

Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co.

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The story of the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. was a story of persistence. Beset by disastrous fires every few years, the two principals, Col. John L. McCulloch and J. Wood Wilson, consistently rebuilt and even expanded the business into two other locations, buying existing plants in each case. The firm specialized in Mason fruit jars and oil cans, although it made other types of jars at least in its earlier days. Opening in 1888, the firm persisted until the Ball Brothers bought it in 1904.

Histories

By 1898, the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. had numbered its factories. Marion was No. 1, with No. 2 at the former Dillon Glass Co. plant in Fairmount. The “King City” factory at Converse was No. 3 (*Commoner & Glassworker* 1898:1).

Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co., Marion, Indiana (1888-1904)

According to Toulouse (1971:356), Col. John L. McCulloch and J. Wood Wilson purchased the former Southern Glass Co. at Louisville, Kentucky, in 1887 and moved the factory to Marion, Indiana, to take advantage of the natural gas available there. McCulloch had been a bookkeeper with Southern Glass in 1879, leaving in 1883 to become a bookkeeper and later a salesman for the North Wheeling Glass Co. (see the section on Southern Glass and the Other N section more information on these firms). The term “Colonel” seems to have been an honorary title – like the Kentucky ‘Colonel.’” McCulloch married Wood Wilson’s daughter, Alice Rebecca Wilson, July 5, 1883. Wood Wilson was involved in banking for his entire life, so his contributions may have been monetary – possibly explaining the continuing rebuilding of the plants after disaster struck (see below). The actual Articles of Association were signed by the pair on January 11, 1888. McCulloch held 66.6% of the \$10,000 stock with the remaining third belonging to Wilson. The plant was in production in 1888, but it burned in February 1890 and was soon rebuilt (Roller 1994:62; 1998a; Toulouse 1971:356; Whittson 1914:670-672).

According to the October 2, 1890, *American Pottery & Glass Reporter*, Marion Fruit Jar began making the “famous ‘Standard’ oil can” for the Brown & Harter Mfg. Co. of Columbus, Ohio, at that time – as well as “the ‘Dandy,’ another first class oil can, and one that is commanding a big sale” (quoted in Roller 1998a) (Figure 1). The factory again burned on February 13, 1893, after which, it was again rebuilt – but a *third* fire completely destroyed the plant again on December 15, 1895. Once again, the persistent pair rebuilt, and this time the factory had a single continuous tank with eight rings (Roller 1994:62; 1998a; Toulouse 1971:356).

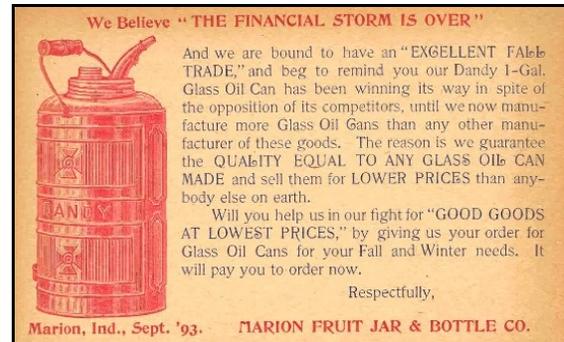


Figure 1 – Dandy Oil Can (Ministria Heritage Collection)

Although the company retained the original name, it incorporated in Indiana with a \$100,000 capital on November 24, 1896. In 1897, the Marion plant had “three furnaces, 40 pots, in operation, making fruit jars and oil cans.” By 1898, the number of pots had increased to 48 (*National Glass Budget* 1897:5; 1898:7). The stamping department (making caps) was destroyed by fire on March 19, 1898, and rebuilt. McCulloch & Wilson installed six Blue machines at the Marion plant between August and November of 1899 (Roller 1994:63; 1998a; Toulouse 1971:356-357).¹ From 1900 to 1902, the plant used 80 pots (this probably meant rings) to make its products. In 1904, McCulloch was listed as president and secretary, with Wilson as treasurer. At that point, Marion operated six continuous tanks with 52 rings, and the firm was refurbishing the factory for 11 more machines (including the Fairmount and Coffeyville plants). (*National Glass Budget* 1900:11; 1902:11; Roller 1998a).

