

## **Melvin McSwain, Glass Minnow Traps, and the Arkansas Glass Container Corp.**

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The Arkansas Glass Container Corp. grew out of a series of factories operated by Melvin McSwain and his family to manufacture lamp chimneys and a glass minnow trap designed and patented by McSwain. McSwain's plants hopped from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Memphis, Tennessee, and finally to Jonesboro, Arkansas. Over the years, the product line shifted, notably to huge behind-the-counter whiskey bottles. After two major fires at Jonesboro, McSwain became part of a team to incorporate the Arkansas Glass Container Corp. on May 20, 1956.

Initially, we listed two marks attributed to the Arkansas Glass Container Corp. in the Other A section, along with one that may have belonged to the firm. After the 2022 revision of the section, David Whitten brought another logo to our attention, so we decided that the factory and its marks deserved its own chapter. The company remains in business as of this revision in 2024.

### **McSwain Glass Co., Fort Smith, Arkansas (1921-1928)**

On September 27, 1921, the *Little Rock Daily News* reported the incorporation of the McSwain Glass Co. of Fort Smith with a capital stock of \$1,000. The plant produced lamp chimneys by hand. According to the *Chicago Packer* for December 26, 1925, John Witherspoon & Co. gained control fo the firm. The officers were John Witherspoon, Melvin E. McSwain and E.O. Simpson (Figure 1). The *American Glass Review* (1927) added that E.O. Simpson was president, general manager and sales manager with John Witherspoon as vice president, R.E. Johnson as secretary and treasurer, and M.E. McSwain as factory manager and chemist. The plant had a single continuous tank with two rings, making “lamp chimneys and lantern globes exclusively.” The following year, the name change to the Witherspoon-Simpson Glass Co., although the officers remained the same (*American Glass Review* 1928). By 1930 (probably a year earlier), McSwain was gone.



Figure 1 – Melvin E. McSwain Obituary Photo

## Witherspoon-Simpson Glass Co., Fort Smith, Arkansas (1929-1935)

As noted above, the McSwain Glass Co. became the Witherspoon-Simpson Glass Co. in 1929, but the operation was sporadic. The *Sharp County Record* of December 11, 1931, reported that the Witherspoon-Simpson Glass Co. had resumed “operations after a year of suspension” – suggesting a closure between December of 1930 and December of 1931. Writing in March of 1935, Craig noted that the plant had been closed since December 15, 1934 – a closure of at least three months – although he did not say why. The factory made “Lamp chimneys, Lantern globes, bottles, [and] minnow traps” at one continuous tank. The last indication of the company we could find was a labor dispute that closed the plant from August 1 to 11, 1935 (*Chemical & Metallurgical Engineering* 1934; *Monthly Labor Review* 1935). After a history of sporadic production, this dispute may have driven the firm out of business.

## Van Buren Glass Co., Van Buren Arkansas (1931-1932)

On November 3, 1931, the *Helena (AK) Daily World* announced that McSwain & Sons would reopen the idle Van Buren Glass Co. plant on December 1 (Figure 2). The plant had been built in 1917 and produced colored glass for motorists’ goggles and for other uses during World War I, closing at the war’s end. Note that vehicles prior to the 1920s had mostly been open to the weather, so drivers typically wore slickers, goggles, and hats like those worn by early aviators.

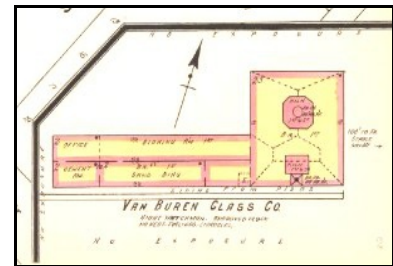


Figure 2 – Van Buren Glass Co. (Sanborn map, 1922)

Although we found no more substantial reports from Van Buren, McSwain apparently opened the factory by early 1932 – possibly only a small unit. The *Springfield News-Leader* posted an ad for Little Giant Minnow Traps on April 16, 1936, demonstrating that McSwain was in production of the traps by that date. Since the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* stated on July 29, 1932, that McSwain was then only in the process of erecting his new glass plant, at Memphis, the traps apparently were made at Van Buren.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The only other possibility is that McSwain contracted with his former associates at Fort Smith – which seems unlikely – although he may have had them made somewhere else.

Fort Smith, home of McSwain's earliest glass plant, is right on the Oklahoma border – the west side of Arkansas. Van Buren is immediately north of Fort Smith, separated only by the Arkansas River. Not only was the Van Buren factory old, it remained uncomfortably close to the Witherspoon-Simpson Glass Co., the firm that took over McSwain's Fort Smith business and an obvious competitor. Memphis was just across the Mississippi River on the east side of Arkansas, farther away from the competition but still comfortably in the South.

