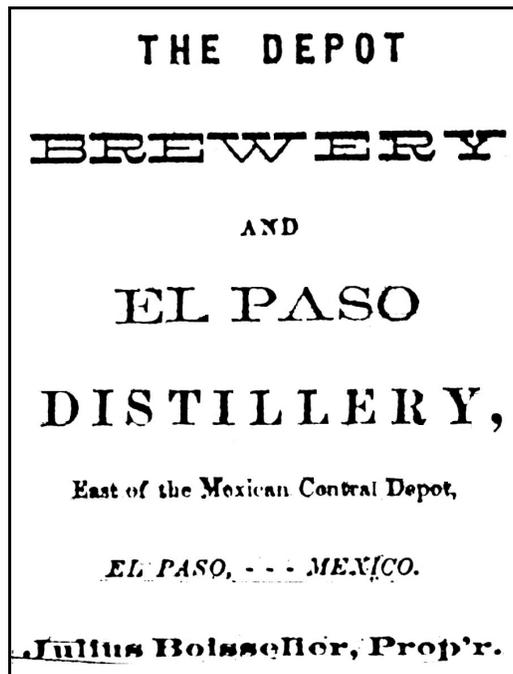


Breweries  
and  
Beer Bottles  
at  
El Paso, Texas



*El Paso Herald 1881-1884*

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Chapter 1  
Overview of El Paso Brewery History

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# Chapter 1

## Overview of Brewing and Beer Bottles at El Paso

The area around El Paso, Texas, has a long, varied, and rich history. The first Spaniards entered the area in 1599, when Juan de Oñate and his huge exploration party crossed the Rio Grande at or near the present location of San Elizario, south of El Paso. Oñate ordered his followers to take a day of rest after the arduous crossing of the Rio Grande – the first Thanksgiving celebration in what would become the United States.

### The Period of the Spaniards (1599-1821)

Oñate went on to establish a colony in what would become northern New Mexico and eventually founded Santa Fé. To support Oñate, supply trains from Zacatecas wended their ways north, typically taking about an 18-month round trip. The crossing of the Rio Grande soon came to be called el Paso del Norte (the Pass to the North). By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Pass was becoming a way stop for the trains of carretas (two-wheeled carts) taking supplies north and Indian goods south (see Timmons 1990 for additional details on El Paso history).

Fray Garcia de San Francisco founded the Mission *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Mansos del Paso del Norte* – at what is currently Ciudad Juárez, Mexico – on December 8, 1659, although the permanent church was not completed until January 15, 1668. Very early, the Spaniards planted grapes, which survived and flourished in the Upper Rio Grande Valley. This was the beginning of the wine industry at El Paso, and the Mission Grape – derived from those introduced by the friars – was soon well known.

The settlement grew dramatically, when the Pueblo Revolt pushed the Spaniards – along with the Indian groups that had allied with them – out of northern New Mexico. Even when the Spaniards returned to the north in 1891, many remained – as did the most of the Native American groups who had settled below El Paso. Throughout the Spanish period, the primary alcoholic beverage in the area was wine. Beer was completely unknown.

Glass of any kind was rare. Carretas had no shock absorbers, so there was virtually no transportation of fragile cargo from southern Mexico to the frontiers. Most items that would later

be made of glass were instead composed of pottery. Wine was stored in ceramic casks or skins (for a discussion of how and when glass came to El Paso, see Lockhart 2001).

### **The Mexican Period (1821-1848)**

Prior to the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821), the area was called New Spain – and it was administered by Spaniards via the authority of the King of Spain. The successful revolution, created Mexico as a country in 1821. The settlement at the Pass, now called El Paso del Norte, slowly grew, mostly on the west side of the Rio Grande. Without special permission, people from the United States were not allowed in New Spain, but that soon changed.

