Bottles on the Border:
The History and Bottles of the Soft Drink Industry
in El Paso, Texas, 1881-2000

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[Revised Edition – Originally Published Online in 2000]
Dedication

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tables</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Foreword</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Foreword</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 – General History of El Paso Bottlers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso Bottlers Association</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 – Dating Soft Drink Bottles</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphology</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing Techniques</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturer’s Marks</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume Labeling</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer’s Markings</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stated Dates</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating Local Bottles</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular Concerns with Soft Drink Bottles</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying Dating Techniques</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposition</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposition Lag</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use-Life of Returnable Bottles</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 – National Franchisers Represented in El Paso</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Colas: Coca-Cola</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Colas: Pepsi-Cola</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Colas: Royal Crown Cola</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fruit Punch: Dr. Pepper</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Uncola: Seven-Up</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mixers: Canada Dry</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 – Bottle Descriptions and Photographs</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptions</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire Bottling Works (1912-1924)</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Containers and Artifacts</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Southwestern Coca-Cola Bottling Co. Connection</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire Bottle Overview</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire’s Six-Panel Bottles – The House Brand</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversion from Mouth to Machine</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter the Paper Label</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variations</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire Ginger Ales</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven Ounce Bottles</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variations</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten Ounce Bottles</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soda Water or Seltzer</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siphon Bottles</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Purple Grape Juice</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electro-Puro Water or Electro Puro Table Water</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange Crush</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near-Beer</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famo</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schlitz</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budweiser</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5c – The Later Empire Companies, Part I</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire Products Corporation (ca. 1925-1956)</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottles and Artifacts</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire House Brand Fruit Flavors</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Labels in the 1920s</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six-Panel Bottles</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variations</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty Bottles</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Labels in the 1930s</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicolored ACL Labels</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variations</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ringed ACL Bottles</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 6 – Liquor Dealers and Soda Bottlers

Julian & Johnson (1882-1891)

R.F. Johnson & Co. (1891-1898)

Henry Pfaff (1898-1907)

Duffy’s Draft Beverage Co. (1952-1993)
Buffalo Mineral Springs Water. ................................. 228
Southwestern Liquor Co. (1907-1918). .............................. 230
Bottles and Artifacts. ........................................... 231
  Clysmic “King of Table Waters” ............................... 231

Chapter 7a – Martin R. Sweeney and the Woodlawn Bottling Co. ................. 235
  Martin R. Sweeney Bottling Works (1905-1908). ....................... 237
    History. .................................................. 237
  Bottles and Artifacts. ........................................ 239
    M.R. Sweeney House Brand. .................................. 239
    History. .................................................. 240

Chapter 7b – Woodlawn Bottling Co., Whistle, and Nesbitt’s Orange .................. 247
    Bottles and Artifacts. ........................................ 249
      Woodlawn House Brand. ...................................... 249
        Variations................................................ 250
        Variations................................................ 253
        Paper Labels.............................................. 253
      Toltec Flavors............................................ 254
        Paper Labels.............................................. 255
        Specialty Bottles.................................... 257
      Barlo and Blatz. .......................................... 258
      Clicquot Club............................................. 259
    Whistle Co. of El Paso (1920). ................................ 260
      History. .................................................. 260
    Bottles and Artifacts. ........................................ 261
      Whistle.................................................. 261
        Paper Label............................................. 261
      Vess Dry................................................. 263
        Specialty Bottle...................................... 264
        Paper Label............................................. 265
      Whizz.................................................... 266
      History. .................................................. 267
Chapter 8b – Magnolia Coca-Cola Bottling Co. ................................. 313
   Magnolia Coca-Cola Bottling Co. (1911-present) .......................... 315
      History ................................................................. 315
         Introducing Coca-Cola .......................................... 315
         The Yandell Years .............................................. 319
         Thomas C. Lucky ............................................... 323
         The Booming 1950s ............................................ 324
         The “Man of Character” ..................................... 325
         Milda Smith Takes Charge .................................. 327
         Change: A New Owner and a New Plant ..................... 329

Chapter 8c – Bottles of the Magnolia Coca-Cola Bottling Co. .................. 331
   Bottles of the Magnolia Coca-Cola Bottling Co. ......................... 333
      Bottles and Artifacts ........................................... 333
         Straight-Sided Coca-Cola Bottles ............................ 333
            Variations .................................................. 334
         Hobble-Skirt Coca-Cola Bottles ............................... 334
            Patented November 16, 1915 ............................ 335
               Variations ................................................ 337
            Patented December 25, 1923 ............................ 338
               Variations ................................................ 339
            Patented D-105529 ....................................... 340
               Variations ................................................ 341
         IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE ....................................... 343
            Variations .................................................. 343
         Volume Change .................................................. 345
            Variations .................................................. 346
| Chapter 10b – Seven-Up Bottling Co. of El Paso (1937-1969) | 429 |
| History | 429 |
| Bottles and Artifacts | 432 |
| Seven-Up | 432 |
| Paper Labels | 433 |
| Amber Bottles | 433 |
| Forest Green Bottles with the Swim-Suit Lady | 434 |
| Eight-Bubble Labels | 435 |
| Neck-Shoulder Markings | 436 |
| A Foot Fetish? – Hands? | 436 |
| Back Label Variation | 437 |
| El Paso Eight-Bubble Bottles | 439 |
| Variations | 440 |
| Seven-Bubble Labels | 441 |
| Variations | 443 |
| Non-Swimsuit-Lady Bottle | 444 |
| Variations | 445 |
| Later Bottles | 446 |
| Like, Sugar Free, and Diet Seven-Up | 447 |
| Sun Spot | 448 |
| Howdy | 448 |
| Kickapoo Joy Juice | 449 |
| 6 Tone | 449 |

| Chapter 10c – Canada Dry and the Seven-Up Royal Crown Bottling Co. | 453 |
### Chapter 11b – Barq’s Bottling Co. and Double Cola Bottling Co.

**Barq’s Bottling Co. (1939-1956) and Double Cola Bottling Co. (1955-1956)**

- History
- Albuquerque and Other Locations
- Bottles and Artifacts
  - Barq’s Bottles
    - Smaller Sizes
    - Fully Embossed Bottles
    - Front ACL/Embossed Back
      - Variations
    - Front and Back ACL
      - Variations
  - Dr. Wells
  - Variations
  - NuGrape
  - Variations
  - Hava Swig
  - Tom Collins Jr
  - Orange Crush
  - Pop Kola
  - Double Cola
  - Nesbitt’s
  - Bubble Up
  - Hollywood

### Chapter 11c – Later Dr Pepper Companies.

**Barq’s Dr Pepper Bottling Co. (1957-1976)**

- History
- Bottles
  - Barq’s Flavors – 12-Ounce
  - Barq’s Flavors – 18-Ounce
    - Variations
  - Dr Pepper – ACL
  - Dr Pepper Cans
  - Dr Pepper Case
  - Dietetic Dr Pepper and Diet Dr Pepper
Chapter 12a – Small Bottlers – 1880-1919

The Mysterious R.C. Pardu

T.L. Reber & Co.

History

The Remarkable T.L. Reber

The Houck & Dieter Connection

The Coffin & Co. Connection

Bottles and Artifacts

Hutchinson Bottles

The Mysterious Circles

Coffin & Co. (1881)

History

Bottles and Artifacts

H.D. Zachry (1882?-1885?)

