

# NICHOLSON BOTTLING WORKS

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Constantino P. "Gus" Nicholson founded bottling plants in Mexico in the nineteenth century and eventually made his way to El Paso. Once in the Border City, he bought Union Bottling Works, but eventually abandoned the enterprise to form Nicholson Bottling Works in 1925. With seven other bottlers operating in El Paso at that time, including the powerful Empire Products Corporation and Magnolia Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Nicholson's decision to independently join the competition was courageous to say the least. As a locally owned and operated company, Nicholson Bottling Works remained in business for an impressive fifty-four years and spanned the

gap between embossed, paper-label, and ACL bottles.

## Nicholson's Adventures in Mexico

Born in Greece about 1870, Gus Nicholson led a colorful life prior to buying Union Bottling Works. As a young man, he immigrated to Mexico with his wife, Anna, where he opened a candy factory and soda water bottling plant in Allende, Coahuilla. Nicholson employed over a hundred girls to manufacture and pack the candy which was then delivered by mule on a route that took from two to three weeks if all went well. Twice, during his stay in Mexico, Nicholson was ruined by revolutionary activities. In both cases,





one of the competing factions took all his mules and supplies. One time, a group of about fifty revolutionaries, including women and children, were fleeing government troops and came to Nicholson's plant. They told him that pursuing soldiers intended to kill them all, women and children included. Nicholson concealed the group among his large hay bales and, when the soldiers arrived, invited them to search his premises. Finding no one but Gus and his employees, the soldiers left to continue their search, and Nicholson fed the revolutionaries before sending them on their way (Nicholson interview).

The loss of a second business was enough for Nicholson. In 1911 he packed up his family and returned to Greece. During their stay, a severe earthquake devastated their home in 1913, collapsing almost half of it into rubble. Nicholson's son, George, asleep in his crib at the beginning of the quake, was catapulted from the second story

hallway into the street but remained uninjured. Although the rest of the family was also unhurt, Nicholson moved again, this time to the United States.

The family name was originally Nicolopolos, but the immigration agents convinced Gus to "Americanize" his last name to Nicholson when the family arrived in New York in 1916. The family eventually settled in an almost entirely earthquake-free area—El Paso, Texas. Nicholson was apparently tired of the candy business, but bottling was in his blood.

Francisco Dominguez & Co. (1915)  
Union Bottling Works (1916-1935)

In 1919, Nicholson bought the Union Bottling Works, located at 409 S. Virginia St. Union Bottling Works had been founded by Francisco B. Dominguez as Francisco Dominguez & Company in 1915 and was renamed as Union Bottling Works the following

year. Joe Salcido bought the business in 1918, but sold it to Nicholson the following year. The business bottled a variety of flavors, all under the Union name, and, with the onset of Prohibition, acted as a wholesale outlet for near-beers, such as NIB. Nicholson delivered his products in a horse-drawn wagon loaded with fifteen to twenty cases at a time, usually with the assistance of a hired helper. Aside from temporary laborers, Nicholson worked the business alone until 1921 when he took on John Beys as a partner. The two men eventually reached a point of irreconcilable differences, and Nicholson offered his partner the choice of buying the Nicholson share of the venture or selling his. Beys elected to

buy Nicholson's portion, and the two parted company in 1925 (EPCD 1916-1935; Anonymous 2003).

At some point, the brothers formed Beys Brothers & Company with Union Bottling Works and their restaurant enterprises as subsidiaries. In 1931, John only employed one worker in the Union Bottling Works plant with an additional laborer during the peak months of July and August. Two one-ton capacity trucks actually distributed the finished products, delivering a total of 12,364 cases of Union soda in seven-ounce bottles during the year. Union sodas sold for 65¢ per case, wholesale. Workers at Union labored ten hours a day during a six-day work week, although the week was reduced to five





days during the coldest months of the year (EPCD 1935; United States Census of Manufactures, 1931). Beys continued to operate Union Bottling Works until its dissolution in 1935 (probably due to the Great Depression).

