Rabbit Trails:
The Twisted Path to Bottle Identification

By Bill Lindsey

As some readers of *Bottles and Extras* magazine know, I assist with the ongoing article series entitled *"The Dating Game"* where Bill Lockhart, Pete Schulz, Carol Serr, I, and occasional other contributors write in-depth articles on the history and makers' markings of a particular glass company or historical grouping of related glass makers.

As Bill Lockhart has explained in previous *"Dating Game"* articles, we have self-dubbed our group the "Bottle Research Group" or BRG for short. The BRG's common bond is a fascination with historical background behind the production and use of glass bottles made during the 19th and 20th centuries. Simply for enlightenment and fun (no profit) the BRG pursues and investigates all kinds of weird and wondrous research avenues in the world of (primarily) American bottle making. In our research "trails" we often end up discovering all kinds of interesting historical tidbits – some expected, and even better, the unexpected. It is the latter aspect of our pursuits that provides the informational "treasure hunt" - and discovery - that is at the core of why we do this. Like Alice in Wonderland, we often end up in a "place" we could not even imagine beforehand.

Anyway, the story of my particular "rabbit trail" starts here...

Recently, the BRG has been discussing (we exchange emails on almost a daily basis) what we refer to as the "San Francisco curved R" (or the "Frisco R" for short). For years Western bottle collectors have noted the presence of a distinctively engraved capital "R" on many Western American embossed bottles made from the early 1870s to possibly as late as the mid-1880s (Markota & Markota 1994; Wichmann 1999; Wilson & Wilson 1968, 1969, 1971; Lawler 2008). (**Figure 1)** These bottles are typically embossed as having been produced for and used by customers in California, Oregon, and Nevada - in order of abundance.

Figure 1

This "R" is quite distinctive in configuration from virtually all other embossed "R's" found on Western bottles from other eras (mouth-blown or machine-made) or those made or used in other regions of the country. Simply speaking, this "R" has an outwardly curved aspect to the angular right leg that bends so much towards the end that it is actually pointing at the base of the next letter in the embossed word. In addition, this leg terminates with a flattened blunt end (Lawler 2008). Since this is much easier to visually conceptualize than describe, take a look at **Figure 1**.

All I can surmise is that this specific style of embossed "R" on Western bottles was the work of a single, yet unknown bottle mold engraver (or machinist) doing his work in the San Francisco Bay Area for molds used at the *Pacific Glass Works* and/or the *San Francisco Glass Works* and certainly at the combined (after 1875) *San Francisco & Pacific Glass Works* (Toulouse 1971). While the story of this mold engraver would be fascinating – if it could ever be fully told (and we are searching!) – that is not the story here. It was, however, the catalyst for some of the trails that I did pursue which, of course, cleared up some questions and created yet more.

While recently looking at some examples of this distinctive "R" on various Western bottles in my personal collection, I noted it's presence on a 1870s era San

