

The King Lives – in Memphis

by Andy Rapoza

I couldn't wait to meet Dick Watson. We had corresponded a few times over the past twelve years, but had never had met face-to-face. I was anxious to meet him in Memphis in order to accomplish several goals: I wanted to attend his talk on bitters, thank him for an old favor, get him to autograph my books, and ask him for one more favor.

I collect medicines from Lynn, Massachusetts and his two books on bitters describe several Lynn bitters bottles. One of these in particular – Thurston's Old Continental Tonic Bitters (L226) – had caught my attention and imagination. Back in his 1968 *Supplement to Bitters Botles*, Dick described the labeled-only bitters along with a small 12-sided sample bottle and a full-sized printed box. Several years ago Dick had graciously allowed me to acquire that incredible box. It's absolutely beautiful and a gem in my collection. Because it is so fragile, I enlisted my father-in-law's help to construct a display unit to protect it. I was anxious to show Dick how carefully I have protected this precious addition to my collection so that he would know how much his gift has meant to me.

The first event at the FOHBC weekend that my wife and I attended was the talk by Dick Watson. He shared his great knowledge, insights, and colorful stories about bitters and was enjoyed by a packed room. Afterwards I introduced myself and showed him pictures of the great bitters box in its display. He said it clearly was in the right home (that meant a lot to me coming from this great bitters collector). He graciously signed my copies of his books. There was just one more goal burning deep in this collector's heart: to ask him if he would send me a photograph of the two Thurston's bitters bottles he described in his book. (I am writing a book about the patent medicines of Lynn, Mass., so if I can't own a certain bottle or package, having a photograph is the next best thing for its research value.)

"Oh, but I can't – I don't have them!" he said. My heart sank. He went on to explain that they and the box were originally in the collection of a bitters collector from Massachusetts forty years ago. When that collector and her husband visited Dick and his wife back in the 1960s, she gave him the box as a thank-you gift for having them over as guests. She also provided Dick with descriptions of the two Thurston's bottles she had in her collection for use in his upcoming book, but he had never seen the bottles. Dick told me her name, but then explained that she was much older than him and probably deceased by now. Last he knew she had retired to Florida, but that was many years ago.

Crunch! It was all over. I had hit a brick wall. It's tough enough trying to find certain bottles that are embossed, but labeled-only bottles are even tougher. The only thing more fragile and ephemeral than glass has got to be paper. They don't come out of the ground with labels (not good ones, anyway). So, while colored figural bitters are worth more to most collectors, labeled-only medicines from the one town I am researching and writing about are like precious jewels to me. This bling-bling, however, had just slipped through my fingers.

A few hours after meeting Dick Watson, I was walking the floor of the fabulous Bottle Expo. I was having a great time looking at each and every beautiful bottle, always keeping an

eye out for something from Lynn, Mass. After a few hours, feeling a little achy and tired, I was just beginning to think that I should call it a day and come back tomorrow. Then there it was! Right there in front of me! I couldn't believe it – I was staring at a dream. After searching for decades, my hand shook as it held the labeled Thurston's Old Continental Tonic Bitters. I told the dealer the story of how I had decided just hours earlier that my search for this bottle had hit a brick wall. But here it was – no photograph needed – I was holding the real thing! Several others came over to the table and listened to me recount my story. Someone commented that it had found the right home – it had.

Then it dawned on me – I had never turned the bottle over to see the price! Good grief! I shuttered to think of the possibility that it was priced way beyond my reach. It was worth a king's ransom to me, but I'm no king. Turns out it was very reasonably priced and the dealer, Ed Herrold, even discounted it some because he was happy to see how much the bottle meant to me. By the way, he is from Florida, so it is my guess that the bottle and box that were separated in the 1960s have been reunited after forty years!

Lightning hit a second time in the show when I found a labeled-only Thurston's XXX Death to Pain at Bill Agee's table. For me, half the fun of collecting is the memory of hunting for and finding a treasured addition to my collection. The unforgettable finds I made at this year's Expo are exceeded only by the friendships and memories I made in the process. Lots and lots to be treasured; maybe I am a king after all.

