

EMBOSSSED VS. UN-EMBOSSSED

By Michael George



Glass Geek Alert

If you have ever found yourself spending a Saturday night analyzing the mold markings of a bottle under a high-powered light and a loupe... well, you might be a glass geek! After a couple nights of “geeking out”, I find myself having more questions and fewer answers. As every collector knows, the therapeutic time spent playing with your bottles is a good part of the excitement of being a collector. Sharing your finds with other collectors completes the circle! After a little investigative work, here are some observations.

Mold Templates?

Have you noticed that many of the embossed medicine bottles have un-embossed counterparts? I have numerous embossed medicine bottles that seem to have been made from the same mold as one another or have un-embossed versions that were presumably for “label only” merchandising. So I decided to take a closer look at these bottles and figure out the relationship between them, if any, from a production standpoint. I have seen many mold variations, repairs and alterations, but this is different. These are completely different bottles made from the same basic mold forms. As I am a collector of New England glass, most of the examples shown here are from this region. However, I am sure that you can make such comparisons from bottles within your own region.

When it comes to glassblowing production, I am certainly a novice. I have never worked at a factory, and all of my conclusions are based upon my observations as a collector. If my story makes very little sense to you, well, you can enjoy the pictures!



Osborn's Indian Vegetable Pulmonary Syrup, an un-embossed example, and a Chapman's Genuine.

A "Likely" Monster Trio

I have always been impressed by the overall size of the "Chapman's / Genuine / 4 Salem St, Boston" bottle, and consider it to be a favorite of mine. This one was produced in Stoddard, NH, mid-19th century. The dimensions are 8-1/4" tall, 2-1/2" deep and almost 4" wide... certainly a bottle with a presence! So when I acquired a large deep aqua medicine "S.J. Osborn's / Indian Vegetable / Pulmonary Syrup / 40 Albany St / Boston, Mass.", I quickly recognized the form; it was just like the Chapman bottle! After a close comparison, it appeared to be made from the same two-piece mold with exact dimensions. Could this mold have started in Keene NH, and later used in Stoddard? The trio was made complete when I purchased an un-embossed example of this mold that was brought into a Keene bottle show. It also appears to be from this mold, but is roughly 3/8" thicker. Could this have been the template, and slug plate inserts were used for the embossed bottles? Which other merchants may have used this form? From a rarity standpoint, the Chapman bottle is very rare; the un-embossed example is extremely rare; and the Osborn bottle is possibly unique, as I have not heard of another. The fact that both the Osborn and the Chapman bottles have the street number and address leads me to speculate that the mold maker was likely the same person for both bottles.

From some of the early Northeast factories, I have also associated un-embossed medicine bottles (having very similar dimensions) to the Dr. Swett's Panacea, G. W. Stone's Liquid Cathartic Family Physic, Smith's Green Mountain Renovator, J. L. Leavitt, Geo Burrill, Covert's Balm of Life and the CA Richards bottles to name a few. Were they made from the blank molds, or quite simply just very similar to these molds?



Dr. Swett's Panacea, Exeter, N.H. and an un-embossed example, same forms.

No Swett!

For years, there is bottle that I have always associated with the Dr. Swett's Panacea bottle, and for obvious reasons, as it has the exact dