

# International Tastes In Gold Town

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**Continuing the theme** for this collection of “artifacts that enlighten,” the object at the heart of this chapter represents the unexpected – or even extraordinary – among the ordinary: a bottle for expensive imported French champagne that had made a 9,000-mile journey to the remote high desert gold-mining town of Highland City in western Montana. The presence of alcohol in a 19th-century mining town is not unexpected; however, finding French champagne among American beer and bitters bottles in a frontier saloon at about 10,000 feet in elevation was an unanticipated part of the Highland City excavations.

Highland City (24SB67) sprang up around the gold-rich Fish Creek, which twisted through the Highland Mountains in what is today southwestern Montana. Three prospectors – J.B.S. Coleman, E.B. “Egg” Coleman, and William Crawford – found gold there on 25 July 1866 while panning in the creek. Later that summer, a second group of prospectors, William Owsley, Tom Hall, and Franck Beck—reportedly extracted gold worth about \$3,100 in a single day. The gold ore at Highland City quickly gained attention for its purity, selling at \$20 per ounce, while ores from nearby Butte, near the base of the Highland Mountain ridge, only commanded \$16 per ounce (Anaconda Standard 1899a; Sahinen 1935; Lyden 1948; Wolle 1962; Wilde 1999; Montana DEQ 2013; Victor 2018). Adding to the young town’s wealth, gold ran not only in Fish Creek, but also through a dry gulch, named Cooley’s Gulch, that sat just below Highland City. Soon, the towns of Highland City and Red Mountain City merged as a two-town conglomeration that stretched for about ten miles (Wolle 1962; Wilde 1999; Montana DEQ 2013; Victor 2018) (Figure 1).

Prospectors found gold-bearing lode ores almost immediately after finding placer gold and had located at least 100 different lodes after only three years (Wolle 1962; Victor 2018). Two months after the first discovery of gold in the District, the population of Highland City numbered roughly 600 people. During the height of the town’s boom, from 1868

to 1872, the population is estimated to have been at least 2,000 and it may have reached 5,000 individuals. While never specified, these estimates likely refer to the conglomeration of Highland City and Red Mountain City rather than Highland City alone. This population made the conglomeration the largest settlement in Southern Deer Lodge County, which at the time included present-day Silver Bow County and the town of Butte, Montana, and stretched up to the Canadian border. To put the population into perspective, the total population of Montana Territory in 1870 was 20,000 people, which meant that approximately one tenth of the entire Territory’s population (or as much as a quarter of the population, if using the estimate of 5,000 individuals) resided at Highland City-Red Mountain City (Anaconda Standard 1899b; Davis 1962; Wolle 1962; Victor 2018; U.S. Census Bureau 1901).

Overall, the prospectors and miners recovered roughly \$2.3 million in gold from the Highland Mining District surrounding the two-town conglomeration from 1866 to the mid-1890s. At its height, Highland City had 300 wooden houses and cabins, 5 dance halls, 10 saloons, several general stores, and a cemetery. The town also garnered enough attention within Deer Lodge County that it had its own stop on the post route, along a road called the Highland Trail, which ran from Alder Gulch to the Highland Mountains.

The presence of just shy of a dozen saloons in Highland City speaks to one of the key ways that the residents chose to spend their time – and their money. The bottles recovered from these saloons attest to the kinds of alcohol that residents chose to buy. Archaeological excavations, conducted at the site in 2013, 2014, and 2016, located at least one of these ten saloons, including a rich alcohol-related assemblage. Through a combination of pedestrian survey, shovel test pit survey (with shovel tests placed at 10 m intervals), and a 1 × 1 m test unit, a minimum of 60 glass vessels were recovered from the saloon assemblage, 28 of which was collected from the test unit.



FIGURE 1. USGS 1990 Butte South, MT 1:100,000 Scale Topographical Map Showing Approximate Location of Highland City, Montana (Exact Location Protected by USFS).

The saloon assemblage yielded at least one Kelly’s Log Cabin Bitters bottle, manufactured in St. Louis, Missouri; one P.H. Drake Sazerac bottle, manufactured in New York, New York; a union clasped hands flask, likely from Philadelphia; and at least four champagne bottles, including two whole vessels (Figure 2). These olive green bottles all came from the same area of the site and have the same narrow shape, pronounced kick-up, or punt, and a champagne finish (Lindsey 2010). Several of the bottle sherds (and both whole bottles) had fragments of foil still attached to the neck, just below the finish. Found near these bottles, on the same transect, was a fragment of foil embossed with “H. RI[?]...Co. / RHEIMS.”

The French town of Reims is known today as one of the country’s centers for producing champagne. It rose to prominence as a center of wine production from the 1860s to the 1880s, when the entire Champagne region shifted its wine-making focus to more urban markets (Guy 2007). During the third quarter of the 19th century, and the early part of the last quarter of that century, the Champagne region experienced a period of financial prosperity and the price of grapes rose steadily, particularly from the 1870s to the 1880. In some regions, it increased by over 100% in a decade (Guy 2007). This price was transferred to the sparkling wines as well, along with costs for transporting the bottles from the region to cities and to the coast.

The presence of champagne at Highland City, which was occupied during this prosperous period for the Champagne region’s winemakers—in which the price of grapes and bottles of Champagne rose—indicates that the residents chose to buy a particularly expensive alcohol, especially when compared with the bitters found in the same saloon deposit. The mining town’s remote location added further costs to the purchase price of the champagne bottles, which covered a distance of over 9,000 miles from Reims to Highland City. The bottles had to be transported from the mountainous vineyards just south of Reims to the city itself, and then to a nearby



FIGURE 2. French Champagne Bottle and Bottle Fragments Recovered from Highland City (Photograph by author, 2018).

port, likely Calais. From there, they were shipped across the Atlantic to merchants on the East Coast of the United States, sent to Saint Louis, and then carried along the Missouri River to Three Forks, Montana. The final leg of the trip was by coach to the base of the Highland Mountain range about 60 miles away, and – at last – in an ox-cart up another 2,000 feet in elevation to Highland City. The champagne bottles at Highland City were likely as much of an unexpected delight to visitors of the town as they were to the archaeologists who uncovered them.

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