

CONFESSIONS OF A BOTTLE THIEF

By Jack Klotz

C O N F E S S I O N S

I have a confession to make—I am a bottle thief. That’s right! Now, I realize those who are in prison, have been in prison, or have been anywhere near a prison might shrug and say, “So What?” or “What’s the big deal?” Certainly, a response is required because it does demand some explanation of sorts.

I will also simultaneously answer a most common question, “What got you started in bottle hunting?” Note I did not say “collecting.” There is a difference. Collecting includes bottles gifted, hoarded, purchased, or any number of methods of acquisition. Hunting certainly could be included in this category; however,

I prefer to give it a separate definition. More specific in scope, whereas the individual researches and follows clues, hunches, rumors, and tall tales in the hopes of ferreting out a few old collectible bottles. A specific physical objective is in mind, requiring the hunter to behave as any hunter would for any worthwhile game.

Excluding scraping up roadkill or fishing in a trout farm, open construction sites, and flooding aftermath, finds may resemble the former but are fair game in the business of bottle hunting. “Whatever it takes to rescue a good bottle from the bulldozer’s blade,” I am fond of saying.

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SHOOTING IRONS

It all started when I was quite young. My earliest memory of my fascination with old things was when I was about the age of six or seven. I can recall going for rides with my parents to the countryside. On our way past the outskirts of town were these ramble-down shacks that had seen better days due to neglect and vacancy. On the sides of them were remnants of time-worn circus posters, some still with visible colors, others not so much. Many were tattered and waving at us just from the breeze of our passing car. I would imagine what might have been left behind inside those shanties based on the western television series I watched religiously every Saturday morning. Shooting irons, a pot belly stove with a coffee pot still

on top, and robber's loot in the saddle bags!

My parents enjoyed exploring the great outdoors, and so did I. They became "Rockhounds," and so we often found ourselves out and about in abandoned ghost towns and mines, hunting through the tailings in search of minerals discarded by miners looking for something else more valuable.

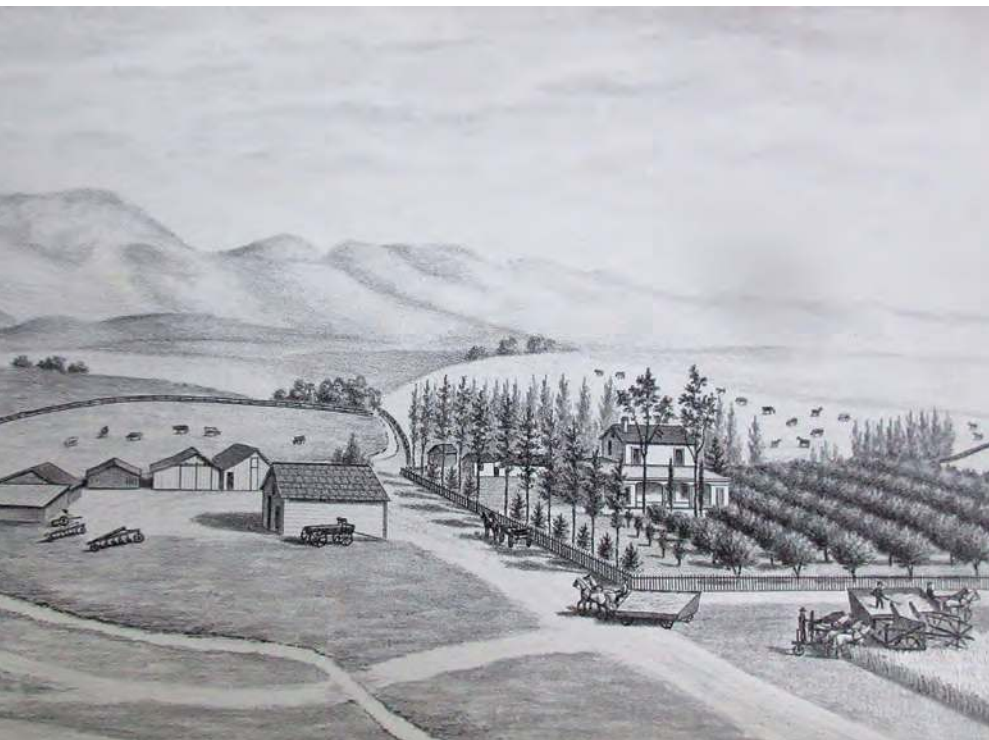
At one of these sites, I recall noticing a shack located precariously on the side of a steep embankment and about 100 yards downhill. I hiked through thick sage and stickers to get to the front door to investigate, and even though it was empty, I was hooked! The smell



