

The Original Higgins Ink A Nevada Invention

The Story of R. (Rufus) L. Higgins Ink Bottles Virginia City, Nevada

*By Fred N. Holabird
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A remarkably rare and beautiful embossed ink bottle recently caused quite a stir when it sold at auction for nearly \$20,000. The extremely rare R. L. Higgins ink bottles may have even more important significance because of a potential link to a nationally named company, the Higgins Ink Co.

Regardless of that possible link, the R. L. Higgins ink bottle is vital to Western collectors because of the rarity, the story behind the man and his bottle, and the significance of the bottle on the national scene.

The embossed Higgins Ink bottles from Virginia City, Nevada remain some of the most desirable embossed Nevada bottles. The three different varieties are all extremely rare. As ink bottles, they are quite different from other embossed bottles made for merchants in the state.

The manufacturing and bottling of ink by Higgins was undoubtedly a step toward commercial competition with other national name brands, but R. L. Higgins never accomplished this dream because of tragedy. While there may be speculation that his ink is the predecessor of the famous century old Higgins India Ink Co., no formal tie has yet been established.

The first record of Higgins in Nevada is in 1863 as the owner of a dry goods store

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in Virginia City, as shown in Kelley's 1863 Nevada Territorial Directory. Census records show Higgins was born in Maine in 1843, but he failed to report his parents names, or their country of origin. He never recorded his first name in any legal documents until many years later.

Higgins was active with his local church, and by 1864 had become a trustee for the Carson City Methodist Church along with Nevada Governor Blasdel, and oversaw the Church's effort to purchase land to build a larger stone church in 1865. He probably continued to operate his general store in Virginia City during this period.

Higgins recognized an opportunity in the mining business in the mid-1860's. Soda, a naturally occurring chemical, was much in demand in the assaying and refining processes in the more than 100 mills built to crush and extract gold and silver from the Comstock. Somehow, he became familiar with a soda deposit near Fallon on the edge of the Forty Mile Desert near Raghorn, now known as Soda Lake.

In 1868, as a resident of Virginia City, he tested the soda at the Nevada Soda Mine and found it to be of "sufficient quality and of inexhaustible quantity." Higgins then purchased the property from A. Kenyon, who had bought it from the emigrants who had originally discovered the mine while crossing the Forty Mile Desert along the Overland Trail from the Humboldt Mountains many years before.

Higgins struck up a partnership with James Duffy shortly afterwards, and the two showed the product to several of the producing Comstock mills where it was used for the reduction of ore. Subsequently, they opened their Virginia City office at 39 S. C Street. His small general store remained a separate business. The mills bought large quantities of the soda, and it was later introduced to the paper and woolen mills of California and to the manufacturers of soap.

The great Savage Mine was one of

Bottles and Extras

Higgins' customers. By 1873, the soda mine produced about 2,000 tons per year, which was sold as fast as it was produced. In 1874, he was selling soda for \$50 per ton. The company name was the Nevada Soda Mining Company.

Higgins used a rare guarantee: This soda is 35% stronger than (any) manufactured. Any man demonstrating the fact that this soda (is less so)...need not pay his bill.

The deposit would become exhausted within a few years. Unlike gold and silver, there were very few soda deposits, and this was the only one near the Comstock.

Duffy was a working partner, but in the local press, he was often referred to as a drunk, particularly in later years. This must have caused Higgins some concern, eventually leading to a dissolution of the partnership.

In 1871, their Virginia City office for the Nevada Soda Mining Company was clerked by a man named Farrington. Business was doing so well that Higgins may have moved his general store down into the valley to the new town located on the Truckee River along the just-completed Central Pacific Railroad.

Reno was quickly developing into a good town, and Higgins may have wanted to capitalize on the new city's excitement as a supply and trade center for the Comstock and other Western Nevada mines.

With a partner, or perhaps his wife, Higgins opened the R. L. Higgins & Co. dry goods store. A notice in the Reno Crescent on July 8, 1871 noted the new store that carried knives, hats, furs and women's goods located on the East side of Virginia Street. The store must not have done well, because it was gone by 1873.

