

Bottles on the Border:

The History and Bottles of the Soft Drink Industry

in El Paso, Texas, 1881-2000



© Bill Lockhart 2010

[Revised Edition – Originally Published Online in 2000]

Chapter 9a

Chapter 9a

Francisco Dominguez & Co. And the Union Bottling Works

Constantino P. “Gus” Nicholson founded bottling plants in Mexico in the nineteenth century and eventually made his way to El Paso. Once in the Border City, he bought the Union Bottling Works, but eventually abandoned the enterprise to form the Nicholson Bottling Works in 1925.

Francisco Dominguez & Co. (1915)

History

Francisco B. Dominguez entered the soda bottling business as Francisco Dominguez & Co. ca. 1915. He changed the name to the Union Bottling Works by following year. The business was located at 409 S. Virginia St., but virtually nothing else is known about it (EPCD 1915).

Union Bottling Works (1916-1935)

History

Constantino P. “Gus” Nicholson

Born in Greece about 1870, Gus Nicholson led a colorful life prior to buying the Union Bottling Works. As a young man, with his wife, Anna, he immigrated to Mexico, where he opened a candy factory and soda water bottling plant in Allende, Coahuilla. Nicholson employed over a hundred girls to manufacture and pack the candy which was then delivered by mule on a route that took from two to three weeks – if all went well. Twice, during his stay in Mexico, Nicholson was ruined by revolutionary activities. In both cases, one of the competing factions took all his mules and supplies.

One time, a group of about fifty revolutionaries, including women and children, were fleeing government troops and came to Nicholson’s plant. They told him that pursuing soldiers intended to kill them all, women and children included. Nicholson concealed the group among

his large hay bales and, when the soldiers arrived, invited them to search his premises. Finding no one but Gus and his employees, the soldiers left to continue their search, and Nicholson fed the revolutionaries before sending them on their way.¹

The loss of a second business was enough for Nicholson. In 1911, he packed up his family and returned to Greece. During their stay, a severe earthquake devastated their home in 1913, collapsing almost half of it into rubble. Nicholson's son, George, asleep in his crib at the beginning of the quake, was catapulted from the second story hallway into the street but remained uninjured. Although the rest of the family was also unhurt, Nicholson moved again, this time to the United States. The family name was originally Nicolopolos, but the immigration agents convinced Gus to "Americanize" his last name to Nicholson when the family arrived in New York in 1916.² The family eventually settled in an almost entirely earthquake-free area – El Paso, Texas.

Union Bottling Works

As noted above, Francisco B. Dominguez had renamed his business as the Union Bottling Works in 1916. The plant remained at the 409 S. Virginia St. location, and Dominguez sold it to Joe Salcido in 1918. Gus Nicholson purchased the business from Salcido the following year. Although Nicholson was apparently tired of the candy business, he bottled a variety of flavors, all under the Union house brand name, and, with the onset of Prohibition, acted as a wholesale outlet for near-beers, such as NIB. Nicholson delivered his products in a horse-drawn wagon loaded with fifteen to twenty cases at a time, usually with the assistance of a hired helper. Aside from temporary laborers, Nicholson worked the business alone until 1921 when he took on John Beys as a partner (EPCD 1916-1935; Anonymous 2003).

¹ Unless otherwise cited, the information for this section came from a series of interviews with Alkividas (Alkie) Nicholson in November/December 1995. It is notable that documentary evidence, when available, confirms Nicholson's memory for both events and dates.

² Melissa Nicholson places the name change in 1925, when Nicholson received his U. S. citizenship.

The Beys Brothers

Andrew, John, and Samuel Beys arrived in El Paso about 1918 and began working – John at Lynchville (a lunch establishment) and the other two brothers at the Orndorff Café. By 1920, Andrew had opened the American Candy Kitchen but the enterprise was short-lived. The following year, Andrew and Samuel opened the Golden Gate Café and the U&I Quick Lunch, while John became involved with Nicholson. The Golden Gate soon faded into history, and the brothers changed the name of their remaining operation to the U&I Café. In 1930, Samuel ran the brothers' newest enterprise, the Golden State Café (Figure 9-1), while Andrew remained in charge of U&I (EPCD 1918-1931).

The Golden State Café advertised the return of beer on September 15, 1933, the first day alcohol could be legally served in El Paso, with an ad that bragged, “A Dream Come True!” The ad continued, “Ready to serve you your favorite beer with your food! Dine here in an atmosphere of refinement and cleanliness—you’ll like our nicely prepared lunch and dinner suggestions” (EPT 9/15/1933). The Golden State, along with the Union Café (possibly the U & I Café) were listed among the places in El Paso that served the new Harry Michell’s Special Lager Beer in 1934 (EPT 11/21/1934).