#### Nicholson Bottling Works (1925-1979)

Nicholson was still determined to stay in the bottling business, so, in 1925, the same year he became a U. S. citizen, he founded Nicholson Bottling Works. He built his plant at an ideal location for his convenience—right in back of his house. For the duration of the company, the address was listed in El Paso city directories as “rear of 1024 Wyoming [Ave.]” Although most of his other children eventually chose different occupations, Nicholson’s son, Alkividias (always known as Alkie) remained in the bottling business. Alkie described the functioning of the bottling business as a great deal of hard work. His typical day started early. He would load his truck with 300 cases, run the route, and be back by noon. In

early days, Alkie would service the Lower Valley one day, Second Ward the next day, Northeast El Paso the following day, and continue in that manner until the entire city had been served and it was time to start over. While on the route, he checked the Nicholson displays in stores, replaced the product that had been sold, and loaded the empty bottles onto the truck. In addition, he would service the many households that bought Nicholson sodas by the case. Frequently, at that time, Nicholson, as well as other bottlers in town, would mix the different flavors in a single case to provide variety for stores as well as individual home customers. The idea of six-pack carriers did not appear until later. Alkie got up at 4:00 AM every morning to prepare machines and sometimes worked until 10:00 o’clock at night.

Nicholson started his bottling works in the middle of Prohibition. It was the era of the speakeasy, but, of greater importance to bottlers, it was the also

the era of near-beer. Non-alcoholic grain beverages permeated the market, and Nicholson could see the advantage of being a distributor. Accordingly, the company sold Goldcrest, Golden Glow, and NIB (which Nicholson apparently brought with him from his split with Beys at Union Bottling Works) until the end of Prohibition in 1933. In addition, the firm bottled Howdy Orange and Muscadine Punch during the same period. About the end of Prohibition, Nicholson ceased bottling franchised brands to concentrate on his own Nicholson flavors.

In 1931, Nicholson employed five workers in the plant during peak season, decreasing to two employees in the winter (even to one – probably Gus, himself – in December). At that time, the company used three one-ton capacity trucks and sold 9,042 cases of six-and-a-half-ounce drinks and 1,690 cases of eight-ounce beverages (a total of 10,732 cases) per year. Nicholson flavors sold for 65¢ per case, wholesale. Although family members worked longer hours, employees generally

labored eight hours a day, six days a week, a very light work-load for the early 1930s (U. S. Census of Manufacturers, 1931).

In the early days at Nicholson, Alkie received \$1 per day, even though he was married and had two children. He was offered \$35 per week for delivering the Las Cruces route for the Sure-Best Bread bakery which he described as “a big outfit with sixteen trucks.” Alkie enjoyed the work for about a year but quit because he could not stand watching his father run the Nicholson routes in the winter. He took over as manager of Nicholson Bottling Works in 1945. In October 1948, C. P. Nicholson died at the age of seventy-eight.

Nicholson’s wholesale price for a case of bottled carbonated beverages was 60 cents (65¢ by 1931). Since each soda retailed at 5 cents per bottle, the stores made a gross profit of 60 cents—a one hundred per cent markup. The company bottled only with cold water because it gave the resulting beverage a better taste and because it mixed

C. 1927



better with the carbon dioxide gas. Tap water at ordinary temperature does not absorb the gas well. They used city water that was purified by passing it through two filters. According to Alkie, it made “the ideal soda pop.” The Nicholsons obtained most of their bottles from Liberty Glass Company of Sapulpa, Oklahoma, although they also purchased some from Mexican glass companies. The bottles manufactured in the U. S. endured much better (lasting about three times as long) and were of higher quality than the less expensive Mexican bottles.

The caps were purchased in 1,000 gross lots and originally applied with a foot pedal machine that simultaneously filled and capped each bottle. The foot operation was later replaced by the complete automation of the bottling process. Nicholson used only pure cane sugar, three 100 pound sacks per batch. The operators originally stirred the vats with hand paddles but later upgraded to mechanized mixing. The new mixers

had a propeller in the bottom of the vat connected by a pole to the motor fixed above the surface level of the beverage. Mechanization improved the quality of the mix as well as conserving manpower. The returnable bottles were cleaned in an automatic bottle washer that ran at 300 degrees centigrade. The bottles came out “like a diamond” (Nicholson interview).