Higgins' soda mining business remained very active. He took on a new partner at the Virginia City general store in 1872, which was known as Higgins and Crampton, Duffy & Co. and became used as the new name for the Nevada Soda Mining Co.'s owners. Their office was located at 55 South C Street in Virginia City in 1873.

Higgins became the proprietor of the Nevada Soda Mining Co., moving the soda mining company office to 16 South B Street. When the Reno store closed, Higgins wasn't through with his retail ventures. Back in Virginia City, he started a stationary, book and music store at

54 and 55 South C Street in Virginia City in 1873, taking over one of the offices that was formerly used by his soda mining company.

Higgins had only one competitor, the Pioneer Book Store, run by Will H. Burrall on the northeast corner of C and Taylor. It is from this new store that Higgins distributed ink in his own personalized embossed bottles.

Higgins' wife performed at Piper's Opera House at least twice in June 1873. The prominent business men of the town offered a benefit concert for her, where she performed with local merchants, such as D. W. Knapp.

About the same time, Higgins advertised that he was closing out his jewelry lines and concentrating on stationery, books, etc. His residence was at 34 South B Street in the early 1870's, and he moved to 191 North C Street in early 1875.

Duffy, Higgins' heavily drinking partner, meanwhile had split up with Higgins around 1873-1874, and returned to Carson City. There he ran the Pioneer Soap Factory, and was superintendent of the Nevada Sulphur Company. As a mining man, he had looked for a venture similar to soda mining that involved easy mining of a product needed for the Comstock gold and silver mills.

Choosing sulphur, used for the manufacture of sulfuric acid, he was able to exploit the Steamboat sulphur deposits at the foot of Washoe Valley near Reno. He had built a small acid works for the production of sulphuric acid by 1881.

Looking for some easy extra cash, he also ran a small dairy out of his ranch house at 10th and Minnesota in Carson City.

Higgins was doing well and put all his affairs in line. The period of 1873-1875 appear to be the most successful and productive years of his life. With the discovery of the great Crown Point bonanza in 1875, followed by the big bonanza of the Con-Virginia and California by John Mackay and James G. Fair in 1875, the Comstock lode was producing gold and silver in unimaginable amounts. No other one deposit in the world at the time had

produced such a wealth. To date, approximately nine million ounces of gold and 220 million ounces of silver have been mined, though most of it before 1880.

Higgins' business must have been booming. During this period, he had developed a new ink that he marketed in custom embossed ink bottles, perhaps the only embossed Western ink made in this manner. The contents of the ink may remain a stranger to modern researchers - there are no articles in the Virginia City newspapers about it, and he does not appear to have tried to patent the ink's formula. This is a notable because no one else in the West Coast attempted the same thing. He must have had great confidence in his new ink formula to justify the expense of custom embossed ink bottles.

Higgins' speciality bottles are not like



L-R: Amber master cylinder ink - \$15,000-17,000-22,000
Aqua master cylinder ink - \$4,000-8,000-12,000
Aqua cone ink - \$500-1000-1500

the regular merchant embossed drug store, soda, or whiskey bottles that were routinely used by local Western merchants. Each of these can be found in the many glass manufacturing company catalogs of the period, all offering to have the merchant's name embossed on the front panel of the bottle. While there are a few ink bottles in some of these catalogs, there is not any mention of making a personalized embossed ink bottle. Nor was this the general practice elsewhere in America. It was usually only done where there was an occasional marketing campaign, which Higgins may have been planning.

In late 175, Higgins suffered a tragic loss. A tremendous fire consumed his business. The catastrophic October 26, 1875 Virginia City fire completely destroyed the business district, causing \$12-million in damages, and was even worsened by a snowstorm on November 2nd. These tragic losses included the Society of Pacific Coast Pioneers cabinets and library housing many original artifacts from the discovery period of the Comstock. This was the only museum of its kind and the contents were lost forever.

Higgins could not recover from the loss of his store. Apparently, under or non-insured, his losses were insurmountable. He filed for bankruptcy shortly after the cleanup was complete, and announced it in the Territorial Enterprise on January 21, 1876. He left Virginia City for parts unknown.

