

# The 2003 California Recall Election; And its relationship to the “Octopus Bottle”

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## The History

The governor who gave California the recent and internationally famous (infamous?) recall, initiative and referendum that allowed the recent 2003 recall-election was Hiram Johnson (Figure 1). Johnson was California's 23<sup>rd</sup> governor and served from 1911-1917. His reforms rescued the state from the tentacles of the Southern Pacific Railroad which effectively owned California's government from 1880 to 1910.

Before Johnson came to power, Southern Pacific owned the state Senate, Supreme Court, the Republican and Democratic parties and most state offices. Organized in 1865 by Charles Crocker (Figure 2), Mark Hopkins (Figure 3), Collis P. Huntington (Figure 4) and Leland Stanford (Figure 5) – four very rich and powerful men – by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Southern Pacific could do as it pleased in California to maintain the profits of its monopoly at the expense of farmers and all others.

The railroad machine chose Republican candidates for governor. The public dutifully elected them. Democratic Gov. James Budd attempted to curtail the power of Southern Pacific, but was blocked by a Republican Legislature. In 1899 the railroad saw to it that Budd did not get re-elected. His replacement was machine candidate Henry Gage. California did not have a Democratic governor again for 40 years.



Fig. 1

California's only hope was a reform-minded Republican. It found one in Johnson, a successful San Francisco lawyer. In his six years as governor (1911-1917), he tamed the railroad, reformed government in other ways and restored democratic processes by giving voters the right to recall state officers and place initiatives on the ballot – including the historic 1978 Proposition #13 and, of course, the 2003 recall of a very unpopular governor.

Hiram's father, Grove Johnson, was a railroad spokesman in the California Senate, and his son's anti-railroad politics soured their relationship. In 1912, Hiram Johnson helped form the Progressive or Bull Moose Party and became Teddy Roosevelt's running mate. In 1916, he opposed Republican Party nominee Charles Evans Hughes and helped elect Woodrow Wilson. When he entered the U. S. Senate in 1917, he opposed everything President Wilson did. He even voted against entering World War I. In 1920, Johnson refused to run as vice president because he opposed Warren Harding. In 1932, he opposed Herbert Hoover and favored Roosevelt, but when Roosevelt was elected, he opposed all his policies. After Pearl Harbor, he reluctantly supported World War II, but



Fig. 2

in 1945 he opposed creation of the United Nations.

Johnson died in 1945, leaving behind a lifelong record of bitter opposition to men and policies. His opposition was always personal. It was never just difference of opinion with Johnson – he was right and others were evil.

## The Bottle

Following the “*Romantic*” period in American Literature (1810-1865) came the era of “*Realism*” (1865-1914). During the latter period, also known as “The Gilded Age,” some authors were content with a general censure of materialism and political corruption, but others went one step beyond and wrote more specifically. One such famous American author was Frank Norris (1870-1902) – Figure 6. Going one step beyond “*Realism*,” Norris became the man who is credited with introducing, to this country, the more severe school of literature, “*Naturalism*.” His writings foreshadowed some of the aspects of notable modern authors – the brutality of Hemingway and the unflinching depiction of sordid detail in Faulkner, are just two examples.

In 1901 Norris published *The Octopus*, which was to be the first in a trilogy about the (1) production, (2) distribution, and (3) consumption of American wheat that was being grown in California's San Joaquin Valley and shipped by the Southern Pacific Railroad. Norris died at the age of 32. He was only able to complete two of the planned novels before his untimely death. The principle action of *The Octopus* is the struggle between

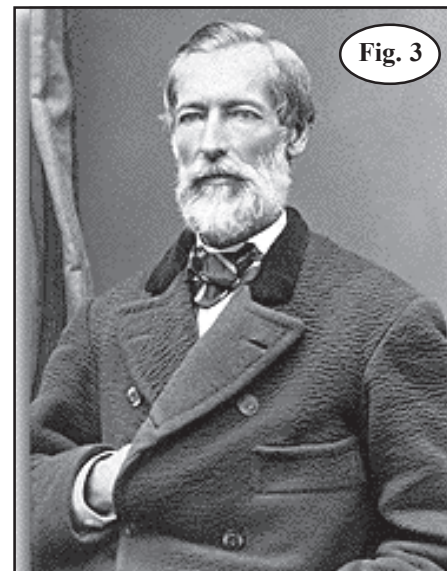
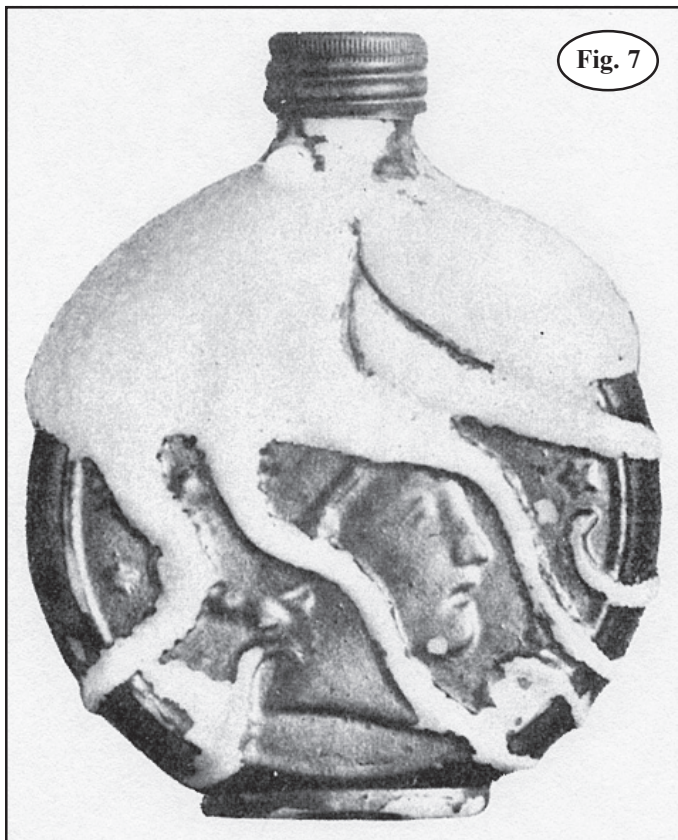


