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 are 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 tree 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.

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 pocketbook, 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 ¾” in diameter. The usual cone is at least 2 ½” tall and also 2 ¼” in diameter. The Master inks are also small with the amber bottle 6 ½” tall and 2 1/8” in diameter. The aqua master is 7 ½” 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 Street, carried quality supplies that were 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 Sheilds 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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