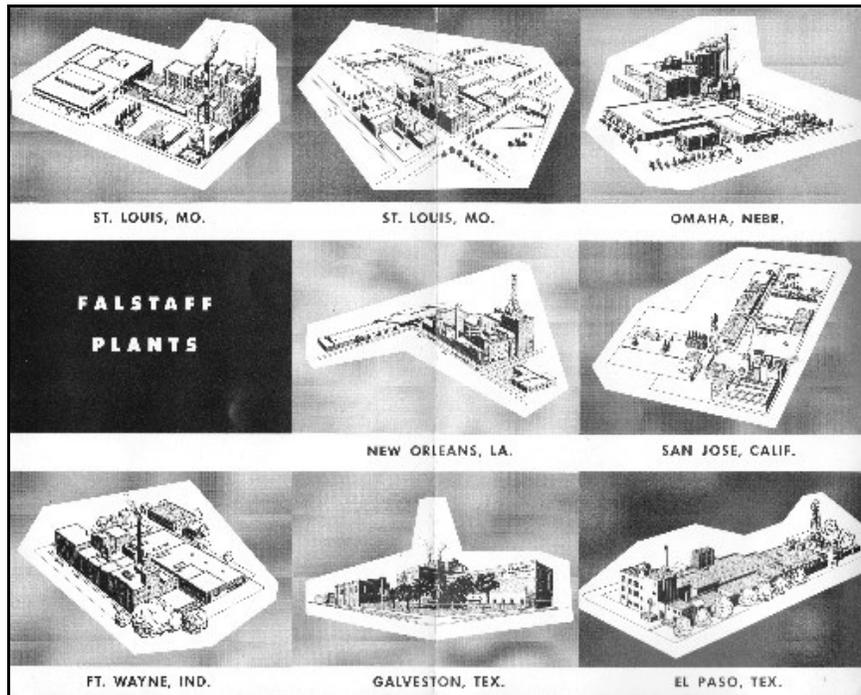


# Breweries and Beer Bottles at El Paso, Texas



Bill Lockhart  
2012

Chapter 8a  
The Falstaff Brewery at El Paso

© Bill Lockhart 2012

## **Chapter 8a**

### **Plant No. 9: The Falstaff Brewery at El Paso**

When Falstaff acquired the former Mitchell Brewery at El Paso, the firm already had a long history behind it. Beginning with the Lemp Brewery at St. Louis, the beer was a successful competitor to the various brands offered by Anheuser-Busch – including the famous Budweiser. Falstaff eventually began branching out to save on transportation costs – including buying the Mitchell Brewery in 1956.

#### **Lemp, Falstaff, and the Greisedieck Family**

##### **The Lemp Brewing Co.**

The Falstaff Brewing Corp. descended from the Lemp Brewery, first founded by Adam Lemp as the Western Brewery at St. Louis, Missouri. Upon Lemp's death, his son, William J. Lemp, built a new brewery, still in St. Louis, in 1864. In 1892, the Western Brewery incorporated to form the William J. Lemp Brewing Co. The company registered the Falstaff trademark (based on Shakespear's heavy-drinking character) in 1903. The brewery closed for Prohibition in 1918 (Falstaff [2002]).

##### **The Greisedieck Family and Falstaff**

Anton Greisedieck opened a brewery in St. Louis in 1870, although it did not seem to be a success. "Papa Joe" Greisedieck instituted the National Brewery in 1891, but it, too, failed. In 1917, the family started the Greisedieck Beverage Co. with Papa Joe as president. This company, too, went into receivership during Prohibition but was reorganized in 1920 as the Falstaff Corp. after purchasing the Falstaff trademark from the Lemp family for \$25,000. The company waited out Prohibition by selling near-beers and soft drinks (Falstaff [2002]). See Kious (2004) for a more complete history of the Griesedieck family.

After Prohibition, the Falstaff Corp. renamed itself as the Falstaff Brewing Corp. and gained Federal Permit Number 1 to resume brewing. Falstaff began expanding almost immediately and bought the Fred Krug Brewing Co. in Omaha, Nebraska, as plant no. 3. The

National Brewing Co. in New Orleans became plant no. 4 in 1936. In 1955, Falstaff bought the Galveston-Houston Breweries in Galveston and, a year later, engulfed the Harry Mitchell Brewing Co. at El Paso (most sources incorrectly date the El Paso purchase at 1955) (Falstaff [2002]).

In 1958, Falstaff sold plant no. 1 in St. Louis. By 1960, the logo was changed to the shield surrounded by four-pointed stars. Despite losing plant no. 1, Falstaff acquired the Narragansett Brewing of Cranston, Rhode Island, in 1965. In January 1968 (often incorrectly stated as 1967), the company closed the El Paso plant which had previously produced cans, returnable bottles, some non-returnables, and keg beer. Falstaff again switched logos in 1969 to a smaller shield with FALSTAFF in large letters underneath (Falstaff [2002]).

