

# **The Bottles of William McLaughlin**

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William McLaughlin had a unique glass history. He began with a business in his garage, grew into a good-sized factory, lost the plant, returned to a garage, into another factory, and back into a garage. Although others (e.g., the Ball Brothers) began in a garage, McLaughlin's undulating trajectory showed a persistence that was unparalleled. Although McLaughlin's wares – predominantly carboys and other large containers – were mostly local in scope, his logos certainly deserve a place in manufacturer's marks history.

## **History**

William McLaughlin began glass blowing for the Illinois Glass Co. ca. 1909 and eventually drifted west (Toulouse 1971:354). According to the McDougalds (1990:92), McLaughlin moved to Los Angeles in 1915 and opened a small glass factory there. Padgett (1996:67) described it as a "backyard factory" that made horseradish, mustard, mayonnaise, and jelly jars until 1918. McLaughlin claimed that because he was not zoned for business, the police visited him several times but never shut him down. He became involved with William Latchford and John McK. Marble in the Southern Glass Co. at Vernon, a suburb of Los Angeles, and the three incorporated the business on October 18, 1918. After just two years with the group, McLaughlin left – citing disagreements with Marble as the reason – to return to his own setup. See the section on the Southern Glass Co. for more information on that firm.

### **McLaughlin Glass Co., Los Angeles, California (1920-ca. 1935)**

In 1920, McLaughlin moved to Los Angeles and built a larger plant at 52<sup>nd</sup> St. and Alameda, where he began making five-gallon water bottles. McLaughlin noted that the plant opened the first week in January and told what was probably an apocryphal story: To test the bottles, he suspended a wooden shipping crate from the ceiling

near a concrete wall with a steel plate. . . . The carboy would be filled with water, and the assembly would be pulled away from the wall a predetermined distance and then released so it would crash against the wall. Survivors would be shipped, and failures would be returned to the batch to be remelted (Padgett 1996:36).

According to Toulouse (1971:354), McLaughlin began this factory using a Teeple-Johnson machine that he had purchased from the Illinois-Pacific plant at San Francisco. The business received a big boost when the Illinois-Pacific warehouse in San Francisco burned on May 2, 1920, destroying all the bottles in storage. Representatives from the Arrowhead and Puritas water companies immediately sought McLaughlin, and he expanded his business to accommodate their orders (Padgett 1996:37-38).

He added insulators to his product line in the late 1920s, but lost much of his insulator business to Glass Containers, Inc., in the early part of the next decade. In 1927, McLaughlin made “prescriptions, vials, packers, sodas, five-gallon bottles, large jars, insulators and special shapes in glass, flint and green” by machine and hand methods at two continuous tanks with seven rings. He added a day tank the following year. In 1930, McLaughlin converted the day tank to another continuous tank, added one more ring, and modified the product list to “street globes, jugs, cylinders, five-gallon bottles, large jars, insulators and special shapes in glass, flint and green” still by both machine and hand made. He added fish globes (like goldfish bowls) in 1932 and instituted two day tanks the following year. The listing continued the same until at least 1936 (*American Glass Review* 1927:141; 1928:143; 1929:101; 1932:76; 1934:96; McDougald & McDougald 1990:92).

From 1933 to 1935, McLaughlin manufactured “amber beer bottles for a large distributor” (McDougald & McDougald 1990:92). McLaughlin explained the situation:

After the repeal of Prohibition, a friend, Frank O’Neil, advised me that Busch Brewing Company had just purchased a new bottle manufacturing machine. I arranged to purchase their old number twenty-eight machine and had them ship it to us. The machine arrived and all the beer bottle molds came attached to it. At this time I had no intention of making beer bottles, but a friend told me that a friend of his owned a fleet of delivery trucks and that he had just signed an exclusive contract with East Side Brewery in Los Angeles. The terms of the

contract also required that the delivery service would sell back to East Side all the bottles that they could get. To go along with this machine I built an automatic feeder because I knew that the patents on the automatic feeder with which Hartford Company was monopolizing the bottle manufacturing market were about to run out.

It wasn't long before we were producing fifteen one quart beer bottles a minute on our automatic machine twenty-four hours a day. The large glass factories had the orders, but we were supplying all the bottles. The big companies were very unhappy about this and sent men to the East Side Brewery to discredit me by testing my bottles by exposing them to the extremes of hot steam and then plunging them into ice water hoping they would break. They didn't break because I was using a small amount of lepidolite [a lithium-rich mica] in the batch along with sand, soda ash, and lime. The lepidolite reduced the coefficient of expansion of the glass batch which resulted in bottles resistant to breakage when first exposed to extreme heat and then to extreme cold (Padgett 1996:54).