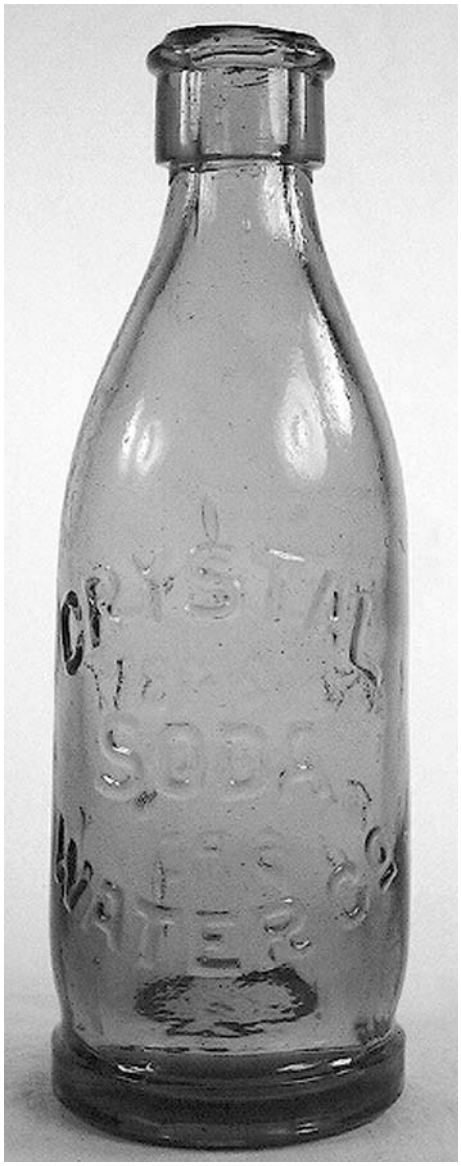

Figure 2

Figure 3

Francisco soda bottle. Specifically, this bottle is embossed boldly with CRYSTAL / SODA / WATER CO on one side (**Figure 2**) and PATENTED / NOV. 12. 1872 / TAYLOR'S / U. S. PT on the reverse side (**Figure 3**). There is one embossed "R" on each side of the bottle and they are both *the* distinctive curved "R" form. The bottle has a pedestal base, crudely applied finish (more on that later), and is a beautiful medium sapphire blue in color. A "window bottle" extraordinaire and one that even non-collectors who view it pick as a favorite!

While looking at this bottle I began to wonder about the significance of the patent date on the reverse. Peck & Audie Markota's excellent book *"Western Blob Top Soda and Mineral Water Bottles"* discusses these bottles and the company that used them (in business from 1873 to 1889) but includes no information on the meaning behind the patent date of November 12, 1872 (Markota & Markota 1994). Neither do the Markotas note anyone named Taylor connected with the *Crystal Soda Water Co.* (As a side note, I should mention that well researched, historical based collector books like the Markotas' are truly timeless works of utility for collectors and archaeologists alike.)

I always assumed the noted patent pertained to either the unusual bottle shape or the unusual lip (or "finish" in glassmaker jargon) – or possibly a unique closure associated with this finish - that these bottles usually have **(Figure 4)**. Although I've never seen one personally, a variant of this bottle finish has been noted where *"a hole*

Figure 4

was made in the neck of the bottle and metal pin thrust through the cork so as to make its accidental escape impossible" (Markota & Markota 1994). Maybe that closure variation was the patent?

Unfortunately, David Graci's excellent and quite comprehensive book *"Soda and Beer Bottle Closures 1850-1910"* did not note this as a closure patent date, so that strongly indicated a dead end as a closure patent (Graci 2003). The Markotas also noted that other variants of the *CRYSTAL SODA WATER* bottles come without the patent embossing on the reverse and with a regular blob finish instead of the unusual tall straight collar with a distinctly flared rim. (Note: There was also a Hutchinson type soda bottle embossed with CRYSTAL / S. W. Co. / S. F. [Markota & Markota 1999].)

Being familiar with *Google™ Patent Search* from work on my *Historic Glass Bottle Identification & Information Website* – and finding it to be an incredible resource for finding patents of all types – I gave it a shot using the patent date and the name Taylor. Why not just go to the source – the Patent Office? (*Google™ Patent Search* is available at this link - www.google.com/patents)

Even though *Google™ Patent Search* can be a bit circuitous to use, after doing some subtle tweaking of the search details, I hit pay dirt stumbling across patent #133,068 issued on that precise 1872 date to one Asher S. Taylor, who hailed from – of all places – San Francisco, CA. (**Figure 5**). Eureka, I thought! However, instead of being a bottle design or finish and/or closure patent, the patent was for an *"Improvement in Bottling Apparatus"* (U.S. Patent Office 1872). The patent seemed to deal with the mechanics of soda bottling and little to do with the bottle itself (or the closure, as with many canning jars) – the usual reasons for a patent date being boldly embossed on a glass container. Even though the patent drawing did include the upper part of a period blob top style soda bottle - with weird notches on the rim of the finish (but not the pedestal *CRYSTAL SODA WATER* shape) – the patent was more about a *"... bottling and corking machine..."* for soda water.

