

LETTER FROM POISONLAND

BY

MIKE DICKMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM ADAMS AND JOAN CABANISS

British researcher and author Roy Morgan famously characterized poison bottles as "weird and wonderful." Certainly one of the weirdest and most wonderful, and also most mysterious, is the bone bottle.

Records from the United States Patent Office establish that in 1893, Edward M. Cone of Newark, New Jersey got a design patent for a realistic-looking bone-shaped poison bottle, decorated with a skull and crossbones. A copy of the patent drawing is shown on the next page.

Beyond the fact of a United States design patent, though, matters become a bit murky.

In his privately-published 1969 book, Wallis W. Stier asserted that the bone-shaped poison bottle had been manufactured in cobalt glass, as well as in amber and clear glass, but his only evidence was the patent drawing. In 1970, author Cecil Munsey wrote that Cone's 1893 bone-shaped patent had been "produced in cobalt-blue glass" but again, he cited no proof apart from a reference to Mr. Stier's book and the same patent drawing. In 1975, Roger Durflinger wrote, "I have heard of a few unusual figurals such as the bone bottle," clearly implying that he himself had not actually seen one. Authors Griffenhagen and Bogard discuss the 1893 design patent but say nothing about a corresponding bottle, either in glass or pottery. And the late Rudy Kuhn in the unpublished third volume of his classic "Poison Bottle Workbook" listed and drew two bone-shaped poison bottles made of pottery: KU-37 and KU-40. Rudy listed both as 3½" tall. He listed them as "scarce" and "very scarce" respectively, and seems to have assumed that KU-40 was based on Cone's 1893 design. Rudy wrote nothing about glass bone bottles.

In 1992, a former member wrote an article called "Dem Bones" for The Poison Bottle Newsletter in which he noted that a member had told him that another then-member had seen a cobalt bone-shaped bottle at a show but had been unable to buy it. He believed the glass bone bottle may have been a "prototype". In addition he related (apparently from personal knowledge) that several years earlier, in California, somebody had dug a pottery bone-shaped poison bottle, "dark mottled walnut" in color, about 3 1/2" inches tall, and unable to stand upright. He included a drawing of the dug pottery bottle. Also, he wrote that it had been dug in a hole which also contained two Carr-Lowery poison bottles (KI-1). We know the Carr-Lowery Glass co. started manufacturing bottles in 1889, which is generally consistent with Mr. Cone's 1893 patent date.

From speculation and conjecture, then, to the fact of a dug pottery bone bottle.

And there are additional cold, hard facts about the mysterious bone-shaped poison bottles. In the early 1970s, member Jerry L. Jones, Sr. (# 223) of North Carolina started collecting poison bottles, buying some from Howard Crowe (# 50) and digging others in local dumps with two of his friends. At the time, Jerry was working for the telephone company in Concord, N.C., and he had to work every fourth Saturday. On one of those working Saturdays, he had been unable to go digging so the other two had gone without him. In the late afternoon, while Jerry was still at his office, one of the digging buddies showed up with a grin on his face and a dirty towel in his hands. "I dug something you might be interested in," the friend told Jerry.

"What?" "Well, let me show you," replied the friend, and then proceeded to unwrap a dirty, bone-shaped bottle made of pottery, with the word "poison" and a skull and crossbones. "How much do you want for it?" "Would \$15 be too much?" "No, that would be fine," said Jerry, who relates that he "almost broke my arm getting my wallet out of my pocket."

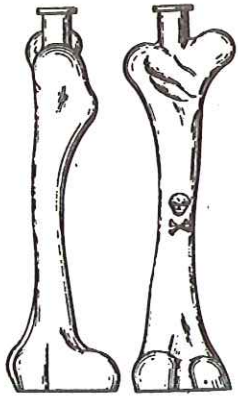
Jerry's bone-shaped bottle is about 4 $\frac{1}{8}$ " tall, has a top opening about $\frac{1}{4}$ " in diameter, and stands levelly on four little molded feet approximately 1- $\frac{1}{8}$ " wide which show wear on the bottom. The dump from which it was dug was in Lexington, North Carolina, which is the county seat of Davidson County and was incorporated in 1827. Judging from the other bottles found there, the dump appeared to date to the 1895-1900 period. Jerry's friend said he'd dug two more pieces of other bone-shaped poison bottles at the same time, but threw them away. At Jerry's insistence, the friend returned to the dump a week later but was unable to locate the pieces.

And, the mystery deepens. In 1985, association editor and member Joan Cabaniss (# 11) saw a bone-shaped pottery bottle at the show in York, Pennsylvania. The person who had it thought it was a whiskey nipper rather than a poison bottle and refused to sell it, but he allowed Joan to take a photograph. From the picture, the bottle appears very similar to Jerry's bottle.

