

# California Fig Syrup: The Company and Its Bottles

Bill Lockhart and Beau Schriever

The California Fig Co. opened at Reno, Nevada, in 1878, selling its only product, Syrup of Figs. The firm had a rocky beginning, reorganizing twice before it achieved success with the final 1897 corporation. The Sterling Remedy Co. purchased the California Fig Co. in 1912, and it remains in business to the present. California Fig packaged its products in a total of six different embossed bottles as well as at least one variation used in England. In addition, the different incarnations of the firm used generic bottles with paper labels both before and after the adoption of the embossed containers – an apparently common phenomenon in remedies successful enough to remain popular from the 1870s to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Company History

According to an 1897 lawsuit (Justia 2015), in 1879, Richard E. Queen invented:

a certain medical preparation or remedy for constipation and to act upon the kidneys, liver, stomach, and bowels, which medical compound is a combination in solution of plants known to be beneficial to the human system, forming an agreeable and effective laxative to cure habitual constipation and many ills, depending upon a weak and inactive condition of the liver, kidneys, stomach, and bowels

According to Wilson & Wilson (1971:140), William Pinniger and Richard E. Queen initially bottled Syrup of Figs and sold the product in Reno, Nevada, in 1878. Although one of these dates must be incorrect (likely Wilson & Wilson), the product was certainly for sale by 1880. Pinniger and Queen registered the Syrup of Figs label with the Patent Office on September 9, 1879 (DePuydt et al. 1997:184).

Apparently, the business was originally called either the Reno Syrup of Fig Co. or just Syrup of Fig Co. The *Reno Evening Gazette* (12/10/1881) announced that the “Reno Syrup of Fig Co.” incorporated in the State of Nevada under the name of the California Fig Syrup Co. with

a capital stock of \$1,000,000, probably in early December of 1881, listing Reno as its principal place of business (noted as the First Corporation in the Containers and Marks section).

By 1883, Queen moved to San Francisco, where he built a large factory with financial backing from Elias Chielovich (Wilson & Wilson 1971:140). The California Fig Syrup Co., San Francisco, received Trademark No. 10,974 for Syrup of Figs on March 4, 1884. Unfortunately, the date of first use was not stated (DePuydt et al. 1997:184).

By May 13, 1884, the company was in trouble. J.J. Quinn, the corporate secretary, advertised an assessment of “of ten cents (10 cents) per share” levied on all stock owners. The levy was “payable Immediately, in United States gold coin, to the secretary.” Any stockholders who failed to pay by May 13, 1884, would have his or her stock sold at auction at 2:00PM on June 11. To add insult to injury, any delinquent stockholders were to pay for the ads. However, the auction was apparently put off until February 1885, when the names of the still delinquent stockholders were published in the *Reno Gazette* (May 13, 1884; February 2, 1885).

At some point during 1885, the firm reorganized – probably soon after the February public auction (hereafter, the Second Corporation). On June 24, 1885, the *Yates County Chronicle* reported that a sales representative for the California Fig Syrup, *San Francisco*, was visiting Pen Yan, New York (where the *Chronicle* was published). By at least October 13 (the earliest ad I can find), the new ads stated:

An Elegant Substitute For Oils, Salts, Pills and all kinds of bitter, nauseous medicines is the very agreeable liquid fruit remedy. Syrup of figs. It is recommended by leading physicians. Manufactured only by the California Fig Syrup Co., San Francisco, Cal. (*Yates County Chronicle* October 13, 1885).

Virtually identical ads, accompanied by the names of the local agents, continued until May 29, 1889.

Apparently, the firm underwent another reorganization (the Third Corporation). On June 1, 1897, the California Fig Syrup Co. incorporated in Nevada, with the main office at San Francisco. The new, soon-to-be ubiquitous, ad debuted on February 27, 1889, in the *Hamilton Daily Democrat*, Hamilton, Ohio, and was soon echoed by newspapers all over the U.S. The

new ad included offices at Louisville, Kentucky, and New York, although it retained the San Francisco location. The Louisville plant was a manufacturing center rather than a sales office. A 1903 labor report noted that the “Nature of Business” of the Louisville plant was “Syrup of Figs Mnfg.” (Ludwig & Young 1903:56).