[top left] San Luis Creek, Sept 1994. On the right of the creek is where the dump was located circa 1890-1910.

[left] Steel engraving of the adobe, inherited by John F. Dana, the second eldest son, circa 1883. The adobe was, for years, a center of hospitality to travelers of all kinds and entertained the likes of Colonel John C Fremont. The rancho was an original Spanish land grant consisting of over 37,000 acres of fertile valley farmland.

[above] Patriarch of the Dana family, Wm G. Dana 1797-1858. Wm. Dana and his wife conceived 21 children, of which 13 survived into adulthood. Richard Henry Dana was his 4th cousin and best known for his written account of sailing to California in the mid-1830s titled *Two Years Before the Mast*. (1840)



of decaying wood and the sound of boards beating against one another in the wind was enough to call back the spirits of the long-gone inhabitants. I suspect I was a successful rockhound due to my keen eye. I trained myself to look for specific details in the rock formations as well as other details simultaneously. This would come in handy in a few short years when I was accidentally introduced to the world of bottle hunting.

My family moved to the central coast of California in late 1963. I had been involved in scouting before the move and found myself immediately involved with the local scouting troop in San Luis Obispo. We would hold our meetings at the Elks lodge on the outskirts of town, where we would become involved in the usual

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activities such as camping, hiking, and the old scout standard "Capture the Flag." The game was played on site where there was a large open field bordered by the lodge on one side and the local creek on the opposite side, flanked by the cemetery. I would often crawl over the embankment and hide in the shallow creek in order to sneak up on the opponent's flag.

I must have covered every square foot of that property on hands and knees at one time or another. Along with these “fun” activities, we also “volunteered” for a variety of community service tasks. One such service came in the spring of 1964 when our troop was sent to the Dana adobe in Nipomo to clear the property of accumulated trash and weeds. The Danas were an early pioneer family who settled in the area and built the adobe in 1839.

It seems during my sleep, one of the guys saw a bat flap by in the semi-darkness, grabbed a broom and gave chase. Egged on by the excited group, they all headed off down into the hallway aided only by dimly lit flashlights.

We arrived early on a sunny Saturday morning with sleeping bags to take us into Sunday to complete the project. My first impression was that it looked spooky but interesting. There were no windows, no doors, and not much to call a roof. After Saturday’s work was done, we staked out our sleeping areas and all huddled in a circle around a small campfire and shared our best ghost or spooky stories. I was dog-tired and so I retreated early into the shadows to my unrolled bag, crawled in, and remembered nothing else until I awoke in the morning.

As I got dressed for the remaining chore ahead of me and packed up my sleeping bag, I noticed an assortment of odd looks and grins from my fellow scouts. It seems during my sleep, one of the guys saw a bat flap by in the semi-darkness, grabbed a broom and gave chase. Egged on by the excited group, they all headed off down into the hallway aided only by dimly lit flashlights. Starting with the broom-wielding leader, they each, one by one, tripped over my outstretched body and collapsed into a human dogpile. It appears I had chosen the wrong place to sleep for the misled mighty bat hunters, and as tired as I was, I never stirred or awoke! None could believe I had chosen such a spot to sleep in, and even fewer believed I slept through the charge of the night brigade! I was convinced they had made the entire story up to tell around the next campfire until the scoutmaster confirmed!

