

The "Hail Mary" Holtzermann's

By "Slim" Wilberger



So, there I was sitting at my table having completed the final cleaning of the bottle and thinking to myself as I turned it over in my hands. How it traveled about 1,093 miles before arriving at my house without me ever leaving my home, from a person I have never met. Against all odds, this cabin bitters bottle which was sitting on a kitchen counter four weeks ago and 747 miles away from me in an estate sale, came to be in my hands tonight? An amazing story of luck? Karma? An alien abduction game of "catch and release?" A wormhole? I am pretty sure the last two had nothing to do with it. However, I'm getting a little ahead of myself so let me tell you the story of how it came to travel so many miles. Maybe you can decide.

It started

It started last year when I had finished up with some glass research on the Internet for the night that I had been working on. Being burned out and not making much progress, I decided to check in with some of the social media groups I frequent to see if anything interesting was being posted. A member of one group had posted several pictures of glass for an upcoming living estate sale. The pictures that were posted showed tables loaded with glassware and china, a wall unit with at least 500+ eye wash cups, another held at least 100 shot glasses and some of the kitchen counters were covered with jars, china and pottery.

The member was inviting everyone in the group to be sure and stop by for the upcoming living estate sale. Without a doubt, I knew this was a sale I wish I could attend. As I am looking over the pictures of the kitchen area, one made my heart skip a beat. They're sitting beside the sink behind some water tumblers. It was a figural cabin bottle with a white hang tag, not just a cabin shaped bottle but a true cabin. Immediately I knew it would either be a Kelly's Old Cabin or Holtzermann's bitters, I felt a thrill of discovery. That moment was like when

Tom Hanks made a fire for the first time in the movie Castaway, except I found a cabin bitters bottle. Unlike a deserted island, it was in an estate sale in another state, it might as well be on an uninhabited island!

Without a doubt, I knew this was a sale I wish I could attend. As I am looking over the pictures of the kitchen area, one made my heart skip a beat. They're sitting beside the sink behind some water tumblers. It was a figural cabin bottle



The image that started it all



The bottle as it looked in the wild

So many thoughts raced through my mind as I enlarged the picture to make out details of the bottle. While I could not make out the exact price on the hangtag, I had an idea. I do not remember exactly how I found the website advertising the sale, but I did. It turns out it was 747.7 miles one way from my driveway to theirs, only an 11 ½ hour drive. Well, that sure as the dickens put a damper on the old thrill of discovery. Returning to my screen I daydreamed of walking up to the counter and picking up that rascal. What a thrill that would be! I spent the next hour or so living my fantasy of walking in there snatching it up and buying it. Then I got to thinking about how some lucky person would have the find of the year even if they did not know it.



Patent Stomach Bitters under the paint

Or how some local bottle collector who happened in and found it. I have to admit I was getting jealous, dumb yes, and for several reasons. But I had this inner kid voice in my mind that kept saying, "I found it first!" So, my daydreaming fantasy went on as I stared at the picture on my computer screen.

The Hail Mary

Now, if you didn't think I was a little crazy when I mentioned that little kid's voice inside my head, you would not doubt it, if you could have heard the conversation I had with him. He was refusing to give up even though I knew it was a lost cause: "He wouldn't listen" to reason. Finally, after about an hour, "we" came up with a "Hail Mary" that Roger Staubach would be proud of. All because of my late father-in-law's advice piped in from somewhere. He told me once that "the only thing that beats a try is a failure." So, I posted to the group that if anyone planned to attend this sale, I was very interested in the bottle I had circled in red. I was willing to pay them for their trouble if they would purchase it and ship it to me. Now it was not lost on me that even if no one else noticed the bottle before I had just placed a huge red target on it. With that, I closed the page and moved on to other pressing work I needed to complete before the day was done. I told my wife and grown boys about this incredible living estate sale I saw and talked about the bottle. We even fantasized about flying out there to attend the sale and how much fun it would be loading up on treasures. All our talk and plans were naturally just wishful thinking. That's just the way our family is. We share dreams and laughs and we stand together when times are rough.

The reply

After about three hours or so I settle back down to the computer not thinking about the bottle. I checked out my auctions to see what new sales had been listed and how my bids were doing. Then I pulled up the social media page to check out clubs to see what interesting news they were sharing. Always a great way to see who found what and learn something new. I guess I was there for about 45 minutes before I thought to check on my messages. I was very surprised to see a reply and after reading it I think I saw my dead

grandpa for a moment! The reply consisted of three or four clear close-up pictures of a Holtzermann's Bitters. I wish I could tell you what the message was with it, but all I remember was the sender was replying to my request. I did not stop and think for even a second about how the person had gotten the pictures. All I could think of was these have been up for everyone to see for at least two hours (most likely two and a half). Did I miss my chance? Why didn't I just stay online after I made my post? Then that "kid's" voice sounding more like Fred Sanford this time, said; "You big dummy!" I saw that there were a few comments from others about the bottle but as quickly as I could hunt and peck my keyboard I responded. I suggested we move our conversation to a less public venue and the sender agreed. I immediately removed the existing conversation so we could talk without interruption.

My mind was so all over the place just to have received a reply, my heart was racing. I remember thinking how super lucky I was to have found someone I have never met to be so nice although I did recognize the sender's name. I had sold this person a piece of glass a few years earlier they had taken a shining to

for their collection of similar pieces.

