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AMERICAN BOTTLE AUCTIONS

By Steve Abbott

In 1967 a tall rangy kid and two friends were ambling under the coastal redwoods and through the coyote brush and woolyleaf manzanita of Nisene Marks State Park in the Santa Cruz Mountains above Aptos, California. They weren't looking for rare plants, birds' nests, or gold, but for old abandoned bottles for which a friend's mother had a resale shop. They would walk up Aptos Creek after a storm, looking for old glass the swollen creek had uncovered. Their finds not only brought them small monetary rewards, but planted in their minds the seeds of historical curiosity and the ancient malady "collectivitis," which the maturity of years often does not cure.

With the idea of antique bottles germinating in his psyche, the tall kid, Jeff Wichmann, went about the business of growing up and preparing for a career in journalism and advertising. The skills of computing, design, layout, and photography led to an early career in printed media advertising. A move to Sacramento and perusal of the classified section of the SACRAMENTO BEE brought back the latent memories of his boyhood: bottles. The legendary 49er Bottle Show in Auburn, California summoned him to

take a peek at the biggest and best bottle show in the West. All the luminaries of western glass collecting were there to talk to, either in person or influence: John Tibbits, John Fountain, Elmer Lester, Frank Peters, Elmer Smith, Peck and Audie Markota, John Thomas, Betty Zumwalt, Bob Barnett, Don Smith, and others. Additionally there were two big buildings filled with every variety of glass known, silent tongues which spoke to the imaginations of collectors.

Up until this period the western antique bottle fancier had two choices for increasing his collection: bottle shows (there were many of them) and bottle auctions (there were few of them and all on the East Coast). There was only a slim chance of a novice gathering enough bottles to be a dealer/collector, but with his background in the print media Jeff pondered the daunting possibility of a bottle auction located in the West. The eastern auctions were well established and the first western auction house, though short lived, had just opened in the East Bay of San Francisco.

When the latter failed, Jeff decided to fill the vacant spot with

The group that brings you the American Bottle Auctions



Jeff Wichmann



Chi Chi Anyanwu



Dennis Fox



View of Jeff's Office



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Bottles on display in the office, Whiskeys and the such.

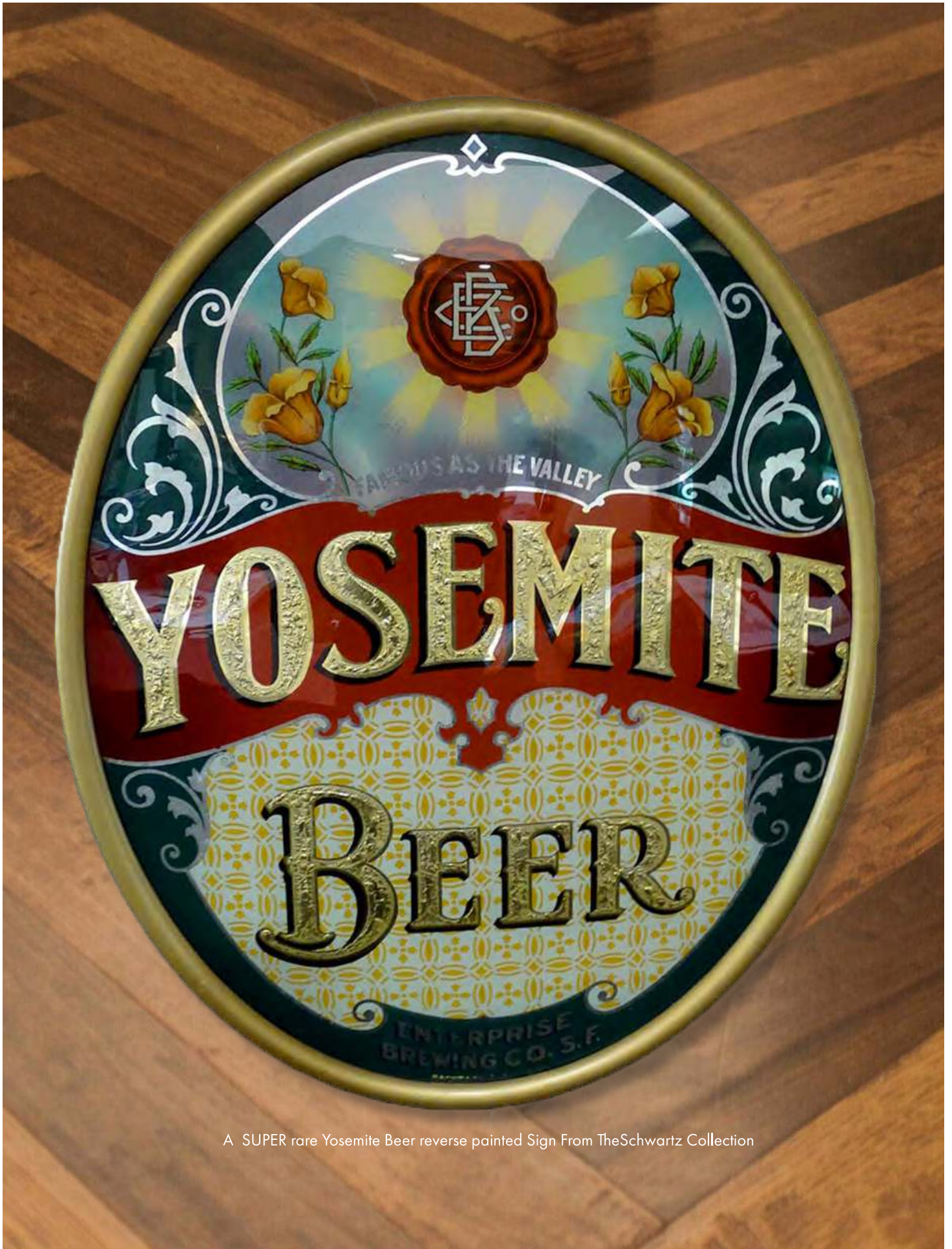
Pacific Glass Auctions. Though he had some experience in the administrative side of business, Jeff had little knowledge on the antique bottle side and so relied on those who were experts in the field, notably Mike Dolcini, Tom Quinn, both walking encyclopedias on western glass. As time went the junior giants Louie Pellegrini, Bobby Hinely, Richard Siri, Ralph Hollibough, George Moss,, the Gold Dust Twins John O'Neill and John Shroyer, Bob Ferraro, Lou and Lisa Lambert, and others too numerous to mention, all grew into their status as senior giants and friends.

