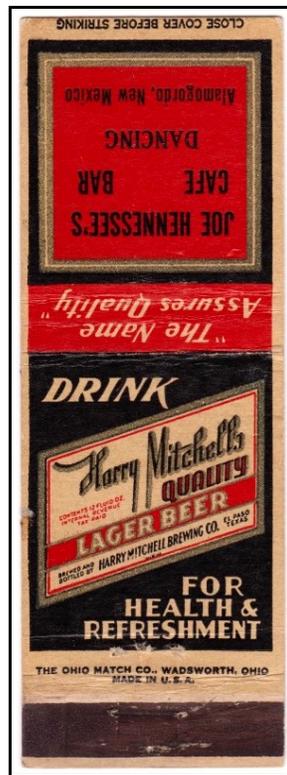


Breweries and Beer Bottles at El Paso, Texas



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Chapter 9
Wrapping It All Up

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Wrapping It All Up

The brewery/beer history of El Paso, Texas, can be summed up in seven distinct periods. Each of these, of course, fits into the larger picture of El Paso history, the still-greater look at Texas history, U.S. history, and world history. In this brief discussion, I will only touch on brewery/beer history with a bit of background in El Paso history and the still-greater pictures.

The El Paso Wine Industry – Before Beer (1662-1881)

When, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Mansos del Paso del Norte, El Paso's first mission officially began on April 2, 1662, its first product – aside from saving souls – was the production of wine. The mission grape soon became well known. Because of El Paso's remoteness – first from New Spain, later from the rest of the U.S. – it was rare that anyone imported glass items. Thus, El Paso developed a ceramic economy instead of one based on glass containers. People stored wine in skins and casks and drank out of pottery cups. Although occasional bottles and jars arrived at the Border City, glass containers remained the exception until the arrival of the railroad in 1881 (Lockhart 1995; Sonnichsen 1968; Timmons 1990).

The Railroad Era – Imported Beer (1881-present)

In this case, the word “imported” indicates beer that was brought in from outside the city – rather than foreign imports. When the Southern Pacific Railway arrived at El Paso on May 19, 1881, everything changed – especially the population. The increase in numbers was accompanied by a significant rise in available products. Of specific interest in this study, there was a huge surge in the availability of glass items – especially bottles in general and bottled beer in particular (Lockhart 1996; 2001; Timmons 1990).

As noted in Chapter 3, many wholesalers began to distribute beer. The town already had many saloons, and virtually all of them began carrying beer. Until the first brewery opened in 1904, the twin rails were the only link to drink – especially the outside breweries. Eventually, railroads entered the Border City from all four directions, and El Pasoans enjoyed numerous brands. This trend has never abated, and the importation of beer from all over the world continues until the present.

The El Paso Brewery (1904-1924)

The opening of the El Paso Brewery on July 20, 1904, marked a major change in the city. Although sales of imported beer continued, El Pasoans were proud of their brewery, and many local saloons exclusively sold Golden Pride or one of the later local brews. It took the management of J. Philip Dieter, a highly successful El Paso businessman, to lift the brewery to a profitable basis, and the plant would likely have enjoyed a long life if not for the combination or wartime restriction on grain and encroaching Prohibition.

Even with the advent of Texas restrictions and national shortages on April 15, 1918, the El Paso Brewery became a producer of a near-beer called Bravo that apparently enjoyed a local success – at least initially. Through the brewery’s subsidiary – the Tri-State Beverage Co. – the firm hoped to ride out Prohibition by selling cereal beverages and soft drinks. The firm – the Tri-State Beverage Co. – prospered initially, but the sale of near-beer plummeted – partly due to *real* beer and more potent drinks at nearby Juárez – until vending of the cereal beverages virtually ceased by 1924. In addition, El Paso had many other long-term, popular soda bottlers – such as the Magnolia Coca-Cola Bottling Co. and the giant Empire Bottling Works – so Tri-State closed its doors in early 1924. The brewery moved the brewing equipment to Juárez in 1922.

