



THE BEST BITTERS IN AMERICA

That would make a great name for a bitters bottle. Wait, B. Desenberg, of Kalamazoo, Michigan, thought of that about 150 years ago. This is undoubtedly the best known of any rare bitters. If you are a collector I bet you at least recognize the name and you probably know some of the story about it. John Pastor asked me to write a follow-up story about this bottle because he has one for sale in his first 2021 auction this spring. Since I have studied this bottle and written more about it than anyone else the following is excerpted from my previous articles.

I was born in Kalamazoo and have lived in the area all my life. I have collected medicines and bitters for a very long time. I worked at the Upjohn Co. in Kalamazoo, so it didn't take long for me to settle on medicine bottles as my main desire. I purchased Dick Watson's *Bitters Bottles* when it came out in 1965. I spent hours looking at every bottle in the book. No. 40 stood out more than any other. "The Best Bitters in America / B. Desenberg & Co. Kalamazoo Mich."

The Best Bitters was my first "heart's desire" and it was the inspiration for this article. As I said, I primarily collect American medicines. I wanted to own a Best Bitters from the time I knew it existed. I also knew that my chances were very small of ever getting one.

It was originally listed as one of the ten most wanted bitters. Only a couple of examples were known. In the 1960s I was paying between five dollars and thirty dollars for bottles for my collection. I didn't know if I would ever even see a Best Bitters, let alone own one. I did see one in the late '60s at a Detroit bottle show. Elvin Moody from Ohio was one of the

dealers. He had a number of good bottles, including several Drakes Plantations for sale. He spent time talking to me as a new collector. I eventually told him my heart's desire was a Best Bitters.

He told me he owned one that he had purchased a few years earlier for less than a hundred dollars. He said it was in with a line of Drakes and he didn't think the seller recognized the difference. He then asked if I would like to see it. He reached in a box under the table, pulled it out, and handed it to me. I couldn't believe my luck. It was beautiful. It wasn't for sale. He said it was probably worth five hundred dollars. It made my day. And it enhanced my permanent status as a collector.

In the early '70s I got a call from the president of our local bottle club. He had a call from a man in a nearby community who found a Best Bitters while digging to connect a new septic system. He told the man that he didn't have much information but I did. I called the guy and went to his house that very night.

The Best Bitters was soaking in a cast iron sink with several other dug bottles. I examined it carefully. It had a small crack in the base. I told the man that it would be worth as much as five hundred dollars if it were in mint condition. I would have made an offer for it but he didn't want to sell it. I left my contact information just in case.

Later that year I received another call. He had found a second Best Bitters and would sell one of them. I rushed to the bank and drove to his house that night. He had one that was mint except for a little dirt. He wanted five hundred dollars. I asked which bottle he was selling. He surprised me by saying the mint one. I drove home the owner of a Best Bitters. I still remember my total excitement.

Over the years I have owned five other Best Bitters, including the original bottle with the crack. I paid \$750 for it, and I paid \$1,500 each for the other four. I won't tell each individual story but they were all exciting. I still own one, and the sales of the other five were profitable and memorable. Best Bitters have been good to me.

I found B. Desenberg's grave in the Jewish section of an old Kalamazoo Cemetery. I first saw the original headstone but it has since been replaced with a new one. I have never found an advertisement for his bitters. I have several for his grocery store but they post date the bitters by about twenty to thirty years. The Desenberg Building, located at 251 East Michigan Avenue, is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was built by the famed Chicago architects Adler & Sullivan, and is located within the Haymarket District of downtown Kalamazoo.

As stated previously, I'm writing this article on Best Bitters as it is one of my favorite medicines. It is also timely, as John Pastor will be featuring a nice example in his upcoming March catalogued auction.

If anyone has, or has ever seen, an advertisement for the Best Bitters, I would love to know about it. Part of the fun of collecting is you never know what is out there! Please contact Joe Widman at oldmedicines@yahoo.com





In the Medicine Chest

By John Panella and Joe Widman



FAR LEFT: The Best Bitters in America, obverse.

NEAR LEFT: The Best Bitters in America, reverse.

BOTTOM: The Desenberg Building, located within the Haymarket District of downtown Kalamazoo, is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

