

The *Arabia* Bottles

September 5, 1856

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I know that this might look a little like an advertisement, but really it's not. I just got back from Kansas City, Missouri and had a chance to go see the *Arabia* Museum.

I have been hearing about this museum for years and finally had a chance to visit it after a four-hour "out-of-my-way" excursion. We had gone to Branson, Mo., for our annual American Collectors of Infant Feeders (ACIF) Baby Bottle Convention, which put us within striking distance of Kansas City.

The *Arabia* was a double side-wheeler steamboat that sunk on the Missouri River very near Kansas, Mo., the present Kansas City. She was 171 feet long, 29 feet wide, and drew 4 ³/₄ feet of water, allowing her to carry 222 tons of cargo and passengers. Heading upriver on September 5, 1856 she hit a large walnut tree snag that penetrated her hull, quickly sinking her. All the passengers had enough time to get off the ship as she sunk in somewhat shallow water, leaving the superstructure exposed. In fact, all of their baggage was also recovered and brought ashore that afternoon and left there during the night. Sometime after dark fell this baggage was

all rifled of any valuables of which it contained. None of these personal belongings were ever recovered.

As the Missouri River gradually changed course, the resting place of the *Arabia* was lost to all except a few locals. The first successful attempt to recover her treasures was in 1897 when a team of treasure hunters out of St. Joseph, Mo., managed to dig down to her deck. They were trying to recover the supposed 400 barrels of Kentucky bourbon that she was thought to be carrying and they actually penetrated her deck in three different locations. All they managed to find were hats, shoes and boots, so they gave up and let her rest. Over the years there have been numerous unsuccessful attempts at salvaging the cargo of the *Arabia*.

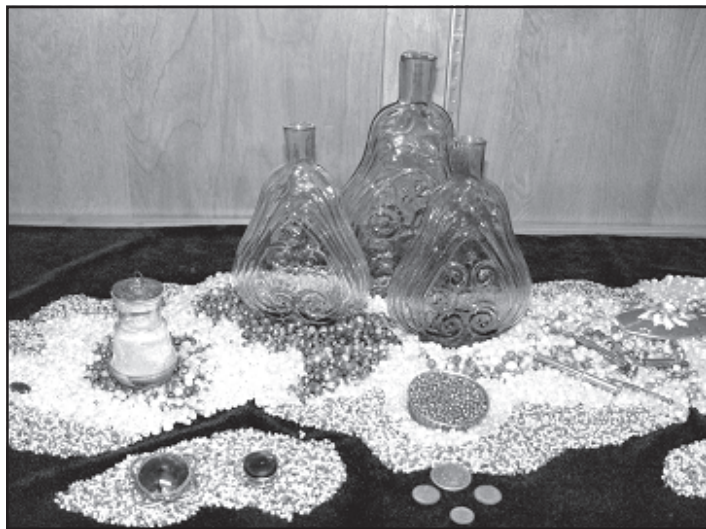
The next attempt was made in 1988 by three men, a restaurant owner, a heating and air conditioner man, and a construction man. What a grouping for a big recovery job! With the help of a big bank loan the project was started — not one federal or state dollar was involved — imagine that. The site was located in two hours with a magnetometer and the big equipment was



Some Wedgwood dinnerware and 72 of the decorative scroll whiskey flasks in three different sizes and at least three different color shades.

brought in. At a depth of 16 feet the water began seeping in from the water table and then the site began to flood. Twenty large pumps and diesel engines were brought in and the pumping began to the tune of 6,000 gallons of diesel fuel per week for the remainder of the project. The deck of the *Arabia* was contacted at the 45 foot level and the recoveries began to emerge from the muck — all 200 tons of them.

I know that my wife, Teresa, was hoping to find some baby bottles or invalid feeders in the museum, but none were to be found. Evidently they were not needed on the frontier in 1856. Remember pliable, vulcanized rubber, used in the nipples, was



Three different decorative scroll whiskey flasks, a bottle of cosmetics, 1,000s of Indian trade beads, and the total money recovered: 26 cents (two silver dimes, a silver half-dime and an 1856 large cent), representing the total of monies recovered.



Writing instruments and ink bottles. Master inks behind, a cobalt blue umbrella ink and other ink bottles and ink wells. Writing pens are in the bottle to the left. Dishes of all types and styles in the far background.



Unknown bottles of medicine to the left, Mexican Mustang Liniment to the right.

not invented till about twenty years before. On the frontier breast feeding was still the norm.

As a result of this disappointment, I'm going to stray from the baby bottle theme of my articles a little and look at some of the food bottles that were being shipped into the frontier of this great country. After all, the adults had to eat.

First of all, I might as well mention that the 1897 attempt was all for naught,



Cathedral pepper sauce bottles with table knives as a backing. They are embossed "Western Spice Mills."

because the 400 kegs of Kentucky bourbon were not to be found on the *Arabia*. As far as kegs of alcohol are concerned, only one keg of Ale was actually found. Yes, there were some boxes that contained gin, wine, cider, champagne, cognac and sherry, but no kegs of Kentucky bourbon.

