

# POISON LAND

*by Mike Dickman*  
*Photographs by Tim Adams*

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. As required, Mr. Cone’s patent application included a detailed drawing of his proposed patent. Thus, today’s collectors are able to see exactly what Mr. Cone had in mind.

Beyond the fact that the Patent Office issued a design patent, though, matters become a bit murky. Specifically, collectors long have wondered whether Mr. Cone’s bottle was ever actually made.

In his privately-published 1969 book, Wallis W. Stier asserted that the bone-shaped poison bottle had been manufactured in cobalt, amber and clear glass, but his only evidence was Cone’s drawing. In 1970, author and FOHBC Hall-of-Famer Cecil Munsey wrote that Cone’s 1893 bone-shaped patent had been “produced in cobalt-blue glass,” but again, he cited no proof except a reference to Mr. Stier’s book and the same patent drawing. In 1975, Roger Durlinger 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 And the late Rudy Kuhn in the unpublished third volume of his classic “Poison Bottle Workbook” listed and drew two bone-shaped poison bottles made of pottery: KU-37 and KU-40, both listed as 3 ½ inches 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. Mr. Kuhn wrote nothing about any bone-shaped bottles made from glass.

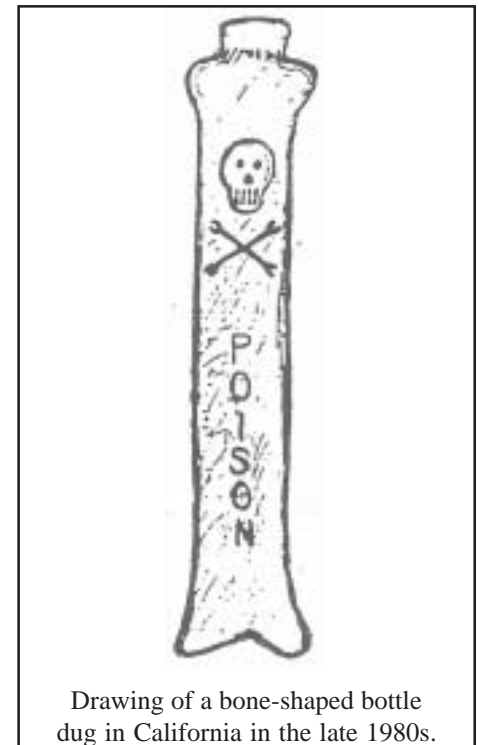
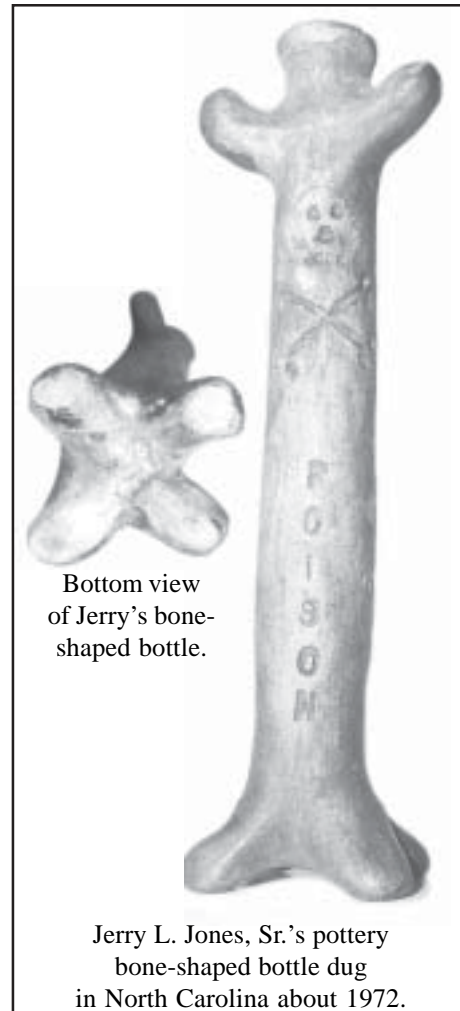
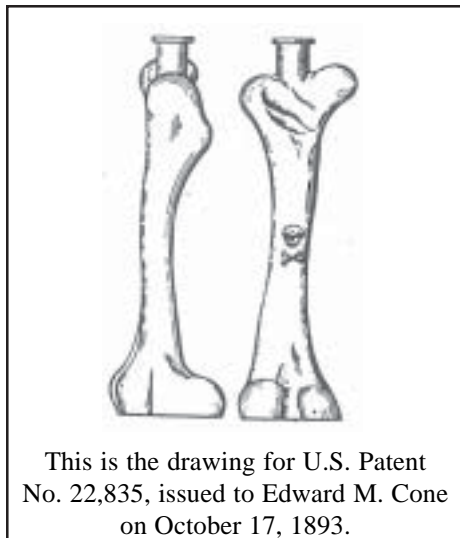
In 1992, collector Philip Soehnlen wrote an article for the Poison Bottle Newsletter in which he noted that another collector, Ben Glassman, had told him that a third

