

Three Rivers Glass Co.

Bill Lockhart, Beau Schriever, Bob Brown, Bill Lindsey, and Carol Serr

History

Three Rivers Glass Co., Three Rivers, Texas (1922-1936)

Three Rivers Glass Co., Bastrop, Louisiana (1929-1933)

The Three Rivers Glass Co. incorporated with a capital of \$50,000 under Texas law in May 1922¹ and commenced building its plant the next month. James Knapp was the president with A.H. Morton as vice president, Charles R. Tips as secretary and treasurer, and H.S. Warrick as manager. The plant began production in September but closed in mid-1923 to reopen the following January after a six-month idle period. Charles R. Tips was the man primarily responsible for creating the company. He masterminded the idea of opening a glass factory in Texas and gathered the needed capital to get it started (Roller 1997; Smith 1989:1-7).

In June 1922, the Hartford-Fairmont Co. merged with the Empire Machine Co. to form the Hartford-Empire Co., one of the largest bottle machine developers and manufacturers in the U.S. Three Rivers made all of its glass by hand during the first two years because of problems with the Hartford-Empire company. Along with the Owens Bottle Co., Hartford-Empire controlled virtually all the machine patents in the glass industry. Officers from Three Rivers visited glass factories in Monterrey, Mexico, and discovered that their machinery, *not* controlled by Hartford-Empire, was comparable to those used in the U.S. Tips hired Harold Trembly to come to the U.S. and build the needed machinery for Three Rivers (Smith 1989:10-11).

The firm increased its capital to \$100,000 as the machines went online in early 1925, and the company made all its products, including the newly added soda bottle line by machine at one continuous tank with six rings. By December, the firm doubled its capacity by adding a second 50-ton tank. By this time, D.J. Woodward had become the vice president, and John Finkbiner

¹ Although Roller recorded the month as April, both Toulouse and Smith stated it was May.

had replaced Warrick as plant manager. The factory added a 35-ton furnace in July 1926, increasing its daily capacity to 60,000 milk bottles, increasing its capital to \$150,000 that month (probably to pay for the new furnace). In 1927, Three Rivers made “milk jars and soda water bottles” by machine at one tank with six rings² (*American Glass Review* 1927:145; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* 7/20/1926; Roller 1997; Smith 1989:12-13, 16; Toulouse 1971:495).

In June 1929, Three Rivers took over the plant of the former Bastrop Glass Co. at Bastrop, Louisiana (Roller 1997). In late 1919, the Ouachita Valley Glass Co. contracted to have its factory built at Bastrop with a 35-ton, 12-ring continuous tank. Theodore Shockney was president with James H. Moroney as vice president, G. Hiatt as general manager, Bert E. Noodbury as secretary, Zora C. Cox as treasurer, and Mike Somers as plant manager. In May of 1923, however, the factory was “sold under foreclosure proceedings to representatives of the Frost Johnson Lumber Co.” for \$12,500. Someone (probably by Frost Johnson) organized the Bastrop Glass Co. in May of that year to take over the plant and lit the fires on July 25. In September, however, the Southern Glass Co. of Winchester, Indiana, leased the factory (*Glass Industry* 1923a:100; 1923b:181; *Manufacturer’s Record* 1923:116a; *National Glass Budget* 1919:11). We have not discovered whether Southern Glass continued to operate the plant or only leased it temporarily while its own was built. In any event, the Three Rivers occupation in 1929 is confirmed.

On December 2, 1928, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* announced that Three Rivers had installed a new automatic machine which will increase the capacity of the plant 33 1-3 percent” – turning out 135,000 bottles each day. The factory operated three shifts per day, running 24 hours. Tipps bragged that 1928 was the fifth consecutive year that the plant had doubled its capacity. The factory now made “regular shipments of bottles” to Mexico and South America.³

In the late 1920s, Three Rivers experimented with a novel idea – delivery of their products by truck. Prior to that time, few roads were paved, and the primary delivery mechanism

² It is not clear what happened to the other two tanks.

³ This may have been the machine that led to the demise of the firm. Despite the discrepancies in dates (December 1928 and August 1929, this may have been one of the Hartford-Empire machines – the fastest and best on the market by that time. See below for a discussion about Hartford-Empire’s effect on Three Rivers.

had been the railroad. However, highways in Texas and the South – the main service area of the firm – were increasingly paved by the late 1920s. The firm had increased its capital to \$250,000 by August of 1929, and, by 1930, virtually all of the factory’s deliveries were via truck. This distribution method reduced costs and allowed Three Rivers to undercut the prices of some of their larger competitors (Smith 1989:20-21). An ad from this period bragged that “What Texas Makes – Makes Texas; We are loyal to Texas” (David & Martha Tips – Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Promotional Poster ca. 1930 (David & Martha Tips)

By 1930, the firm used one 35-ton tank and one 45-ton tank, presumably a single tank at each plant, but the position of Three Rivers deteriorated with the onset of the Great Depression. As the Depression deepened during the mid-1930s, the firm’s customers were increasingly unable to pay, and Three Rivers had more trouble paying its debts. Surprisingly, orders remained steady (Roller 1997; Smith 1989:24-25).