The company was now apparently successful – at least until the passing of the Pure Food & Drug Act of 1906. Not long after the passing of the Act, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* commented that “Syrup of Figs is a laxative whose chief advertising asset is its name.” The laxative effect was produced by Senna, a tropical herb comprising 25% of the mixture. Another 6% was composed of alcohol, making its effect roughly the same as beer bottled during that period. To comply with the law, the firm listed those ingredients on their labels, although the syrup continued to be sold in England under the old label (Sullivan 2012).

### **Sterling Remedy Co. and the Neuralgyline Co.**

Meanwhile, in early 1885 the Sterling Remedy Co., of Chicago, began advertising No-To-Bac, a remedy for tobacco use. The firm soon added other medicines to its inventory (e.g., *Wyoming Post Herald* 3/28/1885). William E. Weiss and Albert H. Diebold incorporated the Neuralgyline Co., another medicinal firm, at Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1901, with a capitalization of \$25,000 (*Drug & Chemical Markets* 1918:9; Moody 1916:1815). According to Funding Universe (2016):

The two men immediately laid the foundation for a style of aggressive marketing that would distinguish the company for years to come. The partners posted signs on fences and trees along the West Virginia roadways in order to advertise the merits of their pain reliever Neuralgine. After one year of business, the company sold \$10,000 worth of the product. Instead of saving it, however, Weiss and Diebold reinvested total profits, along with additional funds from outside investors, for advertising promotions in Pittsburgh newspapers.

In 1904, Neuralgyline increased the capital to \$100,000, and the company purchased Dr. James headache powders. The firm again raised the capitalization to \$500,000 (*Drug & Chemical Markets* 1918:9).

In a 1.5 million dollar deal, Weiss and Diebold announced in the May 1909 issue of the *Practical Druggist* (1909:109) the Neuralgyline was absorbing the Sterling Remedy Co. Sterling continued to operate under its own name and took over the California Fig Co. of San Francisco & Louisville in June of 1912 (Moody 1916:1815). Neuralgyline/Sterling closed the Louisville plant shortly thereafter. We have found *no* sources connecting Neuralgyline or Sterling and Louisville. However, there is a bottle that was made by the Illinois Bottle Co., so the Louisville plant probably remained open for a year or so, although Sterling almost certainly closed the older San Francisco plant immediately. This would explain a bottle with *only* the Louisville name – one that was made *after* Sterling acquired the firm. In 1917, the firm incorporated under West Virginia law as the Sterling Products Co., with a capital of four million dollars (*Drug & Chemical Markets* 1918:9).

## **Enter Bayer Aspirin**

Felix Hoffman, of Friedrich Bayer & Co., processed salicylates from willows and other plants to create what would become known as aspirin in 1893. Bayer Aspirin had entered the world market by 1900, including the U.S. During World War I, the U.S. government confiscated all German-owned businesses within American borders – including Bayer. The feds auctioned Bayer, and Sterling offered 5.3 million dollars to outbid six other competitors and became the owner of the U.S. aspirin patent. With this acquisition, Sterling increased its capital to \$7,000,000 and became one of the largest drug companies in the U.S. In a 1921 court case, the term “aspirin” was deemed to be generic, meaning that the word could be used by anyone. Sterling added the name of the inventor, and the product became Bayer Aspirin (*Drug & Chemical Markets* 1918:9; Funding Universe 2016).

Sterling Products Co. competed internationally with the original German firm and ran afoul of the U.S. government during World War II. When negotiations ended, most of the upper management of Sterling had resigned, but the firm was in a stronger position than ever. The remaining company history was filled with disputes and new products, but it ceases to be of interest to us after World War II, because Sterling was using generic bottles with paper labels by that time. For a later history, see Funding Universe (2016). The company remains in business in 2018.

