

Five Thrills of Discovery From One Bottle

By Paul Fite

Discovering any treasure is an exciting experience. Everyone gets a “rush” when they make a discovery, even if it’s just a twenty-dollar bill found in the pocket of the winter coat from last year. Bottle collectors enjoy a thrill every time they find a bottle, whether it occurs on eBay®, a flea market, at a bottle show, or of course, in the ground. It occurred to me that I can enjoy as many as five thrilling discoveries in my bottle hunting process.

I began researching maps as a planner in Charleston, South Carolina. Surrounded by maps at my job, I found some Civil War maps and discovered where battles and skirmishes had occurred near my home. On weekends, I traveled to those sites to get a better sense of the unfortunate drama. At the overgrown batteries at the site of the Battle of Secessionville, I was able to imagine the brave Federal soldiers advancing in the face of direct cannon and musket fire from the well-entrenched Confederates.

Today, in Maryland, I do my map research in front of a computer on the Internet. I browse topographical maps and aerial photos in search of places to look for bottles. I search for likely spots such as where houses once existed, but are gone now. After several hours of research, I usually find one or two possible sites to find bottles. For example, I found one such promising location at a spot where an Interstate Highway now lies. It was the first thrilling discovery associated with one of my bottles. I got so excited when I found the location, I couldn’t wait for the weekend. Even though I knew other spots where bottles could be dug, I only wanted to check out my newly discovered location.

The second thrilling discovery occurred when I tromped into the woods in an Interstate median. I pulled over on the Interstate as far away from the traffic as I could get, and I discretely slipped into the trees of the Interstate median with my four-

pronged potato rake, backpack and a green five gallon bucket. There, I explored the woods, and kept my eye out for tell-tale signs of glass. I looked in all the obvious places like ditches, gullies and creeks. Often, I only discover the beauty of nature in the woods as a consolation for finding no bottles, and even here in the median of a busy Interstate, nature’s beauty was still evident among the grand old trees.

I pushed ahead through fallen trees and briars until I found an old house site. Piles of bricks and pieces of a tin roof are good to find because where there was a house, there was trash dumped nearby. I walked down hill in the most obvious place to throw trash, and BINGO! There it was, a bunch of bottles scattered around in a ditch. Finding an old bottle dump is always a thrill! Thrill number two, that is.

I raked away dozens of plain whiskeys and beers and I dug below the Clorox bottles and broken jelly jars. I pulled up broken pieces of glass and stoneware from a very interesting type of bottle. I also found a few broken porcelain vessels scattered around with a stamped stencil reading “water bottle cooler” (“whatever that is,” I thought to myself). Then, after being both enticed, and disappointed by so many broken bottles, the bottom of a blue bottle reflected its first glint of light in decades. I carefully scraped away the hard dirt around the bottle and tugged it out of the earth. “Oh Yeh, baby! Come to Poppa!” I don’t know who I was talking too, but I was expecting a beauty. Then, disappointment, “Ah hell, it’s broken!”

Although I am disappointed when I find a broken or cracked bottle, I have a morbid desire to increase the level of my disappointment by assessing how valuable the bottle would have been, had it not been broken. The greater the value of the bottle in its unbroken state, the greater my disappointment will be. So, eager to rate my actual level of disappointment, I wiped

off the mud from the broken blue bottle and, then, I gave a hardy “YES!” It was just a cheap screw top Phillips Milk of Magnesia after all. It isn’t exactly a thrill, but it is always a relief when there is no need to be disappointed after all.

Then, after another fruitless five minutes of digging, I uncovered the top of stoneware bottle. Expecting further disappointment, I grabbed the top of the bottle and gently tugged it out of the dirt with low expectations. But, instead, it was my third thrilling discovery, an unbroken stenciled stoneware ginger ale bottle! I adored the bottle momentarily, but I was eager to find more, so I wrapped the bottle in newspaper and put it in my backpack. By the end of the day, I found several more bottles of no particular interest, but keepers nonetheless.

