

## A Heart Attack on the Bottling Line: The Crystal Beverage Co., Alamogordo, New Mexico

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### History

In late February or early March of 1930, during the beginning years of the Great Depression, Thomas J. O'Connor moved from Oak Creek, Colorado, and purchased the Crystal Bottling Co.

On August 18 of the same year, he bought a lot across the street from the rented building that housed the plant and renamed the new business Crystal Beverage Co.

Adamant about cleanliness, O'Connor bragged to the newspaper that his plant was spotless. But, the story of Alamogordo soda bottling begins much earlier.

George Weigele, Jr., opened the Alamogordo Bottling Works in 1910 and primarily sold his drinks through his father's bakery. He called his beverage "Weigele's Pop."

Weigele sold the business to Jerry F. Johnson in 1914, and Johnson also relinquished the plant to L. H. "Lefty" Karosen in 1920. Karosen had moved to Alamogordo from Kansas City in August of that year to pitch for the Alamogordo baseball team. He bought the bottling works to provide him with a living while he indulged in his favorite pastime, baseball. Karosen also introduced Coca-Cola to Alamogordo on August 6, 1921.

Karosen, too, soon sold out (1922) to D. H. Pharr (who always listed the business under his own name, rather than the Alamogordo Bottling Works). Pharr relinquished the business to A. B. Rose in 1923, and Rose sold to E. L. Craig in 1928. Craig renamed the works as Crystal Bottling Co. and called his drinks "Crystal Sweets,"



All Five Crystal Bottles - (left to right) the embossed bottle; White Sands; small label (red and white); large label (red and white); white label

although he, too, only owned the business for a short time, selling to O'Conor just two years after his purchase of the plant.

O'Conor was quite a character. He would only use cane sugar, complaining that beet sugar was inferior. He ran a one-man outfit (sometimes two, plus one boy during peak bottling months) and delivered his sodas personally in his old, Model-T Ford pickup truck. He was always accompanied by his mongrel dog, Old Toe. Although not fat, O'Conor always played Santa Claus for the children at Christmas. One admirer described him as a "very moral, gentle man" and "everybody's friend."

O'Conor bragged in the *Alamogordo News* on June 19, 1930, that his business was "Producers of the Finest in Bottled Soda Waters." Among other products, he carried Cascade Ginger Ale, Coca-Cola (briefly, during his first two years in business), Hop Ale, Pabst Blue Ribbon (the near-beer – Prohibition was still in effect), Hi-Peak Cola, Golden Ginger Ale, Brandmist, and Broma-Kola. He either used paper labels to identify these drinks or labeled the flavor on the caps; no bottles have been found that identify any of the above drinks, although they all appeared in O'Conor's ads.

Santos Diaz, who drank lots of Crystal sodas as a kid, remembered the plant well. The name of the business, Crystal Beverage Co., was painted on the window in "elaborate" letters. It "attracted attention" from passers by. The machinery was on the right side of the building as you walked in the door, and the place smelled good when O'Conor was making sodas. He was always happy to have people watch him as he worked – and even gave kids a free drink while he was bottling. He was usually cheerful as he operated the machinery.

On the morning of June 14, 1946, O'Conor suffered a heart attack at the plant while bottling his soft drinks. According to



Front Labels - (left to right) large label (red and white); small label (red and white); all-white label

the *Alamogordo News*, he "was determined to carry on with his work" and fell victim to a second heart attack at 5:00 PM the same afternoon. He died before a doctor could be summoned. His funeral was delayed so that his daughter, Grace Marie, could return from China where she and her husband were conducting missionary work.

A small group of local businessmen (R. F. Douglas, J. S. Martin, and W. H. Ashley) attempted to continue bottling, and even began franchising Royal Crown Cola. They gave up about 1948 or 1949, probably due to competition from Coca-Cola, shipped to Alamogordo by the Magnolia Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of El Paso, Texas (Magnolia sponsored a new bottling plant in Alamogordo in 1955), and Pepsi-Cola trucked in from Roswell (a plant was not set up in Alamogordo until 1962).

O'Conor's widow, Grace, sold the bottling plant and property, although she remained in Alamogordo until her death in 1958.

### Bottles

Only two bottles are known from the Alamogordo Bottling Works; the other owners almost certainly used generic bottles with paper labels.

George Weigele, Jr., bottled his drinks in an aqua bottle with the name of the plant, city, and Weigele embossed on it. "Lefty" Karosen also used a similar bottle that included his name as well as that of the company and town. The only other item I have found from the various Alamogordo Bottling Works is a green shell (case)

stenciled with the company name on both sides.

O'Connor probably used generic bottles with paper labels for his original drinks, as no early embossed bottles have turned up. However, in 1936, he employed an embossed bottle similar in style to the ACL bottles that followed. All of these that I have found were made by the Three Rivers Glass Co. of Three Rivers, Texas.