McLaughlin's memory is a bit inaccurate on this point. Anheuser-Busch never made its own bottles. The brewery bought bottles from several sources, including the Adolphus Busch Glass Mfg. Co., almost certainly the company McLaughlin remembered. The timing is also a bit off. Busch closed sometime between 1926 and 1928, *before* the end of Prohibition. By 1917, Busch had 14 O'Neill and two Lynch semiautomatic machines, and we have found no evidence that he acquired others. Toulouse (1971:354) recalled the sale of the O'Neill machines by Busch as being in 1923.

McLaughlin's reminiscences include a story about when one of his "competitors" called the prohibition authorities to claim that he was making bottles for bootleggers. The inspectors found nothing wrong, so they identified the informant. McLaughlin knew that the informant actually made bottles for bootleggers, himself, and told the inspector. The other factory was raided and the owner convicted of violating the prohibition laws (Padgett 1996:56). Although McLaughlin failed to name this informant, it was undoubtedly Latchford, who was convicted of such an action.

By 1924, the firm was incorporated (possibly from the beginning), with McLaughlin as president, R.R. Rathbone as vice president, C.E. Norton as secretary, and T.H. Morgan as treasurer and those officers remained through most of the 1920s. The plant made “bottles, jars, insulators, gas-pump cylinders, and large ware.” By 1934, the plant was listed at 930 E. 52<sup>nd</sup> St. McLaughlin remained as president, with Louis Auger as vice president and secretary; J.G. Schultz was factory manager. According to McLaughlin, he had invented a feeder for the machines that converted them to full automatic production (see above). The Hartford-Empire Co. sued him for infringement on its patents for automatic feeding machines, and the courts forced McLaughlin out of business in 1936 (Padet 1996:54; Roller 1998; Toulouse 1971:354).

Because the Illinois Glass Co. obtained machines that would make five-gallon bottle with continuous-thread finishes, McLaughlin ceased operations in 1935 (Toulouse (1971:354-355). McLaughlin noted, “It was impossible to do that with hand made bottles and I lost a large portion of my best business. Illinois Glass refused to sell bottles to any of my former customers if they were found to be buying any bottles from me.” McLaughlin had earlier “turned all my insulator molds and equipment over to Maydwell and Hartzell” (Padgett 1996:56-57).

### **Back in the Garage and a Plant at Glendale (ca. 1936-1945)**

The next phase of McLaughlin’s glass activities is a bit confused. A great deal of information was only available from McLaughlin, himself. Padgett (1996:56) explained that there was not much “paper” to support most of McLaughlin’s claims because he preferred to make “handshake” deals with his customers. Although he claimed to be in business during this period, there is virtually no documentation or even a name for the firm or firms. He may have continued to call himself the McLaughlin Glass Co.

According to Toulouse (1971:355), McLaughlin “made fixtures, lamp globes, and related glass articles for the Feldman Fixture Company,” inventing a semiautomatic machine that made large bottles during that period. McLaughlin, himself, noted that he next started a business in his garage, subverting the larger bleach companies. At that time, “the smaller bleach companies were having trouble getting bottles so they would purchase Clorox and Purex bottles from second hand bottle dealers and grind the raised letters of the embossing until they didn’t show. Then they could use their own paper label and the bottle would not give any indication that at one time it contained Clorox or Purex bleach.” To counteract this, Clorox began using outline letters in

1951, and Purex used debossed or sunken lettering (Padgett 1996:57). It is unclear, however, just how embossing the name in outlined letters would thwart someone willing to spend an inordinate amount of time to grind letters from the side of a bottle.

McLaughlin built a small oven in his garage where he could heat the shoulder areas of the Purex and Clorox bottles, place them in molds he made, and blow out the letters to form a smooth shoulder. He would then sell the bottles to the smaller companies. McLaughlin also discovered that Welch’s Grape Juice bottles had both the correct temper and were the right size to reheat them and blow them into a mold to make lighting fixtures. However, he needed more space. The bleach jug/lighting fixture phase lasted from 1935 to 1936 in the garage and from 1936 to 1945 at the former Glendale Creamery factory then converted to produce glass<sup>1</sup> (Padgett 1996:57-58, 67).

