

distribute his ink, which soon became the universal ink used around the world. The Higgins Ink Company went on to great success, ultimately being purchased by Sanford Ink, who owns it today.

The coincidence of Charles Higgins "inventing" his ink just after R. L. Higgins made his in Virginia City, only to have his business and inventory destroyed by fire, is remarkable. Both events happened within a year of each other. Where the two relatives? Did a depressed and broke Rufus give away the formula to his relative? Do Charles' original notes contain Rufus' name? Did Rufus quietly move to the East Coast to help Charles?

In our research, we were unable to locate Rufus anywhere in the West, or New York, after 1876, nor able to construct a family free of either man. Meanwhile, the coincidence of timing, product commonality and surname, certainly point to shared knowledge. Are the two Higgins related? Are these R. L. Higgins ink bottles the true predecessors of the Higgins Ink Company? Only more advanced research will answer these questions.

Higgins produced three different ink bottles from his music and stationary store. Because of the extreme rarity of the whole bottles, and near non-existence of broken pieces found in the tens of thousands of Virginia City outhouses and the huge dumps, I think the bottles must have been made just before the fire of October 1875. Had there been distribution of these bottles prior to 1875, we would have expected to find more bottles, or at least broken pieces. Few, if any, have ever been found.

There is a small aqua cone ink, all with sheared tops (approximately five known); an amber half-pint master cylinder ink (two known), and an aqua master cylinder ink in pint size (three or four known). All are extremely rare. Ed Upson found three of the cone inks under sage brush at the end of Seven Mile Canyon near the site of the first Virginia City brewery about thirty years ago. One amber ink was dug in Virginia City, and another dug in San Francisco by Randy Haumann. The aqua master inks were found in Virginia City, with at least one coming out of the old Virginia City dump.

Recently, one of the amber inks sold at public auction for \$17,000. There are no public sales records for the aqua master ink, although one sold privately to an advance collector recently.

## THE VIRGINIA CITY, NEVADA INK BOTTLES Of R. L. HIGGINS

*By Bryan Grapentine  
Photos by Larry Grapentine*

Collecting ink bottles provides those who specialize in this category with a great variety of sizes, shapes and colors, and also several thousands of different bottles listed, spanning almost two centuries of production.

There are ink bottles available for every pocket book, with prices ranging from dollars to a few selling for over fifty thousand.

Most of the American ink bottles were produced in the East. For reasons unknown to this author, very few inks were manufactured in the West and those few that were came from California. Only a few embossed inks are known from the Western U.S., and Nevada may be the only Western state to have ink bottles embossed with the city and/or state.

Nevada soda, drugstore, and whiskey bottles are very popular with Western collectors, and are more in demand and thus command higher prices than similar bottles from other Western states. Perhaps this is because of their background in the historical mining towns. Important bottles are known from Goldfield, Tonopah, Carson City, Winnemucca, Elko, Eureka, Ruby Hill, Seven Troughs, Tuscarora, and Reno - but the ink bottles from Virginia City are in a class by themselves.

### **Brief History of Virginia City**

Virginia City, queen of the Comstock Mining District, was the West's most famous mining town. Mining activity began in the 1850's and reached its peak in the 1870's. The Comstock Lode yielded more than 400 million in gold and silver and remains the richest silver deposit found in the United States.

Nevada became a Territory in 1861 and gained Statehood in 1864, despite the population being too low to

constitutionally authorize statehood. The fabulous wealth produced from the mines helped President Lincoln finance the Union Army during the Civil War and to keep the Union solvent.

The population of Virginia City grew from 15,000 to 18,000 in 1863, and to 25,000 by the mid-1870's. Booming commercial activity supported 110 saloons, over fifty dry good stores, four





banks, twenty laundries, six churches, schools, a railroad, soda bottling plants, and five newspapers - and a thriving red-light district.

A fire in 1875 destroyed three quarters of the city but it was quickly rebuilt.

Today "C" Street, the main business street, is lined with 1860's and 1870's buildings housing specialty shops of all kinds. The area is one of America's largest Historical Landmarks and is a popular destination for tourists and history buffs.

#### Virginia City Bottles

The Virginia City ink bottles may be the only inks with an embossed Western city that were manufactured in the West. These bottles are believed to have been manufactured by the San Francisco Glass Works.

The ink bottles, unlisted by William Covil, are rather unusual in regards to their size. The cone ink is just under 2" tall, and 1 3/4" in diameter. The usual cone is at least 2 1/2" tall and also 2 1/2" in diameter. The Master inks are also small with the amber bottle 6 1/2" tall and 2 1/8" in diameter. The aqua master is 7 1/2" tall and 2 5/8" in diameter. Many master inks are 10" or 11" tall although smaller bottles are not uncommon.

The master inks are both whittled and both aqua inks have numerous bubbles in the glass. The bottles are believed to have been made Ca. 1875 in San Francisco.

The Nevada Bottle Book provides some history on Higgins: "R.L.Higgins started one of the first stationery and educational stores in Virginia City. His ads boasted of stationery, books, music, musical instruments and picture frames. The store originally located at 35 S. C Stret, carried quality supplies that wre previously only in limited quantity or by special orders

from the local mercantile. The business started in the early 1870's and lasted through about 1883. In later years the store was moved to 50 South C street."

#### Rarity and Value

All three bottles are very rare - two each of the amber and aqua master are known and 3 or 4 of the small cone bottles have been accounted for. Two complete sets of the three bottles are presently in Western collections.

Likely only one batch of each size was made. It was probably cheaper to import ink bottles from Eastern glasshouses, and countless inks from Eastern firms have been dug in the Virginia City area.

As you might expect the rarity and interest in these bottles makes them quite valuable. The last one to come up for auction was sold by Pacific Glass Auctions in the Fall of 2001. The pre-auction estimate was \$7,000 to \$10,000 but the final price was an amazing \$18,700.

#### Where the known Bottles were found

One amber master was found by Mike Dolconi in Davis, California in the early 1970's. The other was dug by Randolph (Randy) Haumann in San Francisco in the mid 70's. An aqua master was dug in Virginia City by Gene Shields and Jerry O'Doan in the mid 1970's. Another was purchased in the mid-1970's by Neal Force from an unknown digger. A third was in the Wright collection, digger unknown. This bottle may have been donated to a museum. Ed Upson found three of the cone inks under some brush in Seven Mile Canyon north of Virginia City. Two whole and one broken cone inks were found by a construction crew while digging footings for a redwood deck in Virginia City. Jerry O'Doan dug one in Virginia City. With two exceptions, the ink bottles all have been found in the Virginia City area as you would expect.

Marty Hall, prominent Reno digger and collector, reports that five active diggers with over 70 years of digging in Virginia City have never found even a broken piece of a R.L.Higgins ink - they are that scarce!

Complete sets of the three bottles are in the Bryan Grapentine and Fred Holabird collections. Cone inks are in the Bob Ferraro and the Felch collections. An amber master is in the Wright collection

or has been donated to a museum. Nevada collectors keep track of the current locations of known bottles.

#### References:

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