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Edward Abbey's Bottle

AN ESSAY ON TRASH AND TREASURE

Thomas Bowen

In my office, on the shelf by the stereo, stands an ordinary half-pint liquor bottle. The plastic cap is in place, but the bottle is empty, and there is no label to tell what it once contained. I'm not particularly fond of the bottle, although it does remind me of an excellent field trip to Isla Angel de la Guarda, where two colleagues and I discovered it. But having it on the shelf also makes me uncomfortable because I'm not sure I should have taken it. Yet I'm equally unsure that I should have left it lying against the boulder where we found it. I'm reluctant to throw it away, even though it is just a piece of modern trash. Or is it? Can a common thirty-year-old liquor bottle be a historical artifact? And even though I retrieved it and am now in possession of it, is it really mine to dispose of as I see fit? And if it shouldn't be on my shelf, where does it belong?

These are old issues that archaeologists and historians have wrestled with for generations, and over the years scholars and legislators have developed both formal and informal ways of dealing with them. But legal criteria and even informal rules of thumb are inevitably arbitrary and of limited applicability. They cannot take into account the individual circumstances that surround each specific case. As every field worker knows, the unique archaeological and historical context of a found object and the circumstances of its discovery may be important factors in deciding how to deal with it, with results that

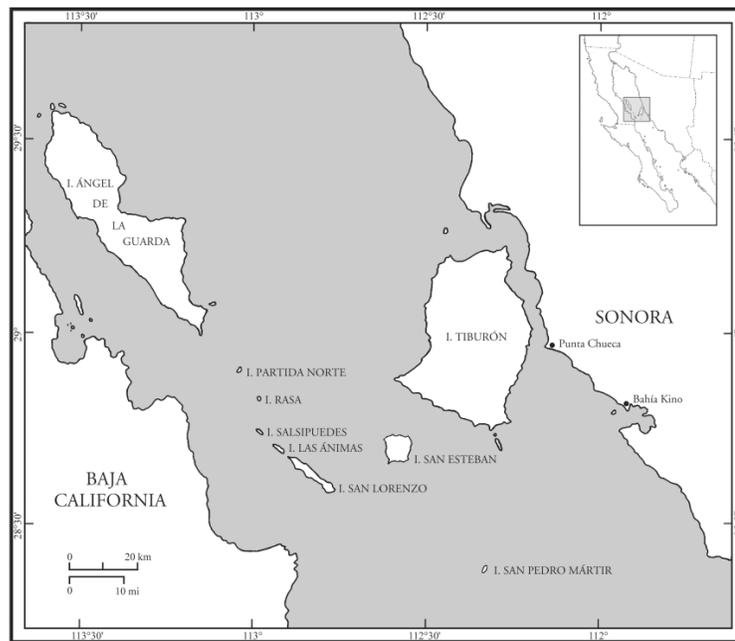
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are sometimes anything but clear. So it is with the bottle on my shelf, which constitutes an unusually vivid case in point and one that is, I believe, worth examining in some detail.

Sorting out the ambiguities that surround the bottle hinges on four inter-related questions. First, did the permitting process of my project authorize or prohibit collecting the bottle? Second, is the bottle a historical artifact or a piece of modern trash? Third, who owns the bottle? And last, who has the right or responsibility to determine its proper disposition? Although there are legal answers to some of these questions, I am concerned here less with the letter of the law than with the issues that underlie it. And, as will become apparent, I have many more questions than answers.

Permissions and Permits

The project that led to the discovery of the bottle was unconventional, as was the permitting process. In 2003 I applied to the Consejo de Arqueología



MAP 1.

Isla Angel de la Guarda and surrounding region of the Gulf of California.

(Map courtesy Thomas Bowen)

of Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), via the appropriate INAH regional office, for a permit to conduct an archaeological survey of islands in the Midriff region of the Gulf of California (see map). My application explicitly stated that I would collect no artifacts and conduct no excavations. Somewhat surprisingly, the Consejo rejected the application but then explained to the regional office that if I would be neither collecting nor excavating, what I proposed was not "archaeology," and therefore I did not need a permit from INAH. With this clarification, the regional office gave me informal permission to proceed with the project.