### McLaughlin Glass Co., Gardena, California (1946-1956)

McLaughlin next purchased the Larsen Letter Co., Gardena, California, in 1946 – a plant that made glass letters for movie theater marquees. Along with his lamp fixtures, he made large ware there, on a machine he had designed, himself, and patented. McLaughlin applied for a patent for a “Method of Blowing Glass Bottles” on April 3, 1953, receiving Patent No. 2,693,667 on November 9, 1954 (Figure 1). Once again, his five-gallon water bottles were so popular that when McLaughlin sold out again, the Arrowhead Puritas water company purchased the plant to make its own bottles in 1956 (Padgett 1996:56, 58, 67).

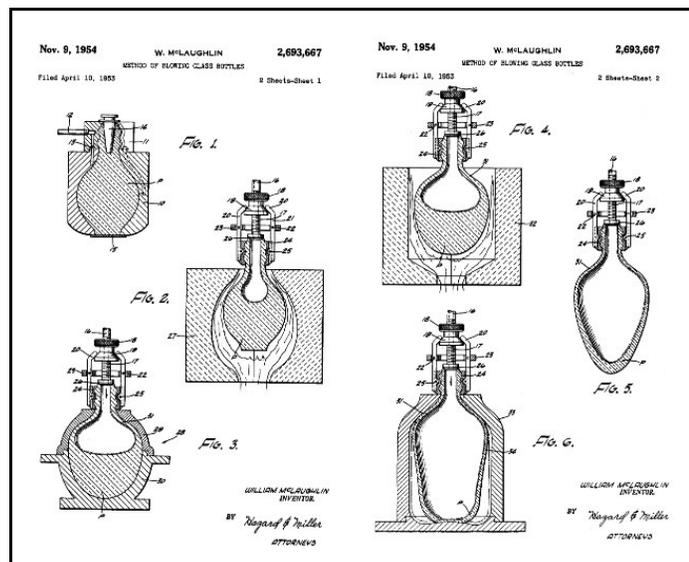


Figure 1 – McLaughlin 1954 patent

<sup>1</sup> These dates do not agree with the dates Clorox and Purex had changed to the outlined and debossed letters.

## Back in the Garage (1972-1975)

After a hiatus in the electrical fixture business, McLaughlin re-entered the glass trade in 1972 with a small factory in his garage. He made commemorative insulators for the next few years but died on July 17, 1975 (McDougald & McDougald 1990:92).

## Bottles and Marks

### M<sup>C</sup>L (1920-1935; 1946-1956)

According to Toulouse (1971:354), McLaughlin used the McL mark enclosed in a horizontal oval from 1920 to 1936. Whitten (2017) did not specify the surrounding oval and dated the mark from 1920 to 1935. He also noted that the mark appears on water bottles from the 1946-1956 period. In a personal communication (12/14/2007), Bob McLaughlin (a descendent of William) confirmed both the plain McL mark and the one encircled by an oval.



Figure 2 – McL (eBay)

Padgett (1996:89-101) illustrated and discussed McLaughlin marks and date codes. In observing Padgett's photos of five-gallon bottles and bases, it becomes clear that all of the machines used by McLaughlin left large, circular post-mold seams on the bases. These circular seams may have been what both Toulouse and McLaughlin meant when they discussed the McL mark in an "oval." Smaller bottles, made with cup-bottom molds, however, do not have these circular (or "oval") markings (Figure 2).

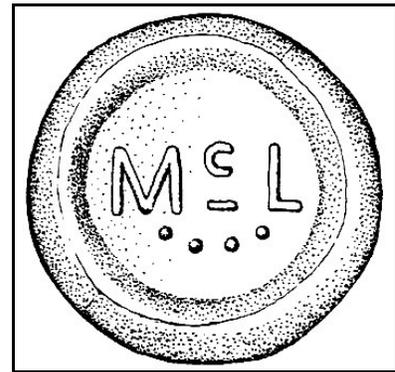


Figure 3 – McL

Photos also show two variations of the mark, based on the configuration of the letter "C." The "C" was always shown in superscript, but bottles with no date code, single-digit date codes, or 1930s date codes always had the "C" underlined ("M<sup>C</sup>L"). Bottles from the 1950s, however, lacked the underline ("M<sup>C</sup>L"). We may thus hypothesize that bottles made in the 1920-1935

period were marked with the underlined “C” logo (“M<sup>c</sup>L”), and bottles made between ca. 1946 and 1956 were produced with only the superscript “C” (“M<sup>c</sup>L”). A drawing showed the “M<sup>c</sup>L” mark with four dots forming an inverted arc below the logo (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup>