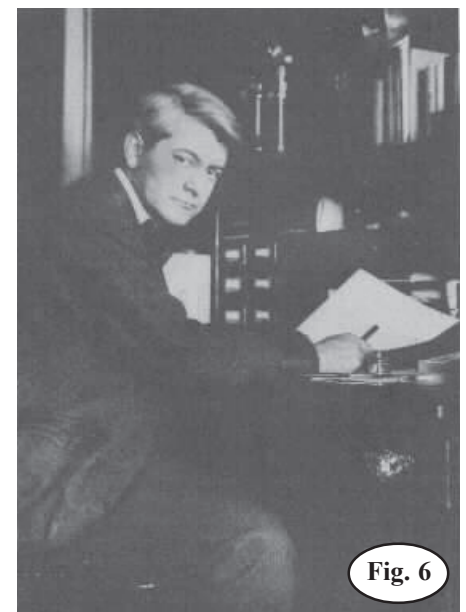
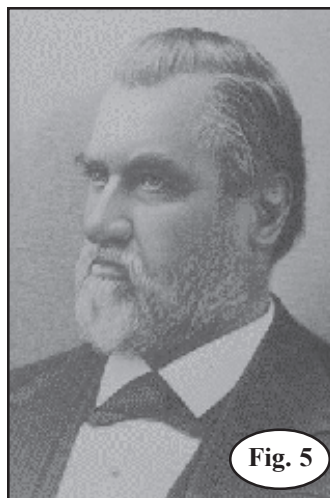
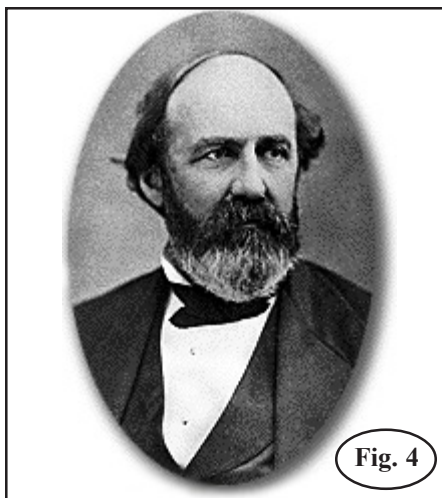
Fig. 3



the wheat growers and the Southern Pacific Railroad for the fertile San Joaquin Valley.

The classic octopus figural bottle (Figure 7), commemorating the battle between the farmers and the railroad, indirectly honors Hiram Johnson the reform-minded San Francisco lawyer who was able to reform the democratic process in California by giving the voters the right to recall state officers and place initiatives on the ballot, thus ending the railroad's strangle hold on the farmers.

The bottle has the shape of a large American dollar. An eight-armed octopus has secured a strangle hold on the coin. On the obverse, the head of Liberty is shown with her mouth open as though screaming with pain. The reverse shows the American eagle under which the date 1901 [the year the book was published] is embossed in the glass.



The capacity of the bottle is four ounces. It is made of milk glass and was originally decorated with gold and red, the coin being gold and the octopus red. Today the bottles are almost always found cleaned of their paint which makes them a most attractive solid white. The metal screw-caps have a cork lining which fits snugly on the ground-off threaded neck of the bottle – an excellent dating mark of certain turn-of-the-19<sup>th</sup>-century bottles.

### Concluding Comments

The late figural bottle book author, Otha D. Wearin (see bibliography) served three terms in the United States Congress. He was a personal friend of Senator Hiram Johnson. We can only wonder if they ever discussed the commemorative Octopus bottle that undoubtedly they were both aware of.

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