Figure 9-1 – Matchbook advertising the Golden State Café

The Beys Brothers at the Union Bottling Works

Nicholson and John Beys eventually reached a point of irreconcilable differences, and Nicholson offered his partner the choice of buying the Nicholson share of the venture or selling the Beys interest. Beys elected to buy Nicholson’s portion, and the two parted company in 1925. At some point, the brothers formed Beys Brothers & Co. with Union Bottling Works and their restaurant enterprises as subsidiaries. The 1927 Sanborn Fire Insurance map shows a somewhat unusual circumstance connected with the Union Bottling Works. The bottling plant is located on the ground floor of the building with the Masonic Hall on the second and third floors above it (Figures 9-2 & 9-3).

In 1931, John only employed one worker in the Union Bottling Works plant with an additional laborer during the peak months of July and August. Two one-ton capacity trucks actually distributed the finished products, delivering a total of 12,364 cases of Union soda in six-and-one-half-ounce bottles during the year. Union sodas sold for 65¢ per case, wholesale. Workers at Union labored ten hours a day during a six-day work week, although the week was reduced to five days during the coldest months of the year (EPCD 1935; United States Census of Manufactures, 1931).

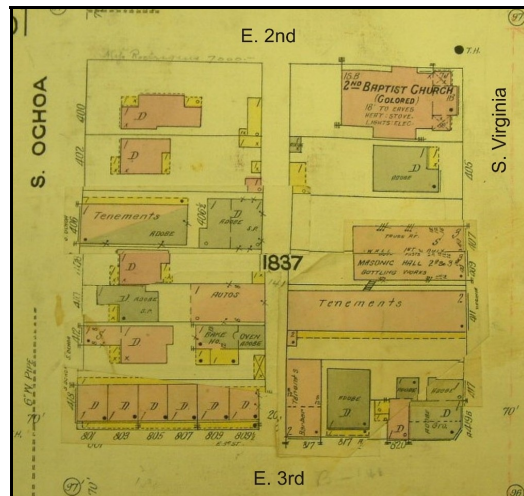


Figure 9-2 – Union Bottling Works (1927 Sanborn map)

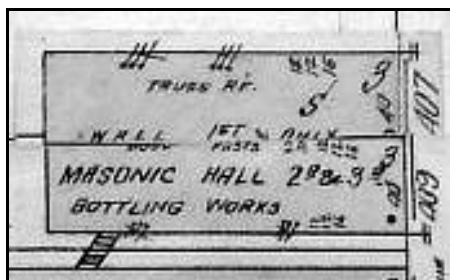


Figure 9-3 – Union Bottling Works – close-up (1927 Sanborn map)

John Beys also applied for a license to sell beer from Union Bottling Works in 1933 at the end of Prohibition. His application was initially withheld because the works was within 300 feet of a church, but it was finally released by Judge Joseph McGill on September 14 because “selling beer was not the principal business of the establishment” (EPT 9/15/1933). Beys continued to operate the Union Bottling Works until its dissolution (along with the U & I Café) in 1935 (probably due to the Great Depression). At that time, he joined his brothers at the Golden State Café.

Other Beys Business

In 1941, Andrew opened the Best Cafe, with the motto, “It’s not only Good, It’s the Best” (EPCD 1944). Although John tried his luck with Beys Liquor Store in 1942, it soon collapsed, and he rejoined his brothers in the restaurant business. John retired for a while but reopened Beys Liquor Store for a few years in 1949. Andrew had closed the Best Café the year before and opened a new one, the Rock Hut Café, in 1949. Samuel died in 1950, but his wife, Helen, continued to run the Golden State Café which by now also included a hotel. Although John went back into retirement, Andrew remained in the café business until 1957. After that year, neither of the brothers was listed in city directories (EPCD 1931-1957).

Bottles and Artifacts

Francisco Dominguez & Co.

Dominguez may have used a generic bottle with a paper label, but I have found none.

Union Bottling Works

The earliest Union Bottling Works containers may not have survived. It is possible that the first three owners used generic bottles with paper labels, one of the major trends in soft drink bottles during the ca. 1916-1928 period. However, the company used at least three different configurations for their embossed containers during the nineteen years they were in business, probably all after 1925, when Nicholson left the firm. The earlier, shorter bottle used by Beys was somewhat similar to the style that Nicholson adopted as his earliest Nicholson Brand container, although that may only reflect the growing trend toward specialty or proprietary bottles.