His partner Duffy met an abrupt end. After midnight on January 16, 1885, Duffy, drunk as usual, decided that Carson City merchant J. M. Benton's wife Mattie needed some unasked-for attention and attacked her while Benton was cleaning up his commerical livery stable. Benton heard her cries, came running, and shot and killed Duffy on the spot. Benton ran the most successful livery stable in town, as well as the local stage line to Tahoe. He was a very active community man, well-liked by the Carson City populous. The killing of Duffy was ruled justifiable homicide, labeling Benton a hero in the process.

A major question arises with serious study and discussion of the Virginia City embossed Higgins ink bottles. Is Rufus L. Higgins related to Charles Higgins, founder of the Higgins Ink Co. in Brooklyn in 1880? There are five points of strong coincidence that point to a direct link.

Charles M. Higgins was born in Leitram, Ireland in 1854, coming to America in 1860. He received a patent for a screw pegging machine at the age of 21 in 1875. He obtained a job with the Scientific News as a patent solicitor and reportedly made experiments with inks in his sister's kitchen in New York. Here he is said to have invented the Higgins India Ink and his Eternal Black Ink. IN 1880, Charles formed a company to sell and

distribute his ink, which soon became the universal ink used around the world. The Higgins Ink Company went on to great success, ultimately being purchased by Sanford Ink, who owns it today.

The coincidence of Charles Higgins "inventing" his ink just after R. L. Higgins made his in Virginia City, only to have his business and inventory destroyed by fire, is remarkable. Both events happened within a year of each other. Where the two relatives? Did a depressed and broke Rufus give away the formula to his relative? Do Charles' original notes contain Rufus' name? Did Rufus quietly move to the East Coast to help Charles?

In our research, we were unable to locate Rufus anywhere in the West, or New York, after 1876, nor able to construct a family tree of either man. Meanwhile, the coincidence of timing, product commonality and surname, certainly point to shared knowledge. Are the two Higgins related? Are these R. L. Higgins ink bottles the true predecessors of the Higgins Ink Company? Only more advanced research will answer these questions.

Higgins produced three different ink bottles from his music and stationary store. Because of the extreme rarity of the whole bottles, and near non-existence of broken pieces found in the tens of thousands of Virginia City outhouses and the huge dumps, I think the bottles must have been made just before the fire of October 1875. Had there been distribution of these bottles prior to 1875, we would have expected to find more bottles, or at least broken pieces. Few, if any, have ever been found.

There is a small aqua cone ink, all with sheared tops (approximately five known); an amber half-pint master cylinder ink (two known), and an aqua master cylinder ink in pint size (three or four known). All are extremely rare. Ed Upson found three of the cone inks under sage brush at the end of Seven Mile Canyon near the site of the first Virginia City brewery about thirty years ago. One amber ink was dug in Virginia City, and another dug in San Francisco by Randy Haumann. The aqua master inks were found in Virginia City, with at least one coming out of the old Virginia City dump.

Recently, one of the amber inks sold at public auction for \$17,000. There are no public sales records for the aqua master ink, although one sold privately to an advance collector recently.

THE VIRGINIA CITY, NEVADA INK BOTTLES Of R. L. HIGGINS

*By Bryan Grapentine
Photos by Larry Grapentine*

Collecting ink bottles provides those who specialize in this category with a great variety of sizes, shapes and colors, and also several thousands of different bottles listed, spanning almost two centuries of production.

There are ink bottles available for every pocket book, with prices ranging from dollars to a few selling for over fifty thousand.

Most of the American ink bottles were produced in the East. For reasons unknown to this author, very few inks were manufactured in the West and those few that were came from California. Only a few embossed inks are known from the Western U.S., and Nevada may be the only Western state to have ink bottles embossed with the city and/or state.

Nevada soda, drugstore, and whiskey bottles are very popular with Western collectors, and are more in demand and thus command higher prices than similar bottles from other Western states. Perhaps this is because of their background in the historical mining towns. Important bottles are known from Goldfield, Tonopah, Carson City, Winnemucca, Elko, Eureka, Ruby Hill, Seven Troughs, Tuscarora, and Reno - but the ink bottles from Virginia City are in a class by themselves.