Hartford-Empire licensed its machines with a caveat that limited the expansion of each licensee. Licensees were restricted in both the amount of production and specific type of goods produced. Hartford-Empire licensed Three Rivers to use three of its feeders for the manufacture of beverage bottles, packers’ and prescription ware in August 1929 (Vatter 1955:91). To finance the improvements in the plant, Three Rivers increased its capital stock to an incredible \$600,000 in what the *Corpus Christi Times* called “the remarkable growth of this South Texas industry” on November 12, 1930. Speaking for the firm, H.G. Goodwin noted in the January 29, 1931, issue of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* that the factories now had “four automatic bottle and jar machines each of which is capable of turning out 18 to 22 bottles per minute.” Even with three shifts operating 24-hours a day, the firm could not keep up with its orders. In 1934, Three Rivers noted that its products were made in flint and amber. The listing was amended to “flint packers, fruit jars, beverage bottles, proprietary ware” in 1936 (*American Glass Review* 1934:100; 1936:98; Vatter 1955:91).

When Three Rivers inaugurated fruit jar production in 1928, however, it had not played the game according to the Hartford-Empire rules. In addition, the glass house was known as a “price cutter” – refusing to adhere to the prices set by the large companies: Owens-Illinois Glass

Co., Thatcher Mfg. Co., Hazel-Atlas Glass Co., and Ball Brothers Glass Mfg. Co. It is unlikely that Three Rivers continued to use the Mexican machinery by this time, almost certainly relying on the faster Hartford-Empire machines. The Ball Brothers repeatedly sent notices to Three Rivers to drop jar production (*American Glass Review* 1928:149; Roller 1997; Vatter 1955:91).

The combination of the Great Depression, Three Rivers' sudden expansion, and ill will of the larger glass houses ushered in the undoing of the Texas company. The firm began bankruptcy proceedings in October of 1932 and was listed with "R.A. Ellerman, agent for receiver" the following year, – a procedure that began a long process with the plant continuing production until 1936. The plant maintained the manufacture of soda bottles, milk bottles, packers' ware, and fruit jars during the entire period. Three Rivers closed the Bastrop factory first – last listed in 1933 (*American Glass Review* 1933:72; 1934:99; 1935:92-93; 1936:98).

On November 27, 1936, the Three Rivers property was auctioned, and the Ball Brothers Corp. made the highest bid of \$80,000 – becoming the new owner of the factory, patents (possibly those connected with the Mexican machines), and all other property. Three Rivers had so many outstanding contracts that the Balls continued to operate the plant throughout 1937, making a variety of containers that included soda bottles, prescription ware, vials, flasks, packers, preservers, and fruit jars (Roller 1997). Brantley (1975:95) stated that the Ball Brothers closed the factory in 1939, although the company retained possession of the property. The U.S. Supreme Court ordered the brothers to sell the Three Rivers holdings in 1947.⁴ After some dispute, the brothers sold the factory in September 1954 (Roller 1997).

Containers and Marks

According to Smith (1989:33), "some logos will be somewhat worn away." In our experience, most of the marks were actually weakly struck. In other words, for whatever reason (*not wear*), the logos were usually indistinct. Because of the location of the marks (i.e., heels and bases), the most likely reason for the indistinct logos was an accumulation of lubricating

⁴ Although Brantley noted 1939 as the year the Balls closed the factory, Toulouse (1971:) stated that the Ball Brothers continued production until 1947. Brantley is most likely correct. The 1942 glass factory list placed Three Rivers as "no report" (*American Glass Review* 1942:107).

materials. If the molds were not cleaned regularly, or if they were improperly cleaned, the buildup could become so heavy that the manufacturer's mark could be completely obliterated.