Prohibition (1918-1933)

Effective Prohibition settled over El Paso in on April 15, 1918. As noted in Chapter 5, the advent of National Prohibition in 1920 was an anticlimax that was hardly noticed on the border. The story now shifts to two locations. In El Paso, the outside brewery agents either closed their doors or imported near-beer into the city. Even grocers began selling cereal beverages. As noted above, near-beer sales dropped dramatically by 1924, and El Pasoans made their own home brew or “bathtub gin,” purchased booze on the black market, drank at one of the Hole-in-the-Wall saloons on Cordova Island and San Elizario Island, or walked across the border to Juárez, When the sale of beer became legal again on April 7, 1933, El Pasoans celebrated in the streets, and liquor returned the following year.

The real story shifted to Juárez, where three notable things took place. First, and by far soonest, bars and night clubs appeared in quantity. The town had always had its drinking spots, but they now multiplied dramatically. Most of these were legal, but each Hole-in-the-Wall was on land of questionable jurisdiction – policed by neither the U.S. nor Mexico. The number of legal saloons and bars decreased after Prohibition, but some continue into the 21st century.

Second, the El Paso Brewing Association moved its equipment to Juárez and opened the Juárez Brewery on January 15, 1922. The brewery was quite successful and later became the Juárez plant of Cervecería Cruz Blanca (Cruz Blanca Brewery). The plant eventually became the only Cruz Blanca brewery and finally closed in the 1980s.

The final major change was the opening of distilleries. One U.S. distillery – Waterfill and Frazier – relocated to Juárez, and two others opened plants in the city. These not only provided whiskey for the local bars, saloons, and night clubs, they also created a market for smuggling into the U.S. Although one distillery was only marginally successful, the other two were popular and operated throughout Prohibition. The final distiller continued to export Straight American Whiskey to the U.S. until the 1970s.

The Repeal of Prohibition in 1933 heralded the end of the boom years at Juárez. Most of the night clubs closed, moved closer to the border, or migrated into El Paso. As noted above, the Juárez Brewery changed ownership but continued to operate. Only one distillery survived. The result was a major depression in Juárez.

The Harry Mitchell Years (1934-1956)

With the return of beer to El Paso, Harry Mitchell abandoned his failing café and bar across the border and assembled a group to finance the Harry Mitchell Brewery. After a bit of searching, the financiers elected to rebuild and enlarge the old El Paso Brewery. From the initial brewing of beer on August 5, 1934, the brewery, the beer, and Mitchell, himself, were dramatic successes. The high quality continued, although the corporation reorganized twice.

The first major change was when Mitchell was able to buy out the other major stockholder, Helen Keller (widow of the major stockholder, Will Keller), and gain full control of the operation on June 19, 1945. Mitchell headed the operation until his retirement on July 19,

1951. The former vice president, Charles A. Kuper, moved up to the presidential position and made a number of changes in the organization – including renaming the plant as the Mitchell Brewery (dropping “Harry”). Kuper remained in charge until the Board of Directors sold the plant to the Falstaff Corp. on April 16, 1956.

Plant No. 9, Falstaff Brewing Corp. (1956-1968)

Falstaff officially took over the Mitchell brewery in April 1956, retaining Walter A. Vetter – vice president of the Mitchell Brewery under Kuper – as the manager. The venture lasted just over a decade. Falstaff officially closed the plant in January 1968. Large-scale brewing at El Paso was at an end.

Micro-Breweries – The New Solution

Just as the Falstaff Brewery at El Paso closed, a totally unrelated enterprise change the face of American brewing. In 1968, a home brewing enthusiast opened the Albion Brewery at Sonoma, California. Although his plant was short-lived, the era of the micro-brewery had arrived. The true tradition did not actual begin until the 1980s, and it became common during the 1990s. As of this writing, the trend shows no sign of abating.

Larger breweries, of course, continued in business, and Budweiser remains the most popular beer on the market. El Paso is served by numerous micro-breweries and continues to import out-of-town, out-of-state, and international brands. The next trend is veiled in the future.

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