



A 'WESTERN' 'HISTORICAL' FLASK

By Eric McGuire

Space could not possibly be allotted to fully describe the life of this unusually talented man. I only give a few interesting facts for those who are not familiar with him, and if you reside in the West, and Wm. T. Coleman is not known to you, it is obvious that history is "not your thing." The flask he produced is about as 'historical' as could be attributed to a western bottle.

Fewer men who chose to find their fortune in the gold mines of California had a greater impact on the West than William Tell Coleman, who was born to Napoleon Bonaparte Coleman and Scithia Davis Chinn on the extra leap year day of February 29, 1824, in Cynthiana, Harrison County, Kentucky. His mother died in 1832, and his father died in 1833. Raised by relatives and his younger brother, DeWitt C. Coleman, the two headed west with the first news of gold discovery—over land.

There are numerous discrepancies and poorly documented accounts regarding his early life in California. Still, it is safe to say that Coleman was an industrious soul and clearly



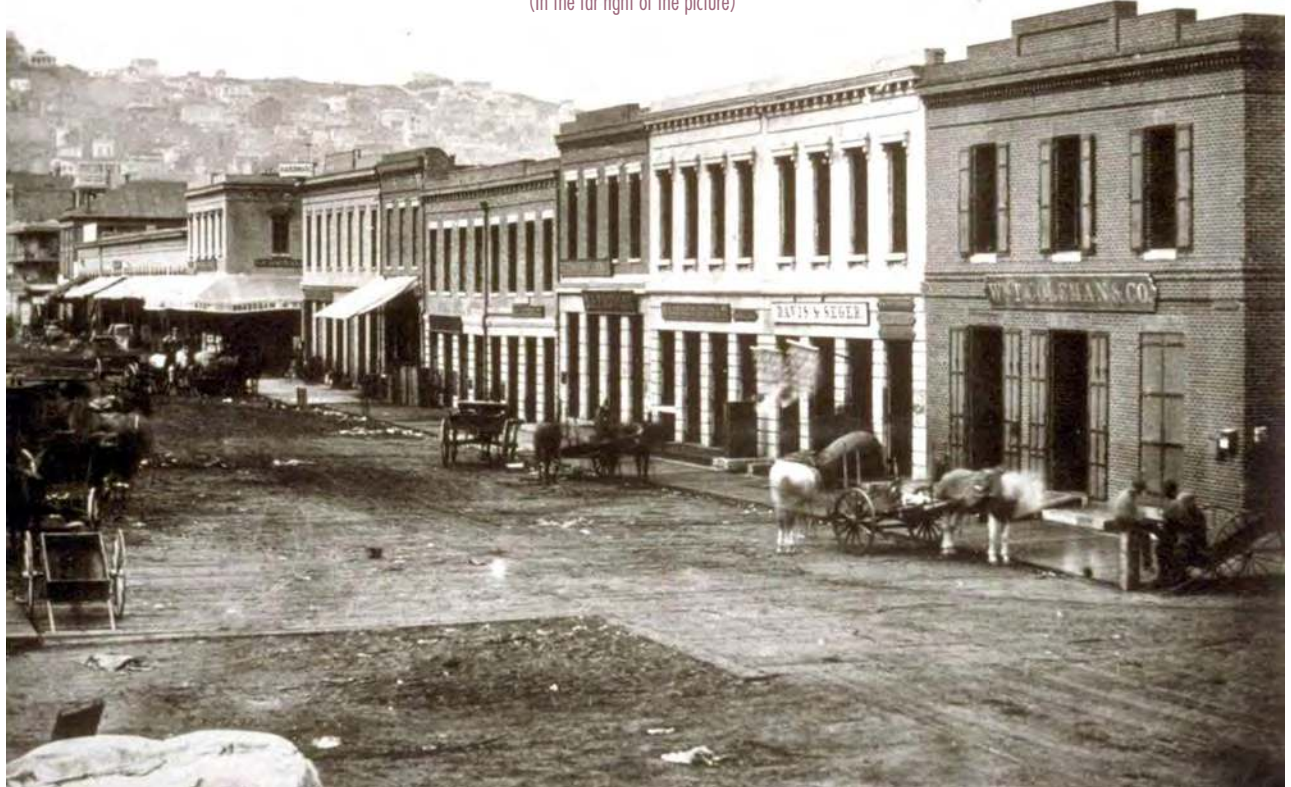
William T. Coleman

Antique Bottle & Glass Collector

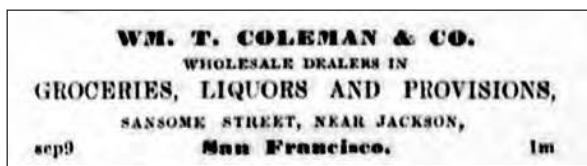


[above] Wm. T. Coleman & Co (star) San Francisco flask

[below] Wm. T. Coleman & Co's. warehouse, circa 1856,
located on the corner of California and Front Streets in San Francisco.
(In the far right of the picture)

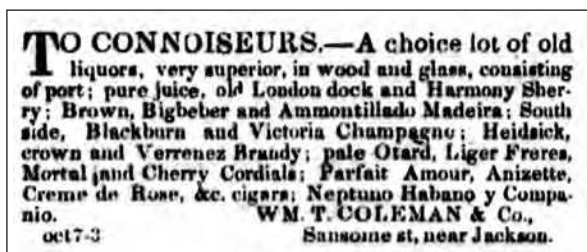


foresaw a path to wealth. Whether he and his brother accumulated an initial “grubstake” is not clear; however, by 1850, he was successfully running his own general merchandise and commission business in San Francisco.