## Containers and Marks

Like all long-lived medicinal containers, the bottles used for California Fig Syrup evolved through several stages of embossing as well as through different manufacturers (at least during the final embossed stage). A combination of dating techniques allows us to reliably date each stage of use.

### (1) **Early Bottles** (ca. 1880-ca. 1883)

Generic

We know nothing about these bottles. However, we can hypothesize that the new firm, small and local, was using some form of generic bottle, possibly whatever the partners could glean from the local used bottle stores. The product was almost certainly identified by some form of paper label.

### (2) **First Corporation Bottles** (ca. 1883-1885)

Embossing

Sides: SYRUP OF FIGS (both sides)

Base: unknown

Manufacturing Technique: Mouth Blown

We have never seen an example of this bottle, although it was reported by Wilson & Wilson (1971:89). The authors noted the bottle was “comp. scarce” (Figure 1). We suspect that it is very scarce and that it was the bottle ordered by the first corporation. This was the simplest embossed bottle, and the new company probably ordered this style ca. 1883, when the firm was organized. The bottles were certainly used until the company exhausted the supply. These were probably colorless as were almost all the bottles that followed. Because this early corporation (and the following one) were not particularly successful, both may have ordered bottles from venues as close by as possible – probably either one of the Denver glass houses or one of those in Southern California. Unless new evidence surfaces, however, we cannot further limit the possibilities.

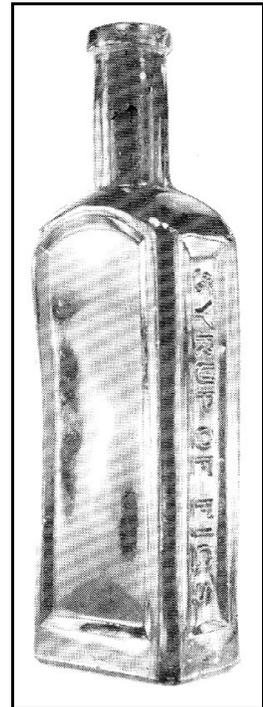


Figure 1 – 1<sup>st</sup> Corp  
(Wilson & Wilson  
1971:89)

**(3) Second Corporation (San Francisco) Bottles (1885-ca. 1889)**

Embossing

Front: CALIFORNIA FIG SYRUP Co. / SAN FRANCISCO, CAL. (Figure 2)

Sides: SYRUP OF FIGS (both sides)

Base: 1 or 2 digit number or no embossing

Manufacturing Technique: Mouth Blown



Figure 2 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Corp

These bottles almost certainly commemorated the shift to the second corporation in 1883. As shown by a bottle offered at an eBay auction, a paper label was affixed to the unembossed panel. Some of the bottles were embossed with a one- or two-digit number on the base, although other bases were unembossed. This may suggest two different manufacturers, although it could also reflect a growing number of molds needed to produce the bottles as fig syrup sales increased. The bottles were originally colorless, but some solarized to an almost lavender color. The company probably phased these bottles out ca. 1889, when the Louisville plant opened. An eBay auction featured an example with an almost complete paper label (Figure 3). As noted in the section above, these bottles may have been produced at a Southern California or Denver location.



Figure 3 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Corp paper label (eBay)

**(4) Third Corporation (San Francisco and Louisville) Bottles (ca. 1889-ca. 1905)**

Embossing

Front: CALIFORNIA / FIG SYRUP CO. (Figure 4)

Left Side: LOUISVILLE, KY

Right Side: SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

Base: 1 or 2 digit number or no embossing

Manufacturing Technique: Mouth Blown

These were the first bottles used by the third Corporation, and they marked the period when the Louisville factory opened. These were mouth blown with either unmarked bases or bases with a one- or two-digit number. Even though this was the right time period for solarization to an amethyst hue, we have only found colorless bottles with this marking. The end date for this section is arbitrary and should be considered a “best guess.” The third corporation also used another bottle later in the sequence (see next entry). Although this is pure speculation, these bottles may have been made by the Illinois-Pacific Glass Co. – since the next variation (see below) was made by the Illinois Glass Co. (affiliated with Illinois-Pacific). As Louisville became more important, the firm shifted to Midwestern glass houses.