### **Memphis Glass Mfg. Co., Memphis, Tennessee (1932-1942)**

The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* for July 29, 1932, bragged that Melvin McSwain was moving his glass business to Memphis, planning to erect a factory “at the corner of Prospect and Railroad Avenues in South Memphis” about August 10. The company relocated because of “the exceptional demand for lamp chimneys and minnow traps in this section.” McSwain noted that “Lamp chimneys are probably one of the few remaining articles still hand blown,” adding that “an expert blower can produce about a hundred chimneys in a working day.” A friend recalled that “it was quite a show to see those McSwain brothers wind a blob of molten glass material on the end of a pipe, and then blow it into a perfect lamp chimney, every one just alike” (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* 1/26/1973) Along with Melvin (called Mell), Arthur B. McSwain – father of the three sons – was vice president with Roy B. McSwain was secretary and Claud McSwain as treasurer. The *Nashville Banner* posted new corporations on November 7, 1933, including the Memphis Glass Mfg. Co., capital of \$10,000, M.E. McSwain, A.B. McSwain, R.B. McSwain, C.P. McSwain, and Bertha Busser as incorporators. Arthur died on March 9, 1937 (*Memphis Commercial Appeal* 3/10/1937).

This was the beginning of McSwain's minnow trap business. He apparently designed his version of the glass traps in 1932, applying for a patent the following year and receiving it in 1935. See the Containers and Marks section for details. The Witherspoon-Simpson Glass Co., the firm that succeeded McSwain at Fort Smith, also began making and selling minnow traps about 1934. See the The Minnow Trap Connundrum in the Discussion and Conclusions section for details and speculation.

At some point during the early part of World War II (almost certainly 1942, when strict rationing of glass and other goods began) business conditions, including “shortages of materials and labor, and disrupted markets” forced McSwain to close. As a friend recalled on January 26, 1973 (*Memphis Press-Scimitar*) that “a scarcity of war materials and other war restrictions killed the business. They closed up.” As a result, McSwain went to work for the Anchor-Hocking Glass Corp., Lancaster, Ohio, from 1942 to 1945 (*Memphis Press-Scimitar* 6/15/1946).

### **Little Giant Glass Co., Jonesboro, Arkansas (1945-1949)**

Tiring of the cold weather in Ohio, Melvin McSwain returned to Arkansas in 1945, this time selecting Jonesboro as his new home, about 70 miles northwest of Memphis. The June 15, 1946, issue of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* quoted McSwain. “I wanted to come back South,” he said, “This is the place to live.” He reopened his business as the Little Giant Glass Co., in a “building used as a mill by the Portia Lumber Co.” (Figure 3). The structure’s owner, the City Water & Light Plant, granted McSwain a one-year lease with an option on a second year. Along with his two brothers, Roy and Claud, McSwain planned to install machinery within ten days of the article, producing his Little Giant Minnow Traps as well as “glass display bottles, lamp chimneys, water bottles and a number of other glass specialties” (*Jonesboro Sun* 6/20/1945). The firm was to have a new location and a new name in 1949.

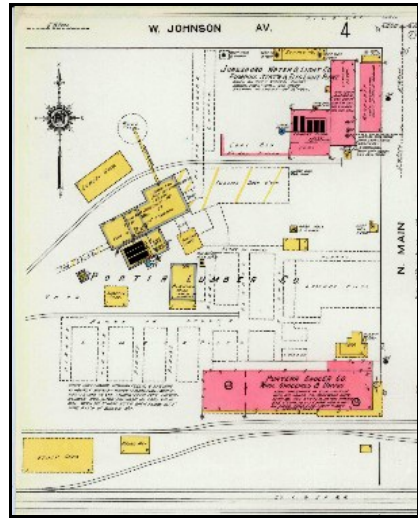


Figure 3 – Portia Lumber (Sanborn map, 1919)

### **McSwain Glass Co., Jonesboro, Arkansas (1949-1956)**

According to the *Jonesboro Sun* for February 15, 1949, McSwain was constructing a new building at 207 N. 4<sup>th</sup> St., hoping for completion by June 1, with an estimated cost of \$30,000. The paper added that “the most important product made by the . . . Company is display bottles for whiskey bottlers. The largest bottle, an exact replica of the commercially-sold bottle, weighs 22 pounds and has a nine gallon capacity.” Too bad the article did not include a photo.

Along with the new location came a new name – the McSwain Glass Co., Inc., incorporated on December 18, 1949, with a capital of \$150,000. The incorporators were the McSwain brothers, Mell, Roy, and Claud (*Jonesboro Sun* 12/19/1949). But, all did not stay well. Although the *Sun* failed to give details or the exact date, the paper published photos of the burned out ruins of the McSwain Glass Co. on August 7, 1950 (Figure 4). Four years later, the warehouse burned (*Jonesboro Sun* 5/15/1954). But, it was time for another change. On May 15, 1956, the Arkansas Glass Container Corp. incorporated with a capital of two million dollars (*Jonesboro Sun* 5/21/1956).