One of Coleman's earliest advertisements appeared in 1850. *Daily Alta California*, September 10, 1850.

His brother, DeWitt Coleman, decided to move north and opened a similar but smaller business in Portland, Oregon. By all early newspaper accounts the business success of Wm. T. Coleman, along with partner Frank M. Randell, was nothing short of astronomical. The essential key to his meteoric rise appears to have been his shrewd and effective use of ships. His advertisements in the local papers offered goods, primarily groceries, coming from all over the world. He would occasionally accept human passengers in those early years; however, his early shipping venture was devoted almost entirely to consumable goods. Huge quantities of groceries and liquors were sold through his wholesale warehouse, located at California and Front Streets in San Francisco.



William Coleman had an interest in rare or unusual liquors which soon became clear as noted in this early advertisement. *Daily Alta California*, October 7, 1850.

His “California Line” of passenger ships was begun after he moved his headquarters to New York City in 1856. He was a busy man, always on the go. This resulted in the establishment of several homes for Coleman and his family. Aside from his house in Yonkers, New York, known as Beechwood and located on the Hudson River, he had three residences in California, not including a fourth that he reputedly built in 1885. The latter was a “country house” at Shasta, California. (*Sausalito News*, Sausalito, California, October 15, 1885) Several references have noted that his favorite abode was the smallest, located in San Rafael, California.

By 1871, Coleman returned from New York to San Francisco, again making that city his primary headquarters, maintaining the shipping business and his “California Line,” which also catered to the movement of passengers. By this time, Coleman was aware of the newly developing rail system in the West, including the transcontinental railroad, which would significantly impact his passenger clipper-ship business. As well as investing in railroads, he became diversified by investing heavily in salmon fishing, oranges, fruit, raisins, wines, and brandy, and borax. The last-named

commodity is the item that literally destroyed his empire. He successfully cornered the market for borax, but the removal of a government tariff on the item shifted his economic position, thus causing his financial ruin in 1888. An amazing testimonial to his business acumen and fairness, before Coleman left this earth, he completely paid off all his debts.

Aside from the high status gained by his wealth, Coleman was also famous for his role in San Francisco’s Committees of Vigilance in 1851 and 1856. San Francisco was so fraught with lawlessness, a good number of law-abiding citizens felt it necessary to usurp local law enforcement and created their own police force and juries and judgments against those who broke the law. This system worked in a somewhat precarious way along with the official city government, which didn’t condone this quasi justice, but it seemed to have co-existed in this difficult time. Vigilante Committee hangings were not uncommon and were often staged in public, probably as a potential deterrent to “would-be” criminals.

Wm. T. Coleman decided to retire from active business on December 31, 1867, with his company re-organizing under the name of two of his trusted partners, George Platt & Lewis Newton, and called Platt & Newton. He still maintained a financial interest in the new company as a “special partner,” but moving on to new ventures was his goal. The *Daily Alta California* noted—“If anyone does know how to rationally enjoy life it is just such large-hearted, hard-working men as Mr. Coleman, for his competency, has been as fairly earned by honorable enterprise and close application to business, as though it had been gained by the severest manual labor” (*Daily Alta California*, March 22, 1868). Judging from a myriad of businesses and activities Coleman continued to indulge in, any normal person would conclude that he actually didn’t retire. Coleman was living in Yonkers at this time and remained there until late 1870 or early 1871 when he moved back to San Francisco.

After moving back, he devoted considerable time to one of his favorite real estate projects. He took a great interest in the relatively rural town of San Rafael, which was located close to San Francisco but possessed a nearly ideal climate and country charm. Aside from his house on Mission Street in San Rafael, Coleman purchased approximately 1,200 acres of undeveloped land in Northeastern San Rafael about 1871. Known as the Coleman Addition, he called it Magnolia Park. Coleman built a 12-acre nursery there and began planting trees on his property, which was mostly subdivided into acre-and-a-half lots. It is reported that he planted over 10,000 trees in order to beautify his development.

“Perhaps everybody does not know who is the proprietor of the fairest part of the domain of San Rafael. It is one of our merchant princes, Wm. T. Coleman, Esq., a name synonymous with public spirit, enterprise, self-reliance, and liberty — one of the representative men of the Western Coast — a great earnest soul, doing all that he does with all his might, and strewing life’s pathway with the results of his under-

takings. It was under his facile hand and open purse that the town of San Rafael has learned to grow and blossom and thrive. He found its Northern Suburbs an open field – he has made it a garden of flowers. Long and tortuous avenues meander through his domains, some through a double row of acacias, some through Australian eucalyptus, others through locust, pine and cedar.” (Placer Herald, Placerville, California, April 17, 1875)

Gathering no moss, in 1873, he involved himself in re-gaining his old firm, previously called Platt & Newton, and re-christened it “Wm. T. Coleman & Co.”

