

Dr. Langley's Root and Herb Bitters

How can you call a bottle with this much character 'common'?

I don't wish to appear boastful. No one likes a braggart and it is really cool that, in our hobby, swollen heads are few and far between. I've been extraordinarily lucky to have been able to add some fairly pricey and rare bottles to my collection over the years. I might even be able to claim that one or two of them are so rare as to be called "one of a kind."

I must also admit that I've gone off the financial deep end once or twice for a bottle or two. This reminds me of my good friend, Ralph Finch, who regularly ran an ad that stated, "Financially irresponsible collector is interested in paying good money for unusual target balls and traps, and any item related to target balls."

While I don't want to be thought of as "financially irresponsible," I do want it known that I count my blessings that I'm able to afford some high-end bottles from time to time.

If you know me or have read my articles, you know that I believe that our hobby is made up mostly of regular guys and gals who work hard, and, while they don't

have a couple million bucks in the bank, they still love glass, bottles and this hobby all the same. By the way, there's nothing wrong with expensive bottles. In fact, I have a few articles in the pipeline that feature rarely seen, high-end bitters bottles.

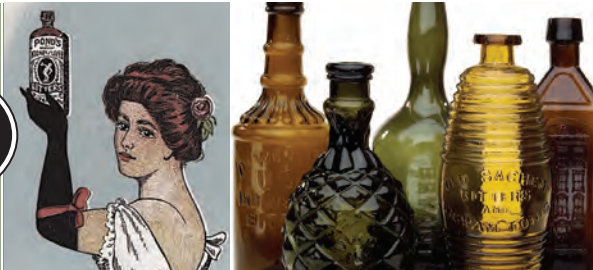
However, spending a couple thousand dollars or more on a bottle is just out of reach for a lot of folks, so I like to concentrate from time to time in my articles on bottles we can all collect.

The bottles we're examining here today have great character, diversity of form and exceptional eye appeal, and any bitters collector should have at least one example on the shelf. New collectors or seasoned veterans can all agree that the Dr. Langley's Root & Herb Bitters provide us with great collecting opportunities. Some examples have great character with fine color and whittle. These are early bottles, many sporting pontil marks and down-right overall crudeness. While we consider some of these bottles as "common" when we examine their numbers and availability, it's hard to use that term when we consider their classy look.

Let's take a brief look at Dr. Langley and how he made his fortune selling his product in Boston.

John Osbourne Langley was engaged in bitters production a good ten years before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. It wasn't until 1852 that Dr. Langley's Root & Herb Bitters really caught on, most likely due to the fact that J.O. Langley teamed up with George Clinton Goodwin. Goodwin had been involved in the wholesale trade of extracts, bitters, sarsaparilla and medicinals since the late 1830s. It is important to note that Goodwin's company was listed at 76 Union St. in Boston (the date embossed on the early Langley variants). The company thrived for several years and, in 1859, Charles C. Langley (John O. Langley's son), and a partner, William Hibbard (taken on previously by the founders), operated the concern quite successfully into the early 1900s.

Ephemera dated August of 1858 makes mention that Dr. Langley's Root & Herb Bitters had moved to No. 99 Union St. It has always puzzled me why there were



different dates on the Langley Bitters. Both on Union Street in Boston, 76 and 99 in my mind had to be on different sides of the street. Try as I might, I could not find why there was the change in address, though I had to think it was important enough to change the embossing on the bottles. I guess they just needed a bigger place! Sometimes the puzzles the bottles leave us remain unanswered.

These puzzles are interesting, and a similar incident from another Boston concern can illustrate this nicely. Most bottle collectors are familiar with the C.A. Richards & Co squares that come in quite a variety of nice colors. They, too, have their roots in Boston, and a year or two ago, I found an interesting trail that was left by the bottles that we collect today.

Fellow collector Bill DePeel offered four different squares on eBay that I just couldn't pass up, specifically for the address trail that they presented. They are embossed as follows:

C.A.RICHARDS & Co // 99 WASHINGTON St // BOSTON MASS.

JAMES DINGLEY & Co (in plate) // 99 WASHINGTON St // BOSTON MASS.

JAMES DINGLEY & Co (in plate) // 18 & 20 MILK St (in plate) // BOSTON MASS.

C.A.RICHARDS & Co (in plate) // 18 & 20 KILBY St (in plate) // BOSTON MASS.