Figure 4 – Burned McSwain plant (*Jonesboro Sun* 8/7/1950)

### **Arkansas Glass Container Corp., Jonesboro, Arkansas (1956-present)**

Although Toulouse (1971:22) claimed that the Arkansas Glass Container Corp. was incorporated in 1958, the firm actually incorporated on May 15, 1956, with a capital of \$2,000,000 (as noted above) – sending out its first carload of bottles on September 18 of the following year. According to the *Jonesboro Sun* for May, 21, 1956, the incorporators were McSwain, his son, Carl, T.J. Robertson, J.T. White, W.J. Werner. McSwain was president with his son, Carl, as vice president. Marble magnate Berry Pink was a board member although not one of the incorporators. The firm moved into the McSwain Glass Co. buildings, eliminating all hand blowing equipment and modernizing everything. But, a rearrangement was already in the wind.

By May 11, 1957, J.T. White, a local businessman, acquired the majority stock and became president of the new corporation. J.W. Werner was vice president and treasurer with T.J. Robertson and M.E. McSwain as additional board members. McSwain also became the superintendent of furnaces (Arkansas Glass 2024, *Jonesboro Sun* 5/11/1957). The factory remained at McSwain’s old address, 207 N. 4<sup>th</sup> St.,<sup>2</sup>

According to Toulouse (1971:506-507), the Underwood Glass Co. of New Orleans served as a sales agent for the Arkansas Glass Container Corp. The *Jonesboro Sun* for May 11, 1957,

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<sup>2</sup> At some point prior to 1993, 207 N. 4<sup>th</sup> St. became 516 W. Johnson Ave., the address of Arkansas Glass in 2024.

confirmed the Toulouse claim, noting that the new firm contracted with Underwood & Assoc. to be the sales agent for Arkansas Glass. Chester E. Underwood was formerly with Knox Glass and had recently opened the Underwood Glass Co. at New Orleans, Louisiana (Figure 5). By mid-year, Underwood had become general manager of Arkansas Glass (for more information on Underwood, see the Other U sections). The new plant was housed in two large metal buildings on the same plot formerly occupied by the McSwain Glass Co. (Figure 6).



Figure 5 – J.T. White (left) & C.E. Underwood (*Jonesboro Sun* 5/11/1957)

According to the *Jonesboro Sun* for May 11, 1957, Arkansas Glass had a smart strategy for production. The factory would “concentrate on sale of standard items so it can maintain a steady operation without changing molds and can pack in same-size containers with only a change of labels. The items will include such things as fruit jars, vinegar jugs, jelly glasses, etc.”<sup>3</sup> Although the company webpage only noted “food grade containers” as the firm’s product, Toulouse (1971:22) stated that the factory originally made “narrow-neck and wide-mouth food bottles and jars, wines, household chemicals, and medicinals in flint glass.”



Figure 6 – Former McSwain Glass Co. (*Jonesboro Sun* 5/11/1957)

In 1985, the factory operated four continuous tanks with seven machines, making “chemical, liquor & wine, narrow-neck, packers & preservers, [and] wide-mouth” bottles (Perrine 1985:12). On January 31, 1986, Carl and Charles Rosenbaum (twins) acquired White’s majority stock and moved Anthony Rampley into place as the Chief Executive Officer. The plant began installing new I.S. (individual section) machines in 1988 to replace the “seven old Lynch-style machines that dated from the 1930s-1957” – and continued to update until at least 2001 (Arkansas Glass 2024).

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<sup>3</sup> Although not specifically mentioned on the webpage or newspaper articles, the labeling was what the Owens-Illinois Glass Co. called Applied Color Lettering of ACL – which has become the general term for the process. See figures in the Containers and Marks section.

A 1993 interview with Anthony “Tony” Rampley (*Jonesboro Sun* 3/14/1993) was quite informative. He remarked that the company had found its niche as “a secondary supplier” filling large and small orders. As an example, he disclosed that “we sell one guy in Missouri five cases of honey jars. . . . In contrast, AGC sends as many as 100 truck loads of containers to a large pickle manufacturer.” The glass house had its own fleet of trucks, ensuring timely delivery. The interviewer noted that

Glass jars and bottles literally pour from the plant’s molding machines 24 hours a day as a steady stream of molten glass is made into everything from long-neck bottles for sauces – including worcestershire – to gallon jars with finger rings on the neck for juices.

In 1993, literally half of the glass turned out by the firm was from recycled bottles. Rampley purred that the employees were the key to a smooth operation, adding that he treated the workers the way he wished to be treated. “The way I operate,” Rampley explained, “is that this is supposed to be fun. If you happen to make money while having fun, that’s gravy. . . . We virtually have no employee turnover.”