After closing more plants in the 1970s, Paul Kalmanovitz gained control of the company and fired most of the corporate employees. In the following two decades, other plants were closed until the Fort Wayne, Indiana, plant was the only one remaining. It, too, closed in 1990, although the Pabst Brewing Co. continued to offer Falstaff from San Antonio and other locations (Falstaff [2002]). For a more complete history see Falstaff Beer History ([2002]).

### **Plant No. 5 at El Paso**

#### **Falstaff Comes to the Border City**

Even though both Van Wieren (1967:367) and Yenne (1986:106) placed the opening of Falstaff in El Paso at 1955, the actual sale did not take place until the following year. On Monday, April 16, 1956, Charles A Kuper, president of the Mitchell Brewing Co. handed the key to Joseph Griesedieck, president of the Falstaff Brewing Co. The ceremony marked the final stage of the purchase of the Mitchell Brewery by Falstaff. In preparation for the sale, the plant had discontinued brewing and packaging Mitchell Beer a few weeks earlier. Griesedieck told the *Times*, “We at Falstaff have demonstrated our belief in the continuing growth and progress of El Paso and the Southwest, and we are pleased to establish our company in this progressive and growth-minded community” (*El Paso Times* 4/17/1956). The Falstaff company claimed June 1956 as the month of the actual opening of their operation (*El Paso Times* 5/17/1957).

The *Times* noted that Falstaff had pioneered the use of multiple plants at separate locations, and the El Paso plant – No. 9 according to Van Wieren (1995:367) – was its most recent acquisition (Figure 8a-1). The home office predicted that actual production would begin in “early summer,” but Falstaff Beer would be shipped in refrigerated cars from Omaha until the local plant was refurbished. El Paso was projected to supply West Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona (*El Paso Times* 1/17/1956).

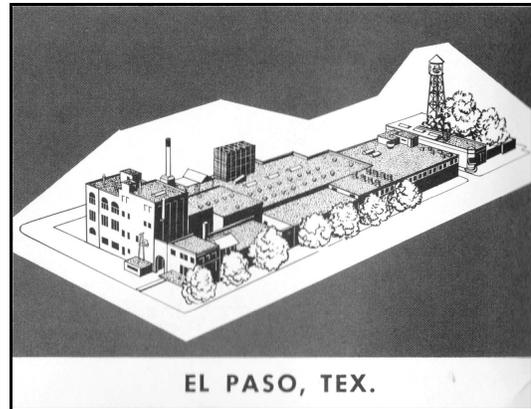


Figure 8a-1 – Falstaff El Paso plant (Falstaff 1958)

It is unclear whether this refurbishing included installing new equipment. Later comments, however, seem to indicate that Falstaff continued to use the old Mitchell machinery. This would have included both the bottle and the can lines, as well as keg operations.

### **Operating the Plant**

Joseph Griesedieck announced in May 1957 that Falstaff had become number one in beer sales in the El Paso area. He claimed that sales had “exceeded expectations.” Griesedieck explained the growth by saying, “El Pasoans and Southern New Mexicans apparently are proud of local industries and patronize them.” Due to the increased sales, he commented, “we have had to add a second shift in our bottling department and a third shift in the brewing department, increasing personnel at the El Paso plant 30 per cent” (*El Paso Times* 5/17/1957). At its peak, the plant employed about 200 workers (*El Paso Times* 5/11/1968).

Griesedieck had one major complaint, however. Texas law required a \$500 tax on the initial brewery that a company opened in the state. The second brewery, however, was taxed at \$10,000, a figure which Griesedieck felt was unreasonably high. Falstaff had earlier opened a brewery in Galveston which made the El Paso branch the company’s second within the state. He expected the law to be revised because, as he said, “Texans are fair-minded people.” He also announced that Falstaff was acquiring additional land adjacent to the El Paso brewery with an eye toward expansion (*El Paso Times* 5/17/1957).

The Falstaff Brewing Corp. was first listed in the El Paso city directories in 1957 with Walter A. Vetter as resident manager, Sherman Mueller as Division Sales manager, and Lawrence R. Dallas as City Sales manager. The address was 3801 Frutas (the same location as both the El Paso Brewery and the Harry Mitchell Brewery). John Bauer, formerly with the now-defunct Mitchell Brewery, remained as Falstaff's brewmaster. J. Robert McDonald was added as division advertising manager the following year (El Paso City Directories 1957-1958).

In 1959, Richard Snyder replaced Mueller as sales manager, and Vernon Koenig became division advertising manager in 1961. Terry O'Connor was noted as city sales manager in 1963, and Henrick C. Gahn became district advertising manager the following year. Only O'Connor, the manager, was listed in 1968. By 1969, Falstaff had disappeared from the El Paso records (El Paso City Directories 1957-1969).