The Santa Fe traders brought goods from Missouri to Santa Fe, and some continued on to El Paso del Norte and from there to southern Mexico. A few soon settled in the area, creating an Anglo village on the east bank of the river. The traders brought whiskey to compete with the local wine production. However, kegs remained the norm. Glass was still too fragile to be brought in quantity. Wine continued to be the main alcoholic beverage, still kept mostly in ceramic casks and wine skins.

But change was in the air. The war between the U.S. and Mexico was short – 1846-1848 – but it completely altered the destiny of the Pass. The Rio Grande became the border between the two countries. What is now Arizona and New Mexico became Arizona Territory.

### **The American Period (1848-the present)**

#### **Before the Coming of the Railroad (1848-1881)**

As more Anglos arrived, the area east and north of the Rio Grande changed. The divided settlements became known as El Paso, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. Even though trade increased – now from Austin as well as Santa Fe – El Paso remained an isolated frontier. Glass was still rare; the keg continued as the whiskey standard, with casks and skins for wine. The few bottles that were brought in were reused until they broke.

Although it would have no effect on El Paso until later, a major event took place in 1872. Adolphus Busch successfully adapted Pasteurization to lager beer and began shipping Anheuser-

Busch beer to points along the railroad and rivers. Pabst, Schlitz, and other brewers quickly adopted the idea along with the newly developed export beer bottle (see Chapter 2 for more on the development of the export beer bottle and the spread of bottled beer).

As early as the late 1870s, some intrepid teamsters successfully attempted to bring bottled goods – mostly medicinal products – to El Paso. Still, the numbers were small. More bottled items were hauled into nearby Fort Bliss, and some El Paso women begged used fruit jars from families at the fort. But change was again in the wind.

### **The Arrival of the Railroads (1881-1883)**

On May 19, 1881, the Southern Pacific Railway arrived at El Paso from the west and continued building toward the east, where it met the Galveston, Harrisonburg, and San Antonio railway at Sierra Blanca, Texas, on December 16. Meanwhile, the Santa Fe arrived from the north in June. El Paso now had three railroads bringing goods – including bottles – from three directions.

Even before the trains reached El Paso, the products came rolling in. Many merchants were sending wagons to meet the oncoming trains at the end of line. Dealers such as Wm. B. Hooper & Co. and Ketelsen & Degetau were advertising bottled beer for sale by April. T.L. Reber & Co. had opened a soda bottling plant earlier in the year, and Houck & Dieter purchased the business in March. The bottle trade was booming.

One of the most interesting ads in 1881 was for the El Paso Brewery at El Paso, Mexico. The brewery sold beer by the keg, bottle, or at the bar and offered beer on the American side through the “Jno. Forster Co.” The rival newspaper (*El Paso Herald*) advertised the Depot Brewery and Distillery, also in El Paso, Mexico, operated by Julius Boisselier, from 1881 to 1884. Both ads likely referred to the same brewery, possibly with a change of ownership. The brewery may have become the Chihuahua Brewery, reported as completely destroyed by fire in 1908 (see Chapter 4).

## **Agents and Dealers (1882-1903)**

The latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the era of the brewery agent at El Paso. Each advertiser claimed to be the “sole agent” for a specific brand of beer. As noted above, some of the earliest were Wm. B. Hooper & Co., sole agent for Blatz Milwaukee Beer; Ketelsen & Degetau for “Lemp’s Celebrated St. Louis Bottled Beer”; and Houck & Dieter for Anheuser Busch St. Louis Beer as well as Wm. J. Lemp’s Celebrated St. Louis Lager Beer. Soon, the newspapers were flooded with beer ads, many of which were short lived. Like most ads today, these generally had more sales hype than information, although some showed bottles.

During this period and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many bars and restaurants limited themselves to a single exclusive brand of beer. The beer would typically be served on tap from a keg, by the bottle, or both. National breweries, such as Anheuser Busch, Pabst, or Schlitz would actually finance an individual bar in return for a guarantee of exclusivity (see Appendix A for the story of one such bar). The key word for beer sales in El Paso during these two decades was “variety” (see Chapter 3 for a glimpse of this variety).

