

Bottles on the Border:

The History and Bottles of the Soft Drink Industry

in El Paso, Texas, 1881-2000



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Dedication

I wish to dedicate this, my first book, to Dr. David L. Carmichael, of The University of Texas at El Paso for igniting the spark that caused me to become an archaeologist and to Dr. John A. Peterson (also of UTEP) for providing the impetus that lured me into historical archaeology and the study of bottles.

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Original Foreword

Archaeologists, bottle collectors, and historians are all interested in soda bottlers and the containers in which they bottled their products. Although the three groups have overlapping interests, their needs rarely coincide. Historians rarely show more than passing interest in the containers, themselves, although they are generally interested in the role the bottles, bottlers, and the bottling industry play in the overall history of a city, a nation, and the world. Bottle collectors are interested in the bottles, themselves, and consider the history of an individual bottle or the bottler to be of interest but less vital than possession of an item, itself. Of greater importance is the value and desirability of each container. The provenience or specific location in which a bottle was found is usually of little or no interest.

A historical archaeologist, on the other hand, is interested in artifacts – in this case, ones made of glass – as a means of information. The provenience is frequently as important as the glass container, itself. As such, a container fragment can be as valuable to archaeologists as the perfect specimen is to the collector. Although we produce endless reams of dry descriptions of artifacts, broken and complete, the focus is not on the artifact itself, but, as expressed so aptly by one researcher, “Just What Can a 19th Century Bottle Tell Us?” (Staski 1984). Our desire is to verify history or to correct it. Like the historians, we grapple for the deeper meaning of the overall picture. But we frequently seek that picture from the viewpoint of the common woman or man, the ones whose lives are frequently ignored by the overview expressed in the textbooks.

The pursuit of the overview also tends to overlook the reality that the larger picture is actually a mosaic composed of a blending of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of microcosmic views of the lives of individuals. The glory usually goes to the one who pastes together these smaller clues to create the larger picture. But the lesser image is equally important. Views of the region, the city, the individual building, and the individual person must also be expressed.

This book is dedicated to filling the needs of the working historical archaeologist – the fieldworker and the analyst. Typically, while analyzing excavated glass artifacts, an archaeologist turns to other archaeological reports, collector’s literature, or local sources (e.g. city directories, newspapers) to identify and date bottles and bottle fragments that represent tiny pieces in the mosaic. Reference works to guide in identifying and dating specific artifacts are few and often difficult to obtain. With notable exceptions, books and articles by bottle collectors, while helpful, rarely contain all the information required by the archaeologist. Gordon Pollard’s excellent reference work for Plattsburgh, New York (Pollard 1993), is one of the few

identification guides written by an archaeologist. The normal pathway for information is for the researcher to search laboriously through directories, censuses, and other sources in an attempt to date and identify a single bottle type from a single company.

My intention has been to add one more piece to the mosaic – to set forth a detailed identification (along with a history) of soda and mineral water bottles from El Paso, Texas, that will be specifically useful to all archaeologists who discover such bottles in their excavations. I believe that similar volumes should be compiled by archaeologists in every city throughout the United States (e.g. Pollard’s work) to provide detailed working references for the future. Nor should the study be limited to soft drinks, although such bottles (or identifiable fragments thereof) are common in both urban and rural historical excavations. With the completion of this volume, I plan to research milk bottles, beer bottles, and other glass containers indigenous to El Paso and Southern New Mexico.

Although my efforts are aimed primarily at archaeologists, I hope this work will be useful to historians and bottle collectors as well. My descriptions are occasionally long and detailed to enable identification *all* segments of a bottle. Where the collector only deals with complete containers, the archaeologist usually only finds only a fragment, often the base or part of the body with just enough of an embossed or enameled label to spark curiosity while defying identification. A single colorless body fragment with embossed lettering that reads “El Paso - Phoenix” can be identified as a Nehi bottle from the Nehi Bottling Company of El Paso and dated 1931-1941. A bottle base embossed with the large initials, J.U. can only have belonged to José Urrutia and his Lone Star Bottling Works, operated from 1918 to 1934. Small scraps that formerly were meaningless can now provide information and disclose other tiny clues.

During the research process, I have been repeatedly blessed with delightful serendipity. As I discussed my soda history project with University of Texas at El Paso student John Seebach, he mentioned that he had dated a young lady whose grandfather owned the Nicholson Bottling Works. He did not know how to contact the grandfather but told me where to find the father, Andrew Nicholson, Sr. Andy, an El Paso jeweler, allowed me to copy a picture of Nicholson Bottling Works taken in 1927, loaned me a case of Nicholson bottles to photograph, and introduced me to his father. Andy’s father, Alkie Nicholson, had been raised in the soda business by his father, Constantino “Gus” Nicholson, former owner of the Union Bottling Works and founder of the Nicholson Bottling Works. Alkie was a veritable fountain of information. His memories included such first-hand details as stirring the soda vats with a paddle prior to the introduction of mixing machines to Nicholson’s and other inside information about the daily

operation of a Prohibition- and Depression-era bottler – details not to be found in the usual sources of information.