In 1997, Arkansas Glass hired Victoria Rampley as the Special Projects Coordinator, and she eventually moved into the position of Co-CEO with her husband, Anthony. According to the website, Victoria P. Rampley designed “the Stout container” in 2012, “originally, a stand-alone 16-ounce sauce container,” although the sizes eventually ranged from 8 to 32 ounces (Arkansas Glass 2024). However, Rampley applied for her patent on October 28, 2013, and received Design Patent No. 721,964 on February 3, 2015 (Figure 7).

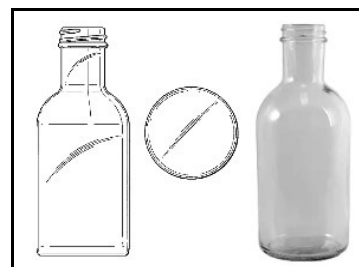


Figure 7 – Stout Container (2015 patent; SAIA)

In December of 2021, Rich McCain became the president of the corporation, overseeing the operation of the factory. Interestingly, the company built a storm shelter for the safety of its employees in 2022. The firm remains in business in 2024, continuing to produce primarily generic glass food containers at 516 W. Johnson Ave., Jonesboro, Arkansas (Arkansas Glass Container 2024).

## Containers and Marks

### The McSwain Firms

The McSwain Glass Co. at Fort Smith, Arkansas (1921-1928), was devoted to the almost exclusive manufacture of mouth-blown lamp chimneys. The Van Buren Glass Co. (1931-1932) almost certainly never opened much less had any production. The Memphis Glass Mfg. Co. (1933-ca. 1942) continued to make lamp chimneys and added McSwain's patented Little Giant Minnow Trap. After the move to Jonesboro, Arkansas, the Little Giant Glass Co. (1945-1949) made "glass display bottles, lamp chimneys, water bottles" (quoted above). The glass display bottles may have been the giant six- to nine-gallon whiskey bottles that the next firm produced in the 1940s, the water bottles were almost certainly the five-gallon ones discussed below. The McSwain Glass Co. (1949-1956) certainly made the large display bottles and minnow traps, possibly continuing lamp chimneys. Finally, sometime after Mell McSwain retired from Arkansas Glass in 1965, he opened up yet another McSwain Glass Co. (ca. 1966-1970s?) where he sold McSwain Jr. Bait Traps that were made for him by his former employer, Arkansas Glass Container Corp.

### Lamp Chimneys

McSwain's first factory at Fort Smith made lamp chimneys and lantern globes, although the latter product was not mentioned in later plants. The early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the shift from oil lamps and candles to electric lights in the U.S., but McSwain found a ready market for the almost outdated oil lamp chimneys in the South. When the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* interviewed Mell McSwain on July 29, 1932, about his upcoming move to Memphis, he bragged that there was an "exceptional demand for lamp chimneys and minnow traps" in that area, adding that lamp chimneys were exceptions to the machine-production standard in place by that decade. Chimneys were still blown by mouth, and the firm made 20,000 each day. Even after the firm moved to Jonesboro in 1945, the demand for chimneys continued, although it seems to have diminished greatly by the 1950s.



## Little Giant Minnow Traps

Although we found no evidence that McSwain manufactured minnow traps during his sojourn at Fort Smith, he stated in 1932 that one of his reasons for moving to Memphis was a high demand for the glass minnow traps in that area. An ad for Little Giant Minnow Traps in the *Springfield News-Leader* for April 16, 1932, shows that McSwain – the only manufacturer of the Little Giant – had begun production by that point. However, it was not until January 18, 1934, that McSwain applied for a patent for a “Minnow Trap” and received Patent No. 2,004,899 on June 11, 1935



Figure 9 – Little Giant ad (*Oklahoma News* 7/2/1935)

(Figure 8). The trap was made from “transparent material such as glass or the like which is suitably protected against breakage.” An ad in the *Oklahoma News* (Oklahoma City) for July 2, 1935, showed a drawing of the “Little Giant Minnow Trap” for “Only 59 c” (Figure 9). If the illustration was correct, the trap was only slightly altered from the patent drawing. All of the mouth-blown minnow traps had no embossing or other identifying marks.

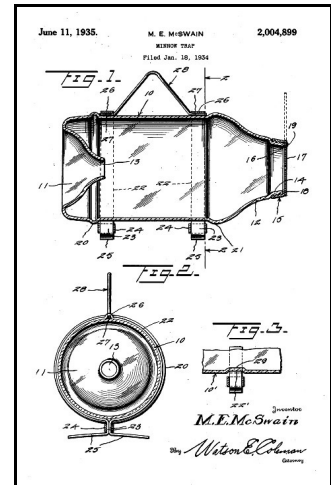


Figure 8 – McSwain 1935 patent

The early Little Giant Minnow Trap looked very much like a fruit jar and mostly followed the patent drawing. Two metal bands encircled the trap at the shoulder and above the heel, each connected at the bottom and bent to form two “feet” to steady the trap at the base of a stream. At the top, the straps were joined together by a wire that formed a handle for easy lifting. A funnel-shaped indent in the jar base had a hole at the narrow end to let minnows swim in but not escape. The other end was a narrow-mouthed jar opening, sealed with a metal lid with a flat disk with three holes, mounted on a swivel to allow removal of the minnows (Figures 10 & 11). Unfortunately, the traps had no identifying marks except the cardboard box. Several other firms made and/or marketed similar traps, also unmarked. Some of MsSwain’s traps were sold by



Figure 11 – Later Little Giant (Auction Site)



Figure 10 – Early Little Giant (Minnowtraps.com)

other dealers under different names, such as the Jim Dandy by the Shakespeare Co. A 1946 ad still showed the Little Giant (Figure 12).