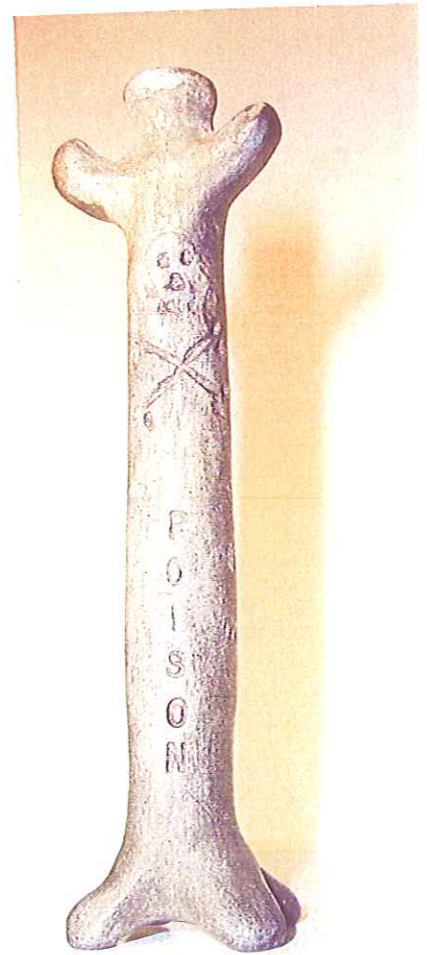
So, what do we know? There are at least three bone-shaped bottles in existence, all similar in appearance and all composed of fired clay. We can assume that at least one or two others were made, based on the evidence found at the Lexington, North Carolina dump. All three of the known pottery bottles strongly resemble the design patented in 1893, although not identical. There also is a credible rumor suggesting that one bone-shaped bottle may exist in cobalt glass, and the possibility (more speculative) that there may be other bone-shaped bottles in clear and/or amber glass. And what are they? Prototypes? Salesmen's samples given or sent to potential customers? Models submitted to the United States Patent Office, or to glass manufacturers who decided not to license the design? Whiskey nippers? No one knows for sure. As I said at the beginning of this article, the bone poison bottles certainly are mysterious.

References:

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- Morgan, Roy, "The Benign Blue Coffin" (Kollectarama, England 1978), p. 6.
- Munsey, Cecil, "The Illustrated Guide to Collecting Bottles" (NY: 1970) p. 161.
- Soehnlén, Philip, "Poison Pen: Dem Bones" (article in The Poison Bottle Newsletter, October 1992), p. 2.
- Stier, Wallis, "Poison Bottles: A Collector's Guide" (privately published 1969).

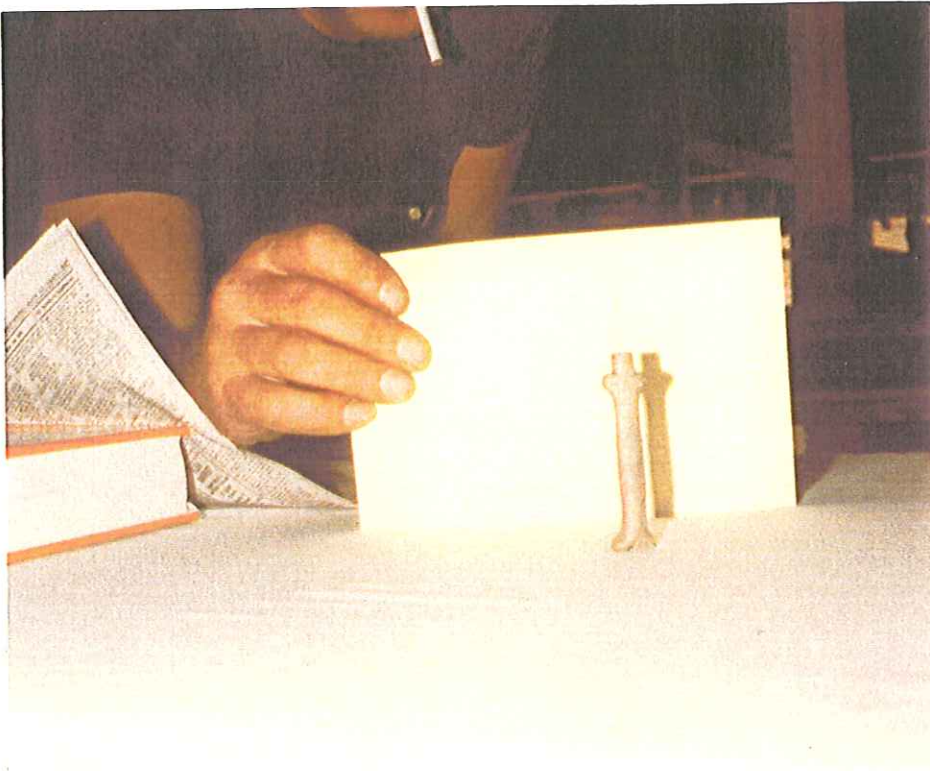


Left:
 U.S. PATENT NO. 22,835
 OCTOBER 17, 1893
 EDWARD M. CONE



Above:
 JERRY L. JONES, SR.'S
 POTTERY BONE-SHAPED BOTTLE
 DUG IN NORTH CAROLINA ABOUT 1972

Above Left: BOTTOM VIEW OF
 JERRY'S BONE-SHAPED BOTTLE

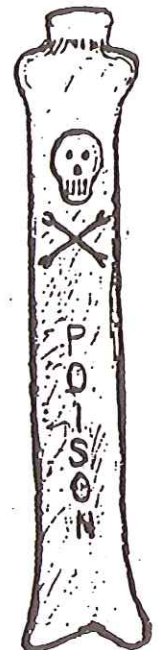


Above:
 POTTERY BONE-SHAPED BOTTLE
 SEEN AT BALTIMORE SHOW IN 1985

Below and Right:
 FIGURAL WHISKEY NIPPERS circa 1890-1910
 PRETZEL AND TAMALE
 ARE POTTERY



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Right:
 DRAWING OF BONE-SHAPED BOTTLE
 DUG IN CALIFORNIA IN LATE 1980S



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