McCulloch and Wilson sued the Ball Brothers on May 23, 1903, claiming that the Balls infringed on the September 30, 1899, Wilbur Fetters patent (No. 602,636), assigned to the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. Although we have not discovered the resolution, it was almost certainly a factory leading to the Ball Brothers’ purchase of the plant (Cole 2003). On September 20, 1897, Fetters applied for a patent for a “Glass Pressing Machine” and received Patent No. 602,636 on April 19, 1898. We have no idea where the 1899 date came from. If there was a later derivation of the same patent, we have not discovered it. The 1898 patent document did not

¹ See Lockhart & Bernas (2014) for a history of the Blue machines.

show any assignment, so the transfer to Marion must have occurred at some point after the patent date. Although never specifically mentioned in the document, one drawing seemed to show a glass insert being pressed, so it is highly probable that McCulloch and Wilson used the machines for that purpose (Figure 2).

The Ball Brothers bought the entire operation in 1904. Ball ran the Marion facility until 1913 (Roller 1994:63; Toulouse 1971:356-357). The company remained listed as the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. in the Thomas Registers until 1909 (Thomas Publishing Co. 1905:103, 577; 1909:199, 1100). The Marion Fruit Glass & Bottle Co. did not record the final deed of transfer to Ball until February 25, 1910 (Roller 1994:63).

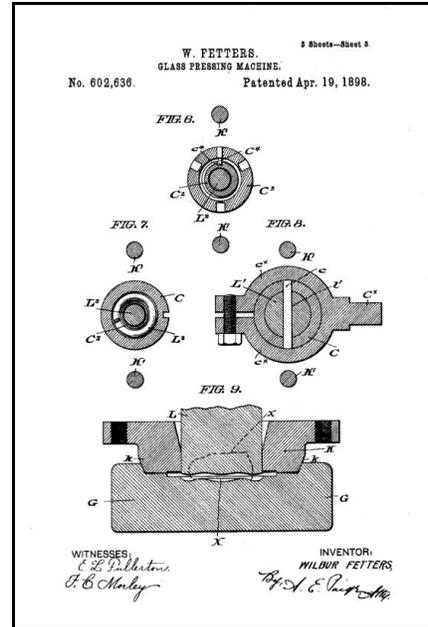


Figure 2 – Feters 1898 patent

Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co., Fairmount, Indiana (1894-1904)

Marion bought the old Dillon Glass Co. plant at Fairmount, Indiana, on December 1, 1894. The Fairmount factory had 60 pots in 1898 (*National Glass Budget* 1898:7). On December 13, 1890, the Fairmount plant burned but was rebuilt – although the smoke stack had been weakened in the blaze and later collapsed. Another major fire on April 24, 1900, consumed the waresheds, destroying 300 carloads of jars. A second factory had been built by 1903, but we have found little record for that operation. The Ball Brothers purchased the plants in 1904, closing Fairmount immediately. The firm razed the buildings in November of 1905 and sold the property on February 28, 1910 (Roller n.d.; 1994:25; Toulouse 1971:356-357).

Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co., Converse, Indiana (1898-1903)

Although Toulouse (1971:356-357) noted that the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. obtained the Converse plant from the Tigner Glass Co. in 1894, Roller (1994:13) listed the deed transfer on July 16, 1898. Wilson & McCulloch installed six blue machines during the period between August and November 1899. The plant moved to Coffeyville, Kansas, in 1903 (Roller 1998b).

Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co., Coffeyville, Kansas (1903-1904)

McCulloch and Wilson moved the Converse plant to Coffeyville at the end of 1903, operating ten machines at a single continuous tank. The Ball Brothers acquired the plant in October 1904 and closed it in 1905. The Balls dismantled the building in 1912 (Roller 1998b).

