

Who In The World Is E.J. Suggs?

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In 1959, the Platters were singing, "Harbor Lights," Ford had an Edsel and I was serving America in the U.S. Navy, at beautiful San Diego, California where Archie Moore lived. For you whipper snappers who don't know who Archie Moore is, I will simply say, he was very possibly the greatest light heavyweight boxer of all time! My home town is Lancaster, Ohio. During the summer of '59, some friends relocated from Lancaster to a small Arizona town called Camp Verde. It was just a small dusty desert town north of Phoenix. Back then.

I took some leave, boarded a Trailways Bus and headed for Camp Verde. On the second day of my visit, my friend Bob said he was going to take me to a ghost town. So we jumped into his '49 Chevy truck and headed for a place called Jerome. Jerome sat high on a hill. The road up to Jerome had no guard rails and was quite nervewracking. Especially the way Bob drives. It was a very interesting place. Mostly empty and very old. On our way back to Camp Verde we had a blowout. When the truck came to a stop, I hopped out to inspect the damage. It was blown out all right, but the tire was also as bald as a billiard ball. I trembled when I realized we just came off the mountain riding on that tire. Well, old Bob popped open the trunk and there inside was a tire just like the one we needed to replace. Just as flat! And just as bald!

Well, dear friends, there were no cell phones in those days so we were stranded, at least for awhile. Bob lit up a Lucky Strike, climbed into the Chevy and told me to flag down the next car. I decided to take a little walk and look at the cactus up close. I had walked maybe 50 yards or so

when I spotted something sparkle in the bright Arizona sun. It was laying next to a cactus about 25 feet off the road. I walked toward it ever so careful as Bob had warned me this was rattlesnake country. I could see it was glass and supposed it to be an old pop bottle. It was half buried and my first thought was just broken glass. I reached down and gave it a pull and out came a whole bottle unlike any I had ever seen. Later on I would be educated as to what it was. (pumpkinseed flask)

This was 1959 and I never became a bottle collector until 1967. In 1969, I joined the Ohio Bottle Club at Barberton, Ohio. I had the honor of being the president of that great club. Back to the bottle, it had an amethyst tint and some words in the glass. "E. J. Suggs" in an arch, and across the middle, "Orient Saloon, and under that, "S. F." I showed the bottle to Bob and he quickly replied, "whiskey flask, we find them now and again out there." You see, Bob was a high tension electrical engineer, and he came to Arizona to build high electric towers across the state. So when he said, out there," he was talking about the desert where they worked.

As we were looking at the old bottle, a dusty old International Scout stopped to see our need. We told the driver our plight and he said he would send help. About an hour later, a wrecker from the Camp Verde Garage arrived, hooked us up, and hauled us to town. While they were repairing the tires, I walked over to a desk where the owner was seated, reading a Super Man comic. "Got something I want to show you," and I pulled the pumpkin seed from my pocket. "I found it where we had the blowout, have you ever seen one of

these before?" He took it, read it, and said, "Yes, I have. Not with this particular name but the same kind."

"How old do you think it is," I asked? "1860 to 1900 or so would be my guess, he opined. "How do you reckon it got out here from San Francisco?" was my next question. He looked at me intensely and asked, "What makes you so sure it's from San Francisco?" Trying to be a little witty I said, "Well, as Chester would say 'it's as plain as the nose on your face, Mr. Dillon!' Can't you see that S F under his name?"

He just chuckled and said, "Did you ever think S F might stand for Santa Fe, or Sioux Falls?"

"I guess you got me there; no, I never thought of those cities, I answered.

He got out of his chair and said, "Follow me, son," and then led me into a back room. It was a room full of clutter. Dusty old clutter like signs, racks, oil cans, etc. He pointed to a shelf that was full of old bottles, dusty old bottles. He showed me two or three that was shaped like the one I found. I don't recall today what each one said. As we walked back to the front room he asked, "What would you take for it? I would like to have it."

