

The Oldest “3-IN-ONE-OIL” Container

By Cecil Munsey
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In May of 2001 the WD-40 Company of San Diego, California, owners of the famous product 3-IN-ONE-OIL – “The Tool Kit In A Can,” began a nationwide search for the oldest can or bottle that contained their over-100-year-old product. Our local bottle club, San Diego Antique Bottle & Collectibles Club, was contacted by WD-40 and asked to supervise the search and verify the winners. There was to be a \$1,000 first-prize for the oldest container found and a Dremel professional rotary tool for each of the first and second runner-ups. The prize-money went to Darrell Meyer of Shoshoni, Wyoming who found the oldest 3-IN-ONE-OIL bottle in an old privy in Laramie, Wyoming in 1981 when he first started digging bottles. The 2nd and 3rd place winners of the contest were, respectively, Arden Allen of Sierra Vista, Arizona and Mike Smith of New Tazewell, Tennessee. Both entrants received Dremel rotary tools.

The search came to an end on June 14, 2001. There were over 2,000 entries in the contest. The whole story was published in *Bottles and Extras* in the November of 2001 issue (see Selected References at the end of this article).

The reader might ask the question, “**Why is it news again?**” Because the above mentioned three oldest bottles (circa 1895) were all “dug” bottles, so the original paper labels did not survive the 100+ years of being buried in the earth [Figure 1]. Recently an estate sale discovery revealed a copy of the oldest 3-IN-ONE-OIL bottle with full labels [Figures 2, 3, & 4].

3-IN-ONE-OIL was invented and first sold in 1894 in Asbury Park, New Jersey by George W. Cole. He touted his invention’s ability to “clean, lubricate and protect.” It was originally invented for use on bicycles. The formula consists of pale spindle oil with a small amount of corrosion inhibitor and citronella oil.

Cole incorporated his company in 1899 as “G. W. Cole, Inc.” In 1905 the firm became the “3-IN-ONE-Oil Company” and began to market some of its oil in small two-inch tall green triangular-shaped glass bottles embossed with the name 3-IN-ONE [Figure 5]. The miniature green bottles were samples that by arrangement with the 3-IN-ONE-Oil Company were included with numerous other manufactures’ items: guns, roller skates, fishing reels, many toys with moving parts, et cetera.

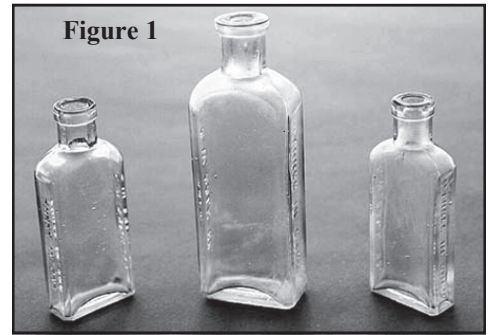


Figure 1

In 1910 a metal screw cap was added to the traditional bottle. In 1933 the 3-IN-ONE-OIL Company was acquired by Drug Inc. and became part of Sterling Products, Inc. 3-IN-ONE Oil was next sold to A. S. Boyle Company in 1936 and from then on the oil was sold in small tin cans. The cans replaced the traditional glass bottles.

In 1990 Reckitt & Coleman Ltd., through its U. S. subsidiary, Reckitt & Coleman Inc. obtained ownership of the product. And finally (for now anyway) in 1995 WD-40 Company of San Diego, California acquired the 3-IN-ONE Oil business.

In 2001 the current owners decided to try to find the oldest container for 3-IN-ONE Oil. And as you have read, they did!



Figure 5



Fig. 2 Fig. 3 Fig. 4

References:

Book:

Munsey, Cecil. *The Illustrated Guide to COLLECTING BOTTLES*. New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1970.

Periodical:

“3-IN-ONE OIL Reunited With Oldest Known Glass Bottle,” *Bottles and Extras*, Vol. 12, No. 11, November 2001, p. 5.

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