

POISON LAND

by Mike Dickman

The early bird gets the worm!

As with many folk adages, there is a great deal of truth in that one, as you are about to see:

First, let's set the stage for our tale of the early bird. We start with a very rare and desirable poison bottle, the **KC-114**, which I previously wrote about in *Bottles and Extras* (Vol. 14, No. 3). There are less than half a dozen KC-114s known, in two different sizes: 4 1/8" high and 5 1/2" high. All of the known examples were hand-blown into a mold and made from clear glass. In addition to their unique molded skull face on the obverse, all of the KC-114s have the phrase, "Patd June 8, 1875" embossed on their base, but no other written embossing is on the bottles. The recently published *American Poison Bottle Work Book and Price Guide* estimates the value of a clear glass KC-114 as between \$10,000 and \$12,000, based upon the reported sales price of the most recent one sold. Interestingly, all of the known examples to date have come out of Pennsylvania, including two of the 4 1/8" KC-114s discovered by one lucky fellow at a Pennsylvania flea market.¹

Suddenly, in the summer of 2006, there appeared on eBay a cobalt example of KC-114, in the 4 1/8" size. It had the identical base embossing and was described to be in "excellent" condition apart from a tiny flake on the lip. It was listed by an eBay trading assistant located in Pennsylvania at a starting bid of \$9.99 plus postage. (Trading assistants are essentially consignees authorized by eBay to sell other people's goods on eBay, typically charging the consignor a small fee plus a percentage of the final sales price.) Not surprisingly, the bidding on this unique cobalt KC-114 started heating up from the get-go.

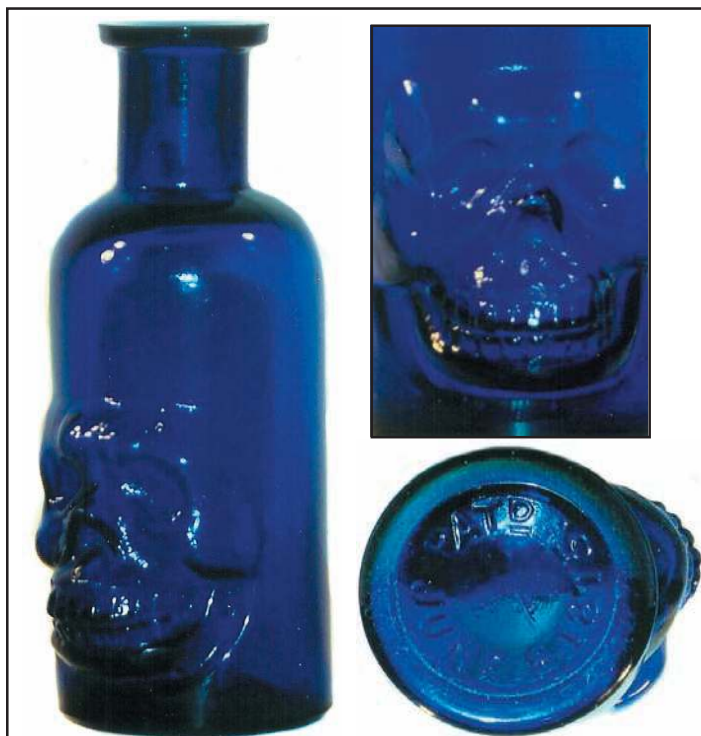
The Trading Assistant contracted several members of the Antique Poison Bottle Collectors Association – including this author, apparently obtaining my e-mail address from the club website – to inquire about the rarity and potential value of the bottle. He related that the bottle was dug from a Pennsylvania dump fifteen or so

years earlier by an elderly local woman and her late husband, and that it had sat on her mantle until that fateful day in 2006 when she brought the bottle – carrying it in her pocketbook! – to the trading assistant. She said she'd be pleased to get \$100 for the strange bottle, but the trading assistant had responded that they would be lucky to get \$10. He listed it accordingly. To his, and his consignor's, surprise, however, spirited and relentless bidding quickly pushed the price close to \$3,000 by the end of the second day of the 7-day listing.

