

Chapter 12

The End of Glass and Future Research



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The End of Glass Milk Bottles

The title is slightly misleading. Just as the initiation of milk bottles began at different times with different dairies at different areas, the ending was neither precise nor absolute. To use El Paso as an example, round dairy bottles disappeared from most dairies in 1947, when the El Paso Milk Bottle Assn. instituted the use of square bottles for most of the city's dairies. However, there were at least two exceptions, and Lane's continued to offer round bottles until at least 1958 – a full decade after other local dairies had switched to other containers.

The end of square glass milk bottles was even less consistent. Most El Paso dairies ceased using glass when the supply of bottles from the El Paso Milk Bottle Assn. wore out. As with round bottles, at least two dairies continued to use square glass bottles until at least 1955. The adoption of waxed-paper cartons began in 1951.

But El Paso was just one area. I have had reports of round milk bottles still being in use as late as the 1980s. Even when a region or an area ceases to use one container format, some individual dairies retain the older traditions. As we enter 2014, there are still a few dairies in the U.S. that continue to use glass bottles, and glass also remains popular in some other countries. It is very difficult to apply absolutes to any area of the study of bottles.

Future Research

There are several areas that require future research. No research is ever complete. At some point, you just have to stop and publish. Each publication is merely a stage or step – to be followed by someone else who will discover new sources and/or new interpretations for older evidence. Correcting past misinterpretations is a natural and normal result of continued research. Someone in the future will invalidate portions of this work – as I have done with some past sources – notably Toulouse (1971).

End Dates

All end dates will need revision. Both collectors and archaeologists will continue to discover “new” bottles, and some of these will extend either the end or beginning dates in this book. Similarly, new historical source material will also materialize. As an example, the Bottle Research Group (including this author) has greatly revised the 1971 work of Julian Harrison Toulouse. Toulouse did a remarkably good job with 1960s technology. However, we now have Google searches, eBay, Google scanned books, and a huge network collectors and archaeologist joined by e-mail. Someone else – with future resources – will revise parts or all of our work.

Telephone Systems at El Paso

A few El Paso milk bottles were embossed with intriguing telephone numbers. The earliest of these phone numbers was embossed on milk bottles used by the El Paso Dairy Co. A plate on the front of each bottle had the Dairy name and location along with “BELL 340 AUTO 1156.” The Bell number was obviously from the Bell Telephone system, but what was Auto? El Paso city directories included Auto numbers between 1907 and 1913.

In his history of the telephone in the U.S., Fischer (1992:42-46) explained the phenomenon. Bell had initially cornered the market because of the patents of Alexander Graham Bell. However, in 1893 and 1894, those patents expired, clearing a path for rival firms. These new companies took two basic forms. One form was the independent providers – commercial ventures. By 1902, ca. 3,000 of these independents operated within the U.S. borders. The second group was comprised of mutual companies – non-profit concerns for local shareholders/subscribers. About 6,000 of these mutual firms existed by 1902. By 1907, Bell had lost about half of its business.

Around 1906 or 1907, the “Auto” group began in El Paso (first listed in the 1907 city directory). This was likely a mutual company, formed to combat the outsider, Bell. Most businesses apparently adopted numbers from both firms, and this may have proved the undoing of the local group. After all, why should businesses have to have two phone systems? In any event, 1912 was the last year for “Auto” telephone numbers in the city directory.

The second period is characterized by five El Paso milk bottles from the 1937-1942 period. Each bottle had a phone number with the initials “RED” followed by a two-digit number, a single letter (J in all but one case), and a single-digit numeral (see Table 12-1). Future research should determine both the company behind the numbers and how long that firm was in business.

Table 12-1 – Dairy Bottles with “RED” Telephone Numbers

Dairy	Bottle Date Code	Phone Number
Escobar Dairy	1941; 1942	Red S6J2
La Selva Dairy	1941	RED 77-J-2
Osaple Dairy	1937	RED 31R4
Stedham’s Dairy	RED 72J1	RED 72J1
Vasquez Dairy	1941	RED 86J-1

Future research should delve into both of these telephone firms – as well as into the original invasion by the Bell system. I have only discovered information on the second independent system by dates on milk bottles. A historical beginning and end to both of these independents would help in bottle dating. That is especially true with the “Auto” system, since none of the early bottles from the El Paso Dairy Co. had date codes.

Non-Glass Containers

Another field of study that should be addressed is non-glass containers – specifically waxed-paper cartons and plastic milk containers. Since waxed-paper cartons deteriorate rapidly after deposition in trash dumps, we have much less information about the local use of these materials than of the much older glass assemblage. There was probably a sequence of development of these cartons based on both configuration (mostly pouring spouts) and design (e.g., labels). Since waxed-paper cartons remain in use in the 21st century, there has been half a century of design changes.

I have made no attempt to explore the plastics era – for two major reasons. First, I have virtually no interest in plastics; second, the initiation of plastic milk containers was too recent. Still, this should be studied while we still have many of the records that will inevitably disappear over time. One of the strange realities of data preservation is that I have found a *much* greater variety of sources for older dairies (especially El Paso Dairy Co.) than for recent ones.

Other Dairy Paraphernalia

As noted throughout this text, there are other material items that were used by dairies – often called “go-withs” by collectors. Many items, especially older ones – such as churns – were not marked with dairy names and are of no concern in this study. However, many articles, such as dairy cans, crates, picks, openers, and caps, were marked with the names of the dairies and are often datable. Future research should follow up on these items. As with bottles, archaeologists and collectors should discover more of these as time passes.

So, I bequeath the information in this book to future researchers. I hope this forms a good base for your discoveries. And I sincerely hope you rewrite a significant part of this work. Only in this way can the study of history grow.

Sources

Fischer, Claude S.

1992 *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Toulouse, Julian Harrison

1971 *Bottle Makers and Their Marks*. Thomas Nelson, New York.