Sunday began with more drudgery, but it would end with a life-long gift I would not truly appreciate for years to come. My small group of three was assigned to pull weeds in the backyard, which we took to somewhat slowly. We eventually made our way to a small mound that looked odd and out of place. I grabbed onto a weed that was as big around as my skinny 12-year-old legs and began a serious battle of tug-of-war. It appeared to any onlookers I was on the losing end of things until it finally and unexpectedly released its grip on mother earth and I fell back on my heavier end. As I sat looking at my defeated foe, I discovered I had been rewarded with a tiny bottle held prisoner by a slightly larger root for who knows how long. As small as it was, it could have easily been missed but for my keen rockhound eyes. I was stunned by the rainbow colors that gave it the look of something from ancient Egypt! I was to learn much later it was called iridescence, a

reaction to chemicals in the ground. One of my fellow scouts had tugged on a weed nearby, and it too had another bottle caught in the roots, but his was bigger! This started a minor digging frenzy, with the two of us now poking at the dirt with our weed pullers and unearthing several more bottles. The third scout scurried off to fetch the scoutmaster, who returned to oversee the continuance of our archeological excavation. It was rather short-lived, ending almost as quickly as it had started.

We discovered we had unearthed a portion of a large Victorian-era garden fountain. The bowl had fallen off the pedestal and was eventually used to fill in with trash! There was one fairly large hair tonic bottle with embossing on the sides, “Burnett’s Cocoaine Boston,” though everyone, adults included, misread it as “Cocaine.”

I found one other bottle of medium size, an unembossed paneled medicine or extract type. This one I managed to find room for in my baggy scout pants to squirrel away when nobody was watching, hence “the bottle thief” reference. Yes, from my first dig experience, I was a bottle thief. I was allowed to keep the tiny bottle I rescued from the roots of fate as the scoutmaster dismissed it as likely a child’s toy and unimportant. Sadly, the tiny one was broken some years later, however, the other bottle remains as an anonymous enigma in my collection among a shelf of high-end bottles. Like the commercial says, “On a good day, worth 50 cents, to me...priceless!”

What made those early finds priceless to me was the knowledge that I was the first person to touch them in 100+ years! In my young mind, it was akin to finding a pirate’s treasure. I call it “The Magic.” There is no feeling quite like it and it is highly addictive.

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A couple of years later I discovered where the old 1890s town dump was located—right along the creekbank and field where I once played Capture the Flag! I had literally crawled over hundreds, perhaps thousands of old bottles, some only inches from the surface and many more as much as eight feet deep! I spent most of my youthful summer vacations riding my bicycle with my shovel and backpack to the Elks’ Dump as we called it. The TV westerns only helped to fan the flames of my imagination. After finding a few bottles, I would line them up next to my bed and fall asleep imagining who might have drunk from them—Jessie James or Billy the Kid?

I became friends with the Richardsons, a father, and his two sons. I would watch in amazement as the three would stand shoulder to shoulder and dig like steam shovels! My skinny 70-pound body could only tunnel in from the use layer and I quickly learned how to watch and predict cave-ins! Not the safest or most productive

method but it worked for me. The big issue was that the dump had been buried under a layer of gravel anywhere from six to eight feet thick. For every foot of use layer dug, there was X amount of fill to deal with. Digging became less and less worthwhile, yet occasionally I would visit after a good flood or just to test myself to see if I could find anything.

My last dig came in the early 1980s after a nearly 20-year run. So, when asked what started my collecting, I always say, "The Boy Scouts corrupted me!" From the first dig at the adobe to the years of digging in the Elks' dump, the Scouts held a special place for my journey that continues to this day. At 70 years of age, I'm still going strong, just a little slower!

This year I am now entering my 58th year of hunting for the elusive "rare ones," and with the grace and generosity of the bottle goddess, mixed with a dose of good luck, I will have continued success!



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