

Rare Centralia Stoneware Bottle

By David Graci

It might be rated as rare, like pontiled glass, an embossed medicine bottle, or an unknown, unrecorded brewery example that surfaced in the deep South. An exquisite shimmering majestic ink might merit that express terminology, but a debossed 9 3/4" tall stoneware bottle from the central hills of Pennsylvania's coal region might not be that fortunate.

The bottle is very well made, in excellent condition, and looks as though it had never been used. Maybe because it might just be a relic from a lost town. It is quite possibly the only stoneware survivor that reminds folks that the town of Centralia really did exist.

Centralia, Pennsylvania, is pronounced in sharp letters debossed on the lower neck area of that stoneware bottle, with a woman's name, Ann Gaughan, above it. That woman's name may be enough to merit a rating of rare for this bottle. Of all the known names on stoneware bottles, only eight are believed to belong to a professional female brewer or saloon owner.

Centralia, Pennsylvania, did once exist. Located west of Allentown and near Mt. Carmel, Shenandoah and Mahanoy City, the town did not disappear until mail service ceased after Sept. 18, 2003. The state had purchased most of the homes, and convinced almost all of the people to move for safety reasons.

The reason was a coal fire burning under parts of Centralia Township which started

back in 1962, with two different causes being blamed for it. Workers had set fire to a nearby rubbish dump, which transferred to the coal, was one theory. The other reason cited was that trash was put into an abandoned strip mine and lit, which spread into a coal seam under the town. That coal fire may continue to burn for decades, causing the State of Pennsylvania to declare conditions unfit for continued housing.

Very little remains of the town that straddled Route 61. Back in the day, mining interests began drawing up plans for lots and streets to attract miners into developing the area. The town would be called Centreville when commerce began, only to be changed to Centralia by the Postal Service in 1854.

In an attempt to organize a mine workers union, a group of Irish miners called the Molly Maguires were active in the 1860s. They were a secret fraternal society founded in the 1800s and named after a woman fighting landlords in Ireland for better conditions. They were responsible for the murder of Centralia's founder, Alexander W. Rea, in October 1868.

Ten years after that event, four men were tried and hung for the crime. The Molly Maguires continued to foment unrest between the mining companies and their supervisors. Unionized miners went on strike in 1875, while violence spread. A Pinkerton detective testified against them, and in 1877 ten men were hanged for

their crimes. The group subsequently lost power and faded away into history.

There isn't much actual history to be found about Centralia's past. The maximum population reached 2,761 souls in 1890. The town had seven churches, five hotels, twenty-seven saloons, two theaters, a bank, post office, and fourteen general / grocery stores. Yet no history about any of its citizens can be ascertained today.

The 1880 census recorded two possible births by different parents for an Ann Gaughan in about 1873. Nothing further could be determined because the 1890 census records were destroyed by fire in 1921. Later census records yielded no further aid. Centralia has three cemeteries that still exist but have no written records of who might have been buried in them.

The town did contain twenty-seven saloons in 1890, which may have produced further records of our "Ann Gaughan / Centralia, Pa." However, until other potential clues can be found, or some help from an interested reader is heard from, the answer to Ann's identity and mystery will remain.

PHOTOS (clockwise, from top left):

The Centralia stoneware bottle.

Centralia as it looked in 1906..

A look at Centralia in 1960.

The decades-long fire continues to burn

Close-up of the debossing.

A clear look at Ann Gaughan / Centralia, Pa.

