

Rare Cincinnati Bitters Finds its way to Memphis

By Mike Cothorn

Photos Courtesy of thememphisdiggers.com

Our group, *thememphisdiggers*, on the way to search for a good place to dig for old bottles, started our normal Saturday by meeting at one of our usual places near the area where we wanted to dig. We put our heads together and remembered a house that had burned down only a few weeks earlier.

We had been eyeing this neat old house for about 10 years. It was located on a street where a lot of steamboat captains lived in the 1860s. We knew that this would be the perfect spot.

We arrived on the lot and Bill and I walked to the house next door while Buddy got his probe out. An old man came to the door and while we were stating our interest, Buddy quickly blurted out: "I got one!"

I went over and said, "Let me feel of that." When I stuck the probe in the ground at several different directions I knew that we had a big brick-lined privy!

Boy, oh, boy! This could be a great one. I went back over to where Bill and the old man were and he said that the property owner wouldn't care if we dug on the lot. We started our dig clearing out the perimeter of the brick lining and found that it measured 8 feet long and 3 feet wide. What a big hole this was, when usually they are 4-feet across.



The prize Morning Call Bitters bottle

Digging further, we started finding 1880s Hutchinson sodas, then an Oriental Toothpaste pot lid and other stuff. We then dug a Parkers Celebrated Stomach Bitters! We liked that because there could be more and better bitters as we got deeper.

We got down to a lime layer and were hoping that when we dug through it we would see older bottles. We got through the lime and “Oh, boy!” There it was, an 1860s’ blob soda! Then another, and another. This was looking good. The next bottles that came were a 6-ounce black-glass ale embossed Star Glass Works, an umbrella ink, and then a pontiled umbrella ink. We dug through bunches of broken glass, including a broken emerald-green eagle flask and several different bitters pieces. Getting closer to the bottom, more and more bottles were coming up and then — what we all had been waiting for.

We pulled up a square “Morning Call.” A what? I kept rolling it over and over in my hands until I could see just what it was. Finally, its words were revealed: It said “Mills Bro & Co / Morning Call / Bitters”!

It had column corners and arched sunken panels on three sides, and the color was fantastic! It looked to be yellow amber with an olive overtone. What a great bottle this was!

Later, when we had gotten home, I cleaned and measured it. It was nine inches tall and 2 3/4 inches wide. We also found out that it wasn’t listed in the bitters book and after a lot of research Buddy finally found it. It was in the 1866, 1867 and 1868 Cincinnati directories. Mills Bro & Co was in business in Cincinnati for only three years! A super-rare bottle! We started wondering, could it be that a captain, on his trip down the Mississippi, stopped in at the local store and picked up a bottle of that special bitters for when he got back home? Sounds good to me. And until we dig again we’ll just have to say, “Thank you Captain.”

Editor’s note: *This exciting new bitters bottle is scheduled to be included in the Federation of Historical Bottle Collector’s 2011 National Auction, Saturday evening, June 25, in Memphis. Visit www.fohbc.com for more information. And, for more photos of the dig and more information on the Memphis club, go to the club’s great website at www.thememphisdiggers.com.*



PHOTOS (top to bottom):

Getting down to business in the privy hole.

Unearthing a great bitters bottle.

The Mills Bro & Co side.