A second interesting characteristic is the central two lines that make up the “M” in the logo. In most of the McLaughlin photos, the central two lines form the letter “V”; however, in a single photo (with a 1930 date code), the two lines form the letter “Y” (Figure 4). This

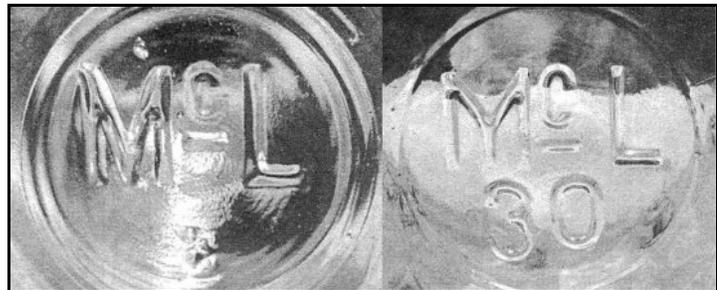


Figure 4 – McL (Padgett 1996:92-93)

variation was also noted on SIMPLEX jars by Bernas (2005:XI-XII). Whether the “Y” variation was a fluke created by an individual engraver or was a characteristic of the early 1930s bottles will require more research. See the Perfection Glass Co. section for more discussion about this phenomenon.

Padgett (1996:96) noted that “bottles made in the 1920’s have single digit numbers,” and photos show that those could be embossed either above or below the logo on the base. Bottles made after 1930 had two-digit numbers, and all photos showed those below the logo. Some bottles were marked with a zero (“0”), but Padgett did not address those. At least some bottles made in 1930 were embossed “30” – but whether that was done from the beginning of the year is currently unknown. At present, a “0” code could mean either 1920 or 1930. There were also bottles with no date codes, likely made during the 1920s. By the 1930s, the use of date codes was probably so deeply ingrained that their accidental elimination was less likely.

## McL monogram

We have encountered a monogram made of an “M” with an extending “foot” that created an “L.” Nestled high in the crook of the “L” was a small “c” similar to the superscript “c” used in “M<sup>c</sup>” abbreviations (Figure 5). The monogram was embossed on the bottom of a machine-

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we have lost the provenance for this drawing. Our apologies to the artist.

made amber base of a quart liquor bottle. This mark is unlisted in any source we have found, but we believe it could belong to McLaughlin.

Bob McLaughlin (personal communication, 12/14/2007) noted that McLaughlin made both whiskey bottles and amber beer bottles. Padgett (1996:54) also noted whiskey bottle manufacture at the McLaughlin plant and told Bob that the factory made quart-size amber beer bottles, as well. Padgett also informed Bob that it is certainly possible that McLaughlin used the McL monogram.



Figure 5 – McL monogram (eBay)

### **M<sup>c</sup>LAUGHLIN** (1920s-early 1930s)

McLaughlin also made numerous insulators, but these were always marked “M<sup>c</sup>LAUGHLIN” along the skirt (Whitten 2017; Woodward 1988:27) (Figure 6).



Figure 6 – McLaughlin insulators (Whitten 2017)

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

With his beginnings in a garage, McLaughlin had an unusual – although not unique (see the section on the Ball Brothers) – history. Both fortunately and unfortunately, much of our information comes from the reminiscences of McLaughlin, himself. This is fortunate in that he presented first-person stories that could never be available from any other source. The misfortune is that memory tends to be unreliable and is always biased. However, it is clear that McLaughlin was persistent and produced good glass ware.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the “M<sup>c</sup>L” was used by McLaughlin, almost certainly between ca. 1920 and ca. 1935. Equally certain is the “M<sup>c</sup>L” logo, likely between ca. 1946 and 1956. The “M<sup>c</sup>LAUGHLIN” mark on insulators is likewise confirmed from the 1920s to the early 1930s.

The logo formed with an ML ligature plus a superscript “c” in the crook of the “L” is less certain but was likely a McLaughlin logo. Since we have only found that mark on amber whiskey bottles with no post-1933 federal codes, those were probably made illegally during Prohibition or in the years immediately following Repeal. McLaughlin’s wording on the subject is interesting. He noted that he was never caught making liquor bottles during Prohibition. He never stated directly that he did *not* produce such bottles. This logo may record the most interesting but untold part of the McLaughlin story.

## Acknowledgments

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