

Three Rivers Glass Co.

History

Three Rivers Glass Co., Three Rivers, Texas (1922-1936)

Three Rivers Glass Co., Bastrop, Louisiana (1929-1933)

The Three Rivers Glass Co. incorporated with \$50,000 capital under Texas law in May 1922¹ and commenced building its plant the next month. The plant closed about mid-1923 (Roller 1997). Charles R. Tipps was the man primarily responsible for creating the company. He masterminded the idea of opening a glass factory in Texas and gathered the needed capital to get it started (Smith 1989:1-7).

All glass was made by hand during the first two years because of problems with the Hartford-Empire company. Along with the Owens Bottle Co., Hartford-Empire controlled virtually all the machine patents in the glass industry. Officers from Three Rivers visited glass factories in Monterrey, Mexico, and discovered that their machinery, *not* controlled by Hartford-Empire, was comparable to those used in the U.S. Tipps hired Harold Trembly to come to the U.S. and build the needed machinery for Three Rivers (Smith 1989:10-11).

The machinery went online in early 1925, and the company made all its products, including the newly added soda bottle line by machine at one continuous tank with six rings. By December, the firm doubled its capacity by adding a second 50-ton tank. The plant added a 35-ton furnace in July 1926, increasing its daily capacity to 60,000 milk bottles (Roller 1997; Smith 1989:12-13, 16; Toulouse 1971:495).

In 1927, Three Rivers made “milk jars and soda water bottles” by machine at one tank with six rings.² The plant added fruit jars the following year (*American Glass Review* 1927:145; 1928:149). In June 1929, Three Rivers took over the plant of the former Bastrop Glass Co. at Bastrop, Louisiana (Roller 1997).

In the late 1920s, Three Rivers experimented with a novel idea – delivery of their products by truck. Prior to that time, few roads were paved, and the primary delivery mechanism had been the railroad. However, highways in Texas and the South – the main service area of the firm – were increasingly paved by the late 1920s. By 1930, virtually all of the factory’s deliveries were via truck. This delivery method reduced costs and allowed Three Rivers to undercut the prices of some of their larger competitors (Smith 1989:20-21).

In June 1922, the Hartford-Fairmont Co. merged with the Empire Machine Co. to form the Hartford-Empire Co., one of the largest bottle machine developers and manufacturers in the

¹ Although Roller recorded the month as April, both Toulouse and Smith stated it was May.

² It is not clear what happened to the other two tanks.

U.S. The firm used its power to restrict many of its licensees by amount of production or limits to expansion. One of these was Three Rivers,

a “price-cutter.” The firm ventured to inaugurate production of a line of fruit jars in violation of its license with Hartford as well as an agreement of March, 1933 between Ball Brothers and Hartford. The latter repeatedly sent notices to Three Rivers to drop this commodity-extension. Thereafter, in 1936, Ball acquired the patents of this smaller competitor and then closed down its plant (Vatter 1955:91).

The Hartford-Empire Co. licensed Three Rivers to use three of its feeders for the manufacture of beverage bottles, packers’ and prescription ware in August 1929. By 1930, the firm use one 35-ton tank and one 45-ton tank, presumably a single tank at each plant (Roller 1997). In 1934, the company noted that its products were made in flint and amber. The listing was amended to “flint packers fruit jars, beverage bottles, proprietary ware” in 1936 (*American Glass Review* 1934:100; 1936:98).

Hartford-Empire licensed its machines with a caveat that limited the expansion of each licensee. Licensees were restricted in both the amount of production and specific type of goods produced. Three Rivers did not play the game according to the Hartford rules. The glass house was known as a “price cutter” – refusing to adhere to the prices set by the large companies: Owens-Illinois Glass Co., Thatcher Mfg. Co., Hazel-Atlas Glass Co., and Ball Brothers Glass Mfg. Co. (Vatter 1955:91).

The position of Three Rivers deteriorated with the onset of the Great Depression. As the Depression deepened during the mid-1930s, the firm’s customers were increasingly unable to pay, and Three Rivers had more trouble remaining in business (Smith 1989:24-25). Apparently, the plant actually began bankruptcy proceedings. Three Rivers was listed with “R.A. Ellerman, agent for receiver” in 1933, and that listing continued until 1936, when Tipps apparently regained the plant’s bearings and was the president. The plant continued to produce soda bottles, milk bottles, packers’ ware, and fruit jars during the entire period. The Bastrop plant was apparently a casualty of the Depression. It was last listed in 1933 (*American Glass Review* 1933:72; 1934:99; 1935:92-93; 1936:98).

Tipps’ revitalization was short lived. Three Rivers had drawn the wrath of the giants when it initiated a line of fruit jars in violation of its Hartford-Empire license and a March 1933 agreement between the Ball Brothers and Hartford-Empire. Hartford-Empire sent repeated notices to Three Rivers to cease production of the line, but the glass house refused. Ball acquired the smaller firm in 1936 (Vatter 1955:91).

After the Ball Glass Corp. bought the Three Rivers holdings, it discovered that there were so many outstanding contracts that the plant remained in operation throughout 1937. Ball continued to operate the plant, making a variety of containers that included soda bottles, prescription ware, vials, flasks, packers, preservers, and fruit jars (Roller 1997). Brantley (1975:95) stated that the Ball Brothers closed the factory in 1939, although the company retained

possession of the property. The U.S. Supreme court ordered the brothers to sell the Three Rivers holdings in 1947.³ After some dispute, the brothers sold the factory in September 1954 (Roller 1997).