During this period, outsiders, such as William G. Hammel, prime mover behind the Illinois Brewing Company of Socorro, New Mexico, visited El Paso with the intention of establishing a brewery in the city. The dream was short lived. Alfred Courchesne also proposed a brewery in connection with the El Paso Ice and Refrigerator Co., but this, too, failed to materialize. The push for a brewery intensified after the turn of the century.

## **The El Paso Brewery (1903-1918)**

A group of local businessmen incorporated the El Paso Brewing Association on June 22, 1903, although the brewery was not completed until July the following year. Located on North Stevens adjacent to the Galveston, Harrison, and San Antonio Railway, the brewery was a large brick building (see Chapter 4). By early 1905, however, the company was bankrupt and was forced to sell the assets at public auction.

Although the bidding was fierce, J. Phillip Dieter – head of Houck & Dieter, El Paso’s largest liquor and beer dealer, as well as the biggest soda bottler in town – placed the highest bid and acquired the brewery and all its assets. In June 1905, Dieter formed a new corporation, the

El Paso Brewing Assoc. (Successors) and continued to improve the brewery. When Dieter died in 1907, the firm reorganized and continued to expand.

Although beset by strikes and construction difficulties, the firm was a success. El Paso was proud of its brewery, and ads enjoined drinkers to patronize the local beer. However, change was again in the wind, as the forces of Prohibition extended their tendrils into Texas at the same time that the war in Europe (eventually called World War I) began to leach away national resources.

### **Prohibition at El Paso (1918-1933)**

Four things happened almost simultaneously in early 1918. Any one of three of these would have altered the course of local history. First, both the city and county of El Paso voted down the local prohibition option on January 30. Second, the Texas legislature ratified the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, bringing state prohibition to Texas on April 15. Third, the governor decreed a ten-mile prohibition zone around any military encampment in the state of Texas, creating a ring around Fort Bliss that encompassed the entire city of El Paso (see e.g., Timmons 1990:225-226). Finally, in a conservation effort to support the U.S. entry into World War I, the Federal Food Administration declared that various grains – including barley, an essential ingredient in brewing beer – could no longer be used for malting. The same body imposed restrictions on sugar.

Since the El Paso Brewery only had sufficient grain on hand for six months, its days were numbered *without* the advent of local or state prohibition. As a result, the Brewing Assoc. created a satellite corporation called the Tri-State Beverage Co. in an attempt to ride out the state bans. Tri-State sold Bravo, a near-beer that may have been produced by the brewery, and various types of soft drinks, including its own Triangle Brand. When it became obvious that the dry period was going to be a long one, the El Paso Brewing Assoc. moved its equipment across the Rio Grande to Juárez. Tri-State closed in late 1923 or early 1924.

El Paso followed the national trend toward near-beers or cereal beverages. Most of the brewery agents closed up or shifted almost overnight from selling wholesale beer to offering near-beers. In addition, most of the soda bottlers also added near-beer lines. The competition was intense. The advent of National Prohibition on January 16, 1920, was a complete anticlimax. Its only local effect was to deaden all hopes that the state restrictions would soon be

lifted. Prohibition also killed near-beer sales. People wanted alcohol. By 1924, sales of near-beer had virtually ceased.

R.W. Long, president of the El Paso Brewing Assoc., and his associates formed a new corporation – the Juarez Brewing Corp. – with Long retaining the presidency. The plant was completed and opened on January 15, 1922, and it removed any remaining chance for the success of near-beer. Access to alcohol was just a short trip away – across the Rio Grande – so thirsty El Pasoans simply migrated. Since some U.S. distilleries also moved to Juárez, the place was alive with nightclubs, and booze was available in quantity, 24 hours a day. The Juárez alcohol industry flourished until the end of Prohibition and for some time thereafter. The brewery, itself, lasted for several years after beer was again legal in the U.S., but it simply could not compete with the Harry Mitchell Brewery – located *in* El Paso (see Langston 1974 for a history of the liquor industry at Juárez during and after Prohibition).

