



# The Wisdom of Solomon

*Oh, baby, you would be wise to have these on your shelf*

You've probably heard of King Solomon, son of David and the third king of Israel who ruled for forty years, from 970 to 930 B.C.

You know, I've always wondered why forty was such an important and prevalent number in the Bible. You remember, it rained on Noah for forty days and forty nights, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and so on. I'll have to ask my friend, Pastor Gary Beatty, that question some day, but for right now, back to our King Solomon.

Solomon wrote much of the book of Proverbs in the Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes and of course, the Song of Solomon. King Solomon was considered one of the wisest men known and, in fact, we still today hear people describe smart moves as showing the wisdom of Solomon.

Most of us know the story of the two women brought to Solomon for a judgement. Both women had recently given birth, and both lived in the same house. Sadly, one child died and then the problems began. The mother of the dead child tried to claim the living child was hers. Brought before Solomon, both women

claimed the living baby was theirs. Solomon ordered the baby to be cut in two and half given to each woman. The mother whose baby was alive begged Solomon not to do this and give the baby to the other woman, as she wanted no harm to come to her child.

The other woman wanted the baby cut in two because she said that neither mother would therefore have the baby. Of course, wise King Solomon knew who the real mom was because she protected her child, even at the prospect of giving him up. Solomon then returned the baby to the true mother.

What's this leading to? If you are a bitters collector, you, too, can be wise by adding Solomon to your shelf. By now, you may be thinking I'm speaking of that great splash of blue you get when you add a Solomon's Strengthening and Invigorating Bitters from Savannah to your shelf, and you are correct. But being wise in this case is not shown by cutting the bottle in half, but by multiplying the Solomons! So, let's examine not one, but two Solomons, the blue square Solomon's from Georgia, and the other, King Solomon's Bitters from Seattle, Washington.



S - 140 Solomons' Strengthening & Invigorating Bitters Savannah Georgia.



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TOP RIGHT: Solomon's Bitters ads in the Charleston Daily News, November 11, 1869.

ABOVE: Reverse of the Solomons' Bitters bottle from Savannah.

RIGHT: The two Solomons bottles side-by-side.

These bottles are quite different in form and color but there is one similarity about both. Each is quite scarce and not easy to find. In fact, Ring/Ham describes both bottles as very scarce, indicating that there are fewer than 75 known examples. Both bottles do show up from time to time on the auction block and at shows, but good examples in excellent condition do not appear regularly. Let's examine both.

There are two almost identical Savannah Solomon's Bitters and they are listed by Ring/Ham in *Bitters Bottles* as follows:

**S -139 SOLOMON'S / STRENGTH-ENING & / INVIGORATING BITTERS// sp // SAVANNAH / GEORGIA // f //**

9 5/8 X 2 11/16 (7) 3/8

**Square, Cobalt Blue, Applied mouth  
Very scarce**

And:

**S - 140 SOLOMONS' / STRENGTH-ENING & / INVIGORATING BITTERS//sp // SAVANNAH / GEORGIA**

9 5/8 X 2 11/16 (7) 3/8

**Square, Cobalt Blue, Applied mouth,  
Very scarce**

If you aren't paying attention closely, you might say they are the same. But close examination shows the difference in the two examples to be extremely minor and subtle; it is simply the position of the apostrophe. In the first case, the apostrophe is placed between the N and S at the end of the name Solomon's. The second example places the apostrophe after the last S in Solomons'.

Coincidentally, pay a bit of attention to the Ring number assigned to the second bottle. Yes, it is 140, but there's that haunting "40" again! Coincidence for sure, but sort of strange, don't you think?

The Georgia Historical Society indicates that Abraham Alexander Solomon began

his business in Savannah in 1845. Apparently the company survived the Civil War and was quite successful right up until the 1980s. Ring/Ham makes note of a letter from Phillip Solomon dated Nov. 29, 1976 indicating that A. A. Solomon Drug Co., "knows no accurate date for the manufacture of these bitters. They were listed in a book of formulas and dated May 1880. It is estimated they were put up between 1850 and 1890." I was able to locate in the *Charleston Daily News* of Saturday, Nov. 11, 1869, three advertisements for Solomon's Bitters, so I'm thinking the information is quite accurate.

This bottle is a perfect example of the "color is king" argument. My point is that if this sort of ordinary square bitters were found only in amber, it wouldn't get the attention it gets from bitters collectors, even if it were the rarest of squares. If color is king then condition must be next in line to the throne.

While there are not too many of these great bottles around, it is even more difficult to find one in excellent condition. Some of the examples that do come to market have been heavily cleaned, and some that were never sent to the tumbler are in really rough condition. Dug examples of this bottle frequently show a great deal of etching, as for some reason the soil in Georgia, where some dug examples are found, has a way of really making these great beauties "sick." I am not sure, but I believe it has something to do with either the mineral content or the acidity of the soil. If you were to remove the etching by "cutting it" (using abrasive agents) in a bottle cleaning machine the result often produces a bottle that still retains some etching and has lost the crispness of the embossing.

