

# Clevenger Brothers Glassworks - The Persistence of Tradition

1987 exhibition catalog text

- Clevenger Brothers Glassworks - The Persistence of Tradition Slide Show >>

The first successful glasshouse in America was established in 1739 by Casper Wistar in Alloway, New Jersey. Wistar imported his glassblowers from Germany to work in this small South Jersey town. The factory's primary production was bottles and window glass, but also produced were a limited number of tablewares, made for the worker's families and local customers. These crude, one of a kind utilitarian pieces were made of bottle or window glass and were often adorned with applied decoration in the same glass. Many of these embellishments can be traced to Germanic forms. Today this type of glassware is referred to as the "South Jersey Tradition." As glassblowers migrated, this tradition spread throughout New Jersey, New York and New England from 1740 to about 1870.

Advances in the technology of glass production, including the development of the mechanical glass press and the automatic bottle blowing machine, greatly reduced the demand for skilled glassblowers. By the early 1900's, the automated bottle machines' impact led to the closing of many glasshouses in New Jersey and throughout the country. It was one of these factory closings, in 1912, that eventually led to the Clevenger brothers establishing their own company.

Henry Thomas (Tom), Lorenzo (Reno) and William Elbert (Allie) Clevenger all followed in their father's footsteps of working in the glass industry. William Henry Clevenger had moved his family from place to place throughout South Jersey where he worked at several glass companies, before settling in Clayton to work for the Moore Brothers' Clayton Glass Works. Tom, Reno and Allie all apprenticed at Moore Brothers and continued working at the Clayton factory until it closed in 1912.

Over the next several years, the unemployed trio tried their hands at many different jobs, including rug making. It was not until 1930 that the brothers decided to open their own glass company. So, at the beginning of the Great Depression, Tarn, Reno and Allie constructed a small furnace in a stable in their backyard in Clayton.

The intent of the Clevenger brothers was to carry-on the "South Jersey Tradition" of glassmaking and produce affordable reproductions of this early American glassware. The earliest known catalog of Clevenger glass, "The Renaissance of South Jersey Blown Glass" published by Grant and Lyon in 1934 stated, "South Jersey glass, beloved by all collectors of old American glassware, has been born again. Glass lovers who had believed that this intriguing product had passed into the category of a forgotten art will be thrilled to learn that down in South Jersey, in a glass factory...., old craftsmen who learned their trade from their forebears in the time hallowed apprentice system are again blowing glass into the same shapes and pattern that made glass history so many years ago." The catalog illustrated many examples of the South Jersey reproductions and also included a Clevenger copy of the famous E. G. Booz whiskey bottle.

The Ritter-Carlton Company, Inc., of Fifth Avenue, New York, New York, published a catalog in 1939 showing the Clevenger glassware they were selling but never mentioned Clevenger by name. The catalog itself is titled "Authentic Reproductions of Early American Glass". The publication went on to say that "we are proud to present this rare collection of authentic hand blown replicas of Early American glass."

Except for the reproduction bottles and pressed glass pieces, Clevenger glass in the 1930Æs was free blown. "Lily Pad" decoration pitchers, bowls, double handled vases, creamers and sugars were produced. Plain blown jumbo jugs, vases, flips, rose jars, footed tumblers, mugs and camphor jugs were just some of the many reproductions available.

Clevenger copies were usually much heavier than the originals. They were also made in vibrant colors not associated with early 19th century glassware. The Grant and Lyon 1934 catalog states "the Clevengers make most of their glass in amber, blue and green". By 1939 the Ritter catalog listed "the six original colors" of amber, amethyst, dark green, colonial blue, light green (also known as South Jersey green) and light blue.

Other vivid colors were added to the line such as red, orange, amberina and vaseline (frequently appearing as opaque yellow). Due to lack of strict control in mixing batches and watching over the melts, variations appeared in many of

the stock colors. Reds in Clevenger glass can range from almost black to a reddish orange. There are greens that appear to be blue-green. A few extremely rare pieces of clear and milk glass were also produced.

During the 1930s, Clevenger Brothers often struggled financially. Brothers Reno and Allie, who were bachelors, were reported in newspaper accounts to have picked apples to keep the factory going, using their earnings to buy ingredients for the glass "batch".

