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BASEMENT BOTTLES

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Much can be said about finding a bottle in “attic m mint” condition. This story is about five “basement mint” bottles manufactured and filled with mineral or spring waters in the late 1860s or early 1870s. One came all the way from California, one came from New York, and three from Sheldon, Vermont. It is believed that they all found their way to a drugstore owned by William E. Krewson on the corner of N. 8th Street and Montgomery Avenue in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

William Krewson may have been the original purchaser of the bottles in the early 1870s to diversify his stock. Did these bottles of refreshing mineral water not sell because they were too expensive, or did Philadelphians prefer the products from Roussel, Johnston, McKinney, Heiss, Twitchell, and the many other Philadelphia merchants? In or about 1886, William Krewson sold his store on the corner of North 8th and Montgomery to William H. King. The bottles of mineral water may have ended up in the basement because they were over 15 years old. A few years later, in 1888, William King sold the store to Milton G. Briggs, who then sold the store to Harry E. Jones in 1890. Here’s where the story gets interesting.

Harry Jones opened a brand-new drugstore in 1899 at the corner of 32nd and Diamond Street, the Strawberry Mansion section of Philadelphia. Strawberry Mansion was a growing section of Philadelphia in the late 1800s, and a new drugstore was needed. Somehow, these 30+-year-old bottles ended up in Harry Jones’ brand-new drugstore. Jones operated

the drugstore for about 12 years before selling it to Harry B. Lupin in 1911. Harry Lupin merged his business and renamed the store The Lupin Ampoules Company Drugstore. These old bottles must have been hidden in the basement inventory and were never sold. Eventually, the drugstore was sold to Milton “Mickey” Lev. It is possible that the store sat empty for a few years until Lev’s Drugstore (as the locals called it) opened up.

The five unopened mineral water bottles found in the basement were sealed containing the original contents.





The Missisquoi Springs Bottles have most of the original wax that covered the corks and are all different colors, with the two bottles having different embossing of the Native American Squaw with Papoose.



Lev completely renovated the old drugstore in the 1940s, and the bottles were probably trapped in the basement behind renovation materials and items from the original drugstore. So, in the basement of Lev's Drugstore, the full untouched bottles sat for another 30 years until Lev decided to close his pharmacy. Fate would save these bottles. A drug salesman named Harvey, who regularly did business with Lev's Drugstore, stopped by the week before Lev closed his pharmacy. Lev was also selling the real estate, so they needed to clean the building thoroughly. He asked Harvey if he wanted any of the old pharmacy items that they discovered in the basement from the original drugstore when it opened in 1899. Harvey saw the five unopened old bottles and a few other items and asked if he could have them. Lev was happy to lighten the load.



The base-embossed mineral water from Carlsbad, California, was just sealed with a deep cork but traveled the farthest without a metal bail or wax coating.

Beautiful olive-green "Excelsior Spring Saratoga, N.Y." mineral water bottle with contents.



Two "Wm. E. Krewson Jr. Pharmacist Philadelphia" drugstore bottles. Note the different street addresses.

Harvey recalled that the old labels were falling off the bottles, so he left them behind. If only Harvey would have kept the labels. Harvey eventually got rid of many items rescued that day and other pharmacy collectibles but kept the bottles in his basement on a shelf for over 40 years. In approximately 2012, I learned that Harvey wanted to sell his old bottles. The full bottles weighed three to four pounds each, so he decided to find someone local who would enjoy the bottles he proudly displayed in his basement for so many years. After speaking with Harvey, I was at Harvey's home within an hour of hanging up the phone.

When I arrived at Harvey's home, I couldn't believe what I saw—five bottles over 150 years old with their original corks,

wax coverings, metal bands, and the original mineral water inside. Harvey knew these heavy bottles, filled with mineral water, needed to find a new home. I am happy they now reside in my "Bottle Room" in my basement. I often tilt the bottles to keep the corks wet and slow any evaporation of their 150+-year-old contents. As Tod von Mechow, the primary researcher for this story, said, "These bottles have really traveled!" So, as I said at the beginning of the story, "Basement Mint" might even be a little better than "Attic Mint" because the basement kept the corks and wax moist and protected the precious mineral water.

The photos show all five bottles in their full glory, and one image is of two drugstore bottles from the son of the original Druggist who purchased these fine bottles over 150 years ago. As you can see from the photographs, the mineral water is as clear and pure as the day it was poured into the bottles. The Missisquoi Springs bottles have most of the original wax that covered the corks and are all different colors, with the two bottles having different embossing of the Native American Squaw with Papoose.

The Excelsior Spring bottle from Saratoga, New York, still has some original material covering the cork, and the wire bail is as tight as a drum. Interestingly, the mineral water from Carlsbad, California, was just sealed with a deep cork but traveled the farthest without a metal bail of wax coating. Maybe someday, these bottles will be opened, and someone can find out if they have the medicinal qualities they claimed!