I spoke with Bill and he directed me to a follow-up response to a Peachridge Glass posting by tigue710. Apparently, according to tigue710, Dingley bought out Richards around 1870, ran the company for four years and then sold it back to Richards, who went back into production. The slug plates help tell the tale as

the company was sold, moved and resold back to its original owner.

The Langley change of address will have to remain an unknown for now. What we do have are some really beautiful bottles with a ton of character that show up regularly at shows and auctions. There are seven known variants of Dr. Langley's Root & Herb Bitters. Let's examine each variant in order.

The first is the easiest to identify, as there is no address embossed on the bottle. While it is still a cylindrical bottle, it has a much smaller diameter than the other variants and the embossing reads horizontally from shoulder to base.

Time out! Let's think about that embossing for a moment. Did you ever wonder why some bottle manufacturers embossed vertically and some horizontally? It may seem elementary to some, but it is interesting to note that many bottle manufacturers frequently placed the embossing horizontally from shoulder to base on their bottles so the user could read and see the name as the product was being poured. It was also assumed that most folks were right-handed and so the user would see the embossing from shoulder to base as he tilted the bottle to the left when pouring. Oh, fear not, lefties! There are quite a few bottles for you embossed base to shoulder.

Oh, the things that clutter my mind! Let us continue.

This first variant is listed as follows:

L 20 DR. LANGLEY'S / ROOT & HERB / BITTERS

L . . . J.O. Langley, Proprietor
Office at 36 & 38 Hanover Street Boston

6 X 2 1/2 (3 3/4)

This variant is easily identified, as there is no address embossed on the bottle and it is decidedly smaller than the other variants. Also, here is another question mark as the label, as well as other paper found about the Langley's, lists a Hanover Street address. My guess is that it was just another office? At any rate, this bottle is found in amber and, much more infrequently, aqua, and is considered very scarce. I have seen these "undressed" bottles appear from time to time in auctions and even eBay. I think that, as this is sort of an ordinary looking bottle, it can be easily overlooked, so keep a sharp eye!

Now, if you're putting a run of these bottles together and want the challenge of tracking down an example of each variant, remember that these guys come in twos. Of course there is only one L 20 without an address, but there are two variants with the 99 Union St. address, two variants with the 76 Union St. address, and two variants with the 99 backwards in the address.

The first of two "99" variants is:

L 21 DR. LANGLEY'S / ROOT & HERB / BITTERS / 99 UNION ST. / BOSTON

8 1/4 x 3 (6 1/2)

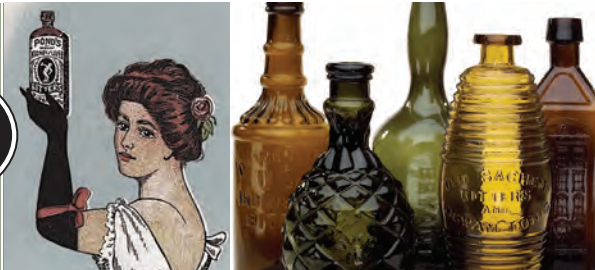
Coming in just over 8 inches, these bottles are considered common in aqua but rare in amber and blue green. Some are found with an iron pontil but rarely are these found with anything other than a narrow square-collared mouth finish. My friend, Rick Ciralli, calls the tops of the Langley's "Life Saver lips" quite correctly as they have a disk-like/Life Saver-shaped lip that is distinctive of all Langley's variants.

All seven Langley's
variants in order.



Sometimes the
embossing tells
the history.





Next is:

L 22 DR. LANGLEY'S / ROOT & HERB / BITTERS / 99 UNION ST / BOSTON

6 1/2 or 6 7/8 or 7 1/8 or 7 1/4 by 2 7/8 (4 3/4)

Common in aqua, scarce in amber or green, these fellows at times sport an open pontil, and again are found with that applied mouth.

So now we have the "unaddressed" Langleys, and the two 99 Union St. variants, as I call them one short, the other tall. The same theme will follow through for the last four variants.

The first is what I call the tall backwards 99 variant. It is listed as:

L 23 DR. LANGLEY'S / ROOT & HERB / BITTERS // 99 (numbers backwards) UNION ST. / BOSTON

Coming in around 8 1/2 inches tall, this cylindrical bottle is listed as only being found in aqua, sporting either a narrow square or double collar, mouth and is considered common. One with an applied sloping collar was recently offered in American Glass Gallery's Auction #21 (Lot 187). If found with a metallic or what we call an iron pontil, it is considered rarer.