### **The Harry Mitchell Brewery (1934-1956)**

On March 22, 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Cullen-Harrison Act, which authorized the sale of 3.2% beer and wine. Later that year, the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment repealed Prohibition, and alcohol was again available. Soon various national laws regulated the booze industries – including the manufacture of liquor and beer bottles.

Alcoholic beverage sales resumed at El Paso on September 15, 1933. One day later, the officials of the Tannhauser Brewery sponsored a ground-breaking ceremony for the new building. The group planned well, receiving estimates, conducting a contest for a beer slogan, and even printing stationery. After October, however, the firm became just another footnote in brewing history (see Chapter 6) – probably because of the popularity of Harry Mitchell.

Harry Mitchell came to El Paso by at least 1913 and fought briefly in World War I. He opened the Mint Café at Juárez in late 1926, serving high-quality food and alcohol. After a series of financial and personal disasters, Mitchell closed the Mint in 1935 to concentrate on his brewery at El Paso.

Mitchell began planning for a brewery prior to the presidential edict that allowed the resumption of beer production. He formed a corporation in September 1933 to manage the new

enterprise. Unlike Tannhauser, Michell obtained the old El Paso Brewery building – rather than attempting to create a completely new structure. He used the foundation of the old brewery but created a much larger building. Construction was just barely finished, when the brewery began production on August 5, 1934.

As soon as the legal limit was raised, Mitchell increased the alcohol content, and the brewery became a resounding success. Along with El Paso, sales extended throughout New Mexico, into parts of Arizona, and in parts of Texas. The firm advertised on the radio and declared dividends to the stockholders.

But all was not well. Despite the optimism, the business began having financial problems. This was, after all, the Great Depression. Although the Depression lifted with World War II, rationing limited production. Mitchell found it especially difficult to find steel caps. He personally visited El Paso bars and begged for old caps to reuse. By the end of the war, however, business was booming again.

Initially, Will Keller, owned most of the stock in the brewery through Globe-Fico. Upon Keller's death in 1936, his wife, Helen, voted the shares. Mitchell and Helen Keller had often been at odds, and he had often felt frustrated. In 1945, Mitchell and his wife, Lela, finally purchased the Keller shares and now had almost total control of the Harry Mitchell Brewery.

Mitchell began making changes. Most of these had to do with stocks, finances, new equipment, and changes in personnel. However, a major change took place in 1949 – the installation of a can line. Although the brewing industry began to use cans for beer as early as 1935, this was a first for El Paso.

Harry and Lela Mitchell disposed of all their stock and resigned from the Board of Directors on July 19, 1951 – although Mitchell remained as a salaried consultant. Former vice president, Charles A. Kuper, assumed the presidency, with Walter A. Vetter as the new vice president. Despite changes in packaging and a new product line, sales fell. On March 27, 1956, the Board officially voted to sell the brewery to the Falstaff Brewing Corp.

### **Falstaff (1956-1968)**

After the repeal of Prohibition, the Falstaff Brewing Corp. began expanding. In 1956, the former Harry Mitchell Brewery became Falstaff Plant No. 9, the newest in the line. While the firm refurbished the buildings, Falstaff trucked in bottles and cans of beer from its Omaha location. The El Paso plant would serve the Southwest.

Walter A. Vetter, former vice president of the final Harry Mitchell corporation, assumed the role of resident manager. Even though sales remained high, Falstaff closed the plant in January 1968, citing changes in drinking patterns. Brewing in the City at the Pass was at an end. Ironically, all three breweries, stretching from 1904 to 1968, had been at the same location. The old brewery eventually became a series of apartments and artist studios.

### **Afterward (1868-present)**

Although brewing at El Paso had ceased, beer drinking had not. National brands abounded in the city. Eventually, microbreweries, associated with local restaurants, began to appear. As of this writing, these local, in-house breweries compete with the trucked-in national brands for an ever-expanding population of thirsty El Pasoans.

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