

## Not Less than 1,000 Bottles for Horseradish Jen Hirt

My great-grandfather starts the morning of December 25, 1913 with a gun to his head.

He wakes to a noise downstairs in his home on East 40th Street in Cleveland, Ohio. His wife wakes too, but there is no rousing from their young children, among them my two-year-old grandfather. Sam Hirt investigates. He is a small Austrian, a less-than-observant Jew with very round eyes and a country of frown under a mustache so wide he looks to be all mouth, like an old baby bird with its beak shut. His forehead glows a half moon under a hairline receding at a wrecked angle. Because he and Anna were well off, they have at the staircase a button for a downstairs light, a convenience that most homes will not have for another half decade. The light reveals a masked man who levels at him a revolver.

I won't know any of this until one hundred years later. And I hear the news not through a family story or a long lost relative, but from the front page of a newspaper.

§

Two weeks before I discover the news of the robbery, my dad sends a surprising email. From the subject—Horseradish—I can half guess it's about Sam Hirt, who started our family's greenhouse business, still thriving today, by growing and selling horseradish. "Hirt's Greenhouse used to be called Hirt's Horseradish," my relatives would say when I pressed them for the few family stories they told. That single sentence was the whole "story." My imagination started and stopped with a wooden cart piled with snaggly white roots.

The message is a forward, the original sender a stranger. He's attached a photo of a small glass bottle with a crusty cork and a red-and-green label. *Hirt's Celebrated Horseradish*, it reads in a flourish of script descended from snake-oils and hair tonics.

I've never seen one before, despite four generations of a greenhouse family, despite standing in the greenhouse Sam Hirt built, despite writing a memoir with the greenhouse at the center, despite how the bottle should have been an heirloom in a box in an attic.

I lean forward to this jpeg Rosetta Stone of clues—the peculiar full name of the business (his horseradish was *celebrated?*), and below that, "Put up by Samuel Hirt, New Sheriff Street Market, Cleveland Ohio"—the precise location of his vendor's stall. Below that, phone numbers so old they are undialable. In the attic of the Internet I quickly set myself to working through search strings involving the new clues—every variation and spelling of *celebrated*, horseradish, Hirt, and New Sheriff Street.

And then, there it is, the top story on the front page of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* from December 26, 1913. The headline reads, "Wield Gun on Man, Get \$739: Masked Robbers Force Citizen to March Downstairs in Night Attire."

As I read and reread, it's like Sam Hirt has gone spectral in his night attire and he's narrating this true crime drama back at me, with the intruder in control. "Turn that light out and be quick about it," the article reports the robber saying. Sam obeys with darkness. Anna calls from the bedroom. The stranger shines a handheld beam. It is a pocket lamp that, like Sam's light button, is a recent invention, and the reporter—there is no byline—will have to take a few extra sentences to explain to the readers how you can have a light in your pocket.

I notice something odd: That the shock of a *citizen* marched *downstairs in his night attire* takes precedence over a headline about open-heart surgery performed with cocaine, and news of the hemophiliac Romanov boy bruising his leg, and a feature about Rockefeller golfing in Cleveland. It seems to take precedent over Christmas and Passover and winter and the whole world. I click to the second page of the article and am shocked back in my chair by a portrait of Sam and Anna—only the second known photo of them together.

The man orders Sam to come down and I imagine Sam must be thinking not about pocket lamps: He is thinking, What end is this? He has survived persecution in Eastern Europe, bartered his way solo onto a voyage to America, outlived one wife, worked the railroads, remarried, started his own business. And now he descends on this holiday to he knows not what.

§

Sam's mistake, says my brother after I email him a pdf of the article, was that he didn't have a dog. My brother's been robbed—a broken side window, his Play-Station taken. The greenhouse business that he (fourth generation Hirt) is now president of has been robbed twice, and partially as a result of that my brother owns a German Shepherd. "Early warning system," he says.

Later, he texts me. "He should have used a bank. All I see in the past are mistakes I refuse to make."

My dad, meanwhile, is delighted. His favorite hobby is digging dirt on relatives dead and alive, and this dirt is golden because of its placement on the front page of the largest newspaper in the region and its narrative details. It quickly becomes the most detailed family story any of us have to tell.

§

The robbers, now two, direct Sam to the safe. They know exactly where it is. Cold heavy gun to a shaking dark-haired head, and I'm sure he's shaking because he must know by now that his house has been cased and the robbers have been watching him, that he has grown complacent—perhaps a better man would sleep with a gun. What else is my great-grandfather feeling? Fury that this is how it ends, after all he's been through? Helpless in the face of six rounds loaded? Is he worried about Anna, the children? Is he cursing his mistake, whatever it was, that let these men stake out his home? He must know he can't overpower the thieves. He must know how suddenly few his options are in this time

of wealth and success and all he's worked for with his horseradish business. I wonder if he wondered if he'd live.

