



Nestled off the beaten path in Mahaska County lies the small town of Beacon, Iowa. Located just west of Oskaloosa, this quiet little burg was once a thriving coal mining community and home to around 1000 residents during its busiest days.

Beacon had been the home of William Beardsley, who may have patented one of the most unusual soda bottles ever used in the United States.

William Beardsley was born in England on October, 15, 1850. He came to the United States in 1870, living in a number of different states before moving to Beacon, Iowa in September of 1871.

Soon after that, he established a drug store and eventually carried on an extensive and successful drug trade until he sold out in 1904.

Of historical interest to Iowans, Mr. Beardsley had a son by the name of William Shane Beardsley. This son would later enter the druggist trade himself, as he opened a drug store in New Virginia, Iowa in 1922.

After working many years as a druggist and farmer in New Virginia, William Shane Beardsley was elected Governor of Iowa in 1948.

While the elder William Beardsley's main profession was that of a druggist, he also operated a soda bottling works that over the years that used no less than six very different styles of soda bottles.

Judging from the variety of his bottles and the different closures that he tried, Mr. Beardsley must have been quite an inventor. Three of the bottles used the familiar Hutchinson style stopper.

Two of those are pictured here, with the mug base example on the left dating to the 1890's. The shorter example has older style embossing and an applied top and dates to the mid-1880's. [See Fig. 1]

The third example which used the

Hutchinson stopper is embossed in a round slug plate: WM. BEARDSLEY, BOTTLER, BEACON, IA.

The larger quart sized bottle shown has an unusual square lip which is covered by an interesting closure which employs a lever and cam to clamp down on the rubber seal. The base of this particular soda bottle is embossed RICH 3. [See Fig. 2]

The bottles of most interest are those with the highly unusual indentations on the shoulder of the bottle and the screw

top. [See Fig. 3]

The bottle has mold formed screw threads and a ground lip. This is perhaps the only screw top soda bottle from the United States that dates to the late 1880's.

There are six conical indentations evenly spaced around the shoulder area and the base is embossed PAT MAY 12TH 1885. For a number of years there was much speculation as to the purpose of the indentations on Mr. Beardsley's bottles.

Some thought they were designed as finger grips for picking up the bottle, while a few locals demised that the indentations were "beacons" such as those on a lighthouse.

The mystery was solved when I was lucky enough to come across the description and drawing for Mr. Beardsley's patent.

The fancy description basically describes a marble stoppered bottle. The indentations were designed to keep the marble from falling into the bottle opening while the soda was being poured or drunk.

A metal cap with a hole in the center was screwed onto the neck with a gasket placed in between the cap and the ground lip.



[Fig 1]

The marble was then seated against the gasket and the pressure of the soda water would keep the bottle sealed provided that the seal did not dry out.

While it appears that the screw top soda bottles were never used, the exact reason for this has never really been determined. None of the bottles found have had the original caps, or the marbles.

If they were designed like the Codd marble stoppered bottles, then the marble should have been inside the bottles.

With his original ties to England, it may be possible that the Codd style bottles so prevalent in England may have influenced Mr. Beardsley's design for a marble stoppered bottle.

More speculation leads me to believe



[Fig 2]

that the screw top bottles didn't seal as well as Mr. Beardsley had hoped. This seems to be the case as a variation of the screw-top soda bottle was designed.

The screw-top was eliminated and replaced with a wide blob-lip, with an inside groove for a rubber seal for the marble to seal against.

Close examination of the two styles of bottles reveals that the same mold was used, but was modified to accommodate the newly designed lip and neck.

The blob-top variant is also slightly shorter than the screw-top version. The same patent date is embossed on the bottom of this style bottle.

So how were these bottles discovered?

Local historians related to me that the bottles had been stored in a basement of a storage building near his drugstore.

Around 1905 or so, Mr. Beardsley and a friend were on a fishing trip up North. When Mr. Beardsley returned home, he found the storage building that contained the bottles had caught fire while his was gone.

While the damage was contained to just the storage building, it was beyond repair and declared a total loss. The remains of the building were pushed into the basement.

Around 1975, the bottles came to see the light of day again. Two young boys came home from school to find that the family dog had done some serious digging in the back yard.

In the process, some glass shards and bottles were now exposed. The boys were intrigued began digging and soon had a sizable hole in their parent's back yard.

What they had found was the original stash of Beardsley bottles that had been covered up so many years before.

When the parents came home, the boys were in a world of trouble, but when they found out that the local antique dealer would pay cash for these bottles, they soon changed their attitude and promptly began to help the boys dig for more.

The dig produced a small hoard of the screw-top sodas. Many of the bottles were broken or damaged, but a number of whole examples were found.

The colors ranged from your average aqua to an ice-blue aqua to a nice light lime-green. Also found were a very small number of the blob top style soda bottles with the inside groove lip.

Most of these have a star-shaped crack in the base, perhaps from landing on top

of the other screw-top bottles as they were probably stacked in the cases.

Only two mint examples of this style bottle were found, and all examples were the light lime-green color.

The other bottles found on this dig included a few whole examples of the quart-style bottles and only two of the Hutchinson-style bottles.

While Mr. Beardsley had been in the drug store business for some thirty years, no examples of an embossed drug store bottle are known with his name.

However, his inventiveness and success in the bottling business has left us with some of the most unusual and perhaps unique soda bottles available to collect today.

Sources:

1. Phillips: Proud Mahaska 1843-1900.
2. Burggraaf & Southard: The Antique Bottles of Iowa 1846-1915.



[Fig 3]