

# SOME MILK BOTTLE HISTORY

By Steven C. Scales

“IN THE year A.D. 2500 it is conceivable that on the mantels of the elect and in the glass cases of museums, made iridescent by age, the glass milk container of our time will take its place beside the tear jug of the present’s past,” prophesied Franklin Wilson in his article “The Milk Bottle Passes,” published in the September 1912, *Delineator*.

Although Mr. Wilson was almost 50 years early in predicting the demise of the glass milk bottle, today’s bottle collectors are several centuries ahead of his predictions as the once common glass milk container has found a prominent niche in the field of bottle collecting.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, milk was delivered to the market in carelessly washed cans and was doled out to the consumer, who carried it home in his own pail or jar. The early customers were the luckiest because they would get the highest cream content while the later ones got mostly skim milk after a long day of separation. Some of the milk came from dirty barns at a time when government inspection consisted of testing milk for the amount of solids it contained.

Then newspaper articles, editors and an awakened public began to cry out for an improved method of transporting and delivering this nutritious liquid.

On March 23, 1880, the Warren Glass Works Company of Allegheny County, Md., patented a “Warren Milk Bottle,” the first known milk bottle to be patented. This was produced in 1881 and sold by A.V. Whitman, a Warren Company executive, at 72 Murray Street, New York City.

Shortly after this, Dr. Hervey D. Thatcher, a Potsdam, N.Y., pharmacist devised a covered milking pail for the dairies to help eliminate the accumulation of caked mud and loose hair that was often found in 19<sup>th</sup> century milk.

In 1884, Dr. Thatcher invented what is probably the most famous milk bottle—the “Thatcher Milk Protector.” The words “Absolutely Pure Milk” are embossed around the shoulder and “The Milk Protector” is embossed around the base. The most striking feature of this early bottle is the embossment of a cow being milked by a Quaker farmer seated on a milking stool. This bottle had a tin lid using the “lightning” closure, replacing the tin lid with one of glass.

On September 17, 1889, the Thatcher Manufacturing Company patented its invention for the “Common Sense Milk Bottle” which used a seat and ligneous disc closure. This was to become the most common milk bottle closure and within 20 years virtually every milk bottle manufacturer was using either this disc closure or a variation of it.

A Thatcher Manufacturing Company advertisement for this bottle read in part, “No rusty metal covers or twisted wire fasteners, less breakage, and can be washed absolutely clean and much quicker than any other milk bottle, avoiding tainted or sour milk.”

Because of Dr. Thatcher’s early milk bottle patent date and the long and continued involvement of his company in all branches of milk production and delivery, he is historically known as “the father of the milk bottle.”

With the invention and perfection of the milk bottle, the first major improvement in centuries for the dispensing of milk, it would seem that both the public and the manufacturers would have been content with this container for several years, but large numbers of physicians, and a portion of the public were not satisfied with this advancement and searched on for an even better container.

Franklin Wilson's article in the September, 1912, *Delineator*, "The Milk Bottle Passes," was one of the earliest articles promoting the "single-service paper containers." The major complaint against glass containers, as stated in the April 21, 1917, issue of the *Literary Digest*, was that "...housewives used the empty bottles as receptacles for vinegar, kerosene, gasoline and other liquids before returning them... and...it was impossible to eliminate all acid traces in the bottle, with the result that the milk spoiled more rapidly."

The reluctance of dairies and bottlers to exchange one set of expensive machinery for a different set delayed the changeover from glass to paper containers and it was not until the mid-1930's that dairies began using the one-way cartons to any extent. These were introduced in stores and were hailed as a major advancement. For the store owners it meant no more collection and return of bottle deposits and no handling and storing of returned empties. For dairies it meant more milk could be carried and loaded on a truck-an empty cardboard quart container weighs approximately two ounces versus almost two pounds for a quart glass container-and no empties to handle.

Although the fiber containers were replacing the glass milk bottles in stores, glass bottles continued their vigil on American doorsteps and in 1935 300,000,000 of these bottles were produced-more than half by the country's two largest milk bottle producers, the Thatcher manufacturing Company and the Owens Illinois glass Company.

These bottles of the 1930's began to take on new color as manufacturers adopted a new process, called Applied Coloring Labeling, to give the bottle a modern merchandising touch. This process, imported from Europe, utilized melted colored glass which would sink into the glass and could not be washed or scratched off. By the mid 1930s almost 20 percent of all milk bottles featured bright red or blue brand names, trade marks and slogans vividly outlined against the whiteness of their contents.

Also in the 1930's the Cream Top Bottle was introduced and enjoyed a brief popularity until the perfection of homogenization in the late 1940's. This vessel featured a bulbous neck, often formed in the shape of a face, which collected the cream. With the help of a specially shaped spoon the housewife could capture this cream in the neck and pour it off separately. This cream line was one of the major reasons the housewife preferred glass containers to fiber as she could see the level of cream in the glass bottles.

With the perfection of homogenization and the resulting elimination of the cream in the milk one of the last major objections to fiber containers was overcome and dairies began converting to fiber containers exclusively.

One of the more interesting aspects of a milk bottle collection is the seemingly infinite number of embossments that can be found on the bottles. Due to the relatively small costs of the plates that could be inserted into the molds, most dairies could afford to have personalized bottles produced. Not only were the names of the dairies embossed on the bottles, but quite often designs were added. Most notable among these were animals, buildings, people, birds, mountains and other objects. Later these names and designs were enameled on rather than embossed. Because of this wide variety of dairy names it is relatively easy for a collector to amass a collection of each type of bottle produced by each dairy that has operated in his city or county.

A large number of milk bottles have been produced in amber, and at least one company, the Alta Crest Farms in Spencer, Mass., produced a green glass milk bottle, which saw limited use in the early 1930s. One little known fact is that a few manufacturers, mainly after the 1920s, tinted their bottles a light rose or pink to improve the appearance of the bottle's fluid contents. Generally, however, they were produced in clear glass.

Milk bottles range in size from 1-inch miniature advertising bottles to 1-gallon or larger milk bottles, and at least 15 different heights have been observed on these once common containers.



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This interesting article was copied from the September, 1973 issue of *The Antiques Journal* and was submitted by member Tom Andriach. The original title of the article was "BOTTLES."