§

The guy who found the bottle—I'll call him Gary—has included his contact info in his email, so my dad and brother have a meeting betwixt themselves to strategize over how to procure the bottle. If Gary wants money, they will pay no more than \$250, which my dad determines is the high-end price for similar bottles on eBay.

My dad emails, calls. He makes it clear that he is "prepared to make an offer." Then he does it a second time. Silence.

I ask him what he thinks Gary is doing with the bottle. Dad thinks Gary might be contacting all the Hirts in the world and seeing who makes the best offer, and there is worry that a distant relative who has the last name but no greenhouse connection will bid high. That's how my dad operates—thinking that any person, given the chance, will take what is rightfully yours. He's so excited by the robbery article because it explains his inheritance of distrust.

A few weeks later, Gary emails to say he's going to keep the bottle for now.

Dad calls me. "It's wrong," he stammers. "Morally wrong. The Hirt family should have that bottle."

§

Sam clicks the combination on the second try and palms \$739 in cash, which the article reports as three days of holiday profit from his horseradish stand. Today, that amount dollars up to \$16,000. How long does he hold it before he hands it over? Or does he even hold it? (Of course he holds it. He counts it every day.) Does he step back and watch the robbers reach into his safe? Will Anna blame him? Does he contemplate retaliation—is there anything he can hit them with as they bend and bag his money?

Then it's over. Cloth bag cinched, pocket lamps off, thieves fleeing out the back door.

Sam calls the third precinct police but they are worthless and the thieves escape. Then, and this is the only way I can make sense of the prominence of the next day's headline, he must have called the newspaper—likely the only time he spoke about the robbery.

§

I want the bottle.

I email Gary and ask if I can interview him on the phone about how he found it. He agrees but writes that there isn't much to say.

The story is that Gary, with a day job in information technology, had a chance to buy the rundown caretaker's house at an old Jewish cemetery in Cleveland. He'd already flipped three houses, but this one he'd keep for himself—because of "perfect neighbors." He hired "a couple of drunks" to gut the house. In the crawlspace between the top floor and the attic they found two bottles, because what else are drunks supposed to find. They showed the bottles to Gary. One was old but nondescript—Gary handed it back to the workers. The other was

Hirt's Celebrated Horseradish. It was, he said, the first time he'd found anything interesting in an old house.

He recognized the name, because everyone in northeast Ohio seems to know our family one way or another—we've been selling plants there for over a century. The label was still bright and smooth and had not known any sun. He took two photos. That night he typed "Hirt's Celebrated Horseradish" into a search engine and the first link was the Hirt's Wikipedia page that I maintain, with the horseradish phrase that I had typed long ago when I thought the business was just "Hirt's Horseradish."

He says the bottle is in a dark cabinet, safe from the light that will ruin the label. Our conversation falls silent as we reach the part where he should offer to sell or I should offer to buy. Or he should just give it to me. Neither of us says anything. He's been difficult to talk to—I've had to rephrase and rephrase my questions to get details out of him, and more than once his tone has tripped into either impatience or annoyance. I haven't told him anything about the robbery article.

"What's your favorite thing about the bottle?" I ask, promising that it's the last question.

Gary pauses. I know he's turning that bottle in his hand, considering it. I close my eyes. I could cry. I hold my breath instead.

"It's the phrase, 'Put up by,'" he says. "'You just don't see that anymore. With the name. 'Put up by Samuel Hirt.'"

He's right, that's the best part of the bottle. He's a computer programmer, dealing all day with the anonymous horrors of tech language and the Internet. Five personalized words on antique glass stand out. I want to say to him, "Imagine how that would look if Samuel Hirt *happened to be your great-grandfather*," but I don't. And I think of the \$3 million worth of plants and mostly plastic containers my family sells each year, none of it with anyone's full name. I think about how my dad will sell vast amounts of something ridiculous this week—like thousands of dollars of live ladybugs—but he can't get a hold of this one bottle with his grandfather's name on it. I hang up without asking for it.