The bottles and jars recovered contained primarily foodstuffs for the frontier housewife and most likely the very few of the better restaurants that existed on the frontier. When recovered from the muck, most of the bottles were sealed with various sizes of corks. Because of the fear of the corks shrinking and exposing the contents to the risk of bacterial growth as the corks dried after 132 years of submersion, the recovery team coated every one of the cork seals with melted canning wax and placed the bottles in cold storage at 36 degrees F.

The real delicacies were the bottles of brandied cherries, both light and dark, that had traveled over 6,000 miles from France so pioneers could make cherry pie. They traveled by steamship to New York, then by train to St. Louis, before being loaded on to the *Arabia*. Merchants sold these bottles of Brandied Cherries for \$1.50 per



Three more of the decorative scroll whiskey flasks with some of the French perfume bottles in front and a dish full of Indian Trade Beads.

bottle. Ten days later on Jan. 7, 1889, one of the first boxes to be opened was marked, "Assorted Pie Fruit, Price and Little, Baltimore." In this box there were the bottles of gooseberries, blueberries, rhubarb, apples, cherries, and blackberries. These were all in round necked cylinder bottle made of both clear and green glass.

Some of the prettier bottles were the "Cathedral" pepper sauce bottles, so named because the panels looked much like the stained glass Gothic cathedral windows so common on the European continent. Attempting to compete with the English delicacies, the American companies designed and used these beautiful Cathedral bottles. The pepper sauce was badly needed because of the inadequate cold storage during the 1800s. This lack of cold storage caused the meat to deteriorate quite rapidly and the early Americans used the pepper sauce and other spices to flavor the meat and cover up the rancid taste. These tall pepper sauce bottles were in wooden boxes stuffed with sawdust and marked "Western Spicemills Pepper Sauce, St. Louis." These bottles are also embossed in the Cathedral window panels with "Western Spice Mills" sauce.

As Greg Hawley describes in his book, *Treasure in a Cornfield*, on many days the finders could not resist the temptation of "pot holing" or moving to a different part of the side wheeler and spending a day checking a new area rather than staying with their systematic search pattern. On one of those days they first opened a crate of footwear, stating, "If this footwear ever comes back in style, we're set for life."

"The next box was more to my liking: three gorgeous, white stoneware pitchers manufactured by Wedgwood. With darkness closing in, we hoisted the day's final box from the cargo hold and gently set it on the main deck. When we lifted the lid, we discovered beautiful 'Cathedral' bottles containing bright green pickles. Each bottle carried an oval label made of lead foil which read, 'Sweet Pickles, Wells Provost & Co. 215, 217 & 219 Front Street Wholesale Depot, New York'."

"The pickles looked good enough to eat and Jerry Mackey proved it. Taking his knife, Jerry sliced off a small chunk of pickle and popped it into his mouth. A few chews and one swallow later, Jerry smiled and said, 'They're sweet pickles, and they are great'."

Another fascinating recovery were the bottles of perfume that were heading for



Left: To the right are various sizes of Cathedral pickle and relish jars, shot glasses (bottom side up), fronted by ink bottles and a Maguire Druggists St. Louis, Mo. standing in front of the plate. **Right:** Green Cathedral Pickled Relish bottles. On all of the bottles you can see where the corks have been dipped in a canning wax solution to keep the corks from drying out, which would have allowed bacteria to enter the contents.

the frontier to make the women palatable to their men. They were still sealed and full. Right after the recovery they opened two dissimilar bottles and inhaled a tapestry of floral aromas. After 132 years under the water, mud and sand the fragrance continued to permeate. This was a moment that the Treasure Hunters would never forget. They even sent samples to technicians at International Flavors and Fragrances, Inc. (IFF) in New York City. One of the fragrances, upon being analyzed, proved to contain: aldehydes, mimosa, marigold, jasmine, muguet, rose, narcissi, moss, vetivert, sandalwood, musk, and orris. With IFF's help the scent has been

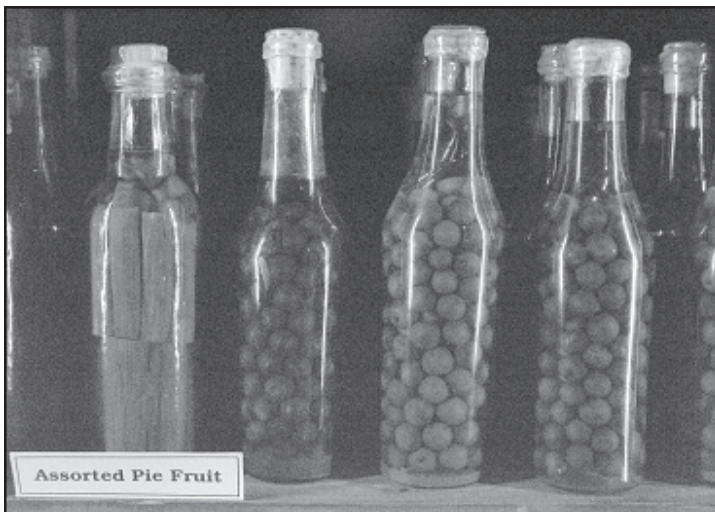
reproduced and may be sampled at the *Arabia* museum.

