

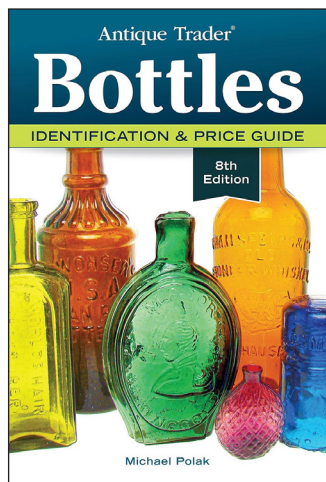
# SHARDS OF WISDOM

*"Heard it Through the Grapevine"*



## Mike Polak, 1945-2024 by Fred Holabird

My buddy Mike Polak just became the Genie in the bottle on Sunday. He had always talked about the magical powers of old bottles and what it would be like to be the Genie, where he could pop in and out of time with various historical bottles, visit the lives of those past, and maybe even mine a few ounces of gold in the Nevada mining camps he loved.



Everybody who collects old bottles knows Mike. If you don't, you probably have read or own one of his eight editions of "*Bottles; Identification and Price Guide*," first published in 1994. He went on to publish eight editions and was working on the ninth edition when cancer crept up on him.

Mike got the bottle bug when he was very young. He would dig dumps, discover treasures with his family, and tell stories to everybody who would listen.

"Back in the pre-Cambrian," as I like to say, Mike and I met at the huge Great Western Show in Pomona in roughly 1981. It had recently shifted from a large warehouse facility along the Santa Ana freeway in southern California to the Los Angeles County fairgrounds in Pomona, where it grew and multiplied faster than rabbits. Soon, the show became the quintessential great show for all things western in America, held twice a year, as I recall.

About that year, I found this guy with a table or two against a wall selling old bottles that were mostly circa 1900 to 1920

unembossed pieces. They weren't fancy antique bottles the likes of which you see at antique or old bottle shows but those of a casual, new bottle digger. By that time, I had turned into a bottle nut—I'd say "junkie," but it isn't true. I'm, first and foremost, a geologist with an insatiable lust for finding gold and silver. Bottles were (and still are) a byproduct of mining exploration and an exciting one.

So I had to stop at this guy's table. With Mike's magnetic smile driving the conversation, we started sharing stories, and soon, Mike had miles of questions pouring out. I told him my first bottles came from an old ghost town no one knew about east of Bishop, but they were from about 1910-20 and not too exciting. Then, at our Humboldt State geology summer camp in the Inyo Range, where we were being taught field mapping about 1972 or so, I happened upon an old mine prospect, and there, lying under a western cedar, sat a beautiful purple Spruance and Stanley, San Francisco embossed pumpkinseed whiskey bottle nestled among the soft needles below the branches, probably left there by the unsuccessful prospector in 1885. Another guy found several embossed whiskey fifths.

This spurred me to find more. We had a "day off" during the month-long field class, and instead of taking the "optional" mapping day, we had heard about a bottle show in Tonopah and a big trash dump with lots of old bottles, so off we went. We found the dump but soon found you'd be better off with a backhoe and loader. Collectors had turned over the top surface; only the deeper portions held the treasures. But what the heck, we dug a deep hole anyway, and I found a beautiful dark green Palmer's ladies' cream bottle still in the window today. In later years, Mike spent time digging in this same dump every year, always finding a few treasures and sure to share them with his friends.

Meanwhile, back at the Great Western Show, I invited Mike to my table and showed him lots of fancy and semi-expensive bottles. By then, I'd written the first of the *Nevada Bottle Books* with my friend Jack Haddock and had just published the second edition. Back in those days, salaries for field geologists were tiny, and I supplemented my income by doing shows and flea markets, selling rocks, bottles, tokens, coins, and old documents. Those shows were great for every collector I ever met.

I probably had 25 books on old bottles at home, and Mike had a pile too. Each was a small compilation of various bottle topics, all published early in the game. He thought doing an extensive bottle book would be a great idea, something much more advanced than the current popular bottle guide. Having written a few small books and magazine articles, I mentioned publishers were anxious for new material. The next time I talked to him, he had pitched his idea to a publisher and was off to the races. He asked me to write a chapter, and he knew I'd do anything to

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help, so he gave me a topic, and off I went.

