980s, Bill became interested in QVC when his daughter Shelley was contacted by QVC buyer/consultant Whitney Smith and Doug Briggs, who is now president of QVC. Together, they helped QVC decide on its initial selections of Fenton glass. Bill made his first appearance on QVC in October, 1988, and he and QVC host Steve Bryant now appear together regularly. "Bill and I have a sixth sense about one another on the air," Steve noted. "We each know what the other is going to say" ("That's a bit scary for each of us," Bill said in response to Steve).

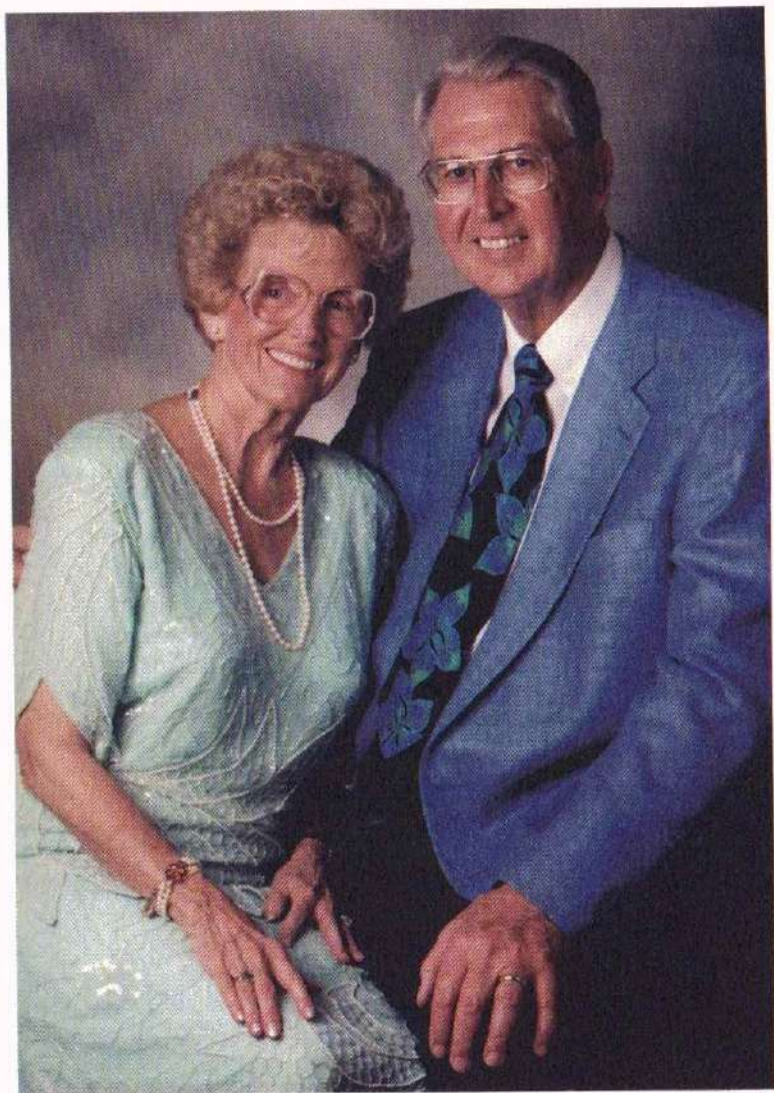
On October 14, 1997, QVC broadcast from the Fenton plant. Weeks of preparation culminated in a three-hour show featuring taped clips of many Fenton family members and



other employees. Live cameras captured scenes in hot metal, as Bill and Steve talked about Fenton glass while decorators worked in the background. For three full hours, Bill did what he does best—describe and discuss the making of Fenton glass and the people he is so proud of who are involved in its production.

At the end of the broadcast, however, Bill turned the spotlight elsewhere. “Everyone did a fine job,” he said. “This was a great day for our company.”





Elinor and Bill Fenton on their 50th Wedding Anniversary (1993).