The agency from which I did need a permit was the regional office of the Area de Protección de Flora y Fauna Islas del Golfo de California (Islas for short), the federal agency directly responsible for managing the Midriff islands as protected areas. Although the general management plan under which Islas operates focuses on native plants and animals, it mandates managing cultural resources as well. These islands, however, had never been surveyed for archaeological or historical sites, so the Islas staff had no idea what cultural resources existed there. Consequently, the agency was eager to support my project. All I needed was a generic camping permit, which Islas was happy to provide in exchange for my data.

Since INAH had determined that my project was not "archaeology," Islas redefined it as an "Inventory of Cultural Resources," again with the stipulation that no artifacts be collected. I was, of course, expected to abide by Islas's camping regulations, one of which was to leave no trash. Islas was understandably sensitive about this because its personnel had undertaken major cleanup projects on several islands and removed many tons of modern detritus. Although not an explicit part of our agreement, it was understood that I could contribute to this ongoing effort by removing whatever trash I found.

The Inventory of Cultural Resources began in February 2004, and in January 2007 colleagues Steve Hayden and Bill Broyles and I embarked on a field trip to Isla Angel de la Guarda. Although our main focus was on indigenous cultural remains, we also wanted to record non-Indian sites of historical importance. One recent site we specifically hoped to locate was a landing strip used briefly in 1977 by Tucson bush pilot Alexander "Ike" Russell. Ike had flown many scientists to remote locations such as Isla Angel de la Guarda and the strip we hoped to find had been cleared to facilitate a long-term study of the island's lizards. Ike's contribution to science was so great that we considered his landing strip to be a legitimate historical site. In our estimation, the fact that Ike had also flown environmental writer Edward Abbey and five illustrious friends to that airstrip further enhanced its historical significance.



ILL. 1. EDWARD ABBEY'S CAMP ON ISLA ANGEL DE LA GUARDA, FEBRUARY 1977

Ike Russell's airplane is parked nearby and Abbey is testing a bandanna for use as a makeshift wind sock.

(Photograph courtesy Terrence Moore)

We did find a landing strip, but it did not entirely match existing descriptions of the one Ike had used. Since other pilots had landed on the island, we needed some way to determine if the strip we found was actually Ike's, and we saw precious little that could help. That's when we discovered the bottle, tucked beside a boulder a few yards from the remains of a camp fire. Bottles are archaeologically valuable because codes embossed in the glass identify the manufacturer and the date of production. Ike had used his strip only between



ILL. 2. THE BOTTLE AS TRASH, JANUARY 2007
The bottle in situ in Edward Abbey's camp, Isla Angel de la Guarda.
(Photograph courtesy Thomas Bowen)

February and August 1977, so any bottle brought in Ike's airplane should have been manufactured in the United States between about 1976 and early 1977. If the bottle we found met those specifications (which it did), it would be strong circumstantial evidence that the landing strip was Ike's (which it was). But none of us knew the codes or whether they could be deciphered from sketches or photographs (have you ever tried taking field photos of clear glass?). How many times, I asked myself, have I failed to get an artifact identified because I failed to record a seemingly insignificant detail?

I knew the bottle could be positively identified by a specialist who had the object in hand. But did my informal INAH permission and Islas agreement allow me to collect it? That depended on whether the bottle was a historical artifact or a piece of modern trash, which could only be determined with certainty by collecting it. After two days of deliberation, I picked up the bottle and put it in my pack, not a trivial decision since, under Mexican law, unauthorized removal and export of artifacts carries heavy monetary fines and prison terms. I now ask myself, whenever the bottle catches my eye, did I violate the law and the terms of my agreements with the Mexican authorities by collecting a historical artifact, or did I perform a service by removing someone else's trash?

Artifact or Trash

In the classroom, archaeologists often define artifacts as anything made or modified by humans; so technically the bottle is an artifact. In the field, the important issue is whether an object has archaeological or historical value. The basic criterion for defining artifacts in this practical sense is age, and in the United States this standard is embodied in two federal statutes. The National Historic Preservation Act, implemented through the National Register of Historic Places, specifies that, to be considered an artifact, an item generally must be more than fifty years old. Under the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, the minimum age is one hundred years. Of course, U.S. statutes have no legal standing in Mexico, but Mexican federal law, applied through INAH, recognizes a similar age criterion by defining historical artifacts as objects that postdate the European entrada and predate 1900. By these measures, the bottle is not an artifact—case closed. But age may not be the only consideration. The U.S. statutes recognize that objects younger than the minimum age can and should be considered artifacts if they bear special historical significance, and this can apply to objects associated with



ILL. 3. THE BOTTLE POSING AS AN ARTIFACT, DECEMBER 2008

The bottle is 17.2 cm tall, 8.2 cm wide, and 3.4 cm thick.