After McSwain retired in 1965 and began his new business, the minnow traps looked notably different and were then renamed the McSwain Jr. Bait Trap. These were machine made until at least the 1970s, the only minnow traps with mold seam marks. The metal bands disappeared, and the jar lay on a flattened side with eight knobs as feet



Figure 13 – McSwain Bait Trap (Minnowtraps.com)

at the bottom and a wire handle bolted into the glass at the top for easy transporting. The end was now sealed with more of a typical metal cap, albeit still with the three holes to let water flow through. Some of the metal caps had a wire carry handle rather than the jar-mounted handle (Figure 13).



Figure 15 – McSwain Bait Trap (Minnowtraps.com)

Applied for a new patent for these improvements, but we have never found any evidence that he received one. This probably was the design for his new traps that he vended from yet another McSwain Glass Co. after he retired from Arkansas Glass in 1965. See The Minnow Trap Connundrum in the Discussion and Conclusions section for more about McSwain’s retirement.



Figure 12 – Little Giant ad (Hardware Retailer 1/1946)



Figure 14 – McSwain Bait Trap (Minnowtraps.com)

## Large Glassware

In 1935 (at Memphis), McSwain added the production of large glassware. The *American Flint* (1935) told the story:

Melvin E. McSwain, its piano-playing president . . . [announced that] they are preparing to spread out into another line—the blowing of five-gallon water bottles. Maybe that won't take bellows-like lungs! It takes more than a gentle zephyr to blow a lamp chimney, so you can imagine what it'll take for these huge bottles. Within the next few days there'll be plenty of huffing and puffing. Better batten down the doors and windows and get ready for the blasts. If you see a red glow on the horizon to the south, don't think it's a fire. That'll be the reflection from the red faces of the glass blowers.

Production of these five-gallon water bottles continued until at least 1945, but, apparently, all were unmarked. We have found no five-gallon water bottles with logos that would indicate any of McSwain's plants. In addition to the water bottles, the Jonesboro plant made large beer and whiskey bottles by at least June 20, 1945. The February 15, 1949, issue of the *Jonesboro Sun* explained that “the most important product made by the Little Giant Glass Company is display bottles for whiskey bottlers. The largest bottle, an exact replica of the commercially-sold bottle, weighs 22 pounds and has a nine gallon capacity.”

The *Sun* for July 10, 1946, added:

Berry Pink, the American marble king, whose factory produces 3,500,000 glass marbles per day [made a] short visit at the Little Giant Glass Factory, with the owners Mell McSwain, Roy McSwain and Claud McSwain. . . . The Little Giant Company manufactures enlarged whiskey bottles and soft drink bottles, six gallon sizes, that are sold by Berry Pink Industries, New York city, for advertising purposes. McSwain brothers expect to manufacture 100,000 of these bottles.



Figure 16 – Mell McSwain, Berry Pink, Roy McSwain (*Jonesboro Sun* 2/15/1949)

The following day, the *Sun* published a photo of Berry Pink with Mell and Roy McSwain – showing one of the six-gallon whisky bottles (Figure 16). The plant continued to produce the giant bottles for Pink until the retooling for the Arkansas Glass Container Co. in 1956 – the end of mouth-blown bottles for the plant. Most of the examples of the huge beer bottles were three feet tall and looked quite large compared to people holding them or normal sized beer bottles. We have also discovered bottles matching the brands in Pink’s ads (Figure 17).

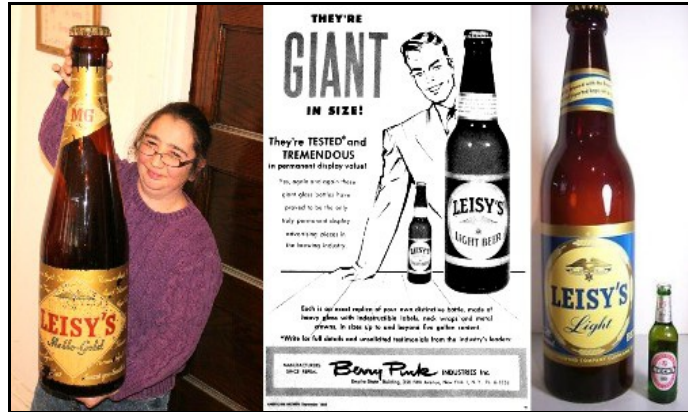


Figure 17 – Giant bottles & Pink ad (*American Brewer* 1950; eBay)

## Arkansas Glass Container Corp.

Unlike the McSwain companies, Arkansas Glass figured out a path and has followed that same production plan for almost seven decades. The firm has made and still makes generic (stock) bottles and jars, the products only identified by paper labels or ACL. The manufacturer’s mark trail, however, has been harder to follow.