Next is what I call the short backwards 99 variant.

L 24 DR LANGLEY'S / ROOT & HERB / BITTERS / 99 (numbers backwards) UNION ST. / BOSTON

Much shorter than its big backwards brother, this bottle stands 6 3/4 inches tall and considered common in aqua and light green. Again, some are found with

an iron or metallic pontil mark and sporting a double-collar applied mouth.

It may just be me, but I don't think this bottle is common for two reasons. First, a bottle with an iron pontil has to date from about 1845 to 1865, making it truly early. Secondly, this bottle doesn't show up that often at all. In fact, it's shown up only three or four times at the auction block over the years and they're hard to find at shows. To me, that's commonly uncommon!

The last two variants, one short one tall, are the 76 Union St. bottles. I believe these variants are harder to find than the other five. They just don't seem to show up.

L 25 DR. LANGLEY'S / ROOT & HERB / BITTERS / 76 UNION ST. / BOSTON

At about 8 and 7/8 inches tall and found in aqua or green with applied mouths and some with rough pontil marks, this bottle is again considered common. Once again, I say: Bunk!

Its shorter brother:

L 26 DR. LANGLEY'S / ROOT & HERB / BITTERS / 76 UNION ST. / BOSTON

Just over 6 inches tall, found in aqua (common) and green tones (rare) with the usual applied mouth, this is frequently a really crude bottle and really a lot of bang for your buck!

I think it's important to mention here that each of these bottles, with the exception of the variant without an address, are frequently found in odd heights. For example, the 76 Union St. variant is essential listed as either 9 inches or 6 inches tall, yet there are examples that measure 7 1/2 inches. There must have been many,

many molds made over the years and these variations are probably a result of just the sheer number of different molds.

Going back to that price tag dilemma I spoke of earlier, there are examples of Dr. Langley's Root & Herb Bitters for everyone. You can find a nice example of the seven varieties of Dr. Langley's for around \$100, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on condition and, of course, character. Back in April of 1995 however, a mint example in a yellow olive color was won at a Glassworks Auction for \$2,640. Yes, it was different and quite the color, but in 1990 only a few years earlier, the same bottle in fine condition with a pleasing more common yellow amber coloration brought a mere \$104.50. The moral of the story here is that there is plenty of room for a Langley's on everyone's shelf no matter your wallet size.

I have all variants of the Langley's on the shelf, and I'm always on the lookout for anything with something "different" going on. Last year at the Saratoga show my good friend Mike Stephano had a Langley's I couldn't pass up. Sitting on his table was this great amber example with the 99 Union St. embossing sporting a nearly complete label. It was so cool, there was no way I was going to pass it up.

By the way, the Saratoga show is a super good time up in the Balston Spa/Saratoga Springs, New York area. Last year we held our meeting on the Saturday before the show on Sunday. After the meeting and lunch on Saturday, we assembled quite a large group and visited some of the original mineral water springs in the area. There's a lot of history here and it's really fun to actually see and taste the spring waters. Some of the club members who grew up in the area actually reminisced about going to the springs for fun in the

Ring-Ham L23
with applied
sloping collar.



