The Lubber Chronicles Part 1 – Lost and Found

Life is a peculiar arrangement of circumstances, some that we choose and others that get thrust upon us. The Ship in the Bottle seems to be one of those things that chose me rather than one I sought out. Here I present the beginning of a series about how the SIB became a part of my life and has played a small role in it. I have a small collection of SIB’s that came to me through various circumstances. Earlier in my life I also generated a small production run of models that were mostly given away as gifts to family members. All of my productions, except the first one which I kept and another that survives in the bedroom of the son of one of my cousins, have met an untimely demise. I haven’t tried to bottle a ship in forty years now and through a series of circumstances I find myself once again spending my time crawling on the floor looking for lost parts as I try to assemble yet another glass contained confection. Oh, the joys I’ve been missing all these years!

My first encounter with the SIB dates back to June of 1964. Our family had moved into a typical post-World War Two tract home on Long Island, New York and there in the basement on an old wooden shelf case was a bottle with a ship model inside that had been abandoned by the previous owners. Nobody paid much attention to it because it looked antiquated and it wasn’t mounted on a base and therefore it would roll off of any flat surface. Our house was of a modern style, wasn’t very near the coast and wasn’t decorated in a nautical motif therefore it didn’t generate much attention and so it remained upright on the shelf in the basement for awhile. It was occasionally trotted out to amaze some visitor and we would all wonder how the ship got put in the bottle.

The 1960’s were the heyday for the Sea in popular culture; Hemingway wrote about Old Men fishing it before he dispatched himself and beach boys were riding its waves on planks. On TV women were patiently waiting for their men to return from it while the scent of Old Spice lingered in their nostrils, the Gorton’s of Gloucester Fisherman was trolling it for fish to turn into bread-coated frozen sticks and fishermen were sipping steaming mugs of Red Rose tea in their sea-heaving ship’s cabin – at least that’s what Madison Avenue had us believe. But there was one instructional commercial, a Schaffer beer TV ad demonstrating a ship model being inserted into a bottle and having its masts raised and sails unfurled by the magical “pulling on the strings”. So now the secret was out.

Some time in my teen age years I decided to take the ancient cruddy looking bottled ship out of the basement, gave it a good wipe off, found a piece of scrap wood that I could stain with the left over Minwax that my father had applied on the new kitchen door and squirted a libel coat of Elmer’s to its base to finally mount this lost treasure to be placed in my bedroom. The glue would give out every once in a while which would be announced with a thud in the middle of the night when the bottle would rolled off its stand onto the top of my chest of drawers, jarring me awake. I never considered it to be truly mine, it sort of belonged to the house, but I became its steward.

This model has been with me ever since. It has survived the various moves from apartment to apartment and house to house and has been inconspicuously placed someplace for years. My only modifications to it besides mounting it on the stand was replacing the disintegrating cork which may or may not have had sealing wax on it and attempting to re-glue a stay that came loose. I also added the Turk’s Head knot after I found the directions for making one in a book.

It lived in my home in relative obscurity until recently. Unlike the days I grew up in when information and instruction had to be hard sort and won, today we have the information miracle of the internet so on a whim I decided to start to research it a bit. I thought there must be an internet forum of collectors of these things full of all sorts of information and within short order I was unraveling information about my priceless treasure.

Without any provenance or solid back story it’s probably impossible to determine the exact origin of my little bottled wonder. Aside from the fact that the bottle has a screw top neck which ages it as a 20th century creation, everything else about it is mostly conjecture. Having some experience now myself with making models I’m now able to detect various nuances about it.

The bottle appears to be a whiskey or liquor bottle but has no discernible markings indicating anything about its manufacture. The screw top bottle was invented around 1910, liquor was banned in the US during the era of Prohibition from 1920 to 1933, and after repeal of Prohibition a US Federal law was introduced and was in place from 1935 to 1965 that mandated that liquor manufacturers have their bottles embossed with words stating that it was forbidden to reuse the bottle. Bottles that I have that post-date 1965 have the words “Liquor Bottle” embossed in their base. So, if the bottle contained liquor it could pre-date 1935. Of course it could also have been a bottle of booze illegally imported from Canada or someplace else any time prior to 1964 or an empty brought back from some foreign country. A slight dimple on the base seems to appear to have an anchor marking when I hold the bottle at a certain angle, but it isn’t really clear enough to make out for sure and the mark is indistinguishable from a manufacturing defect.

The ship’s construction is a paradox of sophistication and crudeness. The hull is so nicely shaped that it almost looks machine carved. The holes are neatly and cleanly drilled (better than what I accomplish with a pin drill) the bowsprit is finely joined to the hull with what appears to be neat tendon pegs that are flush to the surface. The shrouds are made of fine thread and are neatly knotted to the hull. The masts are hinged onto the deck with wire and the spars are attached to the masts with a fine wire that is neatly twisted and is still bright and shiny after all these years. The ship seems to be accurately composed and proportioned. The deck and spars seem stained and/or varnished. And there is the imaginative and nicely composed head-land of a clay background and the sea is well done.

However there are the rough spots. The deck is roughly gouged out as if a chisel wasn’t available or it could be the grain of the wood showing through. However the fore and aft decks are perfectly smooth and flush. The mast and spars are crudely made of some sort of rough wood and not sanded smooth, the mast are single poles that taper but the spars are not tapered to points. The stays are made from a rough twine or cord and one stay had pulled out the bowsprit as if a poor adhesive was use (or no glue at all since nothing else on the model seems glued). The hull was probably not sanded or primed and the paint seems to have not taken well to it. I always assumed the wood used for the hull was pine. It’s somewhat of a paradox that so much care would be taken on some of it and other parts of it are so rough.

I’ve been informed that the techniques used in its construction, that the spars lack sails and the application of a background seem to indicate an “old style” popular in about the 1920’s. The ship is of a three-mast- clipper style which were already supplanted by steam engines by then. In the 1920’s Gloucester fishing sloops were being fitted with gasoline engines and the age of sail was fading fast. But none of this precludes it being built then or later, maybe modeled after a photo or painting like we do today, or from memory or imagination.

I know very little about the previous owners of our house except that it was a couple of about my parent’s age and that they had a large family that had out grown the house. They were the original owners so the chances of an old salt having lived there are low. Of course the model could have belonged to a grandparent or other relative, or it could have been picked up someplace or was a childhood remnant. Just about anything is possible except that it doesn’t date prior to 1910 or so.

Whatever its origins may be, for some reason it was left behind for me to wonder about and inspire me to want to endeavor in this handy-craft and it still remains with me more than fifty years later. It was my first instructor in the making of ship-in-the-bottles and I tried to copy its techniques when I decided to make my own.