

Boston Hop Bitters?

Ralph doesn't know beans. This bottle is via Australia

Notes compiled by confessor Ralph Finch



The ABCR's amber Boston Hop Bitters

Recently, I came across Lot 867, an interesting bottle, and one that always garners the same response when an American collector first finds one: “Huh?” It was offered a few months ago by the ABCR auction house of Travis Dunn, editor of the *Australian Bottle and Collectables Review*. This sale, from Victoria, Australia, was ABCR’s 43rd auction, and contained 969 items!

Lot 867 has a good American name, and then we learn...

Embossing: “Boston Hop Bitters (within a flag). Around shoulder: Boston Hop Bitters. No base mark. Semi-Cabin, indented panels, applied top, dark amber. 26 oz. A good example of this very rare Australian bitters bottle, this is the earlier amber Boston bitters which is darker and has the chamfered base corners. This is a lot rarer than the later amber Bostons.” Opening bid was \$50 Aussie. (All items have a 10 percent buyers fee.)

I initially thought that the Boston Hop Bitters wasn’t a super-rare bottle. But if you wanted one it could take you awhile to find it. Perhaps go to an English bottle show once we are allowed into the country. While usually found in amber, it is also found in cobalt blue and pale green.

In the old days, when the Finches went to England at least once a year, Glass Works Auctions’ Jim Hagenbuch would go several times a year, visiting most of the

big British markets, and would buy any Hop Bitters he could find. They seemed to have but modest interest there, but Jim knew the “Boston” and “Hop Bitters” words had appeal on this side of the pond. When Jim got back to the States, they went into his auctions. I’m sure they paid for his trips. (**NOTICE:** *This paragraph is somewhat incorrect!*)

Then Alan Blakeman, England’s No. 1 bottle magazine man and show promoter, suggested that I was wrong again. He simply said: “Not seen a Boston Hop Bitters for years.”

To make it worse (for me) Travis Dunn sent the following information, and also suggested that I am way wrong. (*Boy, that has never happened before. LOL*)

Travis writes: “Hi, Ralph. As for the Boston Bitters, they are quite a rare and sought-after Australian bitters. There are a couple of types available; Lot 868 is an amber example which is very hard to get, but the most available of the types. This one is in poor condition with repaired holes to the corners; these have quite thin glass at the corners and often have damage in these locations.

“Lot 867 is an earlier variety, a darker amber colour with chamfered base edge corners. These early varieties are very rare.

“Lot 880 is also quite rare, the aqua glass example, but without the lovely colour it will not sell for as much as the amber variety. Would you believe there exists an

example of Boston Hop Bitters in dark cobalt blue glass! An exceptionally rare bottle, if one were to ever come up for sale it would likely be one of the dearest bottles ever sold in Australia!

“As to why these Australian bottles bear a U.S. flag trade mark and the name Boston Hop Bitters is up for debate.

“In Australia we have a range of bitters brands including Boston, New York and St. Louis bitters, which all have similar U.S. flag branding to them, then we also have similar shaped Milwaukee bitters with the American Eagle as a trade mark.

“All are Australian bottles, but are clearly trying not to be Australian! Mostly they date from around the 1880s, a time when industry in Australia was in its infancy and often thought of as being inferior to U.S. or U.K. industry.

“Bitters being a popular drink in the United States had a good reputation out of that country, and so when some Australian companies decided to produce bitters, they likely attempted to cash in on the popularity of the American bitters by coming up with these distinctly American brands which, in fact, had nothing to do with the U.S.

“There was also a large contingent of United States migrants in Australia after the gold rush in the mid-1800s, with some thoughts being that the American names were created to cater for this influx of migrants. Who knows for sure the reasoning as there is very little information available on these products.

“One thing is certain though. A collection of Australian bitters is a very impressive sight, as there is a large range of colours available and most are quite rare as well.

“Oh, and please when next at shows and you see Boston Hop Bitters bottles by the box lot for next to nicks, buy them for me, and I will gladly buy them from you and may even donate a bit extra for your

troubles so that you can buy something scarce for yourself, such as toilet paper maybe?”

The January amber sold for \$10,000, with 52 bids. With the 10 percent buyer's premium that's \$7,310 in U.S. dollars. And shipping all the way up from Down Under can be impressive.

The auction had a green version, too. Lot 880, in rather sad condition, sold for \$410 (Aussie). Bitters man Bob Strickhart added: “I do think the green one is more attractive somehow. Maybe someday I'll find one.”

Travis Dunn commented (amusingly) on the Boston: “Lot 867 finished at an even \$10,000. I knew it was a rare and sought-after variant, hence the estimate of \$2,000-3,000. There is a slight possibility that maybe I didn't realise how sought-after it would be?”

For more information, reach Travis Dunn at travis@abcructions.com, or call (0417) 830-939.

And on February 7, Jim Hagenbuch added: “The bitters bottles that I found in England are the Dr. Soule's Bitters, and they look like a Doyle's Hop Bitters. In the 1980s-1990, I would bring back as many as 10-12 every show. I could buy them for 10-15 pounds each and get \$125 on average here. They don't sell for much more today, but you can't get more than \$40 in the U.S. now.

“The Boston Hop, New York Hop and Philadelphia Hop Bitters are of Australian origin. I don't recall seeing any in England, and I know I didn't bring any back.

“The common color is shades of aqua, they don't sell for much, maybe \$150-200 or so. They are rare in various shades of amber, deep green and teal blue, but very hard to get them out of Australia.”



Is it a DR. SOULE'S? Maybe a DOYLE'S? Want to be hip about hop bitters? Don't confuse a Dr. Soule's Bitters with a Doyle's Hop Bitters. In the recent ABCR auction there was a green Bairnsdale / Hop / Bitters that sold for \$5,150 Aussie. Also, a green Frisco went for \$285 Aussie.

FYI (from Wikipedia): “Bitters is an herb-infused alcoholic mixture. Named for its bitter taste, the liquid was originally developed as a medicinal tonic to help soothe stomach complaints or other digestive disorders. During the late-19th and early-20th centuries, patent medicine dealers bottled and sold the elixir. Americans purchased bitters in simple mold-blown bottles or ones shaped like drums, barrels, or cabins.”

For complaints, bitters or sweet, email rfinch@twmi.rr.com.