Another interesting incident concerned a connection between a bottle collector and a former bottler. Richard “Rick” Chávez graciously allowed me to copy ads and photographs from his collection including a 1939 ad for Seven-Up that featured an infant bracing himself against a stool that supported a bottle of Seven-Up. The sponsor of the ad was the Seven-Up Bottling Co. of El Paso. On March 7, 1996, I interviewed Al Randle, Jr., whose father opened the original Seven-Up franchise in El Paso. Al and I warmed to each other quickly, and I soon became immersed in Al’s recitation of his days as a Seven-Up bottler (see the section on Seven-Up Bottling Co.). Al had finished his story, and we were sharing a little small-talk prior to leaving, when his face lit up in a big smile. He almost effervesced with memory as he exclaimed, “Oh yeah! I just remembered another thing you may be interested in. When I was one year old, just after my first birthday, I was playing around my mother’s dressing table in her room. There was a bottle of Seven-Up sitting on the stool, and I had pulled myself up so I was standing beside it . . .” I gave Al a photocopy of the ad, reuniting him with his former self of 57 years in the past.

And so, to anyone with an interest in soda bottles, glass artifacts, bottlers, or El Paso, I extend my wish that some part of this book will be useful to you in your work, your hobby, or your interests. I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed researching and writing it.

2010 Forward

The natural question is: Why update an already popular e-book? The obvious answer, of course, is because I have more information. The more complete answer requires a bit more background.

I never intended to specialize in bottles. In my early life (I'm a recovered alcoholic), I had a pronounced interest in what was *inside* certain bottle types, but I had no interest in the bottles, themselves. Because of my alcoholism, I started almost everything late (except drinking, of course). I entered college the second time (after my initial disaster in 1963) at the age of 44 (I do not count the auto mechanic classes I took in the early 1980s).

Initially, I attended El Paso Community College and received an excellent start at that institution. After the typical major changes, I shifted to the University of Texas at El Paso and almost immediately began as a work study for John Peterson. He put me to work washing and cataloging 379 bottles, excavated by bulldozer from the El Paso Coliseum parking lot. I was really aiming at the unusual combination of sociology and lithics in prehistoric archaeology. My bottle days were over when I became a research assistant on some Folsom-period artifacts – or so I thought.

All was well until I took a Historical Archaeology class (with John, of course) and joined with another student (Wanda Olszewski) to write the report on the Coliseum bottles (the same ones I had washed and cataloged) for my class project. Bottles. Again. With that report successfully accomplished, I was back to prehistoric pursuits, although I was sidetracked into working on an excavation at San Elizario, Texas, where John (again) was attempting to locate the old Presidio walls.

There were two of us named Bill at that dig (the other, Bill Fling, was an adept at faunal materials), and all was going as planned – until someone found a bottle pit. Whomever it was (memory and time have dimmed the name) hollered, “Where’s Bill?” Someone else answered, “Which Bill? Bone Bill? Or Bottle Bill?” The mold was formed (an appropriate metaphor). Wanda Olszewski and I were once more at work on bottles. We wrote an article on the San Elizario beer bottle pit, and Wanda went on to other things. I, however, was hooked.

Then, Bill Lindsey e-mailed me for feedback on his budding Historical Bottle Webpage. Later, we were joined by Carol Serr, then David Whitten. David withdrew after about a year, and

Pete Schulz joined us. We named our little consortium the Bottle Research Group (BRG). We are investigating all aspects of bottle development, but we have especially zeroed in on manufacturer's marks.

Meanwhile, I have continued my local/regional interests. Not only have several new (to me) El Paso bottles appeared, I now know a great deal more about the historical development of the industry, the evolution of bottle machines, bottles in general, and more about the industry in El Paso. I also know more about what to leave out.

The final, very important change is that I have been contacted by the descendants of some of the historical soda bottlers. They have contributed information and photographs that have improved the quality of this work. I am grateful to all who have furnished information.

One of the greatest problems with bottle research is that it is *never* finished. Something new pops up constantly. An eBay seller may offer an El Paso bottle I have never seen; the BRG may discover a new way to tighten dates on a manufacturer's mark – one that will affect an El Paso soda bottle; or I may find another El Paso historical source. The list, of course, can be endless. I hope the new edition is more helpful than the old one. It is certainly more accurate.

Photo Note

Most of the bottle photos were taken by me and are from my collection of El Paso soda bottles. These were taken under varying conditions but are mostly of good quality. Others were taken years ago – some even decades ago – and are of lower quality. Some of these were sent to me by collectors or archaeologists, and some I copied from eBay and other internet sources. My personal photos are not cited, but I have included citations for both photographs I have taken of other collections and of photos sent to me by other individuals. The range of quality, of course, is tremendous. I have used the best photos that were available to me at the time.

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As with most works of this kind, I could not have managed to produce anything like a comprehensive volume without the help of various other people. The list includes museum personnel, librarians, historians, and bottle collectors--a vast array of talent. Of the highest importance, a bouquet of gratitude goes to my wife, Wanda Wakkinen, for listening to endless hours of speculation during the more than six years of research and writing that went into this work and offering helpful suggestions. I love you, Wanda. [I should add that the research continues with new historic and/or empirical information surfacing all the time.]

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