History and Bottles

G. Edwin Angerstein (1884)

History

Bottles and Artifacts

El Paso Bottling Works (1901)

History


History

Bottles and Artifacts

Clicquot Club Ginger Ale

Crystal Bottling Works (1911-1915)

History

Crown Bottling Works (ca. 1914-ca. 1922)

History

The Nicholson Family

The Arrival of the Greeks
Bottles and Artifacts ................................................. 557
  Crown House Brand ............................................. 557
  Variations .......................................................... 558
Mexican Bottling Works (1915-1917) .............................. 559
  Gallegos Brothers Bottling Works (ca. 1914-1915) ............ 559
    History .......................................................... 559
    Bottles and Artifacts ........................................ 559
  Carlos Gallegos Medina & Co. (1916) ........................ 561
    History .......................................................... 561
  La Mexicana (Mexican Bottling Works) (1917) ................. 561
    History .......................................................... 561
    Manuel Torres Saldaña ....................................... 562
    Bottles and Artifacts ........................................ 565
National Bottling Works (1915-1917) ............................ 566
  History .......................................................... 566
International Bottling Works (1917) ............................. 566
  History .......................................................... 566
Loretz, Pegram & Co. .............................................. 566
  History .......................................................... 566
  Bottles and Artifacts ........................................ 567
  Sheboygan Ginger Ale ......................................... 567
M. Ainsa & Sons (1886-ca. 1922) ................................ 568
  History .......................................................... 568
  Bottles and Artifacts ........................................ 569
  Bevo ...................................................................... 569
James A. Dick Co. (1905-present) ................................. 570
  History .......................................................... 570
  Bottles and Artifacts ........................................ 572
  Circle A Ginger Ale ............................................ 572
    El Paso Distribution .......................................... 572
    National Distribution ......................................... 573
    James A. Dick Ads ............................................ 573
Clicquot Club Ginger Ale ............................................ 575
  Bevo ...................................................................... 576
Avondale Spices ....................................................... 577
Dicksie Cider Vinegar ................................................ 578
Blatz Co., Distributors (1918-ca. 1919) .................................................. 579
  History .................................................................................. 579
  Bottles and Artifacts .............................................................. 579
  Barma ................................................................................. 579
E.M. McCoy, Distributor (1918) .............................................................. 580
  History .................................................................................. 580
  Bottles and Artifacts .............................................................. 580
  Jus-Rite .................................................................................. 580
Zork-Smith Fruit Co. (1916-1919) .............................................................. 581
  History .................................................................................. 581
  Bottles and Artifacts .............................................................. 581
  La Perla .................................................................................. 581
Crombie & Co. (1904-1959) .............................................................. 582
  History .................................................................................. 582
  Bottles and Artifacts .............................................................. 584
  La Perla .................................................................................. 584
  Pearl ...................................................................................... 585

Chapter 12b – Small Bottlers – 1918-1930s ............................................. 589
  Texas Bottling Works (1918-1934) ............................................... 589
    History ................................................................................. 589
    Bottles and Artifacts .............................................................. 591
      House Brand ................................................................ 591
  Lone Star Bottling Works (1918-1934) ............................................. 953
    History ................................................................................. 593
    Bottles and Artifacts .............................................................. 595
      Lone Star House Brand ....................................................... 595
  El Paso Brewing Assn. (1903-1921) .................................................. 596
    History ................................................................................. 596
    Bottles and Artifacts .............................................................. 597
      Bravo .............................................................................. 597
      Bock ................................................................................. 599
      Budweiser ........................................................................ 599
  Tri-State Beverage Company (1919-1924) ....................................... 599
    History ................................................................................. 599
    Bottles and Artifacts .............................................................. 602
Triangle Brand Beverages. ............................................ 602

Variations............................................................ 604

Javo................................................................. 607

Dr. Swett’s Root Beer............................................. 608

Delaware Punch.................................................... 610

Parfay............................................................... 611

Triple “X” Ginger Ale.............................................. 612

Orange Crush and Lemon Crush................................. 612

Weinhard’s R-Porter............................................... 613

Budweiser.......................................................... 614

Falstaff.............................................................. 614

Victory Bottling Works (1923-1931).............................. 614

History.............................................................. 614

Bottles and Artifacts................................................ 615

House Brand........................................................ 615

Variations............................................................ 619

Shells................................................................. 620

Chapter 12c – Small Bottlers – 1920-1950s. ......................... 625

Tickle Beverage & Mfg. Co. (1920). ................................. 625

History.............................................................. 625

Border Beverage Co., Inc. (1919-1922)............................ 625

History.............................................................. 625

Bottles and Artifacts................................................ 626

Grapico.............................................................. 626

Bone-Dry............................................................. 628

Graino............................................................... 629

Antonio Patino (1922). .............................................. 630

History.............................................................. 630

Mackin Brokerage Co. (1928-1933)................................. 630

History.............................................................. 630

Bottles and Artifacts................................................ 631

Falstaff Pale Dry Ginger Ale........................................ 632

Falstaff Dublin Style Cereal Beverage.............................. 633

Falstaff Pale......................................................... 634

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>Start Year - End Year</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Paso Real Juice Co.</td>
<td>1935-1942</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| History | 634  
| Bottles and Artifacts | 635  
| Lime Cola | 635 |
| Sahara Dry Beverages (1939-1959) |  
| History | 636  
| Bottles and Artifacts | 637  
| Sahara Dry Mixers | 637 |
| Wonder Beverage Co. (1946-1954) and Flores Brothers Bottling Co. (1950-1954) |  
| History | 639  
| Bottles and Artifacts | 639  
| Wonder Flavors | 639  
| Flores Bros. Flavors | 640 |
| Sun Spot Bottling Co. (1948) |  
| History | 641  
| Bottles and Extras | 642  
| High Rock | 642  
| Variations | 643  
| Sun Spot | 644 |
| Lone Star Sparkling Beverages (1955) |  
| History | 645  
| Bottles and Extras | 645  
| Lone Star Sparkling Beverages | 645 |
| History | 646  
| Olague Bottling Corp. (1962) and Vess Distributing Company (1962-1974) |  
| History | 647  
| Bottles and Artifacts | 649  
| Three V Cola | 649  
| Vess Flavors | 649 |
| Shasta Beverages Division of Consolidated Foods Corp. (1972-1975) |  
| History | 650  
| |  |
[More to be added as sections are completed]
 Figures

Chapter 2

Figure 2-1 – Belfast Ginger Ale, round bottom. ....................................................... 14
Figure 2-2 – Peened and re-stamped date code on Owens-Illinois base. ................. 28
Figure 2-3 – Postcard from Houck & Dieter wanting empties returned. ............... 36
Figure 2-4 – Socorro Dumpsite. ............................................................................. 42
Figure 2-5 – Author among the Grapette bottles at the Socorro County Historical Society 50

Chapter 4

Figure 4-1 - Bottle Nomenclature. ......................................................................... 61

Chapter 5a

Figure 5-1 – Evolution from Houck & Dieter to Empire Bottling Co. ................. 67
Figure 5-2 – A.L. Houck – plain bottom. ................................................................. 71
Figure 5-3 – A.L. Houck – mug bottom.. ................................................................. 72
Figure 5-4 – Houck & Dieter soda plant. ................................................................. 73
Figure 5-5 – Houck & Dieter ad. ............................................................................ 74
Figure 5-6 – Houck & Dieter Beer Vault................................................................. 75
Figure 5-7 – Houck & Dieter Beer Bottling & Soda Water.. ................................. 75
Figure 5-8 – John Phillip Dieter, October 27, 1895............................................. 76
Figure 5-9 – Dieter’s signature, 1895. ..................................................................... 76
Figure 5-10 – 1892 Houck & Dieter letterhead. .................................................... 76
Figure 5-11 – El Paso Bottling Works, Houck & Dieter...................................... 77
Figure 5-12 – The Houck & Dieter complex seen from Fourth St....................... 77
Figure 5-13 – The Houck & Dieter complex seen from the alley. ....................... 77
Figure 5-14 – Photo angles of Houck & Dieter complex.................................... 78
Figure 5-15 – Houck & Dieter Lemp’s Beer wagon. ............................................ 78
Figure 5-16 – 1903 Houck & Dieter letterhead. ................................................. 78
Figure 5-17 – Houck & Dieter office, 125-127 San Francisco St........................ 79
Figure 5-18 – Houck & Dieter Company.............................................................. 80
Figure 5-19 – Dieter’s mansion/Hotel Dieu Hospital, ca. 1892.. ........................... 83
Figure 5-20 – Houck & Dieter Hutchinson bottle – applied finish. .................... 86

