

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ERIE BOTTLING WORKS**

By Fred Capozzella

Even though the Erie Bottling Works was a late-comer to the area, it is worth looking at their history, as a successful local industry and as a lesson in the general history of the bottling industry. After all, the company has served the area, with a few name changes, since at least 1905.

Although the first listing for the company was in the 1905 Utica City Directory, it is certain the firm was in existence before that date, since an Erie seltzer bottle is etched "Est. 1900." In any event, it did not appear under "Erie." Rather, it was listed under Freeman, Lewis, Prop. Erie Bottling Works, 11 Canal Street. There was a Louis Freedman, peddler, residing at 11 Canal Street in 1904, but it is not certain that he is the Lewis Freeman who owned the bottling works.

The company is listed the same way in 1906, 1907, and 1908. It also appears under "Bottlers" in the Business Directories during those years.

In 1909, it is first listed as Erie Bottling Works, Lewis Freeman and Son, Mgr. 11 Canal Street, and remains that way through 1911.

There seemed to have been some expansion the following year, for the address is now 13-14 Canal in one place and 10-14 Canal in another. Also, "Lewis" has become "Louis." And in 1913, the "and Son" has been dropped.

There is no change through 1915, but in 1916, the firm is located at 614 Canal, which represents a renumbering of the street rather than a move. This listing remains the same through 1919. Clearly, this dates stoneware Erie Ginger Beers to 1905 (or earlier)-1919.

A very significant change for the company occurred in 1920, when the listing is changed to "Bottlers and Distributors." An advertisement for that year indicates that they bottled Whistle ("It's Cloudy in the Bottle") and distributed "Good Old Blatz, The Good Old Milwaukee Beverage." The ad stated they were manufacturers of Carbonated Beverages.

The listing for 1921 was the same, although the advertising dropped Blatz and listed the Carbonated Beverages produced by the company – Home Brewed Ginger Brew, Loganberry, Lemon, Root Beer. Note the listing of ginger brew in 1921. Obviously, the firm had moved to the non-alcoholic version, probably more ginger-ish than our modern ginger ales.

From 1922 through 1924, the firm was owned and/or operated by Freeman and Cohen. But from 1926 through 1935, the firm was owned by S. S. Freeman and was located at 614 Oriskany St. W. The Erie Canal had been filled in and Canal St., as such, no longer existed. It seems the street was widened and renamed Oriskany, retaining the same numbering. The only other change during these years suggests an expansion, since the address in 1932 is listed as 610-618 Oriskany. As an interesting side-note, an ad from 1930 lists Freeman's Pale Dry Ginger Ale as a product, so we know that the Freeman's label was used long before the firm changed its name.

From 1936 through 1938, the listing remained essentially unchanged, although Erie was now a beverage manufacturer and beer distributor. In fact, as a 1936 advertisement shows, Erie distributed Pepsi (there is no listing for a Pepsi bottling company, so the soda must have been bottled elsewhere – Syracuse, perhaps). The most significant alteration occurred in 1939, when the Erie name ceased to exist and the firm was known as Freeman's Beverages, Inc. Obviously, then, any Erie Bottling Works bottles date from about 1900 through 1938, while Freeman's bottles date from about 1930 on. Note that the firm was still owned by the Freeman family, so there had been no change of ownership.

Through the early '40s, the firm again seems to have enlarged, living at 614-620 (and in some years 610-620) Oriskany, and the family ownership continued, with Mrs. Bessie Freeman and Leone Freeman Jameson, along with Samuel S. Freeman, actively involved.

The next major change appears in 1943, when the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Co. was listed at the same address as Freeman's. This remains the same through 1951– but in 1952, there is no longer a listing for Pepsi, which is not listed anywhere in the directories, either as a bottling company or as being distributed by any other firm.

This remains consistent through 1957, when the firm is listed as a beverage manufacturer and has moved to 1400 Broad St. Since the 600 block of Oriskany St. is now the site of the Arterial overpass, it seems possible the move was the result of road construction, rather than any other issue, although there may have been a fire that destroyed the original plant (the Directory for 1957 indicates that 614 was a vacant lot). The Pepsi label reappears in 1961 as the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Co. of Utica, Freeman's Distributor. All of this seems to suggest that Pepsi bottles from Utica date from 1943 through 1951 or after 1961.

Specifically dating these bottles would require an examination of the types of logos used by Pepsi during these periods. The current ownership remains unchanged until 1975, when the president is Bernard King, while in 1976, John Strachan has become president of both Freeman's and of Pepsi. I haven't been able to determine if the Freeman family sold out or retained any control. The firm's products have expanded to include Schweppes, Mountain Dew, Patio, and Welch's. Theodore Prime is the current vice-president. By 1979, we have added Hires and Orange Crush (Orange Crush was sold in the area long before this, however. In 1927, it was bottled by Fred K. Roberts) to the product line and have dropped Welch's.

In 1983, only the Pepsi-Cola Utica Bottling Co. is listed and the Freeman's name has disappeared. Therefore, any Freeman's bottles, ACL or labeled, must date from about 1930 through 1982.

While there may have been other ownership/manager changes over the last 20 or so years, the Pepsi bottling plant remains on Broad St. in Utica (although rumor has it that they feel land-locked and may be considering a move to Herkimer County).

So here we have the history of a very successful firm – one that changed names and locations several times, but remained in one family for at least 75 of its 100 plus years. It survived and grew by becoming a distributor and by recognizing changing tastes in the soda industry, and involving itself in major national brands. The local products may be gone, but we still have a multitude of bottles, readily available and inexpensive, to remind us of a 100 year old business. These bottles serve as an historical record and provide anyone who wants to collect local bottles with a great place to start.