Brief History of Virginia City

Virginia City, queen of the Comstock Mining District, was the West's most famous mining town. Mining activity began in the 1850's and reached its peak in the 1870's. The Comstock Lode yielded more than 400 million in gold and silver and remains the richest silver deposit found in the United States.

Nevada became a Territory in 1861 and gained Statehood in 1864, despite the population being too low to

constitutionally authorize statehood. The fabulous wealth produced from the mines helped President Lincoln finance the Union Army during the Civil War and to keep the Union solvent.

The population of Virginia City grew from 15,000 to 18,000 in 1863, and to 25,000 by the mid-1870's. Booming commercial activity supported 110 saloons, over fifty dry good stores,





four banks, twenty laundries, six churches, schools, a railroad, soda bottling plants, and five newspapers - and a thriving red-light district.

A fire in 1875 destroyed three quarters of the city but it was quickly rebuilt.

Today "C" Street, the main business street, is lined with 1860's and 1870's buildings housing specialty shops of all kinds. The area is one of America's largest Historical Landmarks and is a popular destination for tourists and history buffs.

Virginia City Bottles

The Virginia City ink bottles may be the only inks with an embossed Western city that were manufactured in the West. These bottles are believed to have been manufactured by the San Francisco Glass Works.

The ink bottles, unlisted by William Covil, are rather unusual in regards to their size. The cone ink is just under 2" tall, and 1 3/4" in diameter. The usual cone is at least 2 1/2" tall and also 2 1/2" in diameter. The Master inks are also small with the amber bottle 6 1/2" tall and 2 1/8" in diameter. The aqua master is 7 1/2" tall and 2 5/8" in diameter. Many master inks are 10" or 11" tall although smaller bottles are not uncommon.

The master inks are both whittled and both aqua inks have numerous bubbles in the glass. The bottles are believed to have been made Ca. 1875 in San Francisco.

The Nevada Bottle Book provides some history on Higgins: "R.L.Higgins started one of the first stationery and educational stores in Virginia City. His ads boasted of stationery, books, music, musical instruments and picture frames. The store originally located at 35 S. C Stret, carried quality supplies that were previously only in limited quantity or by special orders from the local mercantile. The business

started in the early 1870's and lasted through about 1883. In later years the store was moved to 50 South C street."

Rarity and Value

All three bottles are very rare – two each of the amber and aqua master are known and 3 or 4 of the small cone bottles have been accounted for. Two complete sets of the three bottles are presently in Western collections.

Likely only one batch of each size was made. It was probably cheaper to import ink bottles from Eastern glasshouses, and countless inks from Eastern firms have been dug in the Virginia City area.

As you might expect the rarity and interest in these bottles makes them quite valuable. The last one to come up for auction was sold by Pacific Glass Auctions in the Fall of 2001. The pre-auction estimate was \$7,000 to \$10,000 but the final price was an amazing \$18,700.

Where the known Bottles were found

One amber master was found by Mike Dolconi in Davis, California in the early 1970's. The other was dug by Randolph (Randy) Haumann in San Francisco in the mid 70's. An aqua master was dug in Virginia City by Gene Sheilds and Jerry O'Doan in the mid 1970's. Another was purchased in the mid-1970's by Neal Force from an unknown digger. A third was in the Wright collection, digger unknown. This bottle may have been donated to a museum. Ed Upson found three of the cone inks under some brush in Seven Mile Canyon north of Virginia City. Two whole and one broken cone inks were found by a construction crew while digging footings for a redwood deck in Virginia City. Jerry O'Doan dug one in Virginia City. With two exceptions, the ink bottles all have been found in the Virginia City area as you would expect.

Marty Hall, prominent Reno digger and collector, reports that five active diggers with over 70 years of digging in Virginia City have never found even a broken piece of a R.L.Higgins ink – they are that scarce!

Complete sets of the three bottles are in the Bryan Grapentine and Fred Holabird collections. Cone inks are in the Bob Ferraro and the Feltch collections. An amber master is in the Wright collection or has been donated to a museum. Nevada

collectors keep track of the current locations of known bottles.

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