The offer

I was asked how much I would offer for the "bitters." Having not the faintest expectation of receiving a reply, I was not prepared to make an offer. A decision that would either make or break a possible deal, I was so concentrating on what offer I should make I never thought to ask about the condition. Then again with the excellent pictures, I doubt they could tell me anything I couldn't see for myself. It was painted so there could be a crack hidden or several cracks and interior stains for all I knew. This would be a good time to tell you I thought about this fact later.

I came up with what I would offer for it and typed it out in my

He was refusing to give up even though I knew it was a lost cause: "He wouldn't listen" to reason. Finally, after about an hour, "we" came up with a "Hail Mary" that Roger Staubach would be proud of.



Views from all sides of the folk art painted peice.

message and pressed the "enter" key on my keyboard. Off it went into the electronic galaxy, I did not hear back that night or the next. I must have checked my computer every few hours for the next several days for a response. Nothing. I did not want to push the envelope by reaching out so decided the best action was to wait. By the fourth day, that little "kid's" voice was back and boy was he scolding the bark off my tree. "What were you thinking? Did you believe it would work out? Are you freaking kidding me?" were some of the nicest things the voice had to say. Naturally, Fred Sanford had to get his opinion in, "I told you he was a big dummy." Alright, I told them, "Y'all are right. What was I thinking that this would work out?" I had let down my guard to believe I would get to hold the bottle. I resigned myself to the fact that that daydream was dead and started deleting our conversation. Still what a thrill it had been finding a two roof Holtzermanns at an estate sale. Not attic mint but it had been in the family as long as the 90 years old owner could remember. I would still have the story of finding it with the pictures I saved of it. Anybody who saves bottle shards will understand.

Medical alert

The next day I received a reply asking if my offer included postage. I'm telling you now my heart is not a medical issue because if it was, the strain would have been too much by now. Without a second thought, I replied "NO", that offer is for the bottle only. For being kind enough to help me. I will gladly pay postage separately once I know how much it will be.

Shortly after that message I received the following, "The bottle has been pulled from the sale for you. I will not be able to pick it up until a week from Monday. By that Wednesday, I should have a shipping total for you." Did I just read that right?! Now, remember I mentioned, "it would travel 1,093 miles before arriving at my house". That is because the owner of the bitters had moved upstate to a different address that was maybe 2 ½ hours' drive one way. The bottle would be mailed from the new address to my address. I jumped from my desk to find my wife and tell her what I just read. Then I kept re-reading the text and as much as I tried



to remain calm that was not going to happen. I might be buying a bottle from an estate sale some 747 miles away from my room. I had decided not to let myself believe it would happen until it was at my house. However, it was a full-blown party going on inside my head. The thread where the sale was originally posted was still active with conversations from others where I read the following. "I was just notified by the estate sale agent that the bitters bottle in this picture has been pulled from the sale." OMG!!

Off through the house, I went flying again to find someone to share this with. My wife and boys were really good listeners and supportive of my "inner child." I went back to the original conversation advertising the sale several times looking at the massive amount of glass, collectibles, china, and furniture that was being shown in new pictures. Reading comments from fellow collectors and following the post for the sale. One person posted they would be interested in some glass plates if "you ship." The response stated everything was in the hands of the estate folks. The interested person was very polite and wrote back "Oh well, worth a try."

Payment sent!

I do not remember how long it was before I received my next message quoting what the shipping cost would be. When I did receive the quote, I did not hesitate to agree to it even though it was slightly higher than I was expecting. The seller even refunded the extra shipping cost when it came in under the quote. I do not remember now how long it took for the package to arrive at my house, realistically I think it took about two weeks maybe two and a half. I would say it felt like when I was seven years old waiting for Christmas to come. I knew it would arrive. All I had to do was wait, then that's when the questions I maybe should have thought to ask started popping up. Would there be a crack or hairlines? What about

stains? No, insurance ?

The day I had been waiting for. It's here! If ever there was a gold medal for packaging this seller certainly would receive my vote. I also give credit to the USPS this time as they did not play, "I've had a bad day and this box is about to have a worse day." It was a nice oversize box and I knew I wanted to savor the moment I would hold my estate sale prize in my hands. Like a skilled surgeon, I slowly cut the tape sealing the box, pulled back the box flaps, and carefully searched the huge amount of packaging peanuts for my treasure. I found it wrapped in packing foam about halfway down. Just as solid a feeling as I knew it would be, not broken in shipment, breathing with relief and excitement at the same. I cleared it from the box and slowly unwrapped it, freeing it from its protective outer covering. Here was the moment of truth, the much-anticipated inspection to answer a few questions. As best as I could tell, there were no obvious cracks, chips, or hairlines. Next, I took my time stripping the paint off, enjoying the emerging golden beauty that had been hidden for probably 80 or 90 years.

Ready to display

Finally, free of its paint job finding no cracks, no chips, no hairlines. There was some interior residue on the inside walls, I spent about three days on the interior using nothing but Dawn dish detergent, soft cloths, Q-tips and bottle brushes to loosen and remove the residue. Now it's ready to display, showing off all the bells and whistles that make this a stunning example. An amazing story of luck? Karma? An alien abduction game of "catch and release?" A wormhole? I simply believe that there are still nice finds to be found and there are still amazing people in the world.

"So, there I was sitting at my table having completed the cleaning of my bottle and thinking to myself.....