His next bottle, adopted in 1938, contained a white and red Applied Color Label (ACL) on the front with the company's name and a white ACL on the back commemorating White Sands National Monument. All examples of this variation that I have seen were made by the Streator, Illinois, plant of the Owens-Illinois Glass Co. in 1938.

It is unclear why O'Connor chose to highlight White Sands. The National Monument was officially proclaimed on January 29, 1933, five years before the issue of the bottle. O'Connor may have simply chosen to bring attention to his beverages by the use of the most dramatic feature in Otero County (it can even be seen from orbiting satellites), or he may have intended to commemorate an important boundary enlargement of the monument that took place on August 29, 1938. In any event, he replaced the bottle design again in 1939.

The front of the new bottle remained the same as the 1938 version, but the back, still in white ACL, now bragged, "The/ADVERTISING/is inside/THE/BOTTLE" and included a line drawing of the head and shoulders of a lady drinking from a bottle through a straw. The lady bears the name LULA on her shoulder. This is a bit strange, since both O'Connor's wife and daughter were named Grace. We are left with the question, "Who was Lula?" This version, and all the remaining bottles used by Crystal were made by the Liberty Glass Co. of Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

People who knew O'Connor remembered that he always had a very large supply of bottles stacked all over his bottling plant. It is clear that he ordered a large quantity of bottles in each lot, but he did not order frequently. Although larger bottlers often ordered several times a year, O'Connor usually waited two or more years between orders, and each order (with one exception) was slightly different.

The 1941 order obtained bottles that were identical to those received in 1939, except that both the front and back labels were slightly smaller (most noticeably on the front). Three years later (1944), O'Connor again made a slight change by eliminating the red ACL from the front. The new, all-white ACL bottle also returned the label to

the original size. A final order, in 1947, was made by the business group that tried to run the plant after O'Connor's death. These are identical in every way to the 1944, white ACL bottle except for the 47 date code on the base.

In addition, Crystal Beverage Co. used a white and red ACL Delaware Punch bottle by at least 1943 and probably until the termination of the company. This was the only other bottle known to be used by the Crystal Beverage Co. At some point after 1961, the Coca-



Back Labels - White Sands (left); Lula (right)

Cola Bottling Co. of Alamogordo began to bottle Sunrise in white and red ACL bottles. I currently have found no evidence for the actual dates when the bottles were used.

Although not specifically connected with the Alamogordo plant, Coca-Cola introduced a promotion that advertised national parks and monuments on the bases of Sprite bottles as a part of Operation Golden Eagle, a 1966 federal government program designed to promote the U. S. National Parks. Each individual bottle base was embossed with the name of one of the 36 national park/monuments, including White Sands National Monument. At least four variations of the White Sands bottle occur, all based on the familiar forest green bottle with debossed, circular dimples. A 16-ounce variation is labeled in white ACL with Sprite (star dotting the "I")/TRADE MARK® stenciled into a white, six-pointed irregular background with ONE PINT below. A 10-ounce version is identical except for size and the lack of the ONE PINT designation. The third variation has Sprite (block letters—star dotting the "I")/TRADE MARK® (all upwardly slanted)/10 FL. OZ. The fourth is identical except that it adds MONEY BACK BOTTLE. According to Billy Bearden's 1998 article in *Soda Pop Dreams Magazine*, a 7-ounce version of the park/monument line also exists, although I have not yet seen an example with White Sands on the base.

A final bottle was filled in nearby Ruidoso, New Mexico. It was made by the Oil City Bottle Co. between 1930 and 1952. The bottle is colorless with an embossed "orange peel" design all over. On the base is RUIDOSO B. CO. RUIDOSO, N. M. The bottle probably once sported a paper label. The Ruidoso Bottling Co. appears in the 1946-47 New Mexico State Business Directory, but I have found no other listing for it. Nothing more is currently known about the company.

In summary, O'Connor and his followers seem to have used a total of six different bottle styles during about 20 years in business. The first was probably a generic bottle with paper label, followed by an embossed bottle. This was replaced by the White Sands commemorative and three other ACL bottles, along with the Delaware Punch bottle. Later, the Coca-Cola plant added a Sunrise bottle and at least four variations of the White Sands National Monument bottle. Counting the two other embossed bottles used by Weigele and Karosen for the Alamogordo Bottling Works, the Ruidoso bottle, and the National Park/Monument series, there are currently known a total of at least 14 bottles of interest from the Alamogordo area. Of course, new bottles are occasionally found, and I hope someday more from Alamogordo will surface.

For anyone interested in a more complete history of the Alamogordo, New Mexico, soft drink industry, my e-book is available free (along with the soda bottling history of El Paso, Texas, and a dairy history of Otero County, New Mexico, at:

<http://alamo.nmsu.edu/library/lochistory.html>

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Close-up of Lula.