Figure 4 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Corp 1

**(5) Third Corporation (Louisville) Bottles (ca. 1905-1912)**

Embossing

Front: CALIFORNIA / FIG SYRUP CO. (Figure 5)

Left Side: LOUISVILLE, KY

Right Side: no embossing

Base: 1 or 2 digit number or a number in an elongated diamond plus an Owens scar

Manufacturing Technique: Mouth Blown or Machine Made (Figure 6)

These were the second bottles used by the third Corporation. As far as we can determine, the San Francisco factory remained open during this period, so we have no good explanation for the lack of the “SAN FRANCISCO” side embossing – unless these bottles were only made for the Louisville plant. The earliest of these were mouth blown with a one- or two-digit number on the base. The final bottle was



Figure 5 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Corp 2

machine made, embossed with numbers within an elongated diamond and an Owens scar (Figure 7). The only example of the latter bottle that we have seen was solarized amethyst. As noted in the last section, the beginning date for this bottle is arbitrary and should be considered a “best guess.”



Figure 6 – Base number

Blasi (1992) called the Louisville-only variant



Figure 7 – Illinois Glass base (eBay)

“common” – although that may only be true in Louisville. They are not common on eBay. The variation with the diamond basemark was made by the Illinois Glass Co. Illinois Glass received its Owens license in 1911, but the factory retooling was a real process, and, because of the delay, the bottles were probably not manufactured until 1912, possibly early in the year. Since Sterling Remedy Co. purchased California Fig Syrup in June of 1912, the bottle was likely ordered before that date.

#### (6) Sterling Remedy Co. (Wheeling) Bottles (1912-1917)

Embossing

Front: CALIFORNIA / FIG SYRUP CO. (Figure 8)

Left Side: WHEELING, W. VA.

Right Side: no embossing

Base: Owens scar with no markings; C with Owens scar; 7 over F with a circle of dots (and Owens scar) (Figure 9)

This variation heralded the full entry of the bottles into the machine era. All of these were made by Owens Automatic Bottle Machines as shown by the distinctive Owens scar on each base. Both the Wheeling designation – the home base for the Sterling Remedy Co. – and the base markings provide great dating tools. The Sterling Remedy Co. purchased California Fig Syrup in 1912 and changed its name to the Sterling Products Corp. in 1917.



Figure 8 – Sterling 1

In 1912, the Owens Bottle Machine Co. licensed both the Illinois Glass Co. and the Owens Eastern Bottle Co. to make prescription and proprietary bottles (including patent medicine containers). Located at Clarksburg, West Virginia, the Eastern Bottle Co. was wholly owned by Owens, and it is probably not coincidental that Owens opened the factory in 1912 – the same year as the license. The plant initially made bottles that had no embossed lettering on the bases, but it very soon added the letter “C” (for Clarksburg). Although the “C” was also used by other glass houses, the combination of a “C,” the Owens scar, and this type of bottle makes the Clarksburg identification positive (Figure 10).



Figure 9 – Machine

The base of the final bottle that we have discovered in this series had a circle of dots with a “7” at the top and an “F” at the bottom. This configuration was short-lived but very revealing. The “F” indicated the Fairmont, West Virginia, plant of the Owens Bottle Co. (the name changed from the Owens Bottle Machine Co. in 1914), and the “7” was a date code for 1917. A series of dots (from one to twelve) indicated the month of manufacture. A single dot to the right of the “7” was for January; February was two dots beginning to form an arc that eventually became six dots filling in the arc between “7” and “F” by June. July began on the left side of the “F” and continued back to the top by December. Unfortunately, the eBay seller who reported this logo did not record the number of dots. At least, we know that the bottle was made in 1917, just before the next major change in bottles. A second example had the “F” in the center, “7” at the top and an almost full circle of 11 dots (see Figure 10).



