

Chapter 1

Overview of El Paso Dairies



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Although there were certainly other considerations, the state of Texas was founded on the cattle business. While the emphasis certainly has been on beef cattle, every rancher or farmer and some town dwellers have always run a few head of dairy cattle. These were generally used to furnish milk for the immediate family, although many people shared milk with neighbors.

The El Paso story begins with these very small dairy operations, although virtually none of these were ever recorded during the early period. However, many of the later dairies – e.g., Hawkins Dairy and Price’s Dairy – claim that they were founded because someone bought a cow. Both of these examples grew to be important dairies in El Paso. Many others only grew into small operations, and most, of course, never developed beyond the stage of supplying a few neighbors.

Actual small dairies probably began to appear in the late 1870s, about the time the town of El Paso became the seat for El Paso County. It was not until the earliest extant city directory (1885) that we actually find records for El Paso dairies, and those continue to the present day. The earliest dairies, of course, were small.

The mode of milk delivery was the horse-drawn wagon carrying milk cans (Figure 1-1). The dairyman drove to the customer’s house, stopped and yelled, then the housewife came out with her bucket or pitcher. The dairyman used a dipper to transfer the milk from the can to the pitcher, along with whatever had fallen into the can while it was filled at the farm or along the route. It was not a sanitary process.



Figure 1-1 – Milk Wagon with cans (Cliff McDonald)

Although J.A. “Uncle Jimmy” Smith was listed as a “dairyman” in the 1895 directory, he had grown large enough to incorporate by 1897. His El Paso Dairy Co. became the first major dairy in the city and was certainly the largest until the late 1920s, when Price’s Dairy grew sufficiently large to purchase Smith’s entire operation. Price’s became the El Paso giant.

Uncle Jimmy was a “progressive” dairyman, making many changes in his practice and – thereby – forcing others to comply in order to remain competitive. Smith almost certainly introduced the milk bottle to the area ca. 1900. Both his bottles and the ones used by his competitors may have been unmarked in the beginning, although Smith began using bottles embossed with the dairy name almost immediately. Most small dairies only identified their milk bottles by the ligneous or cardboard disc used as a seal. Embossing was a high-cost process, requiring that the dairy purchase the molds – or later the plates – to be used.

Aside from El Paso Dairy Co., Price’s, and a few others, however, the small- to medium-sized dairies remained the norm at El Paso throughout the first half of the 20th century. These became so numerous that there were 30 listings (mostly individual dairymen) by 1913, expanding to 51 by 1918. While the numbers declined slightly after that, the reduction was probably due to listing less individual “dairymen” than from fewer small operations.

Although the Glen Springs Creamery Co. was listed in 1906 and 1907, Creameries generally did not make their appearance until 1914. By 1920, the city boasted three of them, creating and selling butter, ice cream, and other dairy byproducts. Once the Price family entered into the Creamery business ca. 1921, however, the days of competition were numbered. By 1933, the Borden's Produce Co. – a national organization – had arrived in town. Soon, only Borden, Price’s, and Hawkins – the largest dairies – were still in the creamery business. The days of small creameries and cooperatives were over.

The norm for dairies that marked their milk bottles was embossing. Although many other areas switched from embossing to pyroglazing (applying glass enamel to the bottle surface in a silk-screen method – also known as Applied Color Lettering or ACL) during the 1930s and early 1940s, very few El Paso dairies adopted the process. The major change was the shift to waxed-paper cartons during the early 1950s.

In 1947, most of the remaining dairies formed the El Paso Milk Bottle Association (EPMBA) to provide identical pyroglazed milk bottles to all members. This marked El Paso's entry into both square milk bottles and the only major use of the pyroglaze technology in the city. The Association was very short lived – offering glass milk bottles for only two years. Price's used its own square, glass bottles briefly, but almost all of the El Paso dairies shifted to the use of waxed-paper cartons.

Although the numbers declined gradually over time, the small- and medium-sized dairies persisted throughout the 1950s, but only the ones in medium-to-large range continued into the 1960s. By 1980, only six dairies served El Paso, dropping to four in 1990. Only the largest remained and continued into the 21st century.

The El Paso Dairy Industry and Bottle Laws

As discussed above, during the early 20th century, the norm was numerous family-run dairies. By 1918, for example, there were 54 dairies listed in the city directory. By the mid-1920s, the numbers began shrinking, and the individual dairies became larger, until there were only 15 by 1924. Few of these were still listed by family names only. By the mid-1940s, only ten dairies and creameries remained, but most of these were still larger. Numbers increased slightly in the 1950s but saw a dramatic reduction during the 1970s and 1980s, until only the largest few remained.

Of specific interest to archaeologists tracing bottles, the largest dairies were the most systematic users of embossed bottles. The El Paso Dairy Co. carried marked bottles from ca. 1903 until it sold to Price's Dairy in 1927. Price's had apparently only used generic bottles prior to that time; however, once Price's became the city's dairy leader, it, too, began the consistent use of embossed bottles. Although there were some exceptions, other El Paso milk producers – especially small ones – only seem to have adopted marked containers when the use of such containers was required by law.

El Paso Milk Bottle Laws

The vector followed by the El Paso dairies in the patterns of their milk bottle purchases correlates to two distinct temporal periods. In each case, the city of El Paso had created a new

ordinance. The first occurred in 1913 or 1914 and remained in force until at least 1918, possibly a few years later. The second was placed in effect in 1936 and created a reliance on marked bottles that lasted into the early 1940s.

A bit of background information is necessary to understand the reasons behind these laws. For liquids such as soft drinks, beer, and milk, a cheap type of container was necessary to hold down costs. The solution for these drinks was the returnable bottle – one that could be reused repeatedly. Although little known to the general public, the customer did *not* buy the bottle – only the liquid it contained. The bottle remained the property of the dairy (or bottler) that originally purchased it. When a customer – or another dairy – kept or used the bottle, it was done so illegally – i.e., theft.