Success seemed to be eluding me...until I read more of the details

in the patent specifications. First off, the stated point for the patent was as follows (quote from the patent narrative):

> *It is necessary for the manufacture of soda-water and other like beverages to keep on hand a large number of bottles to enable them to fill orders to families, groceries, saloons, and other places. These bottles are seldom returned, but are sold by the person in whose possession they are to junk-dealers, who again sell them to other soda men to be again filled with soda-water or other beverage.*

Now this was getting interesting as the re-use of bottles during the 19th to early 20th centuries – by either the original bottle purchaser or by others "pirating" these bottles - has always intrigued me. It is one of the primary factors in the finding of much older bottles on obviously newer historic sites (Busch 1987). Incidentally, the famous (in the West) "Great San Francisco Dig" of 1999 was reported to have been on the site of a bottle "junk-dealer." The patent narrative continued to state...

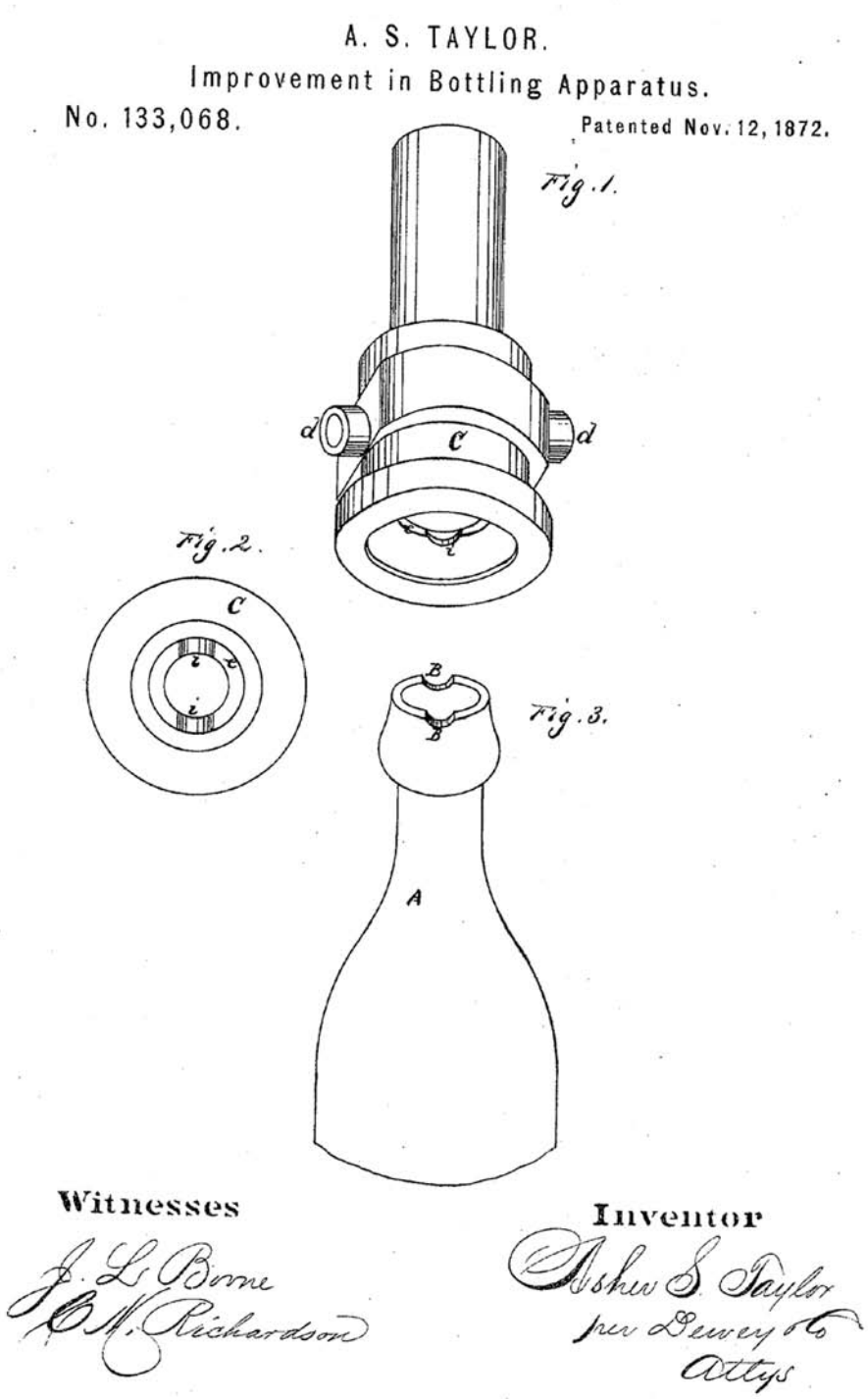

Figure 5

> *My invention consists of constructing a bottling and corking machine to correspond to a mutilated cap or neck of the bottle, so that the manufacturer alone will be able to fill his own bottles. By this means I will render the bottles of no value to persons who bottle a liquid under pressure except the original manufacturer, whose machine is made to correspond with the mutilations on the bottle.*

Now I understood that this patent outlined one of many solutions that attempted to remedy the chronic headache of the time for bottlers of beer, soda water, milk and other liquid products in re-useable bottles: the re-use of proprietary bottles by other users who did not purchase them (Busch 1987). That was the reason for many soda and beer bottles being embossed with "THIS BOTTLE NOT TO BE SOLD" and its variations (Baab 2008).

The problem with the patent drawing remained, however, in that the weird flared rim finish on the *CRYSTAL SODA WATER* bottles did not conform at all to the finish rim notches in the patent drawing as shown in **Figure 5**. Reading on further through the patent narrative, I found the following passage near the end:

> *Various styles of mutilation, such as making the upper end of the bottle* [i.e., the finish] *square, oblong, triangular* ***or otherwise****, can be devised for this purpose; and it will be a great advantage* ***that every manufacturer can have a special arrangement*** *of his own that will protect his trade* (emphasis mine).

In other words, the Taylor patent was for the *concept,* not the specifics of a user-unique finish configuration that meshed with a unique *"bottling and corking machine"* conformation in order to preclude other soda-water manufacturers from utilizing the bottle purchasers expensive re-useable bottles! Although Mr. Taylor did not specifically note the flared rim as a possible *"mutilation"* (probably on purpose so that he could use it!) that was certainly the point of the weird *CRYSTAL SODA WATER* finish, i.e., to mesh with a uniquely designed machine - or more to the point - a uniquely designed filling tube or *"cylinder"* on the machine (Riley 1958).

Since the production of *"square, oblong, triangular"* finishes was pretty much impossible at that time – at least for mass produced bottles with the era's dominant applied finishes – Taylor appears to have quickly come to the conclusion that some variation of a round finish was the way to go. This is indicated by the patent drawing (see **Figure 5**) where the rim of the obviously round (in cross-section) finish had a *"...depression or indentation..."* made, although how it was to be made was undefined.

Unfortunately for Taylor, this invention apparently did not see widespread use or application in the soda water business since the vast majority of soda bottle finishes were of the same general conformation – the blob finish - at that time and for many years after. The lack of success may have been due to the ponderousness and expense of this filling system which required specially made soda bottles and soda water machine filling heads. It was also a new process in a business that was already rife with danger from bottles exploding during the pressurized filling; potential users of this arrangement may have been wary of something "new."

Once I figured this out, I remembered that there are some other California soda bottles with the name Taylor on them. I continued thumbing through the Markotas book and came across a pair of early – Gold Rush era – Taylor soda water bottles, examples of which I personally possess (**Figures 6 & 7**). Low and behold, the Markota's note that the Taylor behind these soda water ventures was the same

Figure 6

Asher S. Taylor listed on the patent discussed above!