I spied an old lift top Coke cooler sitting against the wall. "How about a cold pop and a bag of Planters peanuts?" I replied. He smiled and said, "You sure drive a hard bargain, help yourself." I lifted the lid, pushed my hand down into that icy water and pulled out a Dad's Old Fashioned Root Beer.

A couple days later, I said goodbye to my friends, boarded the Trailways Bus, and settled back into the very comfortable seat for my return to San

Diego. As the bus smoothly glided down the highway I reflected on my time with the Jones family. I then thought about that old bottle. Did I act hastily by giving it up? How about that name E. J. Suggs? There seemed to be an aroma of suspense about that name. As I stared out the window my mind would wonder but kept coming back to E. J. Suggs. Who was he? How old was he when he died? Was it San Francisco, or Santa Fe? For sure, the old bottle had a story that drew me in. I didn't get bitten by a rattlesnake that day, but I did get bitten by the bottle bug, and little did I know I would be infected for the rest of my life.

As I pondered on the name I was mystified I had never heard the name Suggs before. What did E. J. stand for I wondered. My grandfather was born in 1876 and his name was Noah Elijah Beatty. That's it, I thought, he has got a Bible name. E, probably stood for Elijah, and J stood for Jeremiah. So there it was, Elijah Jeremiah Suggs, that had to be it. I arrived back to my ship the U.S.S. Isherwood, DD 520. It would be 38 years before I would really think about E. J. Suggs again.

In 1998, I accepted the call to pastor the First Baptist Church of Boca Grande, Florida. So I said farewell to all my Ohio Bottle Club members and headed south. Coming down through the center of Florida, somewhere close to Sebring, we passed an old auto salvage yard. The name on the business was Suggs Auto Parts. "Betty, stop the car!" I yelled. "Why?" "Just pull over." Once the car was stopped, I said, "Look at the name on the building." She looked, then looked at me like a deer in headlights. "What am I looking for?" she asked. "Don't you see? Suggs."

"Yes, so what?" "Don't you remember the story I told you about that old desert bottle I found? Remember the name, E.J. Suggs?" Gary, what's that got to do with these people," she asked? "Honey, we have never seen or met anyone named Suggs so I reckon that's an uncommon name and these folks are his relatives." "You are crazy," she said. "These bottles have finally sent you over the edge, they're going to think you're nuts!"

Undaunted, I got out of the car and walked inside. As I entered the room, I saw four men behind the counter having a serious discussion. I waited a couple minutes but they paid me no mind what so ever. I raised my voice and said, "Whoever name is Suggs raise your right hand." Well, they looked at me like a calf at a new gate and then all four shot their hands up. Well, long story short, I told them the story of the E. J. Suggs bottle and

then asked if they ever heard of him. They looked puzzled at one another and almost in unison said, "Nope."

I persisted, had their father or grandfather ever mentioned a relative by the name of Elijah. Once again "Nope" was the response. Still pressing the issue I asked, do you have any relatives out west? Who looked to be the oldest of the brothers spat some tobacco into a Chock Full of Nuts coffee can and said, "Mister, we ain't got no relatives outside of Florida. Now if you don't mind, we got work to do." With that they turned their attention away from me..

When I opened the door to the car, Betty was grinning ear to ear like a Cheshire Cat, "Well, did they know E. J. ?" she slyly asked? With that we both had a great laugh. I guess I may never know who E.J. Suggs was, but then again I might! You see, being a preacher man, I have a strong belief in Heaven, and count on going there. Just suppose when I cross the bar and arrive at my new celestial home that there will be some folks there to welcome me. Just suppose a fellow steps forward, sticks out his right hand, and says, "Heard you been looking for me. My name is Elmer Jasper Suggs, so glad to meet you," and with that we shook hands.

Well, friends, it just goes to show you when you think you got all the answers to your old bottles life will throw you a curve. Who would have ever thought Elmer Jasper?

In conclusion, you western fellows and gals, I have some good advice for you. Keep hunting and digging them old bottles, and just maybe you will meet "E.J.Suggs."

Happy hunting and Best Regards, Gary.