xx
Figure 5-21 – Drawing of the early Hutchinson bottle. ........................................... 86
Figure 5-22 – Houck & Dieter Hutchinson bottle – tooled finish. ............................. 86
Figure 5-23 – Houck & Dieter – first crown bottle. .............................................. 90
Figure 5-24 – Houck & Dieter – six-panel bottle. .................................................. 91
Figure 5-25 – Young soldiers with Houck & Dieter sodas stacked in the background. 91
Figure 5-26 – Cases of Houck & Dieter sodas at the Madero camp – six-panel bottles. 92
Figure 5-27 – Houck & Dieter caps for corks. ..................................................... 92
Figure 5-28 – Wines sold by Houck & Dieter. ..................................................... 92
Figure 5-29 – Port bottle with Houck & Dieter Co. at bottom of label. ...................... 92
Figure 5-30 – El Paso bar with ads for Apollinaris Water, Lemp Beer, & White Rock fairy 95
Figure 5-31 – Closeup of the Pretty Polly bar ads. ............................................... 95
Figure 5-32 – German Apollinaris bottle. ............................................................ 95
Figure 5-33 – Apollinaris bottle – exported to the U.S. through England. ............... 96
Figure 5-34 – Crown-finished Apollinaris bottle – still exported through London .... 96
Figure 5-35 – Nassau Selters – one of the seals. ................................................... 97
Figure 5-36 – Nassau Selters. ................................................................................ 97
Figure 5-37 – Psyche, the White Rock logo, of 1893. ............................................. 99
Figure 5-38 – 20th century White Rock Bottle. .................................................... 99
Figure 5-39 – Postcard of Stafford Springs Hotel, front view. .............................. 100
Figure 5-40 – Postcard of Stafford Springs Hotel, side view. ............................... 100
Figure 5-41 – Postcard of Stafford Springs Motel – old bottle house is peaked-roof section. 101
Figure 5-42 – Stafford Springs water bottle. ....................................................... 101
Figure 5-43 – Cerva ad......................................................................................... 102
Figure 5-44 – Houck & Dieter statement to Douglas Builders. ............................ 103
Figure 5-45 – Houck & Dieter Hutchinson bottle – Douglas. .............................. 104
Figure 5-46 – Houck & Dieter Crown-finished bottle – Douglas. ....................... 105
Figure 5-47 – The “buckle” – manufacturer’s mark of the Western Glass Mfg. Co.. 106
Figure 5-48 – Hutchinson bottle used by Dieter & Sauer. ..................................... 107

Chapter 5b

Figure 5-49 – Probable location of Purity Bottling & Mfg. Co. .............................. 111
Figure 5-50 – Location of Purity Bottling & Mfg. Co., 613 San Antonio St. .......... 113
Figure 5-51 – Purity wall ad – ca. 1911 or later.................................................. 113
Figure 5-52 – Purity’s plain-bottom bottle. ......................................................... 115
Figure 5-53 – Purity’s fluted-bottom bottle. ....................................................... 115
Chapter 5c

Figure 5-82 – The old Empire Products Corp. plant at Florence & Mills. 147
Figure 5-83 – Empire Root Beer label. 150
Figure 5-84 – 6-panel Empire Beverages bottle. 151
Figure 5-85 – Ad for Empire McGinty Beverages. 152
| Figure 5-122 | Grapette, Copr. 1946 – 6-ounce bottle. | 187 |
| Figure 5-123 | Grapette, Copr. 1939 – 6-ounce bottle. | 188 |
| Figure 5-124 | Grapette, 7-ounce “twist” bottle. | 189 |
| Figure 5-125 | Orangette. | 190 |
| Figure 5-126 | Lemonette. | 190 |
| Figure 5-127 | Botl-o. | 191 |
| Figure 5-128 | The T-in-a-keystone mark -- Knox Glass Bottle Co. | 192 |
| Figure 5-129 | Goetz Pale Near Beer. | 193 |
| Figure 5-130 | Mason’s Root Beer. | 193 |
| Figure 5-131 | Empire, Wholesome and Refreshing – front. | 196 |
| Figure 5-132 | Empire, Wholesome and Refreshing – reverse. | 196 |
| Figure 5-133 | Empire, For over a half century | 197 |
| Figure 5-134 | Empire, 16-ounce. | 198 |
| Figure 5-135 | Empire Shell (wooden case). | 198 |
| Figure 5-136 | Dad’ Root Beer. | 199 |
| Figure 5-137 | Squirt. | 199 |
| Figure 5-138 | Mr. Cola. | 199 |
| Figure 5-139 | Duffy’s Draft Beverages repair decal. | 201 |
| Figure 5-140 | Old Monk label – Duffy’s. | 201 |

| Chapter 6 |
| Figure 6-1 – Julian & Johnson ad. | 206 |
| Figure 6-2 – Julian & Johnson location in 1888, marked “Who. Liq.” | 206 |
| Figure 6-3 – Julian & Johnson – to the right of Roberts & Heryford. | 207 |
| Figure 6-4 – Julian & Johnson whiskey bottle. | 208 |
| Figure 6-5 – Robert F. Johnson. | 208 |
| Figure 6-6 – Johnson’s business card. | 209 |
| Figure 6-7 – R.F. Johnson & Co., undated ad. | 209 |
| Figure 6-8 – Original R.F. Johnson glass works and storage. | 209 |
| Figure 6-9 – R.F. Johnson, expanded glass works. | 210 |
| Figure 6-10 – R.F. Johnson Hutchinson bottle – round plate. | 210 |
| Figure 6-11 – R.F. Johnson Hutchinson bottle – tombstone-shaped plate. | 211 |
| Figure 6-12 – Top view of Hutter stopper used by R.F. Johnson. | 212 |
Figure 6-13 – “EP” on base of El Paso Bottling Co. bottle. ................................. 213
Figure 6-14 – El Paso Bottling Co. bottle – round plate. ................................. 213
Figure 6-15 – El Paso Bottling Co. bottle – tombstone-shaped plate. ................. 213
Figure 6-16 – R.F. Johnson crown-topped bottles with “HP” monogram. ............... 214
Figure 6-17 – Manitou Springs Bottling Works – Trade Card. ........................... 215
Figure 6-18 – Manitou Ginger Champagne. ................................................... 216
Figure 6-19 – Manitou porcelain stopper covers. ............................................. 217
Figure 6-20 – Ute Iron Springs – Post Card. .................................................... 218
Figure 6-21 – Ute Chief bottle. ................................................................. 218
Figure 6-22 – Ute Chief Mineral Water bottle. ................................................. 219
Figure 6-23 – Pfaff’s bottling works and beer storage. ..................................... 220
Figure 6-24 – Expansion of bottling works. .................................................... 220
Figure 6-25 – Pfaff’s office, 108 San Antonio.. ............................................. 220
Figure 6-26 – Pfaff Home. ................................................................. 221
Figure 6-27 – Pfaff ad, Alamogordo. .......................................................... 222
Figure 6-28 – Block 50, Pfaff’s Alamogordo saloon. ...................................... 222
Figure 6-29 – Alamogordo ca. 1905 – arrow points to Pfaff’s saloon................. 222
Figure 6-30 – Henry Pfaff house brand bottle. .............................................. 223
Figure 6-31 – Pfaff ad for Malt Nutrine. ...................................................... 225
Figure 6-32 – Buffalo Lithia Water bottle. .................................................... 226
Figure 6-33 – Buffalo Springs Mineral Water label. ....................................... 226
Figure 6-34 – Southwestern Liquor Co. ad. ............................................... 230
Figure 6-35 – Clysmic bottle base. ............................................................. 231
Figure 6-36 – Generic “bowling pin” bottle used by Clysmic. ......................... 231
Figure 6-37 – Clysmic “King of Tablewaters” tray. .................................... 232
Figure 6-38 – Clysmic playing cards. .......................................................... 232