Figure 10 – Bases (eBay)

**(7) Sterling Products Corp. Bottles (1917-ca. 1927)**

Embossing

Front: CALIFORNIA FIG SYRUP CO. / CALIFIG / STERLING PRODUCTS, (INC.) / SUCCESSOR (Figure 11)

Sides: no embossing

Base: Diamond-I; Box-O (with date/plant codes); and <0> (Owens-Illinois logo) – all with Owens scars

This was the final bottle style used by the Sterling Products Corp. – the new name adopted by Sterling in 1917. Our sample of these bottles (many from eBay) had three different base logos. Probably the earliest of these bottles bore the Diamond-I logo of the Illinois Glass Co. (Figure 12). Although Illinois Glass used this logo from 1915 to 1929, when the firm merged with the Owens Bottle Co. to form the

Owens-Illinois Glass Co., Sterling only used it until ca. 1919, when the firm switched glass houses.



Figure 12 – Illinois Glass base (eBay)

The Owens Bottle Co. adopted the Box-O logo in 1919 and used it until the merger that created the Owens-Illinois Glass Co. in 1929. Owens used two main configurations for plant and date codes. The earliest, apparently used from 1919 to 1923 had a single-digit number to the left of the Box-O logo (the factory code) and another single-digit number to the right (the date code). In our sample, two bottles were marked respectively 3 □ 9 and 3 □ 3 – Plant No. 3 (Fairmont, West Virginia) and 1919 or 1923 (where the □ symbol indicates the Box-O logo) (Figure 13).

The second configuration is confusing to most people. On these bases, both numbers appeared to one side of the Box-O logo, usually to the right. In our sample these were marked □ 33, □ 35; and □ 36 (see Figure 13). These are *not* date codes for the 1930s. The “3” still indicates the Fairmont plant, while the second digit is a date code. In these examples, the codes equal 1923, 1925, and 1926 (Lockhart et al. 2010).



Figure 11 – Sterling 2



Figure 13 – Owens Bottle Co. bases (eBay)

The final logo was the I-in-an-O-superimposed-over-an-elongated-diamond (represented by <0>). These used the well-known Owens code configuration: a number to the left of the logo indicating the plant; a number to the right of the mark for a date code; and a mold code below. In our sample, the plant code was for Factory No. 2 at

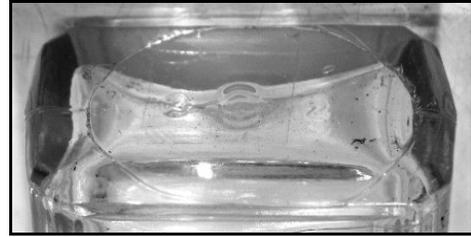


Figure 14 – Owens-Illinois base 1 (eBay)



Figure 15 – Owens-Illinois base 2 (eBay)

Toledo, Ohio, and Factory No. 3

at Fairmont. It is likely that the single bottle made at the Toledo plant was a case of overrun, where the Fairmont plant could not keep up with the orders. That bottle had a “1” date code for 1931, and included

“BOTTLE / MADE IN U.S.A.” – indicating a bottle made for export.

The other two in our sample had “3” plant codes and date codes of “2” and “7” – 1932 and 1937 (Figure 14). These

bottles were probably

used until ca. 1940. A final base was coded “6” for Factory No. 6 at Charleston, West Virginia, with a date code of “7” – 1927 (Figure 15). At that point, the firm returned to generic bottles with paper labels (Figure 16).