collector, Jerry Jaffe, had seen a bone-shaped bottle made of cobalt glass at a show but had been unable to buy it. Mr. Soehnlen opined that the glass bone bottle might have been a “prototype.” Mr. Soehnlen also related that some one he knew had dug a pottery bone-shaped poison bottle in California, “dark mottled walnut” in color, about 3 ½ inches tall, and unable to stand upright. Mr. Soehnlen’s article included a drawing he had made of the dug pottery bottle. He wrote that it had been dug in a hole which also contained two Carr-Lowery poison bottles (KI-1s). 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, we move to our first fact: a bone bottle made of pottery, dug in California.

And there are additional cold, hard facts about the mysterious bone-shaped poison bottles. In the early 1970s, FOHBC member Jerry L. Jones, Sr. of North Carolina started collecting poison bottles, buying some from fellow FOHBC member Howard Crowe and digging others in local dumps with two of his friends.

At the time, Jerry had to work every fourth Saturday. On one of those working Saturdays, he was unable to go digging, so the other two had gone without him. In the late afternoon, while Jerry was still at this 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 unwrapped a dirt-encrusted, bone-shaped bottle made of pottery, with the word "poison" and skull and crossbones.

"How much do you want for it?"

"Would \$15 be too much?"

"No, that would be fine," said Jerry, who related that he almost broke his arm getting his wallet out of his pocket.

Jerry's bone-shaped bottle is about 4 1/8 inch tall, has a top opening about 1/4 inch in diameter, and stands levelly on four little molded feet approximately 1 1/8 inch 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.

Jerry's bone-shaped pottery bottle was displayed at the 2004 FOHBC EXPO in Memphis, Tennessee.

The mystery deepens! In 1985, FOHBC member Joan Cabaniss personally 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 did allow Joan to take a photograph. From the photograph, which this author has seen, 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? Saleman'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 a mystery.

### References:

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Griffenhagen, G. and Bogard, M., "History of Drug Containers and Their Labels" (American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, Madison, Wis.; 1999), p. 94-95.

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Morgan, Roy, "The Benign Blue Coffin" (Kollectarama, England; 1978), p. 6.

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Stier, Wallis, "Poison Bottles: A Collector's Guide" (privately published; 1969).

The late Rudy Kuhn's numbering system of poison bottles was explained in an earlier Poisonland column (*Bottles and Extras*, Vol. 14, No. 3). Volumes I and II of "Poison Bottle Workbook" are available from Rudy's widow, Terry Kuhn, 3954 Perie Lane, San Jose, Ca. 95132; (408) 259-7564; cost is \$20 per volume plus \$5 shipping. The 60 or so pages from unpublished Volume III are available for the cost of copying, plus postage from the Antique Poison Bottle Collectors Association, which publishes the informative quarterly Poison Bottle Newsletter. Contact Joan Cabaniss, Secretary/Editor, 312 Summer Lane, Huddleston, Va. 24104.

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### Useful Bottle Websites

Ron Fowler's Hutchinson Bottle Webpage: <http://www.seattlehistorycompany.com/index.html>

Bill Lindsey's Bottle Identification Webpage: [http://www.blm.gov/historic\\_bottles/index.htm](http://www.blm.gov/historic_bottles/index.htm)

Bill Lockhart's Online Bottle Books: <http://alamo.nmsu.edu/library/lochistory.html>

David Whitten's Manufacturer's Marks Website:

<http://www.myinsulators.com/glass-factories/bottlemarks.html>



Pottery bone-shaped bottle seen at the Baltimore show in 1985. The owner believed it to be a nipper.