Method of Manufacture: Machine

Color: Colorless

Size (in cm.): 19.4 (h); 5.9 (d)

Primary Labeling Style: Embossed

Finish: Crown

Capacity: 6.5 oz.

Overall Bottle Design: Cylindrical at heel, shoulder, and neck but divided into four vertical panels at the body and just above shoulder. The body and neck panels were further subdivided to form a total of eight vertical panels extending around the body.

Front Description

Body: Panels were embossed, PROPERTY OF / UNION / BOTTLING WORKS / 409 SO. VIRGINIA ST. / EL PASO / TEXAS / CONTENTS / 6½ FL. OZS.

Back Description

Body: See front

Heel: Bare

Base: Embossed - (star) 3 RIVERS (star)

Manufacturer: Three Rivers Glass Company (1925-1937)

Dating: [ca. 1925-ca. 1930] Although the container made by Three Rivers could not have been manufactured prior to 1925, bottles of this style may have only been used during the 1919-1925 period when Nicholson owned Union Bottling Works. Texas Bottling Works used similar containers (with no manufacturer's mark) from 1924-1934 (see the section on El Paso's small bottlers).

Collection(s): Mike Morrison Collection; Richard Chavez collection; author's collection.

Variations:

I have only discovered a single slight variation of this bottle (Figure 9-4), and it differs only in heel and base markings. Although the variation has no manufacturer's mark, the heel is embossed 1148 28, almost certainly a model code and date code for 1928. The base has no embossing. A final interesting feature is that the word "UNION" is in a larger, serif font (all other lettering is sans serif) with what appear to be four smaller letters peened out underneath (Figure 9-5). I have been unable to decipher the letters, but the word may be "UNION" in smaller letter of may have been a four-letter misspelling of the name. These containers were used at least during the ca. 1925-1928 period.



Figure 9-5 – Closeup of peened-out letters on Union label

At some point, probably ca. 1930, Beys replaced the short bottle with a taller, thinner one (Figure 9-6).

Method of Manufacture: Machine

Color: Colorless

Size (in cm.): 23.5 (h); 5.8 (d)

Primary Labeling Style: Embossed

Finish: Crown



Figure 9-4 – Union Bottling Works bottle – 6 ½ ounce

Capacity: 7 oz.

Overall Bottle Design: Cylindrical with eight embossed vertical ribs extending from heel to neck, creating eight panels that were embossed with evenly-spaced stippling to form a minute checkerboard effect

Front Description

Body: A countersunk horizontal rectangle on the body front was embossed, UNION / BTG. WORKS

Heel: Embossed - (star) 3 RIVERS (star)

Back Description

Body: No labeling

Base: Embossed - EL PASO / 7 OZ. / TEXAS

Manufacturer: Three Rivers Glass Company (1925-1937)

Dating: [1930s] Bottles of this type were almost certainly used later than the shorter bottles. First use may have begun as early as 1929. This style may only have been ordered once. In 20 years of collecting and researching El Paso bottles, I have only seen a single example.

An almost identical bottle was also made by the Three Rivers Glass Co. for the Dr. Pepper Bottling Co. at Paris, Texas (Smith 1989:50). The photo appears to show this bottle without the countersunk label. The countersunk label on the Union bottle is somewhat unique, and Three Rivers probably only offered it for a short period. Although the recessed labeling area formed an unusual and eye-catching bottle, the squared section protruding inside the container was almost certainly a dirt catcher and created a virtually impossible cleaning condition. Beys was probably happy when the supply was exhausted, and he could return to the use of more normal bottles.

Collection(s): Mike Morrison Collection.

Variations:

A variation was only slightly smaller (23.3 cm. in height and 5.5 cm. in diameter) but claimed the same capacity. The overall shape was identical, including ribs and checkering. The most notable difference was labeling area, which was a diagonal parallelogram embossed “UNION / BOTTLING WORKS / EL PASO TEXAS” (Figure 9-7) In contrast with the earlier bottle, the label was not countersunk.

