

Bottle Collecting Hawaiian Style

by Mike Polak



Left to Right: Willy Thomas, Bert Morita, Mel Tanaka, Glenn Takase, and Glenn Kunihiisa of the Hawaii Historical Bottle Collector's Club. Club dues are \$12 per year; learn more about the benefits of becoming a member by visiting www.hawaiibottleclub.com

I've attended great bottle shows, enjoyed some wild and fun digging adventures, but I never did a show or dug for bottles in Hawaii. Hawaii became a state in 1959, but began centuries earlier when a 1,600-mile-long fissure on the Pacific Ocean floor produced the Hawaiian Ridge that formed the Hawaiian Islands: Hawaii (The Big Island), Oahu, Kauai, Molokai, and Lanai.

While working on the 7th edition of "Bottles: Identification and Price Guide," Mike Leong and members of the Hawaiian Bottle Club helped with the "Hawaiian Bottles" chapter, and Brent and Blake Cousins were featured in the "Digging for Bottles" chapter. Mike and I talked about joining the club for its annual bottle show, held in conjunction with the "Hawaii Collectors EXPO 2013" show last February 22-24 for a book signing, and Brent, Blake and I talked about getting together to go digging. The timing was right, the location even better, and the trip was planned.

The "EXPO," held annually at the Blaisdell Exhibition Hall the last weekend in February, is produced by the Hawaii State Numismatic Association (HSNA), and includes approximately 250 booths with 500 dealers. Besides antique bottles, collectors in large numbers checked out Hawaiiana collectibles, surfing memorabilia, vintage jewelry and clothing, rare coins and currency, fossils, shells, art deco, oil paintings, postcards, books and much more.

Approximately 40 club members set up sales tables displaying large collections of multi-colored Hawaiian bottles including whiskeys, beers, gins, medicines, milks,



Alejandro Gasnen of the Hawaii Historical Bottle Collector's Club is holding a "Hawaiian Soda Works, Honolulu H.I." Hutch. (Approximate value: \$1,500-\$2,000.)

siphon (seltzer water) bottles, Japanese glass net floats, and applied color label soda pop bottles. Of course, I picked up some nice bottles: A "W.C. Peakcock & Co. /Honolulu HI./Wine & Liquor Merchants", 1880-1890 amber whiskey; "Hollister & Co. / Honolulu" aqua Hutch soda



Mike Polak (left) and Pake Zane of the Hawaii Historical BottleCollector's Club "hanging loose" at the Hawaii bottle show.



Mike Polak (left) and Mike Leong, co-President of the Hawaii Historical Bottle Collector's Club, manning Polak's table at the Hawaii Collectors EXPO 2013.



Clesson Toyama and Russell Koivori of the Hawaii Historical Bottle Collector's Club hold a copy of the "Antique Trader® Bottles Identification & Price Guide."

water bottle, 1883 ; "Garden Island" Hawaiian scene-ACL soda pop bottle, 1950, and a Carter's cobalt blue master ink, 1880-1900.

Of all the bottles, the Hawaiian soda water category drew the most attention. It has a unique history of its own, and ranks right at the top for the majority of Hawaiian bottle collections with prices ranging from \$55 to \$5,000.

During the 1880s and early 1900s, when the pineapple and sugar plantations were the basis of Hawaii's main economy, the owners embossed their company names on these soda bottles, sold the filled bottles to their field workers for a nickel each, and charged the cost back to the workers' company store accounts. The company would then collect the empty bottles for refilling, and continue the cycle. In essence, the field workers were always in debt to the company store. During this time, there were more than 44 different soda companies manufacturing Hutchinson, blob top, crown top and over 270 variations of BIMALS (bottles blown into a mold) soda bottles.



Jim Leonardi of the Hawaii Historical BottleCollector's Club surrounded by fishing net floats and collectible bottles.

