

Message in a Bottle

I search the beach for winter's tales

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Chesapeake
Winter

All winter long on wind-scoured Solomon's Island, I've been discovering messages in bottles. On the sands and amongst the rocks, bottles have been transfigured into tale-bearers, shards of seaglass that whisper shreds of history.

The worst weather brings the rarest finds. When the north-west wind barrels down the Patuxent, blasting the river's water out to the Bay, it's time to search. A true blowout exposes dumps where old, intact bottles nestle and scrape in the wet sand.

My most exquisite finds announce their origin distinctly. Two tiny bottles are cobalt blue, but with the unique, opaque sheen that only years of rolling in the sand can bestow. One has an oyster scar. Their raised letters proclaim Bromo Seltzer and Emerson Drug Company. Isaac E. Emerson created the headache remedy in 1888 and sold it from his Baltimore drugstore. For years, a huge version of my bottles, with a flashing light, rotated atop the trademark Bromo Seltzer building.

On a particularly frigid day along the Patuxent, I climb over icy rocks and stumble with tearing eyes across another prize: an apothecary stopper. Seafoam green and frosted by sand, it could be well over a century old. Lea and Perrins inscribed on the curve reveals that it topped a bottle of Worcestershire sauce imported from England. Nearby lies a marble, a cat's-eye of blue and green shrouded by a sand-blasted patina. Where I find these treasures, a dance hall and restaurant once stood.

I've found bonfire glass: amorphous melted lumps with a trace of black charring, perhaps a memento of an oyster roast on the beach. Bits of blue-and-white porcelain and pottery turn up, orphans from opulent dinner parties a century ago.

I'm just beginning to divine what years on a beach can do. The surface of a pottery shard shows crisscross cracks called crazing. This brittle hairnet of stress lines appears when the glaze and the clay beneath swell and shrink out of synch.



Shards whisper shreds of history.

Guy G. Guthridge



Chesapeake Winter

The aging process of sea and sun also summons beauty. Many lavender pieces were originally clear. They turned purple only after years of sunshine, the new hue reflecting the amount of manganese in the original glass and the length of sun exposure. Time and again, a clear piece shows its true amethyst hue only after being examined at home.

A rainbow of beach glass gems has found new life as earrings for me to use as Christmas gifts. The recipients enjoy that I found the glass and imagine, as I do, an intriguing Chesapeake history for each piece.

The mouth of a found bottle or neck “speaks volumes about its history,” notes Richard LaMotte in his book, *Pure Sea Glass*. A hand-molded lip is old, while a screw-on style means a modern origin.

Rare colors like red, yellow and turquoise; a frosted glaze; bubbles (indicating age); and scars on bottle bottoms indicating hand-blowing all increase a specimen’s value for seaglass fanciers.

Bottles are the source of four out of five seaglass shards, I learn.

Many if not most of my bottle messages arrive in fragments that I struggle to understand, bringing mysteries rather than answers. The far majority of finds are not curved like the original vessels but sculpted into a triangle shape. So far, no explanation for that makes sense to me.

Some bottle chips bark orders: Not to be refilled, cautions a clear bottom fragment. The law forbids Sal, sternly orders a brown piece. How did she earn such an admonishment? Does a violet fragment that reads simply Gall also pronounce judgment? Perhaps Sal used her half-pin maneuver on Davi, an opaque fragment. Did any of them Pat off Phill (blue)? Or do harm to his b (green)? Was Phill a beekeeper? Eventually, I learn that after prohibition, liquor bottles had to bear the notice, *Federal Law Forbids Sale Or Re-use Of This Bottle*.

Down the beach, ANN in MD (bluegreen) could have drunk epsi c or eaten a Dairy Product (both opaque white).

A brown fragment Made in USA declares an origin more common in the past than today. Besides Philadelphia (Phill)

and Annapolis (Ann), bottles have come to this beach from New York USA (clear with an embossed eagle) and San Juan PR (green). Another violet bit reads only Port, giving no clue as to which.

Ert Pha! Amtel! Chem! they shout at me. Was brown bit Gottlieb OBE overtaken by events? Mul, advises another. Mull it over, perhaps.

Each storied piece bears a quantum of wisdom.

I walk in Zen-like meditation, yet each step brings suspense, with the rare adrenalin rush when I bend over to extract a true treasure half-hidden in the sand. I think I’ll need at least another winter of searching to burnish my seaglass dialect.

Guy G. Guthridge



Divining what years on a beach can do.