### A

Toulouse (1971:22) claimed that the Arkansas Glass Container Corp., Jonesboro, Arkansas, used the “A” mark from ca. 1958 to at least 1971. The mark did not appear in 1982 (Emhart 1982) or any subsequent manufacture’s mark source, although Arkansas Glass remains in business in 2025. The Arkansas Glass Corp. used a code sequence that began with “A” – but that came into effect far too late to have inspired Toulouse. The code sequence may not have been used until ca. 2000 and remained in use until at least 2013, although its use has always been erratic.

The Arkansas Glass website (2010) described the code sequences on the jar bases, and a look at the firm’s online catalog confirmed the identification. On the top line, the “A” – not surprisingly – represents the company’s first initial; the central number is the size of the

container in ounces (e.g., 8 = 8 fluid ounces); and the final digit is a code that completes the model number. In the center of the base, of course, is the company logo, and the bottom numeral is the cavity number (in the mold). Unfortunately, the final one- or two-digit number was *not* a date code (Figure 18).



Figure 18 – Arkansas Glass code

### **GAC (1957-1990)**

Although we have found no sources that claimed the “GAC” logo as belonging to Arkansas Glass, the letters fit (with the larger “A” as Arkansas), and we have not found any other viable alternative (Figure 19). Two things solidify the identification. First, at least one of the marks was accompanied by the basecode sequence shown on the Arkansas Glass Container Corp. 2010 website (see above for the sequence). Second, Melissa Alonzo sent photos of a cardboard box with the “GAC” mark on it to David Whitten. The box was made in Little Rock, Arkansas, and was filled with bottles embossed “GAC” on the bases. The catalog number “A-1103” was on both the bases of the jars and the side of the box – a common model code used by Arkansas Glass. The box was also marked “GLASS” with “A” superimposed on top (Figure 20). Although it is possible that Arkansas Glass did not initially mark its products with a logo, this was almost certainly the earliest logo used on its glass products. Its use should therefore date from ca. 1957 (the first glass shipment) to 1990, when the firm adopted the state outline mark discussed below.



Figure 19 – GAC logo (Jamie Gore)



Figure 20 – Glass A (Melissa Alonzo)

### **AGC Descending (2010)**

At least one jar in the David Whitten collection was embossed “AGC” in a descending line with a code of “A-16-8” above the logo and “25” below it (Figure 21). The Arkansas Glass Container Co. website showed the AGC descending logo in 2010, so the mark was in use by that date. Even though the logo appeared on the 2010 webpage,



Figure 21 – AGC descending

we have never located another example. Since the similar mark surrounded by an outline of the state of Arkansas was in used by Arkansas Glass from 1990 to 2024 (see below), this may have been an engraver’s error, missing the state outline unintentionally.

### **AGC in an outline of the state of Arkansas (1990-2024)**

The most recent embossed logo consists of “AGC” in a descending slant surrounded by the outline of the state of Arkansas (Figure 22). Joe Spangler, sales manager for the Arkansas Glass Container Corp., recalled: “As far as I can remember, AGC has used the embossing of the state of Arkansas on the bottom of the container.” Joe had been there for 16 years, since 1994 (personal correspondence 3/2/2010). The earliest newspaper blurb we have found with the AGC within the state outline was from the *Jonesboro Sun* for September 29, 1990, the most recent from January 20, 2008 (Figure 23). However, commemorative jars with the state outline logo and an ACL date as late as 2024, such as one for A&W Root Beer, indicating that the mark remained in use as of this study. Another jar, purchased in December of 2024, also had the outline logo.



Figure 22 – State Outline logo (eBay)



Figure 23 – Outline logo from *Jonesboro Sun* (9/26/1990; 1/20/2008)

### **A in a triangle (2011-present)**

The Triangle-A mark is the new logo of the Arkansas Glass Co., adopted in 2011 (Figure 24). A job position blurb in the July 16, 2011, issue of the *Coshocton Tribune* confirmed the year, illustrating the Triangle-A. Unlike the older basemarks, the triangle was intended to be embossed on the heel of the container (Gienah Williams, Arkansas Glass Container Co., personal communication, 6/13/2013). However, we have never been able to locate an example, so the logo only may have been used on paper products and ads rather than embossed on glass.