Then there is the question concerning which of the two Solomons is rarer. When I was tracking bitters bottles for *Big Bob's Best Bitters*, the price guide I published for a dozen years, I listed approximately ten examples of the S-139

and over twenty S-140 specimens. Some of the paperwork suggests that Solomons was the correct spelling of the family name used by that drug company. It would make sense that an early mold was quickly corrected to more properly read with the apostrophe after the last "s". So, possibly the S-139 is rarer, but this is just my hypothesis.

So, what will it cost you to add an example of this bottle to your shelf and add that terrific splash of blue? As I've mentioned, condition is key. Back in 1993, I was fortunate enough to procure a very lightly cleaned example with very crisp embossing for \$425. Of course, that was twenty-seven years ago and, at that time, I thought I paid just about the going rate for that bottle.

Later, in 2009, an example from the Judge MacKenzie collection in mint condition realized \$3,136 at auction, I believe a record price for that bottle. The Dr. Charles (King of Blue) April collection recently contained an unusually nice Solomons S-140 that had probably never been in the ground and was described as in fine condition. It realized \$1,638. I believe you can still find a good example in the \$1,250 to \$1,750 range, reminding yourself all the time that it is all about condition.

For a bitters with that amount of wonderful cobalt color, this is, in my mind, a great bang for your buck and worth every penny. If you can save up in your bottle war chest and obtain this blue beauty, I don't think you'll ever regret it. In the long run you'll find that it was a great investment, as the value of this bottle has held strong for so long.

What of the other Solomon bitters, this time King Solomon? Let us now examine this also scarce specimen.

Once again, there are two King Solomon's Bitters listed in Ring/Ham *Bitters Bottles* and again, the difference between the two is subtle. The bottles are listed as follows:



TOP: King Solomon Bitters Co. letterhead.

LEFT: The K 49 King Solomon Bottle. A close inspection of the label shows King Solomon being presented with a bottle of bitters.

ABOVE: A look at the rear label.

K 49 f // KING SOLOMON'S BITTERS // f // SEATTLE, WASH. // L . . .  
King Solomon's Stomach Bitters

8 3/8 x 4 1/4 x 2 1/2 (5 3/4)

Rectangular, Amber, LTCR, tooled lip  
Very Scarce

and:

K 50 f // KING SOLOMON'S BITTERS // f // SEATTLE, WASH. //

7 1/2 x 3 3/4 x 2 (5)

Rectangular, Amber LTCR, Tooled lip,  
Very scarce

The difference is apparently the size, the K 50 example about an inch smaller in height and 1/2 inch smaller in width. Also, as no label is listed for the K 50 specimen, we can interpret that to mean that only the larger K 49 has been found with labels.

I cannot remember, or perhaps I was not paying attention closely, ever seeing the K 50 smaller bottle. However, four of the K 50 specimens did sell at auction during the 1990s.

By the looks of this bottle, it appears to be an early 20th century bitters, and my good friend Joe Gourd has once again provided us with great evidence. Joe most kindly shares with us a letterhead with the date of Nov. 2, 1908 for King Solomon Bitters. Research and Joe's letterhead will also show that King Solomon Bitters got its name simply because the owner was Sol (short for Solomon) Levinson.

While Solomon Levinson bottled his product in a somewhat unremarkable bottle, he didn't hold back when it came time for labeling. Examining this label could take a bit of time as there's a lot to see. Pictured is King Solomon, having a bit of music played while others fan him. Most importantly though, we see a servant presenting old wise Solomon with a bottle of, yes, you guessed it, Solomons Bitters on a platter.

You know, there's a bit of irony here. Solomon was supposed to be one of the wisest men alive at his time. He wrote over 3,000 proverbs and over 1,000 songs, yet he had a reported 700 wives, as well as 300 concubines. Imagine what it must have been like for Solomon trying to keep a thousand women happy. Hmmmm... wonder how that worked out.

Maybe that's why the old King has his hand up as the servant is presenting him the bottle of bitters. I can hear him now, "Yea though, truly I tell you, it must be five o'clock somewhere, let it be written, let it be done!"

I don't believe that there are many labeled examples. The one pictured here has about 95 percent front label, 85 percent rear label and contents. Usually, I don't care too much for labels, but I think you'll agree that this one is a killer and makes the bottle. I have seen labels offered by themselves on eBay, but I am skeptical in this world where things of this nature can, with some expertise, be replicated. Who knows, maybe a stack of them showed up in an old warehouse somewhere? I'll let you be the judge.

By itself without a label, this is a scarce bottle but one worth adding to the shelf. Recently, a nice example in good condition in a light amber tone sold for around \$200 on eBay, a reasonable price in my mind. You'll have to come up with almost three times that much for a labeled example, but like the splash of blue examined in the first part of this article, I think it is a great investment and a terrific bang for your buck.

So, my wise friends, I think I can hear old King Solomon. He's saying, "Seek ye therefore, oh members of the bottle community, these great bitters to add to thine shelves, and you, too, will possess the wisdom of Solomon."

As for me, any comments or questions are always welcome. I can always be reached at strickhartbob@aol.com. Good hunting!

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