I packed my bottles and headed out of the woods. On the side of the Interstate, I loaded my truck, checked for ticks and drove towards home. Once home, I lugged my pack and bottles to the back yard. I resisted the temptation to admire my finds and headed straight to the laundry room, where I stripped my clothes and placed them directly in the washing machine. Then, I took a shower to wash off all the sweat, dirt, bug spray, chiggers and poison ivy, (or most of it anyway).

My fourth thrilling discovery occurred when I revealed the beauty of the stoneware bottle. After a refreshing shower, I dressed and headed out back to wash my bottles. After the mud was washed away and the stains were carefully brushed away, I held the bottles up to the light to see their beauty. The fourth thrilling discovery was wonderful to behold. The stoneware bottle was covered with a clear glaze that allowed the beautiful sand colored clay to fully reveal itself. The natural flaws in the surface of the clay added to its beauty as a piece of handmade art. There was even a fingerprint visible beneath the glaze. The black stencil stamped on the side of the bottle read:

FOX’S (inside a drawing of a fox)
HIGH GRADE
CONOY GINGER ALE
BOTTLED BY THE CONOY SPRINGWATER CORP.

WASHINGTON, DC
CONTENTS 12 OZ



(1)

The fifth thrilling discovery occurred as an answer to the obvious question, “What is the history of Fox’s Conoy Ginger ale?” For the answer, I went back to where I started, the Internet. After several fruitless Google searches, I finally searched on “Conoy Springwater Corp.” and Bingo! I found a promising link. Fortunately, a member of both the Potomac and Baltimore Bottle Clubs, Mike Cianciosi, had already done some research. His website showed phone book listings and an advertisement from the Company. The Conoy Springwater Corp. was

in business loaning water coolers and selling bottled water and Fox Pale Dry Ginger Ale in 1925 (2). Although there is no reference to Fox's High Grade Ginger Ale, it is obviously the same company. The last listing for the company was in 1932 in the Washington, DC business directory (3).



(4)

It was not as old as I expected, but Wow! I was thrilled. Then, I found the bottle listed in the Washington DC bottle book with a value of \$70-\$80. With my own research now supplemented, I realized the porcelain water bottle cooler was a piece of the water coolers loaned out by the company. With the evidence at the site and the information from the advertisement, I believe I discovered the actual site of the former bottling plant! Big Thrill number five just kept going on!

I recently discovered one more important piece of history about Conoy Ginger Ale. I wondered why the company went out of business around 1932. At first, I presumed the stoneware bottles were so expensive, the company buckled under the price of such a poor marketing decision. Then, after Nic Queen's recent showcase including post Prohibition whiskey bottles, I decided to do some Internet research on post-Prohibition whiskey. As I was reading, it occurred to me that Conoy Springwater Corp.'s last known year of business, 1932, was only one year before Prohibition was repealed in 1933. Then it dawned on me that for thirteen years, soft drinks such as Ginger Ale enjoyed a monopoly among people who needed a "stiff" drink. I believe Prohibition's repeal transformed the market for soft drink sales in a very rapid fashion. Not even a sudden demand for good mixers could keep this particular high-grade ginger ale in competition against "real" drinks like beer, wine and liquor.

Perhaps others will find the thrill of discovering a bottle on E-bay, at a bottle show, a fleamarket or in so many other ways. Maybe, its just me, but the thrill of finding a treasure is more than just a single event. Like a few other bottles on my mantle, I have enjoyed five thrilling discoveries related to one bottle. First, I discovered a location on a map. Second, I discovered a bottle dump. Third, I dug and discovered the bottle in the dirt. Fourth, I cleaned the bottle and discovered the bottle's beauty. And fifth, I "dug" up the history of the bottle. I honestly don't know which thrill is the best because they are all good. I guess I will just have to start over again from the beginning.

1

<http://www.chosi.org/bottles/conoy/conoy.htm>

2 1925 Washington, DC Telephone Directory, from

<http://www.chosi.org/bottles/conoy/conoy.htm>

3 Boyd's Directory for the District of Columbia (various years)

4 1925 Washington, DC Telephone Directory Ad, from

<http://www.chosi.org/bottles/conoy/conoy.htm>

5 Antique Bottles from the Washington DC Area by Potomac Bottle Collectors, 4th edition