(*Photograph courtesy Thomas Bowen*)

important people or events. Although Mexican law does not explicitly provide for similar exceptions, I have been told that such associational criteria are sometimes applied. So although the bottle would be defined as trash according to the legally recognized age criteria, we need to ask whether it has associations that would make it an exceptional item. Specifically, could the bottle have belonged to somebody of historical importance?

The roster of people who camped at Ike's airstrip is short. It includes Ike himself, herpetologist Charlie Sylber and his field assistants, Ike's son and daughter-in-law Dave Russell and Susan Randolph, an expatriate friend of theirs, the twelve-year-old son of Russell family friends, the two or three Mexican men who helped clear the airstrip, and three Mexican fishermen. Visitors who used the airstrip also included Edward Abbey and his companions—a talented group consisting of writer Doug Peacock, painter Sam Scott, photographers Terry Moore and

Ken Petsch, and river guide Clair Quist.

Since Ike did not drink alcohol, the bottle was presumably not his. Charlie is certain that neither he nor any of his assistants brought alcohol on their trips. Susan and Dave are certain it was not theirs and consider it highly unlikely their expatriate friend brought it. It surely did not belong to the twelve-year-old boy, and if the Mexicans brought alcohol, they presumably would have brought Mexican liquor in a Mexican-made bottle. That means the bottle is almost certainly from Abbey's group. Indeed, there is written, oral, and photographic testimony that he and his companions consumed alcohol during their stay.

But exactly whose bottle was it? Abbey and his friends passed a bottle of rum around the campfire in the evenings, but the consensus today is that it must have been a much larger bottle than the one we found—a half pint of rum shared among six thirsty men would barely have lasted a single round. Of course, somebody might have brought a half pint as a personal stash, to be consumed in private, but there is no longer any way to determine this. Abbey himself died in 1989, and none of the other members of the group recalls specific details of their evening refreshments.

A clue to the bottle's ownership may lie in the fact that Abbey and Quist spent two days on the island by themselves before the others arrived. Abbey wrote that during their first night in camp, he and Quist drank Ronrico 151-proof rum. Although he did not give a reason for bringing such high-octane alcohol, a half-pint bottle of it would have provided the greatest kick for the least weight. This is consistent with Ike's fastidious concern with minimizing weight in his airplane, which he clearly communicated to Abbey. Moreover, the bottle's location, seemingly tucked purposefully against a boulder, is consistent with Abbey's anarchical penchant for intentional littering.

Thus, the bottle was almost certainly brought by somebody in Abbey's group, and very likely by Abbey himself. But whoever the actual owner was, the question is whether the bottle acquires historical significance through its association with Abbey. That in turn depends on whether Abbey himself qualifies as a historically significant figure.

Whether Abbey ranks among the literary giants of his time can probably be debated, but there is no doubt about his importance to the environmental movement of the late twentieth century. The semiautobiographical essays of *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968) inspired a whole generation with its celebration of the value and beauty of the natural environment, and his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) presented the case for direct action against entrenched interests that would defile nature for crass profit. For many, Abbey was a culture hero, and his books are widely considered classics of environmental literature. Twenty years after his death, he and his ideals still have a large and dedicated following. Does this make Abbey a figure of sufficient importance to transform objects associated with him—such as the bottle—into historical artifacts? And if so, would this extend to Mexico, where Abbey is largely unknown? Does national provenience of a found object make a difference in its



ILL. 4. EDWARD ABBEY ON ISLA ANGEL DE LA GUARDA, FEBRUARY 1977
(*Photograph courtesy Terrence Moore*)

status? Can an item be trash on one side of the border and an artifact on the other?

Many historians and archaeologists maintain that the importance of an individual as a historic figure is not in itself sufficient to determine the artifactual status of an object associated with that person. To have historical value, the object should be directly linked with the activities for which the person is considered important, or be something that played a major role in shaping that individual's life. Judged by these standards, it would be hard to consider the bottle a historical artifact. Abbey was known to be fond of a good nip, and this was certainly not the only liquor bottle in his life. There is no reason to think that it was instrumental in developing his environmental philosophy or that it provided him with a life-altering experience.