§

The treasure map of the Internet entices me—there *must* be other Hirt's Celebrated Horseradish bottles out there. But my linguistic buzz gets subdued after a few Internet searches. Turns out that everyone in the early twentieth century deemed their horseradish celebratory because it's a bitter herb suitable for Passover Seder. With the invention of machine-made glass bottles in 1906, bottle makers designed a generic "celebrated horseradish" bottle that any up-and-coming entrepreneur could order, customized with a last name. Antique and vintage bottle websites have entire categories of "so-and-so's celebrated horseradish" bottles, like Runyan's and Lake's. The more I click through bottle sites, the less Hirt's Celebrated Horseradish seems quirky and clever and the more it seems mainstream, mass-marketed, a ready-made business. And yet, despite what seem like thousands of "celebrated horseradish" bottles catalogued online, I can't find a single Hirt's bottle. I even contact the National



Bottle Museum in New York. If you ever get one, says the acquisitions guy, we'd love to add it to our collection.

§

We grumble sour grapes over the bottle. My brother says he's not interested in the bottle because it's a thing of the past, and the past is full of mistakes (we could have been wealthy condiment heirs, he laments, far wealthier than greenhouse heirs). My dad says what's important is the photo—that's all we really needed to see, and it gave enough info to lead to the robbery article. He decides he has other things to do and isn't going to waste his time on this. A friend advises, "You don't want that bottle. You'd have to dust it." I tell myself that Gary will take good care of the bottle—if he renovates old houses, at least he cares a little bit for the past, right?

But the truth is I want the bottle, and I can't fully explain why, and I can't fathom a reasonable dollar figure to put on it. Would it show poor judgment to call Gary and offer, say, \$500? Yes. Maybe. But it seems disrespectful to offer just \$50. And I want to believe there is a type of person who would just give an object like that back to the family, but I don't think that person is Gary.

§

At dead ends on all paths, I head back to the online newspaper archives, wondering if, in the days after the robbery, there were any follow-up articles. There were, but not about Sam. The Cleveland police acknowledged the out-of-control crime wave. There was a massive shake-up and reorganization of detectives on December 28, 1913, a complete reassessment of how they would combat the crime that was resulting in hold-ups and even a shooting. Rockefeller enjoyed his holiday golfing, the Romanov heir recovered from his bruised leg (though more sinister dangers loomed for him), and the cocaine-numb heart patient died when the stitches failed. Sam, I figured, was already planning his move out of town—by 1915 he'd bought land in the countryside, in a small town called Strongsville, far from the city.

On a whim, I search for "Samuel Hirt" in the issues before the robbery, and I find that in February of 1913, he scored a day in court for refusing to pay a manufacturer for what he deemed were flawed horseradish bottles:

#### *Bottles Court Attraction*

Not less than 1,000 bottles of a peculiar bluish tint and used for horseradish were on exhibition in a case on trial yesterday before Common Pleas Judge Foran.

Several hundred bottles were strewn about on the floors and a couple of jurors afflicted with artificial legs had a hard time getting about.

Some of the bottles were placed on the trial table and owing to the peculiar acoustic properties of the court room the lawyers and witnesses innocently pulled off a vaudeville bell ringing stunt.

The bottles are involved in the suit for \$400 instituted by the C. L. Flaccus Glass Co., Pittsburg, against Samuel Hirt, who claims in defense that many bottles were defective and unfit for bottling horseradish.

I think about the courtroom that day, what it must have looked like to see 1,000 small bottles set all over the place, 1,000 renditions of the nifty *Hirt's Celebrated Horseradish* label, like in a dream or a surrealist painting. I picture Sam Hirt's frown over those bluish bottles that will make his creamy white horseradish look rancid. I can hear the company rep asserting that they won't take them back, they're fine. I can see the reporter chuckle to himself as he puns that headline—"Bottles Court Attraction." I imagine the judge is annoyed with the spectacle and *someone* is about to be held in contempt, especially if anyone clinks any more bottles in the *peculiar acoustics* of the room. And let's not forget that *amputees are on the jury*, and well, *you* try to navigate that wooden floor mined with five-inch high bottles with *your* peg leg.

There's no follow-up to the article, but I have a feeling Sam Hirt won—no one wants blue horseradish, and judging by the cash he had in his house at the end of that year, he must have been selling a normal looking product. Besides, the Hirts tend to come out on the winning side of money. You'd have to, to keep a business running for over a century.

Yet here's the serious part, the important part: Less than a year after the court case, karma caught up with miserly Sam and he lost \$739 in the robbery, almost double what he was trying not to lose in court.

And here's the part that breaks my heart: There were once a thousand of his bottles all in one room, each one with that fantastic old label, and no one wanted them.

#### *Postscript*

In November 2013, Gary walked in to Hirt's Gardens and handed my brother the bottle, for free. My dad put it in a glass case in his office, under photos of Sam Hirt. On December 23, 2013, I drove five hours to hold it in my hands for the first time.