Tom, the eldest brother, and father of nine, died in 1934. Three of his children, Tom, Willis and Bertram worked at the Clevenger factory.

During these early years, three local antique dealers; Ernest Stanmire, Philip Glick and Rodney Whilden, assisted the brothers in providing financial backing and marketing their glassware. All three influenced production. Ernest Stanmire sold lamps made of Clevenger glass fonts which were assembled at Stanmire's shop. In the late 1940s Philip Glick and Rodney Whilden helped introduce the use of molds such as the "Stoddard" or blown-three-mold design.

By the late 1940s, Clevenger Brothers was showing a profit. Much of this success was due to World War II and the lack of competition from imported glassware. Most production had become mold blown, today referred to as pattern molded. Molded designs of ribs, hobnails, thumbprint or coindot, diamond quilted and the blow-three-mold design were available. Also produced were reproductions of the Hay's Eagle and Grape flask, Fislerville's Jenny Lind calabash and Dyott's Washington and Taylor, the Scroll flask and the Albany flask.

The factory operated like other earlier companies, from fall to spring, and was closed during the summer months. Working hours were generally from 6:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Many of the workers were retired blowers who still wanted to make glass. Among the long list of "old timers" employed at Clevenger's over the years, included Lester Raun, Otis Coleman, Frank Schlagle, Albert Schneeman, Billy Trout, Sam Keyburtz and Vermont Frie.

Seconds or imperfect pieces were being thrown away until the late 1930s when Allie met Walter Earling, a Millville glass cutter. Truck loads of glassware were regularly sent to Mr. Earling's backyard shop, where he and his employees ground out imperfections on handle attachments, rims of bottles and tumblers, and the ends of fitted stoppers.

In 1950 Reno died, leaving Allie the sole surviving brother. It was in this same year that the bachelor Allie, at the age of sixty, married Myrtle, Rodney Whilden's widow. It has been said that Myrtle convinced Allie to employ salesmen to distribute their products.

Fire is always a major hazard of any glassmaking operation. On November 8, 1957, fire broke out and destroyed part of the original "stable" factory. Almost immediately construction began on a new slightly larger building. Glass production resumed on January 11, 1958.

Allie died in 1960 and Myrtle assumed the operation of the factory. The following years were very difficult for Mrs. Clevenger, who had to rely on the advice of the "old timers". On October 3, 1964, the Philadelphia Inquirer printed an article headlined "Old-time Plant Wants Old Timers, Clayton Firm Seeks Glassblowers, 65-75". William Stout Bowers, who was acting as plant manager, was quoted in the article as saying Clevenger was "a haven for old men who have had experience in a glass factory". At that time the report listed the employees with their ages as Joe Wright, 82; Harry Robb, 75; Charlie Wescott, 70; and Vermont Frie, 75.

Shortly thereafter, Clevenger Brothers was offered for sale by Myrtle and her new husband, "Stout" Bowers. On May 9, 1966, James Travis of Millville, purchased Clevenger Brothers. Mr. Travis, who was already involved in a small glass furnace, had stopped at Clevenger that day to purchase a mold and ended up buying the company.

When Travis took over, the youngest employee was fifty-five years old. One of the workers was the famous August Hofbauer. Eventually younger men were trained including Travis's son, Jim.

Under Travis's management the old Clevenger designs are still being produced. New items have also been added to the line. Much of today's production is limited edition personalized bottles, made for organizations, clubs and institutions. Probably the most successful recent product was their Statue of Liberty bottle.

Nearly all current Clevenger products are well marked with the initials "CB" or "Clevenger Brothers, Clayton, NJ" spelled out in the glass. None of the early blown Clevenger production was marked. Long narrow paper labels were the first real identification on pieces. They read "This glass is made by skilled old time blowers and reproduced like the Genuine Antique South Jersey Glass which is prized by collectors of Early American Glass. Made in USA by Clevenger Bros. Clayton, N.J." A small number of mold blown pieces under the Clevenger family ownership, have small "CB" marks on them, for example the Hobnail Creamer, the Moon and Stars Pitcher, the Squat Pitcher, the Booz Bottle and others.

It has been nearly sixty years since Tom, Reno and Allie Clevenger established their small glass factory. The tradition of South Jersey glassblowing still persists today at Clevenger Brothers in Clayton, New Jersey.