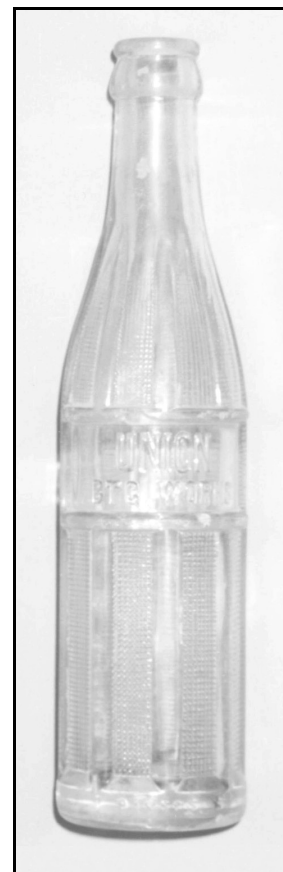


Figure 9-6 – Union Bottling Works bottle – 7 ounce (Mike Morrison Collection)

The heel of the bottle was bare, and the base was embossed “9 I-in-an-oval-superimposed-on-a-diamond 2 / 7 - OZ. CAP. / 1, the manufacturer’s mark used by the Owens-Illinois Glass Co. between 1929 and 1954. The second variation was likely used later; the individual bottle was manufactured in 1932. Because Union was a small firm, this second order of bottles was probably used during the final four years of production. Beys probably ceased operations when he ran out of bottles. Like the countersunk variation, I have only seen one of these. It resides in my collection as of 2010.

Other Beverages Distributed by Union

At this point, I have only discovered a single other beverage carried by the Union Bottling Works. Union was primarily in business was during Prohibition. It is therefore, not surprising that the firm joined the veritable stampede to cereal beverages or near-beers.

NIB

By at least July 13, 1920, Union was distributing NIB, a near-beer. The initials, NIB, were the abbreviation for “Non-Intoxicating Beverage.” An advertisement in the *El Paso Herald Post* (Figure 9-8) showed NIB as packaged in a colorless, export-style beer bottle with a paper label. Although colors cannot be discerned from the ad, the label had downwardly-coursing stripes within a dotted-line border.

The label announced: NON-INTOXICATING BEVERAGE (block) / NIB (script) / SERVE COLD / Tennessee (script) BEVERAGE CO (upwardly slanted block) MEMPHIS, TENN. (underlined block) / CONTAINS [?] LESS THAN 1/2 OF 1% ALCOHOL BY VOLUME. To the right of the upper part of BEVERAGE CO, the label read, CONTENTS / 12 FL. OZ. NIB was manufactured by Tennessee Beverage Co., Memphis, Tennessee (EHP 7/13/1920 4:6 – also see the label in Kay 2007:118). The diagonal stripes were an alternating green and light gold (Kenn Flemmons 2002 – Figure 9-9).

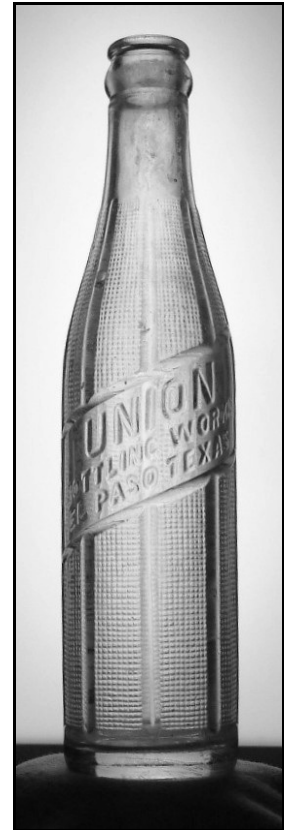


Figure 9-7 – Union Bottling Works bottle – 7 ounce variation

While its history is somewhat sketchy, the Tennessee Beverage Company's lifespan ran from March 1917 until December 15, 1928. It did continue under a different corporate structure with the same name after December 1928 but it was pretty much a shell corporation. The company only existed because Prohibition had driven the Tennessee Brewing Co. out of business. The new company used the same plant, owners, workers, etc.; they just produced a different product (Kenn Flemmons 2002). This follows the same pattern set by the El Paso Brewery and its subsidiary, Tristate Beverage Co. The brewery tried to survive Prohibition by brewing near-beers and bottling sodas (also see Goldcrest below).

Tennessee Brewing Co. stopped brewing Goldcrest Beer in 1913 and began the production of its two main non-alcoholic beverages, NIB and Goldcrest as well as Goldcrest Pure Barley Malt Syrup. In addition, the plant produced soft drinks, including root beer and Canada Dry Ginger Ale. Sales territories spread as far as Oklahoma and Western Texas. By June 1933, with the repeal of Prohibition, the brewery returned to making beer. The non-alcoholic beverages days were at an end (Flemmons 2003:31-38).



Figure 9-8 – Advertisement for NIB (*El Paso Herald Post* 7/13/1920)



Figure 9-9 – NIB sign (courtesy of Kenn Flemmons)