### **The End of Brewing in El Paso**

Despite the fact that the El Paso plant "sold its entire capacity every year, including 1967," Falstaff made the decision to close the local operation (*El Paso Times* 5/11/1968). Joseph Greisedieck announced the closing of the El Paso Falstaff plant on December 2, 1967, because of changing patterns in beer consumption. The plant was mainly used for canned and draft beer, but the "limited capacity" of the local brewery was no longer capable of an "efficient high speed operation." The plant was "the smallest in the company's organization and one that [did] not lend itself readily to expansion" (*El Paso Times* 9/11/1969).

The company's remaining six breweries would take over the extra production load, and Terry O'Conner would remain onsite to continue local distribution of the brew. Walter Vetter, the general manager of the plant, would remain in El Paso to "assist terminating employees in locating other positions" (*El Paso Times* 12/2/1967). Falstaff actually closed the plant in January 1968 (*El Paso Times* 9/11/1969). The days of active brewing at El Paso were over. Both Van Wieren (1967:367) and Yenne (1986:106) placed the closing at 1967 and were probably correct about the cessation of brewing.

## **Postscript: Selling the Property**

On May 10, 1968, the Western Brewing Corp., based in New Orleans, Louisiana, announced their purchase of the Falstaff Brewery property. Fernando A. Cuquet, an New Orleans attorney headed the corporation in El Paso and was backed by Jack Perry, a Houston, Texas, real estate developer, along with William Monteleone, Jr., James and Anthony Moran, George and Alfred Pattison (all of New Orleans) and Frank Lankford of Birmingham, Alabama. The group placed a down payment of \$30,000 on a total price of \$10 million (*El Paso Times* 5/11/1968; 9/11/1969).

The corporation planned to produce a new brand of beer called “Longhorn” to be “marketed over a large area of the Southwest” and intended to make “individual labels . . . available for customers, the first time a retailer can have his own name and brand on bottle or canned beer.” Had the brewery succeeded, this idea would have been the precursor of the more recent micro-breweries. However, the New Orleans syndicate withdrew forfeiting its down payment (*El Paso Times* 5/11/1968; 9/11/1969).

Falstaff again sold the property to Edward C. Hughes and Charles L. Schuman, both residents of El Paso for a sum “in excess of \$400,000” in September 1969. The two formed Central City, Inc. to “develop and operate the brewery property for commercial purposes.” They planned to auction off all remaining brewery equipment on October 31, 1969. The property had become particularly valuable due to its location near Interstate 10, the North-South Freeway, and the Southern Pacific Railway line (with a spur into the brewery, itself). In addition, the area was now the population center of El Paso (*El Paso Times* 9/11/1969). Apparently, however, the group never followed through on its development plans.

The final sale, about 1974, was to C.L. Hill, Inc. One of the principles in Hill’s corporation, John Christie, and his associates, William Kent Elliott and Richard C. Price, had purchased the Grapette Bottling Co. about 1952 and the Empire Products Corp. (which they renamed Empire Bottling Co.) in 1956 (Lockhart 2010).

Bottling property was apparently in their blood. In discussing the brewery, Hill claimed that “the place was a shambles, a complete and total wreck” when the group bought the property. After a remodeling investment of \$100,000, the old brewery building was reopened as a business

complex. In 1977, the structure housed three print shops, a plastic bottle manufacturer, a furniture repair business, and a warehousing firm (*El Paso Times* 6/26/1977).

On a personal note, a friend of mine, Jeff Leach, opened an archaeology office in the old brewery in 1995. At the time, I had moved to Alamogordo, New Mexico – 90 miles north of El Paso – but I was teaching part time at the University of Texas at El Paso. Jeff offered me the use of space in his multi-room office complex, so I would not have to drive the 180-mile round trip each day. Thus, I spent many nights during the spring and summer of 1996 ensconced in the old brewery. I had no idea at the time that the building would play such a prominent part in my future research!

### Sources

Falstaff Brewing Corp.

[1958] *This is Falstaff*. Falstaff Brewing Corp., St. Louis.

[2002] *The Brewing of the Falstaff Brewing Company & Falstaff Beer*. Webpage.

<http://www.jadetech.com/~smallsha/interest.htm>

Kious, Kevin

2004 “GB: Good Beer; Griesedieck Brothers Brewing Company, St. Louis, Missouri.”  
*Beer Cans & Brewery Collectibles* April/May:4-9.

Lockhart, Bill

2010 *Bottles on the Border: The History and Bottles of the Soft Drink Industry in El Paso, Texas, 1881-2000*. Historic Glass Bottle Identification & Information Website: Reference Sources/Bibliography. <http://www.sha.org/bottle/References.htm>