Nicholson Bottling Works delivered to El Paso’s Upper Valley, reaching as far north as Mesilla and Las Cruces, New Mexico, and to the Lower Valley, as far south as San Elizario, Clint, and Fabens. During its heyday, they operated four trucks, one for the Upper Valley, one for the Lower Valley, one for the City of El Paso, and one as a spare. Both Nicholsons were proud of the service they gave their customers.

Alkie Nicholson retired from the bottling business in 1971, selling the bottling works to Herman and Herbert S. Vitela who continued to operate under the original name until closing the business in 1979 (EPCD 1972-



1979). Nicholson continued to live in the house in front of the plant and rented the old Nicholson Bottling Works building as a warehouse for dry goods.

### Nichols Bottles

Even though I interviewed Alkie when he was 87 years old, the Nicholson bottle chronology remains a bit of a mystery. I have only found four embossed Nicholson bottles and seen one photograph; the bottles were colorless, specialty bottles (also called proprietary bottles or deco bottles) of the same style with NICHOLSON/BRAND embossed diagonally on a raised labeling area in the front. The first 6.5-ounce bottle was made by the ROOT Glass Co. and had a date code of 25 (1925) embossed on the heel. Another of the smaller bottles was made by the Southern Glass Company (1917-1931), and the 9-ounce version was manufactured by the Illinois Pacific Glass Corporation with a mark used between 1925 and 1930. Glass in the walls of both bottles were very thick, and they were quite heavy. A photo of a 6.5-ounce Nicholson bottle also appeared in Smith (1989:49), showing that the style was made by the Three Rivers Glass Co. and could have been used as late as 1937 (Three Rivers made bottles from 1922 to 1937, although automatic machine production only began in 1924). The style can be dated from 1925 to about 1936. Since bottles were made by four different companies, Nicholson must have ordered bottles at least four times in that 12-year period.

Another colorless specialty bottle was also made by Three Rivers. This container was cylindrical with small labeling areas encircling center and

heel; a ring just above the heel labeling area separated it from an embossed, double band that spiraled up to another ring defining the base of the central labeling area. Another band topped the labeling area from which 20 embossed, vertical double bands extended to another ring at the base of the neck. The bottle was embossed NICHOLSON BTG. WKS. around the center and MIN. CONT. FULL ½ PT./3 RIVERS (star) at the front heel (Figure 22). Although the heel is embossed with the manufacturer's mark from the Three Rivers Glass Co., the base contained the "Ball" script signature from the Ball Brothers. This combination solidly dates the bottle's creation at 1937, the year the Ball Brothers bought the Three Rivers plant. The Balls operated the plant throughout 1937 until all previously contracted orders from Three Rivers had been filled, then closed it (Smith 1989:25-27).

Although other embossed bottles may surface, it is likely that Nicholson used generic bottles with paper labels from the late 1930s until his first use of ACL containers (possibly as early as the 1940s but maybe as late as the 1950s). He may also have had enough bottles to last until his conversion to ACL containers. His earliest ACL bottles were made in Mexico and had no date codes.

The first ACL bottles were labeled with blue lettering on bottles made in Mexico. All bottles contained eight ounces, and they were embossed on their bases with the MV-in-a-circle mark used by Cartel Vidriera Monterrey, one of Mexico's most successful glass houses. Although Mexican bottles were cheaper, they did not survive the rigors of use as well as

bottles made in the U. S., so Nicholson returned to the use of American bottles, although he retained the same color and pattern. Nicholson ordered his second set of blue-label ACL bottles from Liberty Glass Co. by at least 1963.

He changed to a white and blue ACL label with the same pattern in 1967. The bottles were cylindrical with an orange peel surface on the shoulder terminated by an embossed double ring at the neck and a single ring at the body. The extreme lower body was offset from the labeling area by a single embossed ring to enclose an orange peel surface superimposed with outlined bow-ties extending to the heel. In 1969, Nicholson refined the basic bottle design to remove the neck/shoulder ACL markings and added a slightly swelled area along the shoulder, although he retained the ACL markings on the body. He added a similar 10-ounce bottle in 1971 just before he sold out to the Vitelas. The Vitelas may have continued to use the same style of bottle, although I have not seen one date coded later than 1971. For a more complete description of the bottles and more involved history of the company, see Lockhart (2000).

### References:

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