

# The Talented Carl Worner: *A miracle in a whimsey bottle?*

*Edited by Ralph Finch*

Remember when you were an adolescent and called people on the phone at random and whispered, “Do you have Prince Albert in a can?” (“Then let him out”). Or, “is your refrigerator running?” Could you now call a glass collector and ask, “Do you have a Carl Worner in a bottle?”

On Sept. 21, 2019 an unusual, and perhaps unique, item was auctioned by Rachel Davis Fine Arts of Cleveland with a pre-sale estimate of \$300 - \$500, and described as:

“Carl Worner Bottle whimsey, Henry Lamm Saloon, 1901. Illustrated in Susan D. Jones’ 2003 *Genius in a Bottle: The Art & Magic of Bottle Whimseys*, White Holmes Press.”

The Worner wonder sold on Sept. 21 for \$600, with 19 bids (plus 25 percent buyer’s premium).

And, edited from the internet site, [www.folkartinbottles.com](http://www.folkartinbottles.com) and Susan Jones’ home page is this information:

“Worner is regarded as one of the best-known folk art bottle builders. He is certainly one of the most prolific of his time, with over 100 surviving examples after nearly 100 years from the last dated bottle. And while his name is well-known and his bottles highly recognizable to collectors, we really know very little about the man. What we do know comes from his bottles, hearsay, and from accounts passed down by others. As a good example of his regard

and the growing scholarship of him and his work even among ‘experts,’ he is the only bottle whimsey artist to ever be featured on the Antiques Roadshow where two of his bottles have been featured.

“We know that he was an immigrant from Germany in the late 1800s. We know he lived and traveled extensively though New England and the Midwest. We know that most of his bottles were not signed but when he did sign a bottle, he might spell his first name as Carl, Karl, Chas, or simply K; and his last name as Worner, W?rner, or Warner. And, we know that after 1919 no additional documentable information about the man has surfaced to this point.

“Carl Worner was a prolific builder with a very distinctive style. He built four main categories of bottles: crucifixion scenes, clocks, bar or saloon scenes, and non-saloon dioramas. Among Worner’s non-saloon dioramas were bottles of bakeries, meat markets, a cigar factory, shoe repair shops, a tailor shop, an office, a funeral home (complete with a body in the casket), a marine diorama (with a woman waving to man sailing away in a small boat), a Catholic church altar scene, private homes (including one with the man in lederhosen), and a very different outdoor woodsman scene.

“His known four religious bottles, believed to be his earliest bottles, were colorfully decorated scenes of Jesus and the two thieves hanging on crosses. He also built at least six clocks. It is interest-

ing to note that of the six clock bottles known at least three of them show the same time of 11:37. Did this time have some special meaning or significance to Worner?

“Of all of his bottles, Worner is best known for his Saloon Bottles with many of them containing a ‘Find the Missing Man’ sign. These bottles have a hidden man, often under the floor toward the back of the bottle and located inside a privy. Many of these bottles had the name of the establishment and sometimes a date and through this information we have been able to track some of his travels.

“He identified himself as a ‘Sailor’ in two of his bottles, one of which said ‘U.S. Sailor’ and he likely worked on the Great Lakes and on many of the rivers and canals which accounted for much of his travels. It is also possible that he worked as a porter.

“A Carl Worner bottle was appraised on the Antiques RoadShow on Aug. 21, 2010, by Allan Katz in the range of \$3,000-\$4,000.”

Also: “Carl Worner was a bottle-making wonder, and from what we can gather from people whose fathers and grandfathers met him, he was a man with a fondness for a good cigar and a drink. We have found many places where he has been, but we have precious few facts about Carl, the man.

“His art is very distinctive. His trademark bottle was a saloon scene, often with the saloonkeeper’s name over the bar, featuring a mustached bartender standing in front of rows of bottles and signs advertising Cuban cigars. In front of the bar, he put a table and chairs. Two men usually stood at the bar, with glasses of beer raised in toast to each other. Sometimes the men were sitting at the table, and when the bottle was large enough, there were men standing and sitting.

“In one bottle, he carved a woman sitting at a table. Almost always he put a sign in front of the entire scene with the phrase ‘Find the Missing Man,’ or ‘Find the 4 Man.’ This was a challenge to find another figure, but he had hidden the last man under the floor of the bar, in a cubbyhole meant to be the toilet. Even when there was no sign to find the missing man, he would hide a man under the floor.