The Markotas book has some good historical information on Asher Taylor:

> *...There is no exact date as to when Asher S. Taylor arrived in San Francisco from his home state of New York... The earliest listing for Asher S. Taylor was in San Francisco in 1854, at which time he was listed as being the proprietor of the Jessie Street Soda Factory... From 1854 to 1857 the whereabouts of Taylor is unknown. In 1857 he was again listed as being employed at the Boley Soda Works...Sacramento. Again from 1858 to 1860, his whereabouts are a mystery. From 1861 to 1862 Taylor was listed as being in the Soda Water business in Sacramento... In 1862 it was back to San Francisco... returned to Sacramento from 1863 to 1869...changing his residence each year... In 1870 Taylor was listed as a bitters manufacturer in Sacramento...and from 1872 to 1874...as manufacturer... for 'Sparkling Medicated Bitters'...in San Francisco. This...venture proved to be unsuccessful, and in 1876, broke and with only his delivery wagon and a couple of horses, Taylor became a drayman.* (Markota & Markota 1994)

So it appears that Asher Taylor continued dabbling in soda manufacturing and other bottling endeavors until at least the early 1870s – a fact affirmed by the *"Improvement in Bottling Apparatus"* patent from 1872. One wonders if the noted *'Sparkling Medicated Bitters'* was some

soda water type product using the "bitters" classification to enhance sales during the heyday of that class of medicines? Sparkling, of course, implies carbonation and many soda and mineral waters of the era claimed extensive medicinal properties (Lindsey 2008). Maybe the product was bottled in soda type bottles - possibly by the *Crystal Soda Water Co.* in its earlier days? I guess the inevitable "cost" of answers is more questions.

One of the noted Gold Rush era Taylor soda bottles is the example unusually embossed as follows: TAYLOR & CO. / VALPARAISO / CHILI on the front (**Figure 6**) and SODA / WATER on the reverse. These interesting iron pontil-scarred bottles come in lovely shades of green (very scarce) and cobalt blue (rare). As with all pontiled-scarred Gold Rush era soda bottles from the West, this bottle was certainly made on the East coast (most likely in Pennsylvania) then shipped around the "horn" of South America in the hold of a sailing ship - with apparently a stop in Valparaiso for filling – to San Francisco. I defer to the Markotas again in regards to this mystery soda bottle:

> *This particular bottle is as much a mystery to us as is the person who used it to bottle his product. There is no exact date as to when Asher S. Taylor arrived in San Francisco from his home state of New York. Most of the early sailing ships making the trip around the Horn would put up in Valparaiso, Chile, where they could take on water, provisions, make repairs, wait out a storm, or to pick up or leave passengers. It could have been on such a trip that Mr. Taylor may have found a new source of water that he thought would be suitable for bottling, then shipped to San Francisco or Sacramento for distribution. Taylor must have ran* [sic] *his soda water business from San Francisco, for records show where Taylor, in 1850 and 1852, frequently made trips to South America. From available information, this bottle should date from the early 1850s to around 1857...* (Markota & Markota 1994)

So it appears that Mr. Taylor arrived in California no later than 1850 or possibly as early as 1848. It is unlikely that he predates the California Gold Rush as few Americans were in California prior to gold discovery at Sutter's Mill in January 1848.

I just love these unique soda bottles for their air of unsolved mystery as well as the misspelling of Chile as the hot, vegetable based spice "chili" rather than the South American country. I don't know if any of these bottles have been found in South America; most have reportedly been dug in California.

The other early Taylor soda water bottle is embossed with: TAYLOR & CO. / SODA WATER / SAN FRANCISCO / EUREKA with no embossing on the reverse side. (**Figure 7**) These scarce soda bottles look as though the embossing should be in a plate (aka "slug plate" by collectors) but were actually blown in a unique proprietary mold that did not utilize a plate for the embossing, although the mold could have had replaceable halves. These bottles are also iron pontil scarred and come in lovely shades of sapphire to medium cobalt blue. The production date of these bottles would be the same as the "Chili" bottles, i.e., early to mid 1850s and solidly within the frenzy of the California Gold Rush.

Figure 7

Just for fun (and all this was fun) I ran a regular *Google*™ search on the name Asher S. Taylor in New York, looking for hits on that name in the first half of the 19th century. Amazingly enough I found several references to an Asher S. Taylor living in the late 1830s to mid-1840s in – of all places - Saratoga County, the home of the famous mineral springs! Could this be our future "Western" Asher S. Taylor who developed an interest in carbonated waters by having lived in the Saratoga Springs area prior to his move out West?

