

Covered Bottles

By Richard T. Siri

My interest in Native Americans goes back to when I was six years old and would find arrowheads in the apple, prune and walnut orchards around where I live in Santa Rosa.

The first rain after they disc the orchards was the best time to look for them. I have always maintained an interest in Native American crafts as well as other North American cultures. I had for a few years operated a retail store, selling antiques, old bottles and Native American crafts such as baskets, rugs, pottery, jewelry and beadwork.

It was during that time period that I was in Gallup, New Mexico on a buying trip when I traded for my first covered bottle. I was collecting antique bottles by then and always carried a box of trading stock with me and whenever I was on a trip I'd search out bottle collectors to trade with. While in Gallup I found a person that dealt in Indian crafts as well as old bottles.

When I first walked into his place of business I spotted the bottle and knew I had to have it. As I handled the bottle I could feel ridges under the weaving. Well, for the next few years I would hold the bottle and run my hands over the ridges wondering what it said. It was an applied top whiskey and the ridges formed a square. It had to be embossed inside the square. But what was it?

At a Santa Rosa bottle show I decided to take the weaving off the bottle to expose the embossing. A group of whiskey collectors put a buck each into a pot and whoever made the right guess got the money. Bob Shaw, a collector from Santa Rosa club, made almost the right guess. He said "Our Choice Old Bourbon" (**Fig. 1**), but he didn't say what agent. It had two and turned out to be the rarer of the two -- H. Brickwedel & Co. Bob got the pot, but I kept the bottle.

When I took the weaving off of the bottle, I did it very carefully so I could put it back on.

Today, I don't remove the weaving, but sit and fondle the bottles, trying to figure out what's underneath the weaving. I had an appointment with Frank Ritz, who is a dentist and also a longtime bottle collector. I took a bottle that I believed had embossing on it and while at Frank's, he took an X-ray of it to see if it was embossed. The X-ray turned out black; oh well, back to the drawing board.

I have also investigated rifle bore mirrors and checked out various medical cameras. I couldn't get my cardiologist to check out one of my bottles while he was putting a stent in me and his camera was small enough to fit inside a bottle mouth.

Then at the Canyonville, Oregon show last October, a collector approached me with a covered bottle he wanted to sell, complete with X-rays. Wow! The X-rays were done at a chiropractor's office and showed enough of the embossing to determine that it was a J.H. Cutter whiskey. It was the one whiskey collectors call a "Bird Cutter." It fit right into my



Figure 1

collections a Cutter whiskey and A Native American covered bottle to boot.

Now I had the answer and it turns out that a company that rents from me services X-ray machines. Empire Imaging Inc., is owned by Steven Seefeldt. He set me up with Dr. Wayne Carr, a chiropractor in Healdsburg, Calif. I took several bottles that I suspected had embossing. As it turned out, three out of 11 did. Some I would have bet money that they were embossed weren't. Good thing I didn't take the weaving off of those. One of the bottles was a Dr. Henley's IXL bitters (**Fig. 2**), another was a Warner's Safe Kidney & Liver Cure (**Fig. 3**) and the third was a Louis Hunter Pure Rye from Seattle, Washington (**Fig. 4**).

Having collected antique bottles for many years gave me an insight into how the bottle weaving craft had developed among the various tribal groups. The earliest covered bottles are from the Tlingit and Aleut people from the Aleutian Islands and the Alaskan coastal area. The next group was south of them and includes the Tsihshian and Nuchalnuth from Alaska and British Columbia on the west coast of Canada.

Going still farther south, one finds the Nooka and Makah



Figure 2



Figure 4



Figure 3

from the Olympic Peninsula, Washington State. Next would be the Chehalis tribe from Washington State and then the Tillamook from Tillamook Bay, Oregon. The Hupa, Karok and Yurok tribes from northwestern California area started covering bottles around the early 1900s. The craft then spread across the top of northern California to the Klamath and the Pit River tribal groups to northeastern California and the Modocs.

Finally, the craft was picked up by the Paiutes from south central Oregon, northeast California and northwest Nevada down to the Washoe on the eastern side of the Sierras to about Gardnerville, Nevada.

This progression is based on my knowledge of bottles, but not my knowledge of tribal groups. I think that the weavers just grabbed what was readily available at the time. For instance, applied top bottles weren't covered by

Washoe, Paiute or Pit River tribes and they're not found any in the Hupa, Karok or Yurok weavings. But as you go farther north toward Alaska, applied top bottle start showing up.

In conclusion, it can be assumed that the craft started in Alaska, moved down the west coast across northern California

to the eastern slopes of the Sierras down to about Gardnerville. I have not found any covered bottles from other California tribes from the Pomos down to the Mission Tribe.

The weavings are made from natural dyed grass to Red Bud and Black Root strips as well as willow. I don't want to get into what tribes used what materials to do their weavings since that's another story.

A few years ago at the San Rafael, Calif., Indian show --- the biggest in the nation --- a person knowledgeable in Indian crafts was showing me a covered bottle. In her words, she stated how magical the weavings of the weaver were. And she said the bottle dated to 1890s. I retorted that the weaver was even better than Merlin the magician because she got a 1920s bottle into an 1890 weaving.

People have asked why the various tribes covered bottles. Most were done to sell to settlers and tourists. Native Americans were making tourist items as far back as the mid 1800s that I know of, maybe even longer on the east coast.

On a second trip to the chiropractor, X-rays showed up a Warner's Safe Rheumatic Cure (Fig 5), a Spruance & Stanley pumpkinseed flask (Fig. 6) and a drug store bottle from Tacoma, Wash. (Fig. 7)

The search goes on.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Front cover revealed: (from l to r) Dr. Siegret's ... Pit River Tribe; Crown Distilleries ... Pit River tribe; Yerba Buena Bitters...Piaute Tribe; Whiskey Tillamook Tribe; Beer Klamath Tribe; (bottom) Chinese Rice Wine ... Tshishian Tribe; Chinese Rice Wine ... Tlingit Tribe.