Bottles and Marks

According to Smith (1989:33), “some logos will be somewhat worn away.” In our experience, most of the marks were actually weakly stuck. In other words, for whatever reason (*not wear*), the logos were usually indistinct. Because of the location of the marks (i.e., heels and bases), the most likely reason for the indistinct logos was an accumulation of lubricating materials. If the molds were not cleaned regularly, or if they were improperly cleaned, the buildup could become so heavy that the manufacturer’s mark could be completely obliterated. Creswick (1987) noted numerous fruit jar variations where an entire letter in the side embossing was missing, probably due to filling by lubricant.

Toulouse (1971:495) noted that Three Rivers made a Mason jar with its mark on it. Toulouse (1969:306) described the mark as “‘3 RIVERS’ in a half circle, with a number , 107, indicating a design specification.” Roller (1983:352) noted the mark on a similar jar but added no additional information. Creswick (1987:129) illustrated a Mason jar embossed “3 RIVERS {start} (arch) / 511 / 4.”

Creswick (1987:129) also listed a variation with “3 RIVERS * [* = {star}] H A” on the base. Since she listed the Hazel-Atlas Glass Co. as the manufacturer, the “H A” was almost certainly the HA monogram used by Hazel-Atlas. This implies two ideas. First, as noted by Creswick and speculated by Roller, the jar was intended as a product jar rather than a fruit jar. Second, this mold was transferred from the Three Rivers plant to Hazel-Atlas, probably after the Ball Brothers took over the operations. Since there has been no comprehensive study of product (packers’) jars, it may well be that all or most of the packer molds from Three Rivers were transferred to Hazel-Atlas.

THREE RIVERS {star} (1928-1937)

According to Smith (1989:33), this was the most common format followed by Three Rivers. The logo appeared on either the heels or the bases of bottles. Toulouse (1971:494), however, recorded the mark without the star and noted “1927 to 1935, rarely used.” Our observation agrees with Toulouse. Giarde (1981:120) noted this mark on milk bottles but was almost certainly following Toulouse.

3 RIVERS {star} (1928-1937)

³ Although Brantley note 1939 as the year the Balls closed the factory, Toulouse (1971:) stated that the Ball Brothers continued production until 1947. Brantley is most likely correct. The 1942 glass factory list placed Three Rivers as “no report” (*American Glass Review* 1942:107).

Although this was the most common format we have observed (occasionally accompanied by either a letter, a number, or both), this variation was not recorded by Smith (1989:33). Since Smith reported the “THREE RIVERS” variation twice, it is likely that he intended for one of them to be the numeral variation. Toulouse (1971:494) recorded the mark in an arch and dated it “1925 to 1937, commonly used.” The arch actually reflected the configuration used on the Mason jar (described above). Giarde (1981:120) noted this mark on milk bottles but was almost certainly following Toulouse.

This mark was found on the heels of at least two El Paso, Texas, soda bottles. On one, the script “Ball” mark was also embossed on the base (Lockhart 2000). The same mark appeared on the heel roll of pint milk bottles made for the Mistletoe Creamery, with operations at El Paso and other Texas cities. By at least 1928, Three Rivers began using two-digit date codes on the heels of milk bottles (e.g., the Mistletoe Creamery bottle). We have not observed date codes on other bottle types made by Three Rivers.

Since this is the variation that was actually trade marked, the 1928-1937 date range might most accurately fit in this configuration. Some of the other variations may have been used earlier or later, but current research methods will not allow for a finer distinctions.

3R {star} (1928-1937)

Smith (1989:33) noted that this was also a common format and that it was only found on bases, frequently followed by a single-digit number, often a “7.”

{star} 3 RIVERS {star} (1928-1937)

Although not listed in Smith (1989:33), this mark appeared on two different bottles used by the Union Bottling Works in El Paso, Texas. On one bottle the mark with stars at both ends was embossed on the heel; the other had it on the base (Lockhart 2000).

THREE {star} RIVERS (1928-1937)

This was the least common configuration, although it could be found on either heels or bases (Smith 1989:33).

Discussion and Conclusions

Although we have observed and/or recorded both the 3 RIVERS {star} and {star} 3 RIVERS {star} logos, we have not seen the other variations. It is unfortunate that Smith (1989) did not make a more thorough examination of the examples at his disposal (he included photographs of 94 bottles and jars made by the company).

These variations may be related to dates or different glass styles, although they may only have been changed at the mold makers’ whims. Unfortunately, that means each variation must be dated to the entire period between the first use of the mark in 1928 to 1937, when the Ball

Brothers ceased filling the orders that existed when the Balls bought the company. We have only seen marks on machine-made bottles and jars. Apparently, products manufactured prior to 1928 were unmarked.

We observed one special case, where both the Three Rivers logo (the most common one – THREE RIVERS {star}) and the script “Ball” were embossed on the same bottle. The Three Rivers logo was embossed on the heel, with “Ball” on the base. These bottles could only have been made during 1937, when the Ball Brothers were filling existing Three Rivers orders.

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