Chapter 7a

Figure 7-1 – First location of Sweeney’s soda bottling operation. .................... 238
Figure 7-2 – Sweeney’s second location. ..................................................... 238
Figure 7-3 – Sweeney in relationship to the El Paso Brewery. ......................... 239
Figure 7-4 – Martin R. Sweeney. ............................................................. 240
Figure 7-5 – Margaret “Maggie” Sweeney. .................................................. 240
Figure 7-6 – Woodlawn Bottling Co., 800 S. Florence St. .............................. 241
Figure 7-7 – Woodlawn ad. ................................................................. 241
Chapter 7b

Figure 7-16 – Solarized amethyst Woodlawn bottle, possibly the earliest. .......... 250
Figure 7-17 – Model 322. ................................................................. 251
Figure 7-18 – Heelmark: 322.02. ......................................................... 251
Figure 7-19 – Woodlawn house brand bottle............................................ 251
Figure 7-20 – Variation of house brand bottle............................................. 251
Figure 7-21 – Different finishes from the same Illinois Glass Co. bottle. ............. 251
Figure 7-22 – An unusual machine-made Woodlawn house brand bottle. .......... 252
Figure 7-23 – Base of the unusual bottle, showing atypical machine scars. ......... 252
Figure 7-24 – A Woodlawn machine-made variation.................................... 252
Figure 7-25 – Woodlawn machine-made, Registered....................................... 253
Figure 7-26 – OP 23 heelmark – Okmulgee, Oklahoma plant, Graham Glass Co. .. 253
Figure 7-27 – Toltec Brand, early machine-made bottle.................................. 254
Figure 7-28 – OP 1202 P heelmark – Okmulgee plant, Graham Glass Co., 1916 date code 255
Figure 7-29 – Toltec Brand ad................................................................. 256
Figure 7-30 – Toltec paper label on Armstrong bottle..................................... 256
Figure 7-31 – Toltec Brand specialty bottle................................................. 257
Figure 7-32 – Toltec Brand specialty bottle – side view.................................. 257
Figure 7-33 – Southern Star manufacturer’s mark with 29 date code on specialty bottle... 258
Figure 7-34 – Woodlawn for Blatz near-beer.................................................. 258
Figure 7-35 – Clicquot Club bottle with paper label.......................................... 259
Figure 7-36 – Whistle ad................................................................. 261
Figure 7-37 – Whistle’s paper-label bottle.................................................. 261
Figure 7-38 – Whistle specialty bottle...................................................... 262
Figure 7-39 – Vess Jones patent for the Whistle bottle design.......................... 263
Figure 7-40 – Vess Dry specialty bottle..................................................... 263
Chapter 7c

Figure 7-45 – Marshall and Dale Condon beside a Pepsi truck. ................................. 271
Figure 7-46 – Ad for products at the Raynolds St. location. ................................. 271
Figure 7-47 – The Condon family in 1995, Julia at left. .................................. 272
Figure 7-48 – The Pepsi plant at Pelicano. ...................................................... 273
Figure 7-49 – Pepsi bottle style first used by Woodlawn. ................................. 274
Figure 7-50 – An early Woolawn Pepsi bottle with remnants of the paper label. .... 274
Figure 7-51 – Generic Pepsi bottle in ad. ......................................................... 275
Figure 7-52 – Steelman’s patent for the “wave” Pepsi bottle. ............................. 275
Figure 7-53 – Double-dot Pepsi Logo. ............................................................. 276
Figure 7-54 – Dash Pepsi logo. ................................................................. 276
Figure 7-55 – 2 Full Glass neck logo. ............................................................. 276
Figure 7-56 – Dash logo ACL Pepsi bottle – El Paso. ........................................ 278
Figure 7-57 – El Paso dash-logo Pepsi bottle – reverse ................................ 278
Figure 7-58 – Pepsi “swirl” bottle. ................................................................. 279
Figure 7-59 – Mountain Dew “Hillbilly” bottle. .............................................. 282
Figure 7-60 – “FILLED BY / MARSHALL AND DALE” .................................. 282
Figure 7-61 – Patio flavor bottle. ................................................................. 284

Chapter 8a

Figure 8-1 – The Smith family; Hope is standing far right, Clopton kneeling far right. . 288
Figure 8-2 – A clowning Hope Smith with his wife (or future wife), Milda Conoly. .... 289
Figure 8-3 – San Antonio Brewing Assn. & Magnolia Bottling Co. locations. .......... 291
Figure 8-4 – Magnolia Bottling Co., first location. ............................................ 291
Figure 8-5 – San Antonio Brewing Assoc. building. ............................................ 292
Figure 8-6 – Magnolia’s first home. ................................................................. 292
Figure 8-7 – San Antonio Brewing Assoc. (1898). ............................................. 293
Figure 8-8 – San Antonio Brewing Assoc. (1902). ............................................. 293
Figure 8-9 – San Antonio Brewing Assoc. ........................................................ 293
Figure 8-10 – San Antonio Brewing Assoc. ................................. 294
Figure 8-11 – San Antonio Brewing Assoc. bottle. .......................... 294
Figure 8-12 – Houston Ice & Brewing Co. bottle. ......................... 295
Figure 8-13 – Magnolia Pale beer label. .................................. 295
Figure 8-14 – Magnolia Bottling Co. ginger ale bottle – tilt is how bottle actually stands. .......................... 298
Figure 8-15 – Base of the ginger ale bottle. ................................. 298
Figure 8-16 – Magnolia’s earliest house brand bottle – Illinois Glass Co. .......................... 299
Figure 8-17 – Variation in plates. ........................................... 300
Figure 8-18 – Magnolia’s earliest house brand bottles – note difference in heights. .......................... 300
Figure 8-19 – Root Glass Co. Magnolia bottle – 1909. ....................... 300
Figure 8-20 – Machine-made flavor bottle – no volume information. .......................... 301
Figure 8-21 – Base of “star” bottle. ......................................... 302
Figure 8-22 – Soda Water, Coca-Cola Bottling Co. with star. .......................... 303
Figure 8-23 – Registered flavor bottle – 6 ½ FL. OZ. .......................... 304
Figure 8-24 – Base of Registered bottle. ................................... 305
Figure 8-25 – Registered bottle with upside down plate. .......................... 305
Figure 8-26 – Machine-made flavor bottle. .................................. 306
Figure 8-27 – Close-up of the “R”. ........................................ 306
Figure 8-28 – Mold seams, fins, and washboards. .......................... 306
Figure 8-29 – Fins and ghost seams. ........................................ 307
Figure 8-30 – Circular mold repair scar. ..................................... 307
Figure 8-31 – 1934 ad for Hope’s flavors in square bottles. ........................................ 307
Figure 8-32 – Design Patent No. 70,281 to John M. Lents. .......................... 308
Figure 8-33 – Magnolia’s first square bottle. .................................. 308
Figure 8-34 – Magnolia blossom on the shoulder. .......................... 309
Figure 8-35 – Base of the square Magnolia bottle. .......................... 309
Figure 8-36 – 1865EG25 code on Magnolia square bottle. .......................... 309
Figure 8-37 – Generic square bottle. ........................................ 310
Figure 8-38 – Hope’s square bottle. ......................................... 310
Figure 8-39 – Close-up of Hope’s shoulder panel. .......................... 311
Figure 8-40 – Heelmark on Hope’s bottle. ................................... 311
Figure 8-41 – Base of Hope’s bottle. ........................................ 311