Figure 24 – Triangle-A mark (Arkansas Glass 2024)

## Discussion and Conclusions

Although the focus of this study was the Arkansas Glass Container Corp., the series of predecessor companies, operated by Melvin McSwain proved to be fascinating with his concentration on mouth-blown lamp chimneys, Little Giant Minnow Traps, and huge liquor bottles for display purposes. The glass minnow traps apparently were quite popular for about three decades and apparently again in demand in the 1960s and 1970s.

McSwain's final factory shifted the concentration to more common bottles, creating the Arkansas Glass Container Corp. The firm made "stock" bottles, allowing continuous production, adding ACL labels to fit each order. Arkansas Glass remains in business as of this writing in December of 2024.

The firm's marks have been a bit more difficult to pin down because of a lack of date codes. Although Toulouse suggested a simple "A" as the company's earliest logo, evidence suggests that no such mark was ever used – although codes beginning with "A" became part of the firm's repertoire long after Toulouse published his book.

Although we have no historic evidence, the earliest logo was very likely a "GAC" base embossing. This mark may have been used when the firm first opened, although it may have been adopted later and continued in use until 1990. Strong evidence suggests that "AGC" in a descending slant, surrounded by an outline of the state of Arkansas, was used from 1990 to 2024 (or later). However, Arkansas Glass adopted an A in a triangle logo in 2011 that *may* have been embossed on the heels of bottles. But, we have never found an example, so the mark may only appear on advertising and paper products.

### The Minnow Trap Connundrum

Melvin E. McSwain applied for a patent for a "Minnow Trap" on January 18, 1934, and received Patent No. 2,004,899 on June 11, 1935 (see Figure 8). The traps were called the Little Giant Minnow Traps, advertised in the *Oklahoma City Oklahoma News* for July 2, 1935 (see Figure 9). The ad showed a drawing of a trap that looked only slightly different from the patent drawing. The drawings looked very much like a fruit jar (including a metal cap with three holes

to let the water flow) but with a funnel-shaped indent in the base with a hole at its top – to let minnows swim in but not escape. The jar lay on a flattened side with eight knobs as feet at the bottom side and a wire handle at the top for easy transporting.

The traps came in two styles. On one, two metal bands wrapped around the trap, folding out into two “legs” to allow the trap to rest on the bottom of a creek. Later jars had several improvements. One style had a wire handle attached to the lid (to be carried like a fruit jar). The other had the handle attached to the top side of the two metal bands allowing the far to be carried in the “trap” aspect (see Figures 10-13). McSwain produced the minnow traps from late 1933 or early 1934 (a year and a half before he received the patent) to 1949.

This would be easy to interpret except for one complicating factor: There was another patent during the same time period with essentially the same look. Ewin O. Simpson and Albert F. Kraft applied for a patent for a “Glass Minnow Trap and Method for Manufacturing Same” on April 6, 1937, and received Patent No. 2,082,662 on June 1, 1937 (Figure 25). This invention, however was for the mold and system



Figure 26 – Joy trap by Johnson Glass (eBay)

to *make* the minnow trap. According to Minnow Traps.com, “the Joy minnow traps were made originally by the Witherspoon-Simpson Glass Company in Fort Smith, Arkansas in about 1934,” the earliest year we also have discovered – but the firm closed in 1935. The Johnson Glass Co. began producing the traps around 1937 (Figure 26). Johnson Glass was in Mansfield, Arkansas (about 25 miles south of Fort Smith). This was probably the R.E. Johnson who was the secretary of the McSwain Glass Co. in 1927. Very likely, he remained involved in some capacity until he was able to acquire the firm.

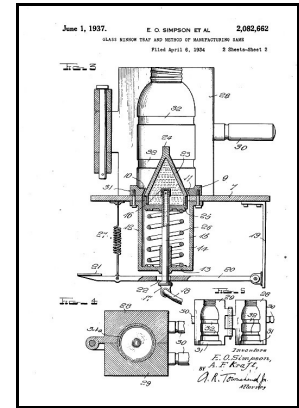


Figure 25 – Simpson & Kraft 1937 patent

According to a 1952 Glass Factory Directory, the Johnson Glass Co. made “battery jars, lamp chimney and novelties, minnow traps, opal shades, [and] private mold work in pressed and blown ware” at one continuous tank and one day tank. By that time, Mrs. John Johnson, Sr., was president with Harold Johnson as president and manager plus Miss Katherine Johnson as secretary and treasurer. But, we have found nothing about the Johnson Glass Co. in between ca.



1937 and 1952 – nor after 1952. Apparently, Mansfield was too small to have city directories, and we found no newspaper articles or ads. We can only speculate that the 1952 Johnsons were relatives or descendants of the R.E. Johnson of the McSwain Glass Co. days.