Figure 16 – Paper label (eBay)

### English Bottles (ca. 1917-?)

Bottles offered on eBay were embossed “SUCCESSORS TO THE / CALIFORNIA FIG SYRUP CO.” on the front and “CALIFIG” on one side (Figure 17). Most of these were colorless, but at least one was made of amber glass. At least one base had an Owens scar and was embossed “B 258 / C / UGB” with some other letters or numbers that were illegible in the photo (Figure 18). The United Glass Bottle Mfg., Ltd., with locations in various parts of England, used the UGB logo from 1913 to the 1960s. We have no other information on the British firm.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Although we know nothing about the earliest generic bottles with paper labels, and very little about the first generation of embossed

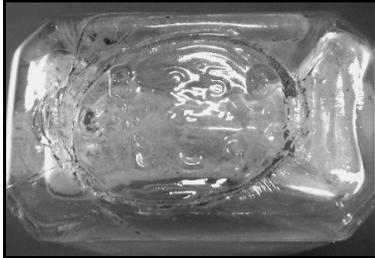


Figure 18 – English base (eBay)

distinct basis for dating the bottles. It is unlikely that new bottle variations will surface in the future, although the possibility always exists.

bottles, the dating of those containers is nonetheless relatively certain. In addition, we have put together a reasonable chronology for the remaining bottle variations. Although future researchers may discover more details about the history of these various firms, the one offered here establishes a

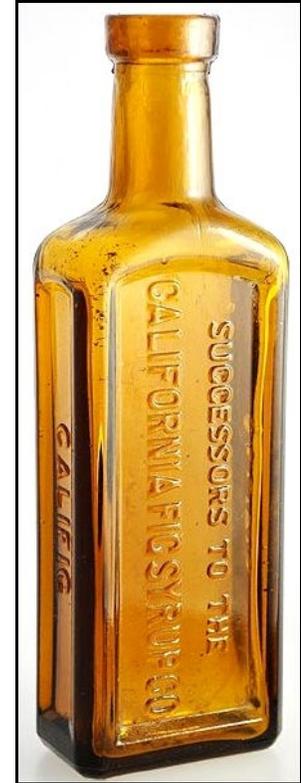


Figure 17 – English bottle (eBay)

## Sources

DePuydt, Ray, Gwen Hurst, Stephanie Ludwig, and Alfred Cammisa

1997 *Archaeological Investigations in Skagway, Alaska, Volume 5, Additional Investigations at the Mill Creek Dump and the Peniel Mission*. National Park Service, Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Alaska.

*Drug & Chemical Markets*

1918 “Sterling Products Co. Buys Bayer Stocks.” *Drug & Chemical Markets* 5(15):5-6. [December 18]

Funding Universe

2016 “Sterling Drug, Inc. History.”

<http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/sterling-drug-inc-history/>

Justia

2015 “Worden v. California Fig Syrup Co. 187 U.S. 516 (1903).”

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/187/516/>

Lockhart, Bill, Pete Schulz, Russell Hoenig, Phil Perry, Carol Serr, and Bill Lindsey

2010 “The Dating Game: The Owens Bottle Co.” *Bottles and Extras* 21(1):50-62.

Ludwig, Andrew B. and William Young

1903 *First Biennial Report of the Labor Inspector of the State of Kentucky: Inspections of Factories Machine and Work Shops from July, 1902 to December, 1903*. George F. Fetter Printing Co., Louisville, Kentucky.

Moody, John

1916 *Moody’s Analyses of Investments: Founded to Endure and Investors Make Secure. Part II Utilities and Industrials*. Moody’s Investors Service, New York.

*Practical Druggist*

1909 “News and Comment.” *Practical Druggist* 25(5):109-112. [May]

Sullivan, Jack

2012 “Old Main Artifacts: California Fig Syrup Co. San Francisco, Cal.”

<https://oldmainartifacts.wordpress.com/2012/04/07/california-fig-syrup-co-san-francisco-cal/>

Wilson, Bill and Betty Wilson

1971 *19<sup>th</sup> Century Medicine in Glass*. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Hobby & Publishing Co., Washington, D.C.

Last updated 4/27/2018