Chapter 8b

Figure 8-42 – Early Magnolia business card. .............................. 315
Figure 8-43 – 921 Myrtle Ave. 316
Figure 8-44 – Coca-Cola ads ca. 1912. 317
Figure 8-45 – Inside of the plant at Myrtle ca. 1913. 317
Figure 8-46 – A Mature Hope Smith. 318
Figure 8-47 – Milda Conolly as a girl. 318
Figure 8-48 – Magnolia Coca-Cola ad. 318
Figure 8-49 – Three new trucks in front of the Myrtle St. plant. 319
Figure 8-50 – Map of the Yandell plant, 1941. 320
Figure 8-51 – Coca-Cola receipt – 1943. 320
Figure 8-52 – Magnolia ad with unusual carrier. 321
Figure 8-53 – Ad showing a “box” vending machine. 321
Figure 8-54 – Coca-Cola war advertisement. 322
Figure 8-55 – Magnolia receipt – 1946. 322
Figure 8-56 – Magnolia ad for delivery of Cokes to Alamogordo. 323
Figure 8-57 – The opening of the Alamogordo plant. 323
Figure 8-58 – Hope M. Smith – a man of character. 325
Figure 8-59 – Hope and Milda in their later years together. 327
Figure 8-60 – Forrest M. Smith. 327
Figure 8-61 – Magnolia ad – Yandell location. 328
Figure 8-62 – Key chain commemorating the new building. 329
Figure 8-63 – Ad including Dr Pepper. 330

Chapter 8c

Figure 8-64 – Mouth-blown, straight-sided Coke bottle from Magnolia. 333
Figure 8-65 – Machine-made, straight-sided Coke bottle from Magnolia. 334
Figure 8-66 – OP 37A mark – Okmulgee, Oklahoma, plant, Graham Glass Co. 334
Figure 8-67 – Bottle drawing – 1916 patent document. 335
Figure 8-68 – Copy of the prototype 1916 bottle – These were never used. 335
Figure 8-69 – Hobble-Skirt Coca-Cola bottle – BOTTLE PAT’D NOV. 15, 1916. 335
Figure 8-70 – Ad with 1915-patent Coke Bottles. 336
Figure 8-71 – Ad with 1915-patent Coke Bottles. 336
Figure 8-72 – Base of 1915-patent bottle with horizontal “TEXAS” and “4”. 337
Figure 8-73 – Base of 1915-patent bottle with “TEXAS” in inverted arch and “1”. 337
Figure 8-74 – Base of 1915-patent bottle with “TEXAS” in inverted arch. 338
Figure 8-75 – Bottle drawing – 1923 patent document. 338

xxix
Figure 8-76 – Hobble-Skirt Coca-Cola bottle – BOTTLE PAT’D DEC. 25, 1923........ 338
Figure 8-77 – Heelmarks on 1923-patent bottle. ............................................ 339
Figure 8-78 – Base of later Owens-Illinois 1923-patent base. ......................... 339
Figure 8-79 – Bottle drawing – 1937 (D-105529) patent document. ................. 340
Figure 8-80 – Hobble-Skirt Coca-Cola bottle – BOTTLE PAT. D-105529. ........ 340
Figure 8-81 – D-105529 bottle in 1940 ad. .................................................... 340
Figure 8-82 – D-patent base – Chattanooga Glass Co., 1941. ......................... 341
Figure 8-83 – D-patent base – Chattanooga Glass Co., 1948. ........................ 342
Figure 8-84 – Skirt embossing from Laurens Glass Works, 1948. ................... 342
Figure 8-85 – D-patent base – Laurens Glass Works, 1948. .......................... 342
Figure 8-86 – Skirt embossing from Owens-Illinois, 1950. .............................. 342
Figure 8-87 – D-patent base – Owens-Illinois, Streator plant, 1950. ............ 342
Figure 8-88 – Hobble-Skirt Coca-Cola bottle – IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE.. .... 343
Figure 8-99 – IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE transitional base – Chattanooga Glass Co. . 343
Figure 8-90 – IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE transitional base – Laurens Glass Works. . 344
Figure 8-91 – IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE base – Owens-Illinois (old logo). ........ 344
Figure 8-92 – IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE base – Owens-Illinois (new logo). .... 344
Figure 8-93 – IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE base – Chattanooga Glass, Chattanooga plant. . 344
Figure 8-94 – IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE base – Chattanooga Glass, Corsicana plant. . 344
Figure 8-95 – Comparison of three letter sizes on line spacer bases............. 345
Figure 8-96 – Original Random Baseplate format. ....................................... 347
Figure 8-97 – ACL hobble-skirt bottle with case wear. .................................. 347
Figure 8-98 – Magnolia ad for 6½-, 10- and 16-ounce sizes. ......................... 349
Figure 8-99 – 12-ounce ACL bottle............................................................... 349
Figure 8-100 – 26-ounce ACL bottle............................................................. 349
Figure 8-101 – Fanta bottle. ......................................................................... 350
Figure 8-102 – Ad for Sprite. ........................................................................ 350
Figure 8-103 – Fresca bottle. ....................................................................... 350
Figure 8-104 – 1973 bottle with ACL missing; note lack of ribs at center labeling area. . 351
Figure 8-105 – Red label Coke bottle. ......................................................... 351
Figure 8-106 – Magnolia Coca-Cola siphon bottle. ....................................... 352
Figure 8-107 – Magnolia bottle opener. ....................................................... 353
Figure 8-108 – Wooden Coca-Cola cooler. ................................................... 354

Chapter 9a

xxx
Figure 9-1 – Matchbook advertising the Golden State Café. ........................................................ 359
Figure 9-2 – Union Bottling Works.......................................................... 360
Figure 9-3 – Union Bottling Works – close-up............................................. 360
Figure 9-4 – Union Bottling Works bottle – 6 ½ ounce.................................. 362
Figure 9-5 – Closeup of peened-out letters on Union label.......................... 362
Figure 9-6 – Union Bottling Works bottle – 7 ounce.................................... 363
Figure 9-7 – Union Bottling Works bottle – 7 ounce variation...................... 364
Figure 9-8 – Advertisement for NIB............................................................ 365
Figure 9-9 – NIB sign.................................................................................. 365

Chapter 9b

Figure 9-10 – Location of Nicholson Bottling Works................................. 369
Figure 9-11 – Nicholson Bottling Works, 1927........................................... 370
Figure 9-12 – Nicholson Bottling Works building, 1996............................. 370
Figure 9-13 – Nicholson building in 1996 – taken from other end of the alley. 370
Figure 9-14 – Alkivides (Alkie) Nicholson................................................... 371
Figure 9-15 – The Nicholson family of bottles.......................................... 374
Figure 9-16 – Nicholson’s first 6½-ounce specialty bottle............................ 375
Figure 9-17 – Base of the first bottle.......................................................... 376
Figure 9-18 – Nicholson bottles – 6½- and 9-ounce sizes............................ 376
Figure 9-19 – Nicholson’s second specialty bottle..................................... 377
Figure 9-20 – Base of Nicholson’s second bottle....................................... 378
Figure 9-21 – Nicholson family of ACL bottles........................................ 378
Figure 9-22 – Blue-label Nicholson ACL bottle........................................ 379
Figure 9-23 – Base of blue-label bottle made by Vidrieria Monterrey........... 379
Figure 9-24 – Base of blue-label bottle made by the Liberty Glass Co........... 380
Figure 9-25 – White & Blue label bottle made by the Liberty Glass Co........... 380
Figure 9-26 – Base of white & blue label bottle........................................ 380
Figure 9-27 – Second White & Blue label 8-ounce bottle............................ 381
Figure 9-28 – The final Nicholson 10-ounce bottle..................................... 382
Figure 9-29 – Empty Nicholson shell....................................................... 382
Figure 9-30 – Nicholson case with bottles................................................. 383
Figure 9-31 – Original embossed Howdy Orange bottle............................ 383
Figure 9-32 – Grigg’s original patent for the Howdy bottle......................... 384
Figure 9-33 – Embossed Howdy orange bottle........................................... 384
Figure 9-34 – Grigg’s second Howdy patent issued in 1929. ........................................ 385
Figure 9-35 – Golden Glow Special Brew label. ......................................................... 386
Figure 9-36 – Golden Glow label on bottle. ............................................................... 386

