

## THE MYSTERIOUS NUMBER SYSTEM

by Bill Lockhart, with help from  
Pete Schulz, Al Morin, and Others

**Editor's Note:** Over the years, members have asked questions about the numbers on the heel or base of a milk bottle. This article should answer some of the questions.

Several years ago, Brad Blodgett and Al Morin independently sent me copies of unpublished manuscripts written about Massachusetts milk bottle seals by Louis and Nancy Schadlich in the late 1980s or early 1990s. This led to a series of exchanges over the next year or so, especially with Al. Al was particularly concerned with an issue I had just begun to think about: those one- or two-digit numbers that seem to be associated with the initials of most glass houses that made milk bottles -- like E4 or 5W (Figure 1).

Al suggested that there had to be some form of national numbering system for milk bottle manufacturers. If so, that would require a federal law. After looking for a few months, I still could not find such a law. However, after looking at manufacturer's marks, ads, and comments in publications, it became clear that the numbering system started sometime between 1905 and 1912 - and was not practiced on the West Coast. Pete Schulz began looking at newspaper files, and the following explanations unfolded:



Figure 1 - E4 and 5W logos

Giarde (*Glass Milk Bottles: Their Makers and Marks*, 1980:145-146) had already discussed the idea that codes, specific to milk bottles, were required by either federal or state laws as early as the "early years of the 1900's." He noted that many states required milk bottle manufacturers to register with specific state agencies (the title of which varied from state to state) to ensure the accuracy of the volume measurement of their bottles. Giarde further stated that states required each company to register a specific mark which led to the development of such logos as E4, BB48, etc. Such numbers were generally accepted by most states (rather than a company needing a different mark for each state).

Laws connected with milk were nothing new. Growing concerns about health issues, especially tuberculosis, had increased during the late 19th century and led to the general acceptance of the milk bottle. The sanitation of the bottle was nearly miraculous when compared to the older system whereby the dairyman ladled out milk from metal cans into the housewife's pitcher or bucket -- along with horse hairs, dead flies, and God-alone knew what else.

The next major concern was volume of the bottles. The very nature of blowing a bottle into a two-piece mold created a container of only approximate volume. Massachusetts led the way in dealing with this issue, initiating the seal system on June 6, 1900. However, this law required "sealers" in each town to check the volume of the bottles, and the dairies had to deal with the rejected bottles. Dairy farmers took their concerns to the legislators, and lawmakers decided to shift the onus to the milk bottle manufacturers. By this time, machines to make wide-mouth bottles and jars were becoming more and more refined. Soon, the mouth-blown milk bottle was virtually a thing of the past.

Massachusetts revised its law on June 19, 1909, to require milk bottle makers to post bond and use an embossed "seal" to guarantee the correct volume capacity of each bottle. The new law, however, required only the initials or logo of the glass house. The development of the seal system is an interesting story in itself -- and will be the subject of a future book or article.



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The idea of using an identifying number for each glass house apparently developed in the state of New York. According to the *Orange County Times-Press*, the state of New York required "the name or initials and a designating number" to be embossed on the milk bottles of any glass manufacturer wishing to sell dairy containers within the state beginning on January 1, 1910. By 1912, New York required "the name, initials or trade-mark of the manufacturer and a designating number . . . furnished by the state superintendent of weights and measures upon application by the manufacturer."

Also, by at least 1912, Wisconsin required the word "SEALED" plus the name, initials, or trade mark "in the side or bottom of the bottle," along with a number provided by the superintendent of weights and measures of that state. Maine mandated the use of individual numbers for milk bottle identification in 1913. Other states soon followed.

The number 1, for example, was assigned to the Lockport Glass Co. and was consistently used by that company below their LGCo mark. Fidelity Glass Co. marked its bottles FID2 until the Atlantic Bottle Co. purchased the company and began using a mark of ABC2. This system continued in sequential order to at least number 52 (the L52 mark used by Lamb Glass Co. – Figure 2). The number 9 (Figure 3), assigned to Knox Glass Bottle Co., may have reflected a sense of humor (K9 = canine). These numbers were almost always embossed on the heels of milk bottles, usually as part of or close to the company initials or logo. Occasionally, the numbers appeared on the base (as with F.E. Reed & Co.), but this was more unusual (Figure 4).

Problems began to arise almost immediately. During the initial instigation of the number system, some states assigned different numbers to the same company. For example, Thatcher received number 1 in Wisconsin, 14 in Michigan, 11 in Pennsylvania, and both 1 and 11 in Maine. In other cases, different states assigned the same number to separate companies. Both the Pennsylvania Glass Co. and the Woodbury Glass Co., for example, were given the number 8 by different states. Both the Sheldon-Foster Glass Co. and the Poughkeepsie Glass



Figure 2 - Lamb Glass Co. logo



Figure 3 - K-9 - Knox Glass Bottle Co. (later Thatcher Mfg. Co.)



Figure 4 - REED on the heel; 34 on the base



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Figure 5 - Thatcher's 1-11-14 code



Figure 6 - B.P. 17 - Belle Pre Glass Co.



Figure 7 - 17 CHATT - Chattanooga Glass Co.

Co. were assigned the number 3 (Poughkeepsie apparently used P3). Eventually, all the codes solidified into a single number for each company, although Thatcher played it safe and embossed its bottles with 1-11-14 to reflect each of its assigned numbers (Figure 5).