One of the bidders was Mr. X, a FOHBC member who wishes to remain anonymous. By bidding, Mr. X was able to obtain the e-mail address of the trading assistant and subsequently his phone number and physical address of his business. Mr. X decided he wanted to buy the bottle, but, knowing it would likely prove to be an expensive purchase, also decided that he needed to (in his words) "touch it, feel it, bite it" before he bought it. Therefore, Mr. X became an early bird. Rising at about 3 o'clock a.m. on the third day after the listing first appeared, and leaving his pleasant abode at 4 a.m., Mr. X drove to the trading assistant's store in order to arrive at its 9 a.m. opening. By then, the trading assistant had terminated the eBay listing and was fielding a constant stream of phone calls from interested buyers including, it is reported, the Sotheby's auction house in New York City. In fact, when Mr. X arrived, he

feared he had not been such an early bird after all, because upon opening, the store's employee told him the trading assistant was already gone on his way to a well-known antique bottle auction house in Pennsylvania. At Mr. X's request, however, the employee called the trading assistant on his cell phone and he and Mr. X spoke at length while the former continued driving towards his destination. Presumably, the cobalt gem was going to be consigned to public auction.

Mr. X and the trading assistant chatted amicably about the bottle and its history, rarity and value as the trading assistant drove. Mr. X was not pushy and decided in his own mind that he was not likely to acquire the bottle, notwithstanding his early rising. But that was okay with him. The two men said their goodbyes and Mr. X decided to have some breakfast before heading home. As he left the store and began walking across the street, however, the employee called him back. The trading assistant was on the phone again and wanted to talk to him. Again, the two men conversed for a while and the trading assistant felt out Mr. X as to the seriousness of his interest in the cobalt KC-114. Perhaps it was the revelation that Mr. X was an early bird who had arisen in the dark, early hours of the pre-dawn morning



The unique cobalt KC-114 poison bottle dug in a Pennsylvania dump and sold for the price of a new car. The design was patented on June 8, 1875, according to the base embossing, making it one of the earliest American poison bottles.

to make the drive, but for whatever reason, the trading assistant suddenly announced that he was turning around and driving back to the store. Would Mr. X wait for him? Of course he would, replied Mr. X, and so he did.

When the trading assistant returned, he showed the bottle to Mr. X, who examined it with a magnifying glass, looked at it under a black light and took it out to the sunshine to look at it more. The cobalt KC-114 had good, honest base wear, some dust and spider webs inside from its many years of sitting on the mantle. The flake was inconsequential: two centimeters long, at most. The two men went to a restaurant and spent the next few hours talking, while the seller fielded phone call after phone call about the bottle. Finally, Mr. X made his first – and best – offer, and the trading assistant said, "It's a deal!" They shook

hands and made arrangements for payment. The price? Your author is bound not to say, other than it was five figures and somewhat more than the author and his wife recently paid for a fully loaded 2008 Honda Civic.

However, there are literally millions of Honda Civics in the world – but there is just one cobalt KC-114.

The author does not know whether Mr. X actually bit the bottle before making his offer, but in the end, the early bird got the worm.

References:

Kuhn, Rudy. *Poison Bottle Workbook*, Volumes I and II (privately published), and unpublished Volume III. Mr. Kuhn's standardized numbering system for poison bottles was explained in an earlier "Poisonland" column. (*Bottles and Extras*, Volume 14, No. 3)



Less than half a dozen of the clear glass KC-114s are known, all found in various parts of Pennsylvania.

American Poison Bottle Work Book and Price Guide, published by the Antique Poison Bottle Collectors Association (APBCA).

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¹ In my previous article, I mistakenly wrote that KC-114s have ground-glass stoppers, based on a photograph I had viewed. However, I have since learned that the stopper I observed was placed there by its owner and is not original to the bottle. The KC-114s were not, in fact, made with ground mouths or stoppers.

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