McSwain applied for his patent on January 18, 1934, followed by the actual patent on June 11, 1935, a year-and-a-half later. Simpson applied on April 6, 1937, and received the patent on June 1 of the same year. However, the Witherspoon-Simpson Glass Co. began making the traps ca. 1934, at least three years before receiving the patent for the process – just about the time McSwain began selling the traps. Understand, however, that these were just two of the dozens of glass houses – large and small – producing glass minnow traps throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Witherspoon-Simpson crew had gradually eased Mell McSwain out of the former McSwain Glass Co. at Fort Smith in 1929-1930. The McSwain family bought an old glass plant just across the Arkansas River in Van Buren in late 1931 making minnow traps within a few miles of their former plant.

The following year, McSwain abandoned Van Buren to build a new factory at Memphis, just across the Mississippi River just east of Arkansas. The new plant made lamp chimneys and minnow traps in direct competition with the family’s old operation at Fort Smith. Since the two traps were very similar, it is likely that Witherspoon-Simpson controlled most of the market in the western sector of the South, while the McSwain family captured the eastern business. Because of the massive government restrictions enacted during 1942, minnow trap production virtually ceased. After World War II, McSwain returned to Arkansas, resuming both chimney and minnow trap production, continuing the latter until 1949.

According to Minnowtrap.com, similar glass, fruit-jar-shaped traps were available in the early 1900s, made by the Hawco Co. and sold through the Shakespeare Co. (Figure 27). Even though there were a number of differences in the various models from these companies (including McSwain and Witherspoon-Simpson), each was made to the same basic design – fruit jar shape, funnel at the “base,” metal top, and some kind



Figure 27 – Hawco trap (MinnowTraps.com)

of wire harness or other device to form “feet” and a carry handle (Figure 28). The jars may have gone out of style in the mid-1950s – returning a couple of decades later.

Now for the speculation. While we have found no historical sources (mostly newspaper articles) that mentioned any active anger or wrong doing, the sequence of events makes it likely that the McSwain family harbored a grudge against the Witherspoon-Simpson group – one that was probably reciprocated. Whether Mell McSwain invited Witherspoon into the business as a monetary infusion or whether it was a hostile takeover, it appears that McSwain was relegated to increasingly lower positions until he was eased out of the business altogether. After that, the competition appears to have grown into a quiet feud that finally dissipated with the replacement of Whitherspoon-Simpson by the Johnson Glass Co. ca. 1937.

The oddest “coincidence” is that McSwain and Witherspoon-Simpson began making minnow traps within two years of each other, 1932 and 1934 respectively. This is *too* coincidental to have just been serendipity. There is a real story here, but the remaining evidence fails to tell it – leaving us with unanswered questions. McSwain had his idea for the patent by 1932 but did not apply until 1934 – the earliest year we can find for Witherspoon-Simpson’s production of the Joy brand of minnow traps. The Joy traps were virtually identical to the 1935 McSwain patent (the one he applied for in 1934) (Figure 29). So, who came first? With the patent, why didn’t McSwain sue his competitor? How did Simson and Kraft get their patent for a device to *make* an almost identical trap in 1937? Were these two firms cooperating despite their relatively close locations? We may never know the answers, but any disputes must have been eventually resolved. The Joy minnow traps sold by Johnson Glass carried the McSwain patent number (see Figure 26). In any event, the McSwain glass houses has certainly provided an interesting chapter in glass-making history.

As an entertaining post-script, Mell McSwain, a former Vaudeville performer, retired from Arkansas Glass in 1965 and returned to his first love – “piano and organ” – teaching



Figure 28 – Jim Dandy traps (MinnowTraps.com)



Figure 29 – McSwain’s Little Giant (top) and Johnson’s Joy (bottom) (eBay; auction)

locally. He was so good that he had played with 1940s dance bands like the Paul Whiteman Orchestra and bands like that of Jack Teagarden (one of the great jazz trombone players). In an interview by an old friend, printed in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* on January 26, 1973, he mused that

I have a glass minnow trap business on the side. We made minnow traps from 1945 to 1955, and sold them ‘round the world. I quit when I found it hard to get blowers. Now I am back in production. They are made for me in molds by the glass company here.” [i.e., Jonesboro – Arkansas Glass Container Co.]

An ad in the May 1975 issue of *Field and Stream* magazine, showed the “new improved model” that doubled as a roach trap, then selling for six dollars each. He still used the McSwain Glass Co. name, but dated the firm “since 1925” (Figure 30). His selection of a date probably indicated an old memory. McSwain incorporated the McSwain Glass Co. in 1921; 1925 was the date when the John Witherspoon Co. took over the business.



Figure 30 – 1975 ad (*Field & Stream* 1975)

Discussing McSwain’s musical career, the interviewer quipped:

But he is sort of a paradox, isn’t he? You would think that if an old glass blower was going to play any kind of instrument, it would be a horn. But, there he is, banging away on a piano. Well, maybe it is best this way. After all his years of glass blowing, he probably doesn’t have enough wind left to toot a tuba.

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