Mason Fruit Jar Co. (1904-1905)

The Ball Brothers seem to have operated the former Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. factories as the Marion Fruit Jar Co. during 1904 and part of 1905. The *Coffeyville Daily Journal* for May 6, 1904, reported that the Coffeyville plant (under the Marion Fruit Jar Co. name) shipped “nearly fifty car loads of fruit Jars” (probably Mason jars – although the paper did not say so specifically) in two days. The paper added that, if the 540,000 jars “were laid in a row, end to end supposing the average length of a jar to be eight inches, they would stretch a distance of sixty-eight miles.” Both the Marion and Coffeyville plants were reported as part of the Marion Fruit Jar Co. (Johnson 1908:247; State of Indiana 1907:124). This may have been a temporary name, while the Ball Brothers filled existing orders from Marion Fruit Jar and seems to have disappeared after 1905.

Containers and Marks

According to ads and letterheads, the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. produced the 1858-embossed Mason jars and glass-lined oil cans from at least 1890 to 1899. There is no question that the plants made fruit jars after that point, but they may have discontinued the oil cans about the turn of the century.

M.F.J. AND B.Co. (1888-1904)

Toulouse (1969:216) reported this mark on a mouth-blown Mason jar and claimed the maker was the Marion Fruit Jar and Bottle



Figure 3 – MFJ&BCo (North American Glass)

Co., Marion, Indiana, 1890-1904. Toulouse (1971:356) later amended the date to 1888-1904. Although Toulouse showed the mark with an ampersand (&), Roller (1983:238; 2011:359) illustrated it in an arch with the word “AND” in much smaller letters than the initials (Figure 3). Creswick (1987:138) illustrated the mark on the base of a Mason jar, also with the small “AND” (Figure 4).

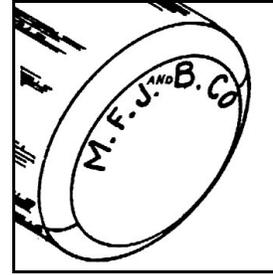


Figure 4 – MFJ&B Co (Creswick 1987a:138)

M.F.J.Co. (poss. 1888-1904)



Figure 5 – MFJCO (eBay)

According to Toulouse (1969:215) and Roller (1983:250; 2011:374), this mark was found on the base of mouth-blown, grooved-ring wax-sealer fruit jars made in aqua and amber colors (Figure 5). Neither

author attempted to identify the maker, although Toulouse dated the jar ca. 1860-1880. Creswick (1987:157) illustrated the jar and suggested that it was made by the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co., Marion, Indiana 1888-1904; Converse & Fairmount, Indiana 1894-1904 (Figure 6).

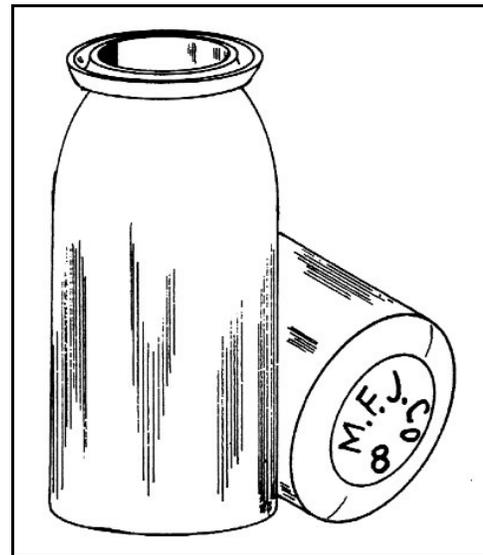


Figure 6 – MFJCO (Creswick 1987a:157)

The Marion Jar

Toulouse (1969:194) reported a mouth-blown jar embossed “THE MARION JAR (slight arch) / MASON’S (arch) / PATENT / NOV 30 / 1858 (all horizontal)” on the front (Figure 7). He reported two variations of the jar, one with block letters and the other with “deliberately roughened letters” on the top line, dating both variations ca. 1890-1904 by the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. Roller (1983:231) noted both variations as well as two more, one with a triangle in the center of the base, another with a five-pointed star. He also noted that the cap was stamped “GENUINE BOYD CAP FOR MASON JARS” in a circle around a Diamond-M logo in the



Figure 7 – Marion Jar (North American Glass)

a variation with “MFJCo” embossed “on neck below thread to right of side seam.”