Then there was a tooth rattling speed bump on the road to getting started: how to get in touch with potential customers around the state, nation, and eventually the world? Today an entrepreneur can buy lists through internet sources, but at its inception, Pacific Glass Auctions had to rely on word of mouth, fliers handed out at flea markets, antique magazines and newspapers, antique shows, and the major one, lists from contemporary competitors. Advertising in competitors' publications did not work for long, but Pacific Glass Auction was able to buy a list from a major eastern auction house, Harmer-Rook (now H.R. Harmer), and move ahead.



View of the Office When You Walk In

A list of customers was a start, but how to get a picture of the bottles in front of potential customers was another problem. The first effort to place the merchandise in front of buyers' eyes was a black and white stapled catalogue. It was better than a written description, but an impossible way to sell a puce umbrella ink by illustrating it in shades of gray. This led to the first all color catalogs which were impressive, but expensive. Sending out X number of catalogs costing \$13, plus mailing was an expensive outlay, but worth it. These catalogs were eventually replaced with a professional photography setup and digital internet catalogs online at americanbottles.com. This website with a few iterations not only features the merchan-



A SUPER rare Yosemite Beer reverse painted Sign From TheSchwartz Collection

dise for sale, but informational articles about bottles, upcoming shows, an archive of bottles and prices brought.

The next obstacle was stock and here serendipity played a role. During his first visit to the Auburn bottle show, Jeff ran into an old childhood chum who was scouting around to see what his father's whiskey bottle collection would bring. Their meeting revealed that Jeff had bought an aqua Gold Dust consigned by his friend to the East Bay auction. The realization that Jeff had enough money to buy this sparkler moved his friend to invite him to his home, where he ended up selling the entire collection to Pacific Glass Auction, stock which was featured in early PGA auctions.

Success breeds success and consignments from individuals and major collections began to roll in, including eastern glass, inspiring a new name for Pacific Glass Auction, American Bottle Auctions. Dennis Fox, ABA's long time "bottle bloodhound" (this dog can hunt), came across a nearly free Bowen's Blood Purifier, thought to be among the earliest western blown medicines, then came across a laundry basket full of super rare medicines with an aqua Sachem's Bitter resting on top like a cherry on an ice cream Sunday. Shortly following this a call brought ABA to an elderly couple who had bottle collection in the barn. The husband was blind, but could tell every Gold Dust and Miller's flask, by feel, kind of a braille technique. This collection didn't come cheap, a stack of cash and credit cards were maxed, but the stock was increasing.

Then there have been major western collections, starting with the Bob West trove, Bryan Grapentine, Vince Madruga, Alex Kerr's target balls, and most recently the Ken Fee collection. The West cache brought a lot of publicity and did phenomenally well. The Grapentine collection was enormous, over 900 lots, which required three auctions and



Jeff's Personal Collection of California Gold and Some Cabin Bottles.

grossed 1.5 million. The Alex Kerr target ball collection, which several old timers thought ABA would not get, was also an unqualified success and brought in the most money for the consignors up to that point. Most recently the Ken Fee collection took two auctions to complete and brought to the consignor just south of a half million dollars.

Some of the best single bottles to go through the auction have brought record or near record prices. The Bowen's Blood Purifier, Dr. Parker's Indian Tila-quillaugh's Balsam, an amazing Lyon's Powder, an incredible H&G walking bear soda, Bryant's Stomach Bitters, the Julius Goldbaum bar bottle, and most recently the aqua Cassin's. Even with a large overhead consisting of a self-owned building in Sacramento, a treasured full time office manager, Chi Chi, advertising, ABA has been able to keep its consignor fees, ranging from 10-13% among the lowest of any national auction. ABA also occasionally functions as a middleman, matching sellers as buyers as it recently did with a Tippecanoe log Cabin, which sold for around a quarter of a million dollars.

The ABA office is itself a mini-museum with some major bottles and advertising on displays: from great whiskey ads and bottles trays, signs, marbles, target balls, and, yes, the great American pastime baseball. Visitors are welcome with a healthy heads up before a visit.

The future looks bright for ABA and other bottles collectors, dealers, and auction houses. These antique treasures are still affordable to the new collector and a few newer collectors with avaricious appetites and unlimited budgets. Plans for upcoming auctions are in the planning stages. If you plan on coming to the FOHBC EXPO in Reno, stop by ABA's table for a visit.

The Bryant's Bitters, Jeff's First Claim to Fame



Specializing in Western Bottles