“Besides saloon scenes, Worner carved shops and even some vignettes of family life around the dinner table. He made several crucifixion bottles (which seem to be early examples of his work), and he probably made a bottle containing a mantel clock. Only about a fourth of the known bottles are signed, and even fewer are dated. There are very few hard facts about his life.

“Presumably the earliest bottle we know of is signed along with ‘Hanau a Main,’ a city in Germany he may have been born in. He made another religious scene in a pharmacy bottle from a Norwalk, Conn., drugstore that went out of business in 1896. He claimed to be from ‘New York,

**TOP LEFT:** Lot 129, a Worner bottle marked for “FRED BENZ / HOTEL AND / SALOON” “FIND THE / MISSING MAN,” signed „K. WOERNER,” an incredible example, likely unique, was sold in American Glass Gallery’s July auction for \$1,100 with 10 bids. Benz Saloon was located in Medina, N.Y., along the Erie Canal.

**TOP RIGHT:** Carl Worner Bottle whimsey, Henry Lamm Saloon, 1901. On Sept. 21, this Rachel Davis item sold for \$600, with 19 bids (plus 25 percent buyer’s premium).

**BOTTOM:** A close-up of the FRED BENZ bottle.



San Francisco and Honolulu' in 1901, and 'New York and Chicago' in another. He was a hobo in 1912 or 1913 when he came into the H.C. Meyers Saloon in Granite City, Ill.

"He asked for an empty bottle and a cigar box and returned with the saloon bottle, which he presented to Mr. Meyers. And he showed Meyers how to present the "missing man" riddle so that the hidden cubbyhole was obscured by the holder's hand. Whether or not he had always been a hobo is just conjecture. But he certainly moved around!

"Worner made bottles for saloons and businesses in the St. Louis area, all around Chicago, north central Illinois, a town along the Erie Canal around Buffalo, N.Y., Havre-de-Grace Md., Reading and Wilkes-Barre Pa., and Newark, N.J. Another possibly came from Terre Haute, Ind. Almost all of these places are near the coast, rivers or canals.

"The earliest dated bottle is 1890 (not known from where), a bottle from the Chicago area is dated 1900, and the bottle from Maryland is dated 1901. The latest dated bottle is 1919, from Chicago. In an undated bottle, possibly from the 1920s, he put his street address in Chicago, a center-city neighborhood. By finding the saloons and business establishments themselves, it is possible to get a range of dates on some of the undated bottles.

"For example, the 'M. Rummel Saloon' bottle was probably made for Michael Rummel of Newark, whose saloon was listed in the city directories there from 1911-16.

It can be assumed that Worner was born in a German-speaking country, probably in Hanau. In one of his saloon bottles hangs a poem written in German, which translates as, 'He who has not wine, women, beer and song is a poor man his whole life long.' He also used the German words for 'beer' and 'wine' on bar signs in that bottle.

"Other bottles were signed 'Carl Wörner' clearly with an umlaut over the 'o,' and one was additionally signed 'Gemacht bei Hermann Domke, Bäkersgeselle,' which translates as 'made at the establishment of Hermann Domke, journeyman baker.' That bottle is dated 1907. The 1890 bottle is signed 'K. Worner,' Karl being a common German spelling, but the 1901 bottle says 'Chas.' which is from English.

"He made a Meat Market scene for a butcher in Chicago; the family still has the bottle. The story they associate with this treasure is that Worner made it for them at the Columbian Exposition (World's Fair) of 1893. The greatest number of his bottles have been found to come from Chicago and northern Illinois, including two which made reference to the coal industry. Perhaps he came to work in the coal mines, or perhaps he worked in shipping.

"Most of the places he made bottles were near water, either the ocean or rivers or canals. The Illinois coal country is connected to both the Great Lakes by river from Chicago, and to the Mississippi by canal to Molene. But the early Connecticut bottle may suggest that he came first to the East Coast, worked around New York for a few years and went to Chicago to work building or servicing the Columbian Exposition.

"If he had a drinking problem, it could explain why he had only transient jobs and frequented so many saloons.

"Because nobody who knew him is still living, it makes the research difficult, (although) a number of these bottles are still in the possession of the families for whom they were made. Worner seems to have moved around too quickly to have been listed in the directories of the cities where he patronized the bars.

"This artist of great talent is also a man of mystery, and every new bit of information on his art shows us more about his wandering life.

## CORRECTIONS —

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