Chapter 10a

Figure 10a-1 – Nehi Bottling Co................................................................. 393
Figure 10a-2 – Patent for the Nehi “Silk-Stocking” bottle. ................................. 394
Figure 10a-3 – Nehi “Silk-Stocking” bottle..................................................... 395
Figure 10a-4 – Nehi bottle (Owens-Illinois 1930:B17). ...................................... 396
Figure 10a-5 – Unusual Owens-Illinois codes on Nehi bottle. .............................. 398
Figure 10a-6 – Par-T-Pak bottle offered by the El Paso plant. ............................. 399
Figure 10a-7 – Base of Par-T-Pak bottle. ............................................................ 399
Figure 10a-8 – ACL Par-T-Pak Cola bottle...................................................... 400
Figure 10a-9 – ACL Par-T-Pak ginger ale bottle.............................................. 400
Figure 10a-10 – ACL Royal Crown Cola bottle with debossed shoulder label. .... 401
Figure 10a-11 – Closeup of debossed shoulder label. ......................................... 401
Figure 10a-12 – ACL RC Cola bottle with embossed shoulder label. .................... 402
Figure 10a-13 – Closeup of embossed shoulder label. ........................................ 402
Figure 10a-14 – Ad for RC bottle with ACL shoulder label. .............................. 403
Figure 10a-15 – ACL RC Cola bottle with ACL shoulder label. ........................... 404
Figure 10a-16 – Base of 1939 RC Cola bottle...................................................... 404
Figure 10a-17 – Nehi-Royal Crown plant, 1940s (courtesy of Robert R. Ritter). ...... 405
Figure 10a-18 – Robert R. Ritter in 1996 with one of his paintings. .................... 407
Figure 10a-19 – ACL Nehi bottles – red-on-yellow (left), white-on-red (right). ...... 409
Figure 10a-20 – Red-on-Yellow ACL Nehi bottle. ............................................. 411
Figure 10a-21 – Back of Nehi bottle with PHOENIX - EL PASO. ......................... 411
Figure 10a-22 – Back of Nehi bottle with EL PASO, TEXAS. ............................ 412
Figure 10a-23 – Base of the 1947 Nehi bottle. .................................................... 412
Figure 10a-24 – Keystone-T mark on a Nehi base............................................ 413
Figure 10a-25 – Nehi bottles, 9 and 12 ounces. ............................................... 413
Figure 10a-26 – White-on-red ACL Nehi bottle – style not used in El Paso. ........... 414
Figure 10a-27 – White-on-red ACL Nehi bottle – from El Paso. ............................. 414
Figure 10a-28 – Pyramid-style ACL Royal Crown bottle. ..................................... 416
Figure 10a-29 – Back of Pyramid RC bottle made in 1951. ................................. 418
Figure 10a-30 – Three styles of Royal Crown Bottles......................................... 418
Figure 10a-31 – Royal Crown bottle – no pyramids.
Figure 10a-32 – Back of 1956 Royal Crown bottle.
Figure 10a-33 – Base of 1956 Royal Crown bottle.
Figure 10a-34 – Royal Crown diamond bottle.
Figure 10a-35 – Royal Crown with circle label.
Figure 10a-36 – Royal Crown ad.
Figure 10a-37 – Nehi – no-garter bottle.
Figure 10a-38 – Nehi base with 1961 date code.

Chapter 10b

Figure 10b-1 – Original plant location.
Figure 10b-2 – Brass disc embedded in El Paso streets.
Figure 10b-3 – Ad featuring Al Randle, Jr. – 1939.
Figure 10b-4 – Seven-Up Co. Employees ca. 1950.
Figure 10b-5 – New plant at 5607 El Paso Dr., ca. 1960.
Figure 10b-6 – Paper label from a Seven-Up bottle.
Figure 10b-7 – Typical soda shape – amber bottle.
Figure 10b-8 – Squat shape – amber bottle.
Figure 10b-9 – 7 up / ALKALINE REACTION, – 1935.
Figure 10b-10 – 8-bubble front label.
Figure 10b-11 – Embossed “u7p” neck/shoulder label.
Figure 10b-12 – Embossed “7up” neck/shoulder label.
Figure 10b-13 – Embossed, textured “7up” neck/shoulder label (Chris Weide).
Figure 10b-14 – ACL neck/shoulder label – 7-bubble.
Figure 10b-15 – One- and two-footed variations of front labels.
Figure 10b-16 – The four earliest back labels.
Figure 10b-17 – Back labels 2 & 3.
Figure 10b-18 – Back labels 5-6.
Figure 10b-19 – El Paso’s first 7-up bottle – 8 bubbles; embossed neck/shoulder label.
Figure 10b-20 – Base of embossed bottle – 1937.
Figure 10b-21 – Back of 8-bubble bottle with ACL neck/shoulder label.
Figure 10b-22 – Base of 8-bubble bottle – 1940.
Figure 10b-23 – Tiny “L” on the reinforcing ring of the crown finish.
Figure 10b-24 – 8-bubble and 7 bubble bottles.
Figure 10b-25 – An early El Paso 7-bubble bottle.
Figure 10b-26 – Back of a 1946 bottle. ......................................................... 443
Figure 10b-27 – Base of a 1946 bottle. ....................................................... 443
Figure 10b-28 – Back of a 1949 bottle. ....................................................... 443
Figure 10b-29 – Base of a 1949 bottle. ....................................................... 443
Figure 10b-30 – Back of a 1951 bottle. ....................................................... 444
Figure 10b-31 – Swimsuit lady & non-swim bottles. ................................. 444
Figure 10b-32 – Non-swim bottle, 7-oz. ........................................................ 445
Figure 10b-33 – Non-swim bottle, 12-oz. ...................................................... 445
Figure 10b-34 – Non-swim bottle, 28-oz. ...................................................... 446
Figure 10b-35 – More recent 7-Up bottle. .................................................... 446
Figure 10b-36 – Like – the first diet cola from 7-Up. .................................... 447
Figure 10b-37 – Red-on-White ACL Kickapoo Joy Juice – 10 oz., front. .... 449
Figure 10b-38 – Red-on-Yellow ACL Kickapoo Joy Juice – 12 oz., back. .... 449
Figure 10b-39 – 6 Tone bottle. ................................................................. 450

Chapter 10c

Figure 10c-1 – Canada Dry Ad. ................................................................. 453
Figure 10c-2 – John D. Scott (left) and Robert J. Galentin in 1958. ............ 455
Figure 10c-3 – Two paper-label variations of Canada Dry bottles. .......... 457
Figure 10c-4 – Four variations of Canada Dry ACL bottles. ................. 458
Figure 10c-5 – 1951 Canada Dry ginger ale bottle. ................................. 458
Figure 10c-6 – Base of 1951 ginger ale bottle – note underlined “3” ......... 459
Figure 10c-7 – 1960 Canada Dry ginger ale bottle. ................................. 459
Figure 10c-8 – Base of 1960 ginger ale bottle – note obvious overstamp of “60” on “59”. 460
Figure 10c-9 – 1965 Canada Dry ginger ale bottle. ................................. 460
Figure 10c-10 – Canada Dry Hi-spot Cola bottle. ................................... 461
Figure 10c-11 – Canada Dry Club Soda bottle. ....................................... 462
Figure 10c-12 – Canada Dry Spur bottle. ............................................... 464
Figure 10c-13 – 6-oz. (left) and 7-oz. comparison. ................................. 464
Figure 10c-14 – 10-oz. Canada Dry Beverage bottle. .............................. 465
Figure 10c-15 – Canada Dry shell. ......................................................... 466
Figure 10c-16 – Seven-Up Royal Crown plant at Boeing Dr. ................. 468
Figure 10c-17 – Seven-Up Employees, ca. 1974. .................................. 469
Figure 10c-18 – Seven-Up Royal Crown ad. ........................................... 469
Figure 10c-19 – Al Randle, Sr., and Pete Echaniz, ca. 1976. ................. 469

xxxiv
Figure 10c-20 – Pete Echaniz, ca. 1980. ................................................................. 471
Figure 10c-21 – Business card from Pete Echaniz. ................................................... 471
Figure 10c-22 – Seven-Up Royal Crown ad. .............................................................. 472
Figure 10c-23 – Frostie Root Beer bottle, 1937. ......................................................... 473