Toulouse (1971:495) noted that Three Rivers made a Mason jar marked with its logo. Toulouse (1969:306) described the mark as “‘3 RIVERS’ in a half circle, with a number, 107, indicating a design specification.” Roller (1983:352) noted the mark on a similar jar but added no additional information. Creswick (1987:129) illustrated a Mason jar embossed “3 RIVERS {star} (arch) / 511 / 4” (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – 3 Rivers jar (Creswick 1987:129)

Creswick (1987:129) also listed a variation with “3 RIVERS * [* = {star}] HA” on the base. Since she listed the Hazel-Atlas Glass Co. as the manufacturer, the “HA” was almost certainly the HA monogram used by Hazel-Atlas. This implies two ideas. First, as noted by Creswick and speculated by Roller, the jar was intended as a product jar rather than a fruit jar. Second, this mold was transferred from the Three Rivers plant to Hazel-Atlas, probably after the Ball Brothers took over the operations. Since there has been no comprehensive study of product (packers’) jars, it may well be that all or most of the product molds from Three Rivers were transferred to Hazel-Atlas. However, the “HA” may have been some form of mold code.

THREE RIVERS {star} (poss. 1925-1927)

According to Smith (1989:33), this was the most common format followed by Three Rivers. The logo appeared on either the heels or the bases of bottles. Toulouse (1971:494), however, recorded the mark without the star and noted “1927 to 1935, rarely used.” Our observation agrees with Toulouse. Giarde (1981:120) noted this mark on milk bottles, but we have only found a couple of examples from eBay. On one, “THREE RIVERS” was in an arch on the base



Figure 3 – THREE RIVERS (eBay)

with a comparatively large star – probably five times as large as the ones in the later logos – in the center, partly obliterated by the ejection scar. On the other – a soda bottle – “THREE” was arched over the star with “RIVERS” in an inverted arch below (Figure 3). This was probably the earliest mark used by the glass house, possibly 1925-1927 – although the dates are an educated guess.

3 RIVERS {star} (1925-1937)

Although this was the most common format we have observed (occasionally accompanied by either a letter, a number, or both), this variation was not recorded by Smith (1989:33). Since Smith reported the “THREE RIVERS” variation twice, it is likely that he intended for one of them to be the numeral variation. Toulouse (1971:494) recorded the mark in an arch and dated it “1925 to 1937, commonly used.”



Figure 5 – 3 Rivers

The arch actually reflected the configuration used on the Mason jar (described above); the logo was often embossed horizontally. Giarde (1981:120) noted this mark on milk bottles but was almost certainly following Toulouse. This mark was found on the heels of at least two El Paso, Texas, soda bottles. On one, the cursive “Ball” mark was also embossed on the base – dating the bottle at 1937 (Lockhart 2010 – Figure 4). The same mark appeared on the heel roll of pint milk bottles made for the Mistletoe Creamery, with operations at El Paso and other Texas cities (Figure 5). By at least 1928, Three Rivers began using two-digit date codes on the heels of milk bottles and soda bottles – possibly all bottles. An example from eBay showed a 1929 date code on a peppersauce bottle (Figure 6).



Figure 4 – Ball



Figure 6 – 1929 date code (eBay)

Since this was the most common variation, the 1925-1937 date range might most accurately fit in this configuration. Some of the other variations may have been used for shorter periods, but current research methods will not allow for a finer distinctions.

3R {star} (1925-1937)

Smith (1989:33) noted that this was also a common format and that it was only found on bases, frequently followed by a single-digit number, often a “7” (Figure 7). Unlike Smith, however, we have only discovered a single example of this variation. It may have been used more frequently on smaller bottles, where our sample was composed mostly of soda and milk bottles.



Figure 7 – 3 R

{star} 3 RIVERS {star} (1925-1937)

Although not listed in Smith (1989:33), this mark appeared on two different bottles used by the Union Bottling Works in El Paso, Texas. On one bottle the mark with stars at both ends was embossed on the heel; the other had it on the base (Lockhart 2010).

THREE {star} RIVERS (1925-1937)

This was the least common configuration, although it could be found on either heels or bases (Smith 1989:33), but we have never found an example.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although we have observed and/or recorded the “THREE RIVERS” around a star, “3 RIVERS {star},” “{star} 3 RIVERS {star},” and “3R {star}” logos, we have not seen other variations. It is unfortunate that Smith (1989) did not make a more thorough examination of the examples at his disposal (he included photographs of 94 bottles and jars made by the company).

These variations may be related to dates, sizes, or different glass styles, although they may only have been changed at the whims of the mold makers. Unfortunately, that means each variation (except the all-letters one, probably early – 1925-1927 or so) must be dated to the entire period between the first use of the mark in 1925 (when the firm adopted machines) and 1937, when the Ball Brothers ceased filling the orders that existed when the Balls bought the company. We have only seen marks on machine-made bottles and jars. Apparently, products manufactured prior to 1925 were unmarked.

We observed one special case, where both the Three Rivers logo (the most common one – 3 RIVERS {star}) and the cursive “Ball” were embossed on the same bottle. The Three Rivers logo was embossed on the heel, with “Ball” on the base. These bottles could only have been made during 1937, when the Ball Brothers were filling existing Three Rivers orders.

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