The number 17 is even more contentious. The state of Wisconsin assigned number 17 to the Empire Bottle & Supply Co. by at least 1913. However, Al Morin has a milk bottle embossed B.P.17 on the heel (Figure 6 - First letter does not look like a B, due to angle of photo), and an eBay auction sold another embossed BP-17. Both were made for Washington DC dairies, so the user of the mark and the number had to have been the Belle Pre Glass Co. of Alexandria, Virginia. Finally, Al has another milk bottle embossed 17 CHATT (Figure 7). The Chattanooga Glass Co. used the CHATT mark on the heels of Coca-Cola bottles from 1920 to 1934 and on the bases of flasks and possibly other bottle types closer to 1920. I have never found any record that Chattanooga made milk bottles – but the bottle and the mark exist!

When one company purchased another, the milk bottle identification code also went to the buyer. Very oddly, Thatcher bought the milk bottle business from J.T. & A. Hamilton in 1920 and received along with it the number 14 – which had already been assigned to Thatcher by the state of Michigan. This is likely the only firm to receive the same number by two different routes – once by assignation, once by acquisition.

But Thatcher's situation later became even stranger. When Thatcher acquired the milk bottle business from the Knox Glass Bottle Co. in 1932, it also acquired the K9 logo. Then, when Knox reentered the milk bottle business a decade later, it acquired a new number – K-14 – an old Thatcher number! It seems likely that Thatcher had officially retired the number 14 or had simply failed to renew it in the state that issued it (Figure 8).

The study of the state numbering system is still in its infancy. Below is a list I have compiled from numbers on milk bottles, secondary publications (Giarde, Schadlich, Rawlinson, etc.), and lists published in 1913 and 1916 newspapers.



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would like to encourage readers of TMR to send n numbers you find on your bottles (or anywhere else). Send them to me (bottlebill@tularosa.net) or directly to TMR. Maybe we can fill in the gaps appearing in the list below.

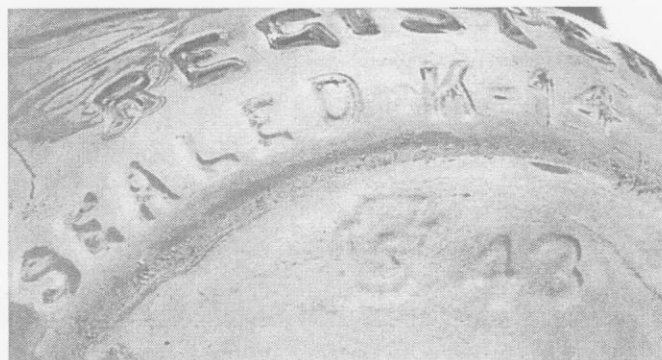


Figure 8 - Knox Glass Bottle Co. - K-14

### No. Company (Logo)

- 1 Lockport Glass Co. (LCo / 1); Thatcher Mfg Co. (1-11-14)
- 2 Atlantic Bottle Co. (ABCo2); Fidelity Glass Co. (FID2); Michigan Glass Co. (M.G.2)
- 3 Sheldon-Foster Glass Co.; poss. Poughkeepsie Glass Co. (P3)
- 4 Essex Glass Co. (E4)
- 5 Winslow Glass Co. (4W)
- 6 Bell Bottle Co.
- 7 Illinois Glass Co.; Liberty Glass Co.
- 8 Pennsylvania Glass Co. (P.G.C.8); Woodbury Glass Co. (WGCo8)
- 9 Knox Glass Co. (K9, K.9, or K-9)
- 11 Thatcher Glass Mfg. Co. (1-11-14)
- 13 C. L. Flaccus Glass Co. (F-13)
- 14 J.T. & A. Hamilton (J.T.&A. 14 mark)
- 16 J.B. Brooke [jobber]
- 17 Empire Bottle & Supply Co.; Belle Pre Glass Co. (B.P.17, BP-17; Chattanooga Glass Co. (17 CHATT)
- 19 Travis Glass Co. (T-12-19 to T-19-19)
- 24 Butler Bottle Co.(24B)
- 29 Standard Milk Bottle Mfg. Co.
- 30 Du Bois Glass Co. (DBGCO 30)
- 31 Buck Glass Co. (B.G.CO31)
- 32 PE-32 EMPIRE heelmark – company presently unknown
- 34 F.E. Reed Glass Co. (REED on heel; 34 on base)
- 37 ? [1932 Sears catalog – listed in Rawlinson 1970:28]
- 39 Crescent Milk Bottle Co.
- 48 Berney-Bond Glass Co. (BBGCO48, BB48); Owens-Illinois Glass Co. (BB48)
- 51 Universal Glass Products Co. (U.G.P.CO.51, U.G.P.51, U-51)
- 52 Lamb Glass Co. (L-52, L.G.Co.52, L52 [with "52" in the crook of the "L"]); Liberty Glass Co. (SEALED 52 L-G)
- 60 Florida Glass Mfg. Co. (not confirmed)

### Source

Rawlinson, Fred

1970 *Make Mine Milk, The Story of the Milk Bottle and the History of Dairying.*  
FAR Publications, Newport News, Virginia.