Chapter 11a

Figure 11a-1 – Texan – 8-oz. bottle. ................................................................. 481
Figure 11a-2 – Texan – yellow & red ACL. .............................................................. 482
Figure 11a-3 – Debossed Dr Pepper slant block letters. ............................................. 483
Figure 11a-4 – Base of the 1952 bottle. ................................................................. 484

Chapter 11b

Figure 11b-1 – An assortment of Barq’s bottle caps. ................................................. 489
Figure 11b-2 – John Yowell and employees with trucks. .......................................... 490
Figure 11b-3 – An employee at the Dixie Filler in 1939. ........................................... 490
Figure 11b-4 – John Yowell and employees in front of the plant, 1939. ....................... 490
Figure 11b-5 – Service truck in the 1940s. .............................................................. 491
Figure 11b-6 – John Yowell and employees in front of the plant in 1947. ..................... 491
Figure 11b-7 – An Orange Crush truck in front of one of the Barq’s plants. .................. 492
Figure 11b-8 – A Barq’s truck in front of the plant, ca. 1950. .................................. 492
Figure 11b-9 – Barq’s drivers by their trucks, ca. 1950. ........................................... 493
Figure 11b-10 – Double Cola plant. ..................................................................... 493
Figure 11b-11 – Fleet of trucks marked Double Cola. .............................................. 493
Figure 11b-12 – The Artesia Barq’s plant. ............................................................... 494
Figure 11b-13 – Patent for the Barq’s bottle, 1935. .................................................. 495
Figure 11b-14 – Barq’s bottle – 8 ounce. ............................................................... 496
Figure 11b-15 – Embossed Barq’s bottle. ............................................................... 496
Figure 11b-16 – White and blue ACL front – embossed back. ................................. 497
Figure 11b-17 – Base of bottle with embossed back. .............................................. 497
Figure 11b-18 – Base of alternative bottle, probably embossed back. ....................... 498
Figure 11b-19 – Front view of an ACL Barq’s bottle. ............................................. 498
Figure 11b-20 – Back label on a 1948 Barq’s bottle. .............................................. 501
Figure 11b-21 – Back label on a 1953 Barq’s bottle. .............................................. 501
Figure 11b-22 – Back label on a 1960 Barq’s bottle. .............................................. 502

xxxi
Figure 11b-23 – Back label on a Barq’s bottle made by the Chattanooga Glass Co. 502
Figure 11b-24 – Both sizes of Dr. Wells. 503
Figure 11b-25 – 7-oz. Dr. Wells – El Paso. 504
Figure 11b-26 – 12-oz. Dr. Wells – El Paso & Albuquerque. 504
Figure 11b-27 – Randall 1941 patent for the NuGrape bottle. 505
Figure 11b-28 – 1941 NuGrape bottle – El Paso, Texas. 506
Figure 11b-29 – 1942 NuGrape bottle – El Paso & Albuquerque. 507
Figure 11b-30 – 1943 NuGrape bottle – Albuquerque, New Mex. 508
Figure 11b-31 – 1944 NuGrape bottle – El Paso, Texas. 508
Figure 11b-32 – 1946 NuGrape bottle – Albuquerque, New Mex. 508
Figure 11b-33 – 1946 NuGrape bottle – El Paso, Texas. 509
Figure 11b-34 – Hav-A-Swig bottle. 510
Figure 11b-35 – Tom Collins Jr. bottle. 511
Figure 11b-36 – Orange Crush bottle. 513
Figure 11b-37 – Pop Kola bottle. 515
Figure 11b-38 – Double Cola bottle. 516
Figure 11b-39 – Nesbitt’s bottle – rectangular label. 518
Figure 11b-40 – Nesbitt’s bottle – oval label. 518
Figure 11b-41 – Hollywood bottle. 519

Chapter 11c

John Yowel (standing) with son “Dub” (in truck), 1959. Cover
Figure 11c-1 – Unpacking Dr Pepper bottles made by Liberty Glass Co. in 1958. 525
Figure 11c-2 – Leisure time at a convention. 526
Figure 11c-3 – Larger size Barq’s bottle – ONE PINT 2 OZ. 527
Figure 11c-4 – Larger size Barq’s bottle – 18 OZ. 528
Figure 11c-5 – Dr Pepper bottle with “bounce” letters – introduced in 1958. 529
Figure 11c-6 – Dr Pepper bottle with broad letters – introduced in 1971. 529
Figure 11c-7 – End view of a 1972 Dr Pepper shell. 531
Figure 11c-8 – Side view of a 1972 Dr Pepper shell, showing internal letters. 531
Figure 11c-9 – Diet Dr Pepper. 532
Figure 11c-10 – Pommac, a Swedish import. 533

Chapter 12a

Figure 12a-1 – Location of Reber’s “Soda Water Fac.” and El Paso St. businesses. 539

xxxi
Figure 12a-38 – Avondale spice tins by the James A. Dick Co. ............................ 577
Figure 12a-39 – Dicksie Cider Vinegar, James A. Dick Co. ............................. 578
Figure 12a-40 – Closeup of Dicksie label .......................................................... 578
Figure 12a-41 – Barma, a near-beer distributed by Blatz .................................. 579
Figure 12a-42 – Jus-Rite, a near-beer distributed by E.M. McCoy ....................... 580
Figure 12a-43 – La Perla, brewed by the San Antonio Brewing Assoc. ............... 581
Figure 12a-44 – La Perla, a near-beer distributed by the Zork-Smith Fruit Co. .... 581
Figure 12a-45 – Map of Crombie & Co. ............................................................... 584
Figure 12a-46 – La Perla, Crombie & Co. ............................................................ 584
Figure 12a-47 – Pearl near-beer, Crombie & Co. .................................................. 585