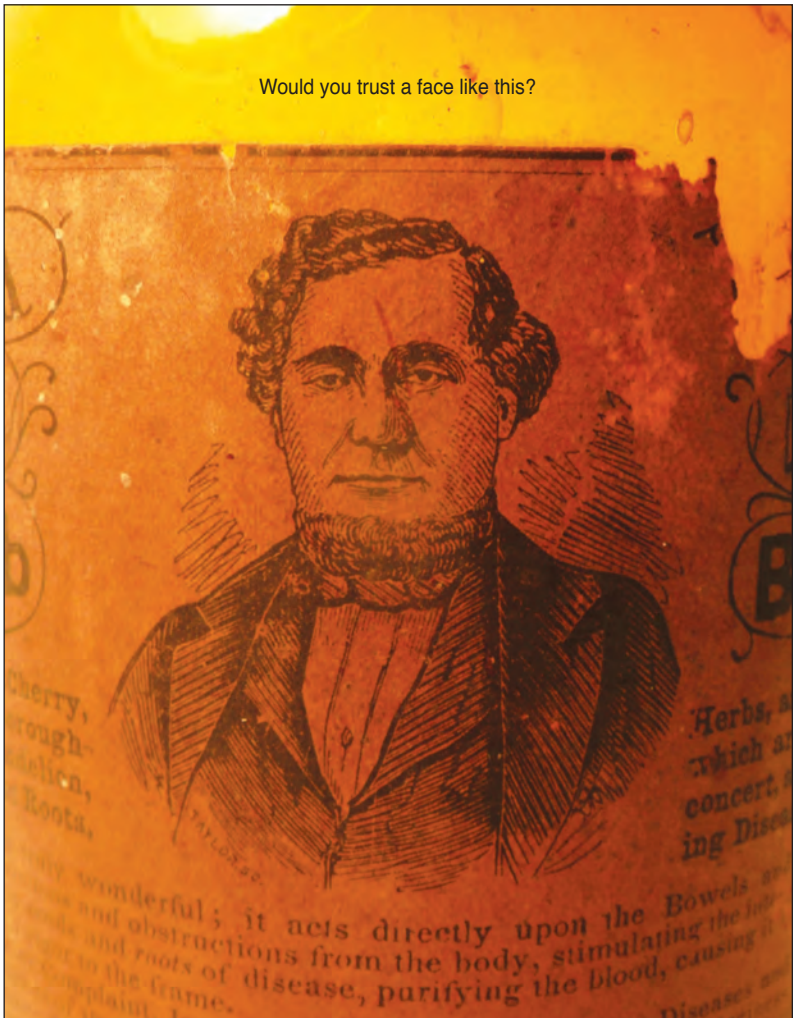
Two amber
Dr. Langley's,
one with label.



Beautiful
graphic label
on an amber
Dr Langley's.



Would you trust a face like this?



summer when they were younger and having a big drink of the spring waters.

I tried the waters and have one comment: "YUK." I guess it's an acquired taste.

After touring about four or five springs, a large group of members assembled for a prime rib dinner while watching the horses run at the local track. It's trotters at this time of year, the old track for thoroughbreds is a historical masterpiece and runs only in the summer months. It, too, deserves a visit!

I'm a member of the club, not because I'm that much into mineral water bottles, but because it's a great club with great folks to spend time with and they deserve our support. Our meetings are held in the National Bottle Museum in Balston Spa and it's a really nice time and an excellent show.

Ever been to the National Bottle Museum in Balston Spa? I suggest a road trip stat. Watch this magazine for the listing of this show and join us, a splendid time is guaranteed for all!

The label on the bottle Mike sold me is a bit dark and difficult to read but the picture of old Dr. Langley is worth the price of admission. I mean, look at this guy! How can you look at him and not believe him when he claims that if you "Buy me and I'll do you good!"? The label reads as follows:

"Buy me, and I'll do you Good ... DR. J. O. LANGLEY'S Root & Herb BITTERS. Composed of Sarsaparilla, Wild Cherry, Yellow Dock, Prickly Ash, Thoroughwort, Rhubarb, Mandrake, Dandelion, and others comprising the best Roots, Herbs, and Barks in the World, all of which are so compounded as to act in concert, and assist Nature in eradicating Disease."

The fine print goes on to tell how the compound is truly wonderful — acts directly upon the bowels, purifies the blood, etc, etc, etc. It also speaks to the many diseases and maladies it will cure, but my favorite lines are "One bottle will do them more good than forty Latin prescriptions of drugs, by which so many people are annually killed." And "CAUTION —

The great success of this Medicine has produced a host of imitations, containing no merit but the name of some ingredients stolen from my label, Avoid such miserable trash as you would poison, See that my name is blown in the bottle with a yellow cap over the the cork, without which you will be worse than robbed."

In other words, if you don't use my stuff, and use their stuff, it'll rob ya, and kill ya! Well, I'm convinced ... aren't you?

Bottom line here is that the Langley's Root & Herb Bitters is a great bottle, one worthy of being on any bitters collector's shelf. My final thought is this: imagine for a moment what the price tag would read if there were only a few examples of this fine early bitters with great glass character? This is a common bottle that is uncommonly great!

As usual, if you have questions or comments, I'd be glad to hear from you at strickhartbob@aol.com. In the meantime, enjoy our hobby and good hunting!

All Dr. Langley variants together.

