

The Stolen Bottles Story ...from Jeff Wichman

A California bottle collector recently came home to a broken front door and ransacked house after a burglar had broken in while he was gone. The collector was stunned to find many of his prized bottles gone. He immediately called the police who took a report. The victim spent the night wondering how, why and, most of all, who? The story was just beginning.

The victim of the multi-thousand dollar theft was left wondering how someone could have known he had a collection to begin with, let alone how he knew he wouldn't be home. Also, how he could have been so brazen to kick in the front door with neighbors nearby. Had the thief been casing his house? He had to be a large man just to kick in the door. And maybe the scariest question of all, was he coming back?

All these questions continued to bother the victim and, although he had little hope of seeing his bottles again, he called antiques shops in his area and contacted American Bottle Auctions (ABA), an antique bottle auction house in Sacramento, Calif. The owner of the auction house received an email listing of all the missing bottles the next week, which was followed up with a phone call from the victim. The victim explained the dread he was going through, trying to piece the puzzle together and his concern for other collectors; was this person going to strike again? American Bottle Auctions' owner told him he would be on the lookout for any bottles that came their way. So, that was that, or was it?

The next week the auction house owner had been down to Santa Barbara to check out a bottle collection. On his way back, he called his office and checked for messages. He was told a man had some bottles and wanted to sell them. He wrote down his phone number and called the cell phone. The man said he had been collecting bottles since he was a kid and was getting married. He said he needed to sell some bottles for a down payment on a house for his bride and himself. The owner asked him what he had for sale and the man mentioned a few pieces. The owner told the caller that he could meet him the next day, Saturday. He agreed that they would meet at ABA's downtown office and see if they could strike a deal.

The next day, the owner got to his office around 11:30 a.m. It was very hot out and he wanted to cool the office a little before his guest arrived. He walked into the office and the phone rang. It was the bottle seller, "Where was he?" the seller wanted to know. The owner responded that he thought the meeting was at noon. The seller agreed that it was and he was early. "Can I come up now?" he asked the owner. "Sure," he answered, "I'll come down and unlock the door." In a couple minutes, the groom-to-be stood in the showroom holding a plastic tub filled with cloth-covered bottles. He sat the tub on a table and talked incessantly about the bottles, where he found them, how he had collected them all his life, he never stopped talking. The owner reached into the tub and pulled the first bottle out and uncovered it. It was a black Hostetter's Bitters in nice condition. He then pulled out another, then another and,

within a minute, he knew what was going on. It all fit. This man didn't know much about bottles for someone who collected them his whole life. And, more importantly, every bottle was coming back to the owner's mind in the form of the list that had been e-mailed to him — the list of stolen bottles.

The owner didn't know what to do. How could he have been so stupid? The guy never sounded right, so why didn't he have a plan? His first thought was to tell the guy he needed to talk to his business partner in private, so he walked outside and called his friend. He whispered to him that a guy was here with all the stolen bottles. His friend asked him what he was going to do. "I don't know, that's why I'm calling you!" he exclaimed. "Maybe you should call the police," he said. "Well, yeah, but now? How can I with him here?" "Maybe I can call for you," his friend replied. "I'll think about it and call you back," the owner finally whispered. He walked back in the office, looking into the seller's eyes to see if he suspected that he knew these were stolen bottles. He didn't appear riled. "Well," he told the guy, "what you have here is about \$2,500 worth of bottles." The owner was still wondering what to do. He knew two things and only two things. One, he had to find out this guy's name. Second, he couldn't let him just walk out with the bottles. He couldn't stand the thought of telling the victim he'd seen his bottles but let the guy go. After another couple minutes of continuous babble from the seller, the owner simply said, "The best I can do is \$2,000."

The owner had thought about just buying them, but the seller had told him they were worth \$45,000 on the phone the day before. Was this guy violent? He seemed okay. Dressed in white Dockers and a fairly dressy black shirt, he felt sweat accumulating under his own shirt now. If this guy is a criminal, would he get violent if the owner told him he knew the bottles were stolen? "Isn't there some kind of rule that shop owners go by in these situations?" he thought to himself. The owner didn't have much cash but decided to go ahead and see if the guy would take a check. "All I have is a check if you'll take the \$2,000. I couldn't get cash until Monday," he said. Wait a minute, the owner thought. He could maybe get the guy to come back and meanwhile have the police there waiting for him. But would he really want to get into that? What if the guy got suspicious? No, he thought, just hope the guy takes a check. It's Saturday and he can't cash it until Monday anyway. Besides, you can cancel the check before Monday and let the police know, meanwhile, he thought.

"Okay, I'll take a check," the guy muttered. The owner was now feeling queasy, not knowing if he'd done the right thing or not. Then, one last idea hit him. Ask the guy for a drivers license and get his address. "If I type in your address on the check, they're easier to cash," the owner said to him nervously, wondering if he'd just blown it. "No problem," the seller said, handing him his license. In a minute or

two, the guy was gone, the bottles were in the office and the owner was on the phone leaving a message with the bottle's owner. Next, he called the police who said they would get back to him. He thought of canceling the check right away but then thought it would look too suspicious. "Besides, he can't cash it until Monday anyway," he said to himself.

Later that night, the bottle owner called the auction owner and was delighted to learn his bottles had been recovered. "Did you get his name," he wanted to know. "Not only his name but his address," the owner replied. "Fantastic! I'll get back to you after I talk to the detective who is handling the case," he told the auctioneer.

The next couple of days were filled with phone calls... calls from the police, the detective and all the ramblings that occur when something like this happens. The auction owner thought everything was fine until he found out that the check had been cashed that same Saturday. "Oh, well," he thought. "I'll get it back. Besides, if the thief didn't cash it, there wouldn't have been a crime," he thought.

Soon, he was identifying a picture of the thief... not an easy task with a three-year-old picture to go from. A call to the detective said that they were preparing to arrest the man. It seemed he might have a drug problem and had been involved in other incidents, not unlike this one. The detective was cautious about revealing too much information. A couple days later, when all the information had been confirmed, the detective called the burglar to tell him they happened to have a video of him breaking into the victim's house. He told him that the neighbor had installed a hidden video camera on his front porch and he was easily identified from it. The thief bought the phony story, broke down and admitted everything. The detective had obviously done that before, it worked. They arrested him. They brought him to jail, where he is still staying, awaiting a deal with the prosecutor. The detective told the auction owner that they had recovered \$600. But, he also said that it would be a while before he saw any compensation, since they couldn't release any money until the burglar was sentenced.

The victim agreed to pay the auctioneer the two grand and wait for the other money to be released. He had his bottles back (which were worth way more than \$2,000) and, better yet, the culprit who invaded his castle was sitting in jail.

This is a true story and it is being published for a few reasons... not the least of which is to let bottle collectors know that stuff like this is happening. Many collectors don't think people would steal bottles since they have their own "fingerprint" in the bubbles and crudity inherent to antique glass. But thieves do take bottles and collectors should make sure they're collections are secure and, most of all, insured. The owner of these bottles did have insurance, but he also had a \$1,000 deductible. Still, not a bad investment since the thief left a number of much more valuable bottles behind for some reason.

Another reason for this story is a question. What would you have done had you been in the place of the auctioneer?