Chapter 12b

Figure 12b-1 – House-brand bottle used by the Texas Bottling Works ............... 591
Figure 12b-2 – House-brand bottle used by the Texas Bottling Works ............... 592
Figure 12b-3 – Crude 6 ½ FL. OZ. on heel of Texas Bottling Works bottle ........... 592
Figure 12b-4 – M.M. on base of Texas Bottling Works bottle .............................. 593
Figure 12b-5 – Business card for Lone Star Bottling Works Manuel Torres Saldaña. 593
Figure 12b-6 – Lone Star bottle dump at Socorro, Texas .................................... 595
Figure 12b-7 – Bottle from the Lone Star Bottling Works ................................. 595
Figure 12b-8 – Base of Lone Star bottle with deep groove in machine scar ......... 596
Figure 12b-9 – El Paso ad for Bravo, a near-beer ............................................ 597
Figure 12b-10 – Ad for Bravo from Jefferson City, Missouri ............................. 598
Figure 12b-11 – Sign for Bravo .......................................................... 598
Figure 12b-12 – El Paso Brewing Assn. ad ....................................................... 599
Figure 12b-13 – Tri-State Beverage Co. 1922 letterhead .................................. 600
Figure 12b-14 – Triangle Brand Beverages ad ................................................. 602
Figure 12b-15 – Triangle Brand Beverages ad ................................................. 603
Figure 12b-16 – Triangle Brand bottle ............................................................... 603
Figure 12b-17 – Front heel with no volume mark; back heel with OS 215 S ......... 604
Figure 12b-18 – 7 FLU. OZS. on the front heel of the second 1919 bottle .......... 604
Figure 12b-19 – MIN. CONTENTS 6½ FL. OZ. on the front heel of the 1920 bottle. 605
Figure 12b-20 – CONTENTS 7 FLU. OZS. on front and CH243S G 21 on 1921 bottle. 605
Figure 12b-21 – 1024E on the base of the 1922 bottle ...................................... 606
Figure 12b-22 – Javo ad ........................................................ 607
Figure 12b-23 – Dr. Swett’s Root Beer bottle .................................................... 608
Figure 12b-24 – Dr. Swett’s Root Beer ad. ......................................................... 609
Figure 12b-25 – Delaware Punch ad. ................................................................. 611
Figure 12b-26 – Lemon Crush ad. ................................................................. 612
Figure 12b-27 – Lemon Crush ad. ................................................................. 612
Figure 12b-28 – Orange Crush ad. ................................................................. 613
Figure 12b-29 – R-Porter ad. ................................................................. 613
Figure 12b-30 – Falstaff near-beer ad. .............................................................. 614
Figure 12b-31 – First bottle used by the Victory Glass Works. ......................... 616
Figure 12b-32 – Victory’s first six-panel bottle. ................................................... 617
Figure 12b-33 – Heel of six-panel bottle with company name. .............................. 617
Figure 12b-34 – Base of six-panel bottle. ........................................................... 617
Figure 12b-35 – Second six-panel Victory bottle. ................................................ 618
Figure 12b-36 – Closeup of one panel on second bottle. ..................................... 618
Figure 12b-37 – Final Victory bottle. ................................................................. 619
Figure 12b-38 – Closeup of one panel on the final bottle. .................................... 619
Figure 12b-39 – Base of the final bottle with A.M. initials. ................................... 619
Figure 12b-40 – Side view of Victory case. .......................................................... 621
Figure 12b-41 – Corner view of Victory case. ..................................................... 621

Chapter 12c

Figure 12c-1 – Location of the Border Beverage Co. ............................................. 625
Figure 12c-2 – Border Beverage Co. ad. ............................................................. 626
Figure 12c-3 – Grapico ad. ............................................................................... 627
Figure 12c-4 – Grapico bottle. .......................................................................... 627
Figure 12c-5 – Bone-Dry label. .................................................................... 628
Figure 12c-6 – Bone-Dry in city directory ad. .................................................... 628
Figure 12c-7 – Graino label. ........................................................................ 629
Figure 12c-8 – Graino ad. ........................................................................... 629
Figure 12c-9 – Letterhead from Mackin Brokerage Co. ..................................... 630
Figure 12c-10 – Falstaff Pale Ginger Ale. ........................................................... 632
Figure 12c-11 – Falstaff Dublin Style. .............................................................. 633
Figure 12c-12 – Falstaff Pale. ....................................................................... 634
Figure 12c-13 – Acme Beer ad from T.R. Fye. .................................................... 634
Figure 12c-14 – ACL Lime Cola bottle; El Paso Real Juice Co. .......................... 635
Figure 12c-15 – Embossed Lime Cola Bottle. ..................................................... 635
Figure 12c-16 – Sahara Dry bottle. ................................................................. 638
Figure 12c-17 – Wonder Beverages bottle. ....................................................... 639
Figure 12c-18 – Base of Wonder Beverages bottle. ........................................... 640
Figure 12c-19 – Flores Brothers Beverages bottle. ............................................. 641
Figure 12c-20 – High Rock/Sun Spot bottle. ..................................................... 642
Figure 12c-21 – Sunspot bottle. ..................................................................... 643
Figure 12c-22 – Lone Star Sparkling Beverages siphon bottle. ....................... 645
Figure 12c-23 – Lone Star squirter top. ............................................................ 646
Figure 12c-24 – Ad featuring 3V and Vess beverages. ...................................... 648
Figure 12c-25 – 3V Cola bottle from 1961-1962. ............................................. 649
Figure 12c-26 – Vess bottle made in 1961. ....................................................... 649
Figure 12c-27 – Vess bottle made in 1962. ....................................................... 649
Tables

Chapter 2

Table 2-1 – Owens Illinois Plants Manufacturing Soda Bottles. .......................... 30
Table 2-2 – Precision of Dating Methods. ....................................................... 41
Table 2-3 – Deposition Lag for Returnable, Carbonated Soft Drink Bottles. ......... 50

Chapter 5a

Table 5-1 – Bottle Chronology for Houck & Dieter. ................................. 87

Chapter 5b

Table 5-2 – Bottle Chronology for Purity Bottling & Manufacturing Co. ............... 115
Table 5-3 – Bottle Chronology for Empire Beverages and Fruit Thrills. ............... 126
Table 5-4 – Bottle Chronology for Empire’s Ginger Ale Bottles. .................. 130

Chapter 5c

Table 5-5 – Empire Product Corp. House Brand Bottles............................... 162
Table 5-6 – Empire Product Corp. Ginger Ale Bottles. ............................... 167
Table 5-7 – Orange Crush Bottling Styles and Probable El Paso Use Dates. ......... 171

Chapter 5d

Table 5-8 – Significant Dates for Grapette Bottles (after Magnum 1998). ......... 186
Table 5-9 – Empire Bottling Co. House Brand Bottles. ............................... 198

Chapter 7c

Table 7-1 – Changes in ACL Pepsi-Cola Bottles (from Lockhart 2009:125). ....... 280
Table 7-2 - Style Changes in Mountain Dew Bottles. ...................................... 281
Chapter 8c

Table 8-1 – Hobble-Skirt Bottles Embossed “PAT. D-105529” ............................. 340
Table 8-2 – Hobble-Skirt Bottles Embossed “IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE” .................. 345
Table 8-3 – Dates of Manufacture of Hobble-Skirt Bottle Characteristics ................. 348

Chapter 10a

Table 10a-1 – Chronology of Nehi-Royal Crown in El Paso and Phoenix .................. 408
Table 10a-2 – Chronology for Location Markings on Red-on-Yellow Nehi Bottles .... 410
Table 10a-3 – Chronology of Royal Crown Bottles at El Paso ................................. 415

Chapter 10b

Table 10-1 – Date Ranges for Seven-Up Back Labels ............................................ 438

Chapter 11a

Table 11a-1 - Dating El Paso Dr Pepper Bottles ..................................................... 485

Chapter 11b

Table 11b-1 – Possible Barq’s Bottle Variations at El Paso ..................................... 496
Table 11b-2 – Back Label Variations on El Paso Barq’s Bottles ............................... 500
Table 11b-3 – Variations on NuGrape ACL Labels used at El Paso and Albuquerque ... 506

Chapter 11c

Table 11c-1 - Dr Pepper Bottle Chronology ......................................................... 530

Chapter 12a

Table 12a-1 – Proprietors of Crown Bottling Works ............................................. 555
Table 12a-2 – Chronology of the Mexican Bottling Works .................................... 562

Chapter 12b
Table 12b-1 – Changes in Ownership and Location for the Texas Bottling Works. . . . . . . 590
Table 12b-2 – Changes in Ownership and Location for the Lone Star Bottling Works. . . 594
Table 12b-3 – Variations in Triangle Brand Bottles. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 606
Table 12b-4 – Changes in Ownership of the Victory Bottling Works. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 615
Table 12b-5 – Variations in Victory Bottling Works Bottles. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 620
Original Foreword

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And so, to anyone with an interest in soda bottles, glass artifacts, bottlers, or El Paso, I extend my wish that some part of this book will be useful to you in your work, your hobby, or your interests. I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed researching and writing it.
2010 Forward

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

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

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

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

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

Then, Bill Lindsey e-mailed me for feedback on his budding Historical Bottle Webpage. Later, we were joined by Carol Serr, then David Whitten. David withdrew after about a year, and...
Pete Schulz joined us. We named our little consortium the Bottle Research Group (BRG). We are investigating all aspects of bottle development, but we have especially zeroed in on manufacturer’s marks.

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

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

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

Photo Note

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

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

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