

Alaska Bottle Collecting History

(One of a series)

By Larry Smith
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I have lived in Alaska for more than 30 years and have been a digger most of that time.

Alaska has a big mining history, which started in Juneau around 1880, including the Treadwell Mines and the mines up Gold Creek. Juneau, the state capital, was built on the foundation of mining.

There are lots of places to go digging, but humans are not at the top of the food chain up here. The brown bear has been known to eat people somewhere in Alaska every year so we always pack firearms when going into the woods.

A large percentage of bottles are found broken because of the rocky areas these sites sit on. Digging started back in the 1960s. I have seen a wonderful collection dug by one of the first diggers. He was collecting western (whiskey) fifths like myself and had a nice collection with a couple of really rare fifths found up Gold Creek, glop top and tooled top examples. The tooled top amber Pioneer Bear fifth was a smoker, light amber and hammered whittled. The other was an A.P. Hotaling globtop Portland fifth.

The money bottles have to be Alaska drug store bottles from 1890 to 1910, little clear medicines that are easy to find when we kick into virgin diggings. They sell in the \$100 to \$1,000 price range. There are at least 10 different



Brown bears are hazards for Alaska bottle collectors.

brands embossed Juneau.

Joe Usibelli Jr., of Healy, Alaska probably has the best collection of Alaskan bottles in the state and would be the best person to contact. He owns the Usibelli Coal Mine in Healy.

My best dig was an adventure to Unga Island about six years ago. It's an uninhabited island out in the Aleutian chain. From Juneau we flew to Anchorage, then to Sandpoint where we chartered

a 50-foot fishing boat to take us to the island. We had to get permission from the Unga Corporation which owns the island and we weren't to touch the old Unga ghost town. We were also told that if any of the wild cows that roam the island gored us, we couldn't sue the corporation.

All we wanted to do is dig around the Apollo Gold Mine. I was accompanied on the first trip to the island by my girlfriend, Alisa Higgins, and my son, Taylor Smith. When the boat dropped us off (it was during May), it was blowing 40 knots, raining sideways and temperatures were in the 40s, very nasty. The captain said we could try again the next day, but I didn't have the funds for another \$500 boat ride one way so we went for it.

We found a place to pitch our tents that night and





hunkered down. The next day, I knew we had to find some bottles fast or my crew would abandon ship on the dig. I didn't think the weather would be so bad. We all had on full dress rain gear.

The boat captain had told us about the Sourdough Flats near the Apollo and we found a two-acre field with bottles sticking out of the grass everywhere. Bonanza! We dug hard, but I could not believe the amount of unembossed bottles we found. They ran about 100 plain to every one embossed. We probably dug 500 bottles in all colors and just a handful embossed. But they were great:

Four heavily whittled green Dr. Henley's Wild Grape Root Bitters, a clear Eagle Glen Whiskey from San Francisco, lots of Hostetter's Bitters, a whittled Crown Cocktails fifth, two red whittled Peruvian Bitters, a whittled Red Hand Beer from San Francisco and a few others.

Two of the Henley's were on top of the ground where the wild cows walked through the grass and kicked them up. We dug two outhouses and the best of the Henley's came from one. The dump was two to three feet deep and solid glass, 75 percent of which was broken. The water table was only a foot down and the Johnson grass made digging tough.

We were able to dig only a small percentage of the dump during the four days we were on the island. It was discouraging to find so few embossed ones.

We ran into a herd of wild cows one day. These animals are not like domestic cows. They have hair like a woolly mammoth and they run around the island like deer. I carried a 12-gauge shotgun loaded with slugs and when I

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saw the bull, I didn't think it was a big enough gun to stop it. Luckily, we kept our distance.

Our last night the weather kicked up again and our boat was scheduled to pick us up the next day. We were glad to leave. The site is so remote and even from Juneau it cost each of us \$2,000 including air fare and boat charter. The island is just 10 miles from the mainland, but with 10-foot swells, a 50-foot boat was definitely needed.

If the site was easier to get to, we would all go back, but it isn't.



Have something to share?
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Have you been out finding
some treasures?

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