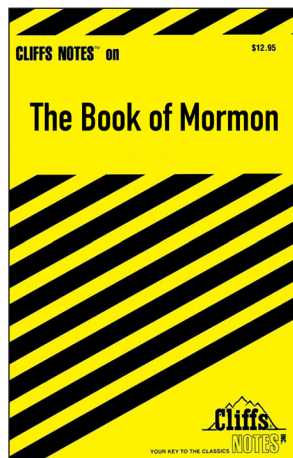
Fifty phone calls later, out came the first edition. Over the years, Mike did a great job of presenting specialized categories and delving into all aspects of collecting, from the specific bottle genres to more advanced historical discussions. Mike met and spoke to hundreds of advanced collectors, museum curators and diggers. With new advancements in printing technology, Mike was able to utilize color photographs in his books for the first time with a national antique bottle publication. He helped take the bottle hobby to a new level, opening the old bottle frontier to novice yet interested collectors because his books were on the shelves of every major bookstore in America. All told, he sold over 100,000 copies.

Mike was back in Tonopah a few months ago for Jim Butler Days and surely made the trip to the Tonopah dump. We had planned a get-together, but life intervened, and Robin and I had to be somewhere else. Now, when I look at some of the few colorful and historical bottles on my shelves, I'll be looking for that Genie. I know it's Mike. RIP buddy.

## Tired of television? Notes cobbled by Ralph Finch

Is it time to read a book? First, check on your bookcases, and maybe there is an old book you've forgotten. You might have a treasure between the covers. (I do.) Here is one, for example, and from the *Invaluable.com* website:

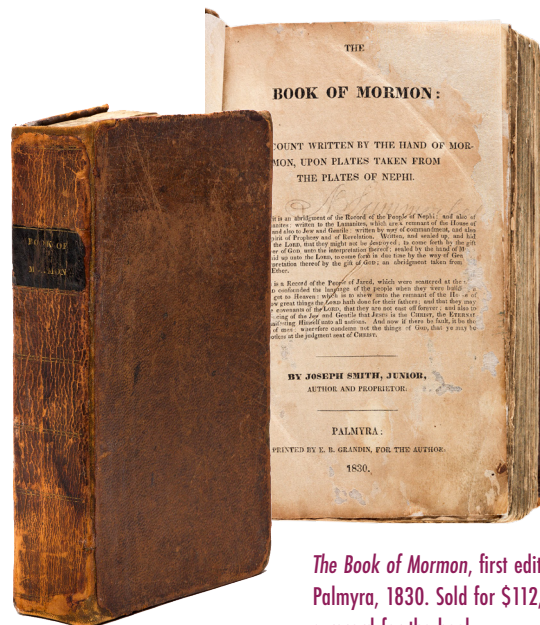
*The Book of Mormon*, published in 1830 (it made a poor musical—in the opinion of this “critic.”) sold for \$35 million in a private sale in September, 2017. (You can probably find the *Cliffs Notes* for far less.)



“Holding the record as the most expensive antique book ever sold is the original printer’s draft of *The Book of Mormon*, hand-written following the dictation of Mormonism’s founder Joseph Smith. Considered one of the central texts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), *The Book of Mormon* was purportedly derived from Smith’s translation of text found inscribed on golden tablets discovered near his Palmyra, New York, home in the 1820s.

“This draft then made its way to the local printer, E. B. Grandin, for typesetting before the hand-crafted manuscript was given to a member of the growing Mormon church for safekeeping. It stayed within the church’s possession until its sale in 1903; the

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*The Book of Mormon, first edition, Palmyra, 1830. Sold for \$112,500, a record for the book.*

2017 purchase, then, marks the manuscript’s fitting return to the LDS archives. Such formative texts can achieve impressive auction prices even when they are not so unique: a 2018 auction of a first edition publication of the *Book of Mormon* sold for \$80,000.

## Old Bottles poem by Island Alex (Alex Okinczyk)

I would be honored if you would print my poem in your magazine. I’m a longtime subscriber.

*Old bottles...like a fine glass of wine,  
Leaves a fine memory of a distant time,  
Once you pick it up...and put it on a shelf,  
look at it closely...reminds me of myself.  
Was it underwater or buried in the sand,  
look at imperfection as you hold it in your hand,  
who and why left it here...really isn't clear,  
maybe it's a soda or a ginger beer.  
If it has a pontil...bubbles in the glass,  
has a heavy bottom...it was meant to last.  
So raise a glass...drink a toast...to those who will say,  
to your health...bottles empty...throw it away.  
Lost in time 200 years—maybe even more.  
Someone will find it, wonder what it's for,  
once you pick it up...put it on a shelf.  
Look at it closely...reminds me of myself.*