COPARTNERSHIP NOTICE.

THE COPARTNERSHIP HERETO-
fore existing between the undersigned, at San Francisco and New York, under the firm name of Platt & Newton, is this day dissolved by mutual consent. Either partner will sign in liquidation. Mr. Hy. A. Thomas will sign for us at New York under powers of attorney. The Shipping and Commission business will be continued by W. T. Coleman & Co.

**WM. T. COLEMAN,
L. H. NEWTON.**

San Francisco, May 31st, 1873.

I have this day re-established the firm of Wm. T. Coleman & Co., and will continue the Shipping and Commission business on my own account.

WM. T. COLEMAN.

San Francisco, June 2d, 1873.

The undersigned have this day formed a partnership under the name and style of **NEWTON BROTHERS & CO.**, for the purpose of conducting an Importing and Jobbing business at 119 and 121 Front street.

**L. H. NEWTON,
MORRIS NEWTON.**

San Francisco, June 2d, 1873. je3-1m2p

The co-partnership notice dissolving Platt & Newton and re-establishing Wm. T. Coleman & Co. (Sacramento Daily Union, June 3, 1873)

tents—may well have been another method for him to show appreciation to many of his important friends and to garner some recognition. Coleman was a master of advertising, with nary a single day going by that his name didn't appear in a newspaper somewhere. Hopefully, in the near future, some obscure document will be uncovered that reveals the purpose of this rare memento of California's past.

This historically important item could have been produced within the range of two time periods, both when Coleman's headquarters were located in San Francisco. Between 1850 and 1856, or between 1870 and 1888. The last date is when the firm of Wm. T. Coleman & Co. was finally dissolved. These two periods represented when Coleman resided in San Francisco. To be sure, he maintained a number of other branches, but it is assumed that he would have blown SAN FRANCISCO into the bottle only if he was located there at that time.

William Tell Coleman died in San Francisco on December 22, 1893, and is buried in a family vault in St. Louis, Missouri. His wife, Caroline Page Coleman, died in Oakland, California, on May 12, 1896, and is also buried in St. Louis. Of their seven children, only two reached maturity; Carlton Chinn Coleman (1859-1895) and Robert Lewis Coleman (1870-1924).

The item of specific interest to bottle collectors is the extremely rare flask with Wm. T. COLEMAN / SAN-FRANCISCO, enclosing a star embossed on its face. To date, there is no evidence for why or when this bottle was produced. It is safe to say that it was made within a very tight time period. Close examination of the bottle indicates it was probably blown in Europe and possibly France. The high-quality clear glass and solid rod pontil suggest a style not unlike French perfume bottles of the period from the 1840s to about 1870. With a possible French connection, it may have held liquor such as cognac. The small half-pint size of the bottle indicates it may have contained expensive liquor, and Coleman produced the item as a “giveaway” for a special event. Coleman was always a leading figure in a variety of important or festive events in California, and the bottle—and con-

THE BEST SHIP LOADING.
COLEMAN'S CALIFORNIA LINE FOR SAN FRANCISCO

CREMORNE

DAYTON, Commander, is now rapidly loading at Pier 15 E. R. foot Wall St.

WM. T. COLEMAN & CO., 141 Front St. near Wall St.

105 DAYS to SAN FRANCISCO!

Coleman's California Line,
SAILING REGULARLY AS ADVERTISED

"HORNET,"

MITCHELL, J. C., Commander, is now rapidly loading at Pier 15 E. R.

WM. T. COLEMAN & CO., 88 Wall St.,

SMALLEST & SHARPEST CLIPPER LOADING.

Coleman's California Line
FOR SAN FRANCISCO

SYREN

GREEN, Commander, is now rapidly loading at Pier 11, E. R.

COLEMAN'S CALIFORNIA LINE FOR SAN FRANCISCO

Sailing regularly on advertised days.

DAVID CROCKETT

SPENCER, Commander, is now rapidly loading at Pier 11, E. R. foot Wall St.

DAVID CROCKETT

WM. T. COLEMAN & CO., 88 Wall St.,

COLEMAN'S CALIFORNIA LINE.

SAN FRANCISCO

CLIPPER OF SATURDAY, DECEMBER 25th

DERBY

PIER 15 EAST RIVER

WM. T. COLEMAN & CO.

Coleman's California Line
FOR SAN FRANCISCO

WILLIAM TELL

WM. T. COLEMAN & CO.,

Clipper of
COLEMAN'S CALIFORNIA LINE FOR SAN FRANCISCO.

SAILING REGULARLY ON ADVERTISED DAYS.

COMET

WM. T. COLEMAN & CO.

Highly collectible Wm. T. Coleman advertising trade cards.