

# The People's Favorite Bitters

## A Rare Bitters Turns Up in the Darnedest of Places

By Jeff Wichmann

An email arrived a couple months ago and, like the dozens I get almost daily, I read it and said I would investigate their bottle. This bottle in particular was called the People's Favorite Bitters and as there was no picture, I sat with my fist on my chin, trying to picture what the bottle looked like. I know! I know! I should know, but remembering literally thousands of different bottles made from coast to coast, not to mention remembering every McKearin number (which I don't), is no simple task.

I grabbed *The Bitters Bottles* book originally written by Carolyn Ring and followed up by a new version written in tandem with Bill Ham, and went to the "P" section. There it was - P 41 - with a drawing of this most unusual, barrel-shaped bitters with an odd row of swirling lines enveloping the entire bottle leaving an area in the middle that left room for the embossing. It reads: PEOPLE'S FAVORITE BITTERS POWELL & STUTENROTH with a date on the shoulder area that read PATD JULY 28 1868. I then grabbed the updated version that Bill had written on his own with new photographs that I have to admit, although somewhat reluctantly, rivaled my own in quality, maybe better. There on page 155 was a picture of not one, but two Favorite Bitters, one without the embossed "People's" and a little shorter in stature. Wow! I was thinking how beautiful the bottles looked, the People's variant light-amber shining like a million rays of sunlight; well, maybe not a million.

What was interesting was that the other variant was not only shorter, it was a little stubbier and had larger ridges also swirling around the body of the bottle. Time to investigate a little more before I returned the email. As it turned out, the Favorite variant was the first one made and was then changed to the People's Favorite Bitters on July 28, 1868, the date on the shoulder of the bottle. Now I was intrigued, as

the People's variant seemed to be extremely rare while the other was rated as very rare.

This bottle was getting better by the minute.

I emailed the woman back and conveyed what I had learned and I asked her to send some pictures and I would find out its value. I also asked, "Where did you find this incredible bottle?"

The picture came the next day and it was the identical bottle, ridges, golden amber, nearly identical to the one in Bill's book. I had meanwhile talked to a few people and asked what they thought it was worth.

"Lots," was the general reply. "Three or four known," was also mentioned. In U.S. dollars? "Oh, nearly \$20,000, maybe more."

Way better by the minute!

The person was excited as I was. "Can you send it out?" I asked. The answer was yes and before long I was one foot away and staring at a masterpiece of mold making and a rare one at that. So where did it come from? The story goes like this:

The woman, Kristi Saporito, who knew nothing about old bottles, has parents who owned a house next to their own.

The place? Kansas.

And where did it come from? The woman conveyed that her parents had decided to tear down the old house and, during the tear down, this bottle turned up. Oh, there were others but this one, this time, was special. Turns out the partners, Powell & Stutenroth, were from Naperville, Illinois. Since the house was pre-Civil War, the timing was perfect. An Illinois bitters in Kansas? Found while tearing down a house? In need of a little sprucing up, if you didn't like a bottle like this, cookie jars



might be your thing.

Well, after a light cleaning, it sits waiting for our upcoming auction in March. Will it sell for as much as \$20,000? Who knows? All I know is when I asked these gracious people in Kansas if they wanted to risk cleaning it, the reply I got astounded me. "We didn't pay anything for it, so if it breaks, that's the way it goes," she said. When was the last time I heard anyone saying anything like that?

The woman on the end of the email turned out to be a lovely, caring person who knew that there was more to life than money, much more. As the family spokesperson, she and her family were happy with their decision and Lou Lambert cleaned it up like he'd just washed the evening dishes. "No sweat," he answered when I asked him if he could try not to break it. He didn't; it's drop dead gorgeous and everyone so far is happy.

It will be one of the highlights of the March auction. And, as I told Kristi, we will get the word out on her amazing find. How a wonderful bottle like this made in the 1860s ended up in a house so far away from California and will now go to auction, then to some lucky bidder, is just another amazing story in the collecting world.

Kristi sounded excited and as I hung up the phone, we both thought about the past and future and I said, "trust me, it's going to do well; after all, it's not in Kansas anymore."