After the "EXPO," we flew from Oahu to Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaii, which is almost twice as large as all of the other islands combined, for the digging adventure. From Hilo we drove north for an hour with the Pacific Ocean on our right, and lush green mountains on the left, to the town of Honokaa where Brent and Blake Cousins live. Honokaa's roots go back to 1873 when the Hamakua Sugar Plantation began operations. While there, I picked up a nice "Hamakua Soda Works/Honokaa, Hawaii", circa 1930s.

The next morning, I met with Brent and Blake and we traveled
Circa 1880-1890 medium amber "W.C. Peacock & Company" whiskey bottle bought at "Collectors EXPO 2013."





Co-President of the Hawaii Historical Bottle Collector's Club Paul Kanehiro (left) and collector Dwight Kaai.



Tracey and Arnold Akau with part of his Hawaiian bottle collection.

to one of their "secluded digging spots." All digging spots are secluded and kept secret from other bottle guys. If you asked me where we were going, where we had been, how we finally found the spot, or even how we found our way out, I couldn't tell you. It's not because I need to keep the spot secret, it's because I had absolutely no clue as to where we were. I might as well have been blindfolded.

We started descending a steep hill that was maneuvered by holding onto thick bamboo trees the entire way down. I confess that I did some slipping and sliding before reaching the bottom. We continued on through a deep valley working our way around huge boulders and thick jungle vegetation and found the remains of an ancient homestead that dated back approximately 300 years. Because it is considered sacred, we only took photos and didn't disturb anything in the area.

After hiking for 45 minutes, we arrived at the digging site. I began to get more excited entering the area as I noticed numerous remnants of 1860 - 1880 broken bottles, pottery shards, dishware and other similar artifacts. Brent and Blake were also excited since they had recently found a "Hoffschlaeger Co. LTD-Honolulu" dark amber whiskey bottle while digging in the same area. Their bottle is circa 1900-1910 and is valued at \$175-200. There were two of these bottles for sale at the "EXPO" for \$225 each. We began digging and ended up being approximately 7-8 feet below the top surface of the area. While we found a lot of common whiskeys with great colors, medicine bottles and other artifacts, we didn't find any early embossed whiskeys or soda bottles. We found remnants of early items, but nothing complete. We dug for about 4 hours and would have gone longer, but we were losing light from the day. And, we needed light to hike out of the area. While we didn't find some of the very earlier bottles, we had a lot of fun trying. There's no such thing as a bad day of digging. As for myself, it was even better. I'm in Hawaii, digging where I never could imagine being, learning new history and finding historical bottles and relics from Hawaii's past. Now, how cool is that? My wife (Jacque) and I also want to say thank you, to Brent's and Blake's parents, Tom and Carmel, for inviting us to their house for the best homemade pizza we've ever had.

Before heading back to Oahu, we visited with Tracey and Arnold Akau of Waimea. Arnold, who is a long time Hawaii bottle digger and collector, is also the last of four generations who has worked for the Parker Cattle Ranch. He recently retired after 30 years. Tracey has also worked with the Parker Ranch for 23 years as manager of their retail shop. When we entered their home, the first thing I saw was Arnold's bottle collection. I was in awe. I would consider his collection of sodas, whiskeys, medicines, milks, pottery and other Hawaiian artifacts as being in mint or near mint condition. He then tells me that he actually doesn't have everything displayed because of a lack of space. Amazing! We swapped digging stories and agreed that I needed to return for some future digging and fishing.

A Big Mahalo to Mike Leong and the Hawaiian Bottle Club, Brent and Blake Cousins and Tracey and Arnold Akau, for treating us to some great fun experiences, and showing us the true meaning of the "Aloha Spirit."



Brent Cousins and Mike Polak at the digging site on the Big Island of Hawaii.



Mike Polak, Blake Cousins and Brent Cousins at the end of a good day of bottle digging.



Circa 1880-1900 tooled-top whiskey bottles found during the Hawaii dig.



Blake Cousins and Mike Polak at the digging site on the Big Island of Hawaii.

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