The city of El Paso enacted ordinances to deal with a problem that was discussed nationwide during the 1920s and 1930s. Larger dairies generally purchased milk bottles embossed with their names – partly for the obvious advertising benefit but also to deter theft of the bottles. Smaller dairies often used generic bottles, identifying the dairy by the cap. Smaller producers would also frequently use *any* bottle that came their way – even if it were embossed with the name of another dairy (e.g., *Milk Route* 2000:3-4). El Paso used the bottle identification laws as means to keep smaller dairies in line.

The 1913/1914 Ordinance

Three lines of evidence led me to search for a milk bottle law during this period. First, the term “CITY ORDINANCE” was embossed on the reverse sides of El Paso Dairy Co. bottles made from at least 1916 to at least 1918, possibly as late as 1920 (see Chapter 5, El Paso Dairy Co.). Second, at least five El Paso bottles made during the ca. 1917-1922 period were embossed with permit numbers, the highest of which was “PERMIT # 98” – embossed in a front plate. The presence of permit numbers indicates some form of law. Finally, at least 13 bottlers adopted embossed bottles for the first time during the ca. 1914-1918 period, including Mrs. L.W. Hawkins and Good Service Dairy – discussed in later chapters.¹

¹ The bottles with permit numbers and other dairies that began using bottles during the 1914-1918 period will be discussed in Chapter 9.

Although I have been unable to locate the specific ordinance, the *El Paso Herald* (8/27/1913) discussed a “proposed milk ordinance” that covered several points, including pasteurization, fees, inspection of cattle (especially for tuberculosis), permits, and milk bottles. Although there was quite a bit of disagreement on several points “One point firmly agreed on was ‘Any dairyman found using another dairyman’s bottle will be fined under the protective clause, if it is adopted.’”

According to the *Herald* (8/27/1913), the meeting concluded that “the ordinance will be redrawn with the suggested changes agreed on incorporated in it,” and each dairyman would have one week to study it, “when it will come up again for further discussion.” It is thus likely that the ordinance was passed in late 1913 or early 1914. Since the *Herald* article discussed both permits and protecting bottles of each dairy, this is almost certainly the ordinance that created the embossing on the reverse of the El Paso Dairy Co. bottles and the permit numbers appearing on other milk bottles.

The ordinance almost certainly remained in effect until at least September 7, 1916, when 19 dairy owners, representing “nearly all of the dairies of the city who distribute their milk in bottles,” were arrested for “violating the city bottle ordinance” (*El Paso Herald* 1916). Among those listed were “The Price Dairy” and “The Hawkins Dairy.” Unfortunately, details about the bottles were not included.

In 1936, Dr. J.A. Hill, veterinarian and dairy owner, recalled that “El Paso had such an amendment [i.e., similar to the milk bottle ordinance of 1936] in 1920 and 1922 but it was repealed shortly after passage” (*El Paso Herald-Post* 1936a). Hill was almost certainly remembering the 1913/1914 milk bottle “amendment” even though his dates were probably a few years late. All but one of the 13 dairies that began to use embossed milk bottles during this period had discontinued such bottles by or before the mid-1920s suggesting that Hill was correct about the short duration of the law.

The 1936 Ordinance

The city of El Paso passed a very important statute that went into effect on October 9, 1936. Like the earlier ordinance, it had far-reaching consequences for El Paso dairies and, ultimately, for archaeologists who excavate area sites. The ordinance required that each dairy

permanently mark all milk bottles that it used (*El Paso Herald Post* 1936b). From the mid-1920s until this ruling, most dairies – especially small ones – used generic bottles with the dairy identified only on the cap.

As noted above, the largest dairy in El Paso – the El Paso Dairy Co. – used embossed bottles throughout the 1903-1927 period, and Price’s Dairy followed with marked containers from 1930 on. Most El Paso dairies did not. As the primary user of marked bottles in the city, Price’s was almost certainly behind the 1936 ordinance.

By 1938, there was a major problem with enforcement. William W. Hawkins, president of the El Paso Milk Bottle Assn. (see Chapter 6), complained about the “inability of City officials to enforce the milk bottle ordinance. The *El Paso Times* (2/22/1938) noted that

the ordinance provided that each dairy must have its name stamped on its bottles and prohibited one dairy from using another dairy’s containers. Fine of from \$1 to \$50 was set up for violation of the ordinance and a fine of from \$10 to \$100 was provided for mutilation of bottle markings.”

The latter set of fines was directly related to the practice of etching one dairy’s name atop another dairy’s embossing on bottles – a practice done by a few of the small dairies.

By 1938, the Association was the de facto enforcement body for the laws – much to the chagrin and mistrust of the “19 independent dairymen” in the county. The Association had established a milk bottle exchange at 1630 Myrtle Ave., operated by Clarence Biggerstaff. The purpose of the exchange was to “provide for periodical pick-up of bottles from various dairies and return them to the owners.” However, Biggerstaff said that “the task of straightening out milk bottle mix-ups was an all-day job” (*El Paso Times* 2/22/1938).

Between 1936 and 1942, at least 11 dairies – already in existence – adopted some form of marked bottles, certainly in response to the 1936 ordinance. Some of these dairies – Hawkins Dairy, San Antonio Dairy, and Vasquez Dairy, for example – had been in business since the first two decades of the 20th century, but they did not consistently use marked bottles until the late 1930s. At that point, most of these either continued to use marked bottles, switched to waxed-paper cartons – or both.

Sources

Milk Route

2000d "Getting Back the Empty Bottles." *Milk Route* 239:3. [from *Milk Dealer* 1927]