Then cases of medicines were also recovered, most unmarked, but some of them were in embossed bottles, declaring their origin and contents. Some of these were: Castor Oil; Nerve and Bone Liniment, Maguire Druggist, St. Louis, Mo.; Mexican Mustang, Dr. D. Jones Expectorant; and some small round pills of an unknown substance in small round tins.

Also after lunch on Jan. 9, 1989, an amazing find of bottles was located and recovered. It consisted of cases of superb examples of decorative scroll whiskey

flasks. They were blue and green bottles packed in straw. The box was marked, "Christian Ihmsen and Sons, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania."

As stated in the book, *Treasure in a Cornfield*, Mr. Hawley states, "These decorative scroll whiskey flasks originated in the 1830s" and also mentioned an article by Ralph Finch in which he stated that "practically every glasshouse along the river made them." Today collectors are willing to spend thousands of dollars for some of these once common bottles. "Pristine examples, such as those found aboard the *Arabia*, are virtually unknown. Trapped in the bowels of this steamer and



Left: Assorted Pie Fruit. These round cylinder bottles contained gooseberries, apples, blackberries, cherries, blueberries and rhubarb. **Right:** To the left are some of the embossed Western Mills Spice sauce Cathedral pepper sauce bottles. To the right are some of the Cathedral bottles of Sweet Pickles with the lead foil seal still attached that reads "Wells Provost & Co., 215, 217 & 119 Front Street, Wholesale Dept. New York." Jerry Mackey said that still tasted good.



Left: Case Gin in the square bottles. They are a little shorter and fatter than those normally encountered. Not quite sure of what the round bottles in the back are. **Right:** The bottle on the left is a Dr. J. Hostetter's Stomach Bitters; next is the Maguire Druggists, St. Louis Mo.; the rest are Cosmetics bottles. Notice that some of them were already shaped to attract women's attention.

surrounded by mud, the glass remained pure and unblemished."

By counting the examples of this bottle in the museum displays I can say that there were at least 90 of them recovered.

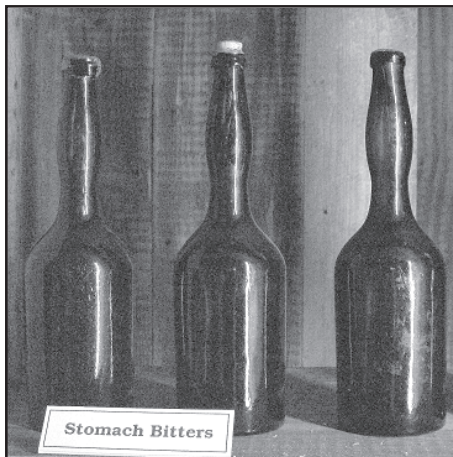
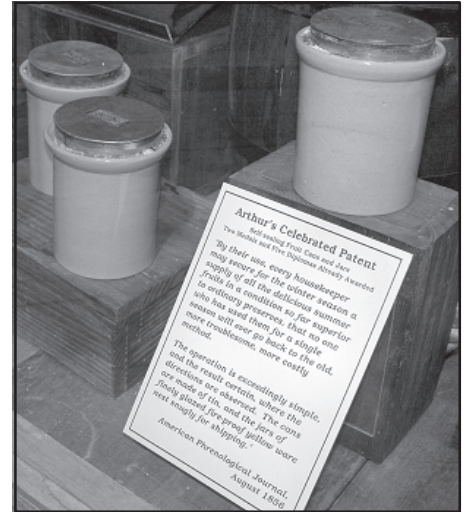
After talking to one of the conservators at the *Arabia* museum I found out that only about 70 percent of the recoveries are on display. She estimated that it will take at least another 20 years to finally preserve all of the 200 tons of recovered treasures.

Also, it's worthy to note that the bank notes were paid off in full about ten years ago.



Left: On the top shelf left is Mexican Mustang Liniment; next is Maguire Druggists, St. Louis Mo. in two sizes and to the right are Nerve & Bone Liniment bottles. The bottom shelf is full of the famous Castor Oil bottles.

Right: On Dec. 29, 1988 next to the stoves previously found was "a long narrow box containing 24 yellow stoneware canning jars. Accompanying tin lids displayed a brass label stamped with the words 'R. Arthur, Patent, Jan. 2, 1855.' The user filled the jar with fruits or vegetables, then pushed the vertical edge of the lid down into the wax-filled groove, which created an airtight seal." This may well have been a predecessor of the "Potter & Bodine's Air-Tight Fruit Jar Philada." Patented April 13th 1858 that also used a tin cap into a wax seal in a groove.



Left: Three dark brown "Lady's Leg"-style Stomach Bitters bottles. Except for the lack of embossing, they are very similar to the later Schroeder's Spice Bitters bottles as found on another sunken steamship, the *Bertrand*. **Right:** Pickled Relishes in yet another green Cathedral bottle.