I continued my search by going back to *Google™ Patent Search* looking for more patents applied for or issued to Asher S. Taylor and ran across something that appears to be related to a bottle that has

puzzled Western collectors for years. This scarce bottle has 8 flattened body panels, smooth non-pontiled base, a period-typical applied blob lip/finish, and is embossed with CHAMPAGNE / MEAD on two consecutive sides – the rest are unembossed. (**Figure 8** – Photo courtesy of American Bottle Auctions) According to the Markotas, these bottles were used by *Gass & Co. - Champagne Mead Works* - a short lived San Francisco firm in business from 1871 to 1872 (Markota & Markota 1994).

Figure 8

What I found in the patent records was one issued to *"Asher S. Taylor, of San Francisco, California"* for an *"Improved Beverage or* ***Champagne Mead****"* (emphasis mine). The patent notes that it is *"Specification forming part of Letters Patent No. 106,428, dated August 16, 1870"* and was for inventing the formula for *"an Improved Beverage called 'Champagne Mead."* Wow! This was right before (1870) the documented beginning of the "Champagne Mead Works" in San Francisco, though the Markotas do not mention Taylor's name at all in their information on the company. As with the *Crystal Soda Water Co.*, there was most likely some direct connection between Asher Taylor and the *Champagne Mead Works,* though, for the moment that is lost to history. More questions...

For those interested in whipping up their own batch of Champagne Mead, the details are below. I should note that traditional mead is fermented honey and thus alcoholic. This recipe of Mr. Taylor's includes no honey - it is cider based - and apparently was not fermented, i.e., non-alcoholic, although it is possible that the cider in the recipe was "hard":

> *To make my beverage I add to forty (40) gallons of good cider the following spices and flavoring- extracts: Ginger, four (4) pints; mace, three (3) ounces; orange-water, one (1) gallon; vanilla, three (3) ounces; anise, one (1) pint. To this mixture some predominating flavor can be given by adding either of the following ingredients: Cloves, two (2) ounces; cinnamon, one (1) ounce; nutmeg, one (1) ounce; pine-apple, one (1) ounce.* (U. S. Patent Office 1870)

The rest of this short patent notes some logistical aspects like the mixture is dispensed from a *"soda-fountain"*, *"charged with carbonic acid in the usual manner"*, and that the beverage can be kept *"a great length of time without deterioration."* This sounds potentially alcoholic to me although carbonation also acts as a preservative.

After running the draft of this article through the BRG for comments, Pete Schulz noted that he had some additional tidbits of information on the product from period newspapers...cool! This included several 1870 advertisements for Champagne Mead by the *Kenyon, Gass & Co.* – apparently the first producer of the product in 1870 – whose "depot" was located at 1806 Powell Street in San Francisco. One of these ads - dated July 16, 1870 - noted that Champagne Mead was *"recommended by the Medical Fraternity as the only Temperance Drink"* and that it *"Contains no Acids...No Injurious Drugs"* but was instead *"...made of Fine, Healthful Herbs"* (Alameda Encinal 1870). So there was indeed no alcohol in the product as the recipe implied.

Of additional interest, Pete also had a photocopy of the California trademark registration application for the name "Champagne Mead" filed by Frank Kenyon on April 4, 1870 - some months prior to Asher's patent for the formula (California State Archives 1870). The above noted ad also warned potential customers to *"Beware of spurious brands, as a patent is secured."* This was about a month prior to the patent actually being "secured." Of course, "truth in advertising" was a concern of little ethical importance at that time when bold, unsubstantiated claims for most products – particularly patent medicines - was the norm.

Unfortunately, none of this additional information clarified the connection between Asher and the actual producers of Champagne Mead. The product was purveyed

by the previously noted *Gass & Co.* in 1871 (their "Champagne Mead Works" were now at 114 Turk Street) and possibly part of 1872, Kenyon having disappeared from the firm and from San Francisco by 1871 (Langley 1871, 1872; Markota & Markota 1994).

So ends the story of my bottle research "rabbit trail" that started with the "San Francisco curved R" and ended with the formula for "Champagne Mead"...as well as more questions. I welcome any readers' thoughts or additional information they may have on the subjects discussed here. My email address is: historicbottlewebsite@yahoo.com

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