Other scholars contend that the important issue is not merely whether an object qualifies as a historical artifact, but whether it has significant research value or interpretive value for the public. Although it is hard to imagine that the bottle has any real research value, one institution has expressed interest in exhibiting it in a public display of Abbey materials. Its suitability for display suggests that the bottle has at least limited historical significance.

Ownership

If we assume for the sake of argument that the bottle was Abbey's, he became the owner when he purchased it and was the owner when he brought it to the island. But did ownership change after the bottle was emptied and placed against the boulder and Abbey himself had left the island? If the bottle qualifies as a historical artifact, the answer is simple—under Mexican law the federal government, acting through INAH, would have become the legal owner because all antiquities and historical artifacts in Mexico are the property of the federal government.

But what if Abbey did not intentionally dispose of the empty bottle, but *lost* it? Saving an empty bottle is not a farfetched idea—for years Ike kept an old Gallo wine bottle in his airplane as a container for drinking water because the cap didn't leak and the green glass kept the water from going bad. Does discarding an object imply voluntary relinquishing of ownership, whereas losing it does not? Do we not believe that a person who finds a lost wedding ring is obliged to return it to "the rightful owner"? In practice, of course, the idea of prolonged ownership of lost items cannot be extended indefinitely; otherwise the normal archaeological practice of collecting prehistoric artifacts

for study would have to be considered a form of theft from the long-deceased owners. Or can it? Theft is precisely how some Native American groups regard archaeological field work.

And if the bottle is merely trash, not a historical artifact, who owns it? How long should the person who left it be considered the owner and thereby held responsible for littering? If the person who left it retains sufficient ownership to be accountable for littering, does INAH, Islas, or any other agency or person—including me—have the right to remove it, or is that theft too? And if removing it is theft, who is the victim—Abbey, INAH, Islas?

Disposition

Possession is not the same as ownership, as the laws that apply to stolen property amply demonstrate. Whether or not I am the legitimate owner of the bottle, I am currently in possession of it, and possession confers the power, if not the right, of disposition. Although I certainly can dispose of it however I wish, my concern is how I *should* dispose of it. I have put this question to about a dozen anthropologists and historians and they have proposed a variety of possible solutions.

Turn it over to the Mexican government. Obvious as it seems, in fact this is not an option. As for INAH, it is the responsibility of the regional office with jurisdiction over the island to provide the definitive ruling on the bottle's status. However, despite repeated inquiries by letter and email, I was unable to get any response from that office. The staff of a neighboring regional office was more accommodating. They told me unequivocally that the bottle is neither old enough, nor Abbey famous enough in Mexico, to consider it a historical artifact, and consequently they have no interest in it.

The director of the Islas regional office agreed with INAH that Abbey is not sufficiently important in Mexico to curate items once associated with him. His opinion is that the bottle is worthless and should be removed from the island and discarded. He underscored his position by pointing out that, as part of their massive island cleanup program, Islas people removed trash left on another island by a nationally famous and much-revered Mexican biologist and conservationist. As far as Islas is concerned, even the one-meter-square sampling plots that scientists have marked with stones on several islands are not a legitimate part of island history but eyesores that should be dismantled. In short, the Mexican government considers the bottle trash and doesn't want it.

Give it to Abbey's heirs or friends. This option is marginal at best. Abbey's widow regards the bottle as trash and doesn't want it, and most of those who were with Abbey on the island share that view. The one individual who did express mild interest in it thinks it properly belongs with Abbey's papers.

Donate it. The majority opinion is that the bottle should be given to the institution with the most important collection of Abbey papers. Indeed, that institution has expressed mild interest in having the bottle. However, as one colleague pointed out, donation raises an ethical dilemma. Offering the bottle to an institution implies that I believe it has historical value, and if I believe that, then I must also believe that collecting it constituted unauthorized removal of an artifact and that bringing it into the United States was an act of smuggling. Given that reasoning, how in good conscience can I ask any institution to accept what I tacitly consider an illicit artifact? Or do my personal beliefs, tacit or not, matter?

Repatriate it. This solution can be ruled out purely on practical grounds. From my shelf to Abbey's camp is a fifteen-hundred-mile drive (no air service available) followed by a five-hour voyage in a small open motorboat—weather permitting. More importantly, one might ask if tucking the bottle back under its boulder would really turn back the clock. Once an artifact has been removed and handled, can repatriation ever fully restore the site it came from to its original condition? And since both INAH and Islas regard the bottle as trash, wouldn't repatriation be tantamount to littering and hence a violation of my agreements with those agencies?

Toss it. Of the dozen or so anthropologists and historians I consulted—all of them familiar with Abbey and his writing—about half regard the bottle as a historical artifact and the others consider it trash. If I were to side with the trash contingent, discarding the bottle would be a reasonable solution and by far the simplest. Or would it? When I asked whether I should just toss it, even some of those who regard the bottle as trash responded, with considerable alarm, "Oh no, don't do *that!*" So even as trash the bottle evokes strong emotions, and the simplest solution is apparently not all that simple.

Keep it indefinitely. The bottle takes up very little space on my shelf, so there is no immediate need to decide its fate. But that won't last forever. When I die, it will fall to my heirs to decide what to do with it. In other words, keeping it is just a way of passing the buck.

Redefine it. One colleague regards the bottle as neither artifact nor trash, but as an example of "memorabilia." He notes that his museum has informally adopted the concept of memorabilia as a way of dealing with just this kind

of object, and that this concept could be very useful to the archaeological and historical communities generally. To provide guidance in the field, however, any new category such as this would have to be formally defined and integrated into the existing legal and ethical framework in both the United States and Mexico, and this would take time. Meanwhile, had the authorities caught me with the bottle and pressed charges for artifact theft, my assertion that it is really just a memorabilium (unfortunate word, that) would not have got me out of jail.

Auction it on eBay. It's a kick to speculate about how much a liquor bottle that probably belonged to Abbey would fetch on the open market. Playing devil's advocate, I asked several colleagues whether this was a reasonable "solution." Most reacted in the same way as the person who laughed nervously and said, "You're joking, aren't you?" Indeed I was, because I have no intention of selling it in any forum. Like virtually all my colleagues, I regard selling artifacts, or anything that could be construed as an artifact, as a violation of professional ethics. Yet the question had a serious purpose—to probe whether it is the object or the seller that carries the ethical baggage that virtually all of us recognize. Would any of us object if the bottle had been found and offered for sale by someone other than a historian or an anthropologist?

Although the consensus is that selling the bottle is a bad idea, the reasoning behind that judgment turned out to be surprisingly varied. One person noted that selling it, like donating it, would be an implicit assertion on my part that it has historical value and hence would make me ethically, if not legally, culpable for collecting it. Another cautioned that U.S. federal agents patrolling the internet might very well see it as a legal matter, landing me in big trouble. But one colleague pointed out that all sorts of junk is sold on eBay. My offering the bottle for sale, he maintained, does not imply that I think it has historical value; merely that I think someone might want it badly enough, for whatever reason, to actually buy it. On the other hand, another person argued that, trash or not, selling items from cultural sites is unethical because it encourages trafficking in illicit artifacts. Another individual opposed any sale for personal gain, but did not entirely rule out the eBay "option" if profits were channeled to a nonprofit conservation group. And one person (facetiously?) recommended selling the bottle without delay while there are still plenty of Abbey fans to buy it! In fact, as he shrewdly noted, putting it up for auction on eBay might actually provide an effective test of Abbey's historical significance.

Enjoy it. One person, an ethnohistorian who knew Abbey and most of the other characters in this tale personally, offered what may be the wisest council of all:

“If you want to honor Abbey’s memory,” he advised, “fill the bottle with booze and have a drink. Or two. Or more.” And then when the time comes, “Just toss the bottle anywhere. That’s what Abbey would have done. With relish.”

Conclusion

For the time being, the bottle still stands on my shelf. Whether artifact, trash, or memorabilium, it served its purpose well. By collecting it, the manufacturer was unequivocally identified as the Owens-Illinois Glass Company of Ohio and the date of manufacture as 1976—just right for Ike’s landing strip and Abbey’s camp. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine whether it contained Ronrico 151-proof rum, which would have been about as close to verification of Abbey’s ownership as one could possibly hope for.

The irony of this saga is that in the end the bottle was not necessary at all because the site was later positively identified as Ike’s landing strip and Abbey’s camp from Terry Moore’s photos of the trip. And the ultimate disposition of the bottle is not really very important either, but the conundrum it illustrates—the need to make irreversible decisions in the field under ambiguous circumstances—is. For all the statutes, professional guidelines, and informal rules of thumb, field work in archaeology and history relies on decisions of the individual practitioner, and sometimes you just have to wing it.

Acknowledgements and Sources

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