M in a Diamond



Figure 9 – Marion Jar (Creswick 1987a:113)

and much more ornate than the one embossed on the liner (see Figure 8). For information about an unrelated Diamond-M logo, see the section on M&Co and the Diamond-M Marks.

center, and the liner was embossed “BOYD’S GENUINE PORCELAIN LINED” around a similar Diamond-M figure (Figure 8). Creswick (1987:113) illustrated both major variations as well as the lid and liner (Figures 9 & 10). The Roller update (2011:351) added that Vivian Kath had provided information on



Figure 8 – Marion Lid (North American Glass)

Whitten (2017) stated that “M inside a diamond” was found “on Mason-type zinc caps for fruit jars, and their corresponding milk glass “discs” or inserts” and correctly placed the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. as the user. The lids originally came with The Marion Jar. He further observed that “the ‘M’ has slightly out-curved ‘legs’ which make the mark appear as the letter ‘W’ when viewed upside down.” We would also like to add that the “M” stamped into the lid is very different

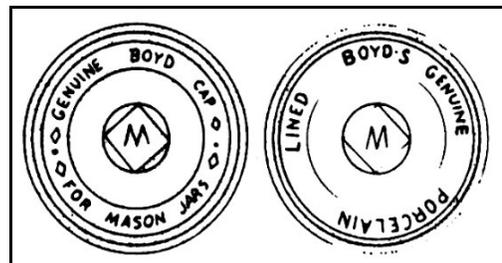


Figure 10 – Marion Lid (Creswick 1987a:113)

Discussion and Conclusions

There is virtually no question that The Marion Fruit Jar, the “M.F.J. AND B.” initials, and the Diamond-M lid motif were made or used by the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. The MFJCo initials, however, are less certain. While the initials correspond to the Marion Fruit Jar Co., that name was only used by the Ball Brothers for a year or so, and the jars were mouth-blown wax sealers. The Ball Brothers *did* make wax sealers from ca. 1895 to 1912, but those were clearly marked with the Ball signature and were machine made.

On the other hand, if Vivian Kath’s claim that a tiny “MFJCo” was embossed beneath the threads on the finish of an example of The Marion Jar is correct, it establishes a strong connection between those initials and the Marion Fruit Glass & Bottle Co. factory. Possibly, one of the plants continued to use the older Marion Jar molds and added the new initials on the finish. Although we have found no ads for the product, the Marion Fruit Jar & Bottle Co. may have produced grooved-ring, wax-sealer fruit jars as well. The bulk of their products had no manufacturer’s marks on them – e.g., The Marion Jar – with no basal logos except the triangle or star on some bases. Therefore, the plant could have made unmarked wax sealers. Certainly, none of the machine-made jars had logos or any form of identification – at least none that have been reported by any source we have found. If the Ball plant continued to produce wax sealers until the molds wore out, the workers could have easily added the “MFJCo” basemark. While much of the above is speculation, it fits the few known facts, and we have no other explanation.

A final issue to address was the triangle and five-point star basal embossings on some Marion Jars. These *could* have been ways to identify the different satellite factories – Fairmount and Converse (later Coffeyville). If the prices in Leybourne (2010:256) are any indication (\$20-30 for the star; \$20-25 for the triangle), the two marked bases are fairly common. If that speculation is correct, then the triangle and star markings could also have been used on other Mason jars (with the patent date on the side) that were made by the two satellite plants. Creswick (1987:139) illustrated such marks on the bases of the Patent-embossed Mason jars (Figure 11). Of course, it is also possible that these markings could have been mold makers’ signatures.

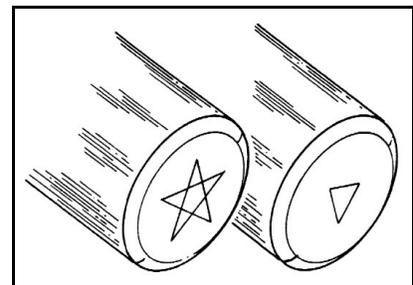


Figure 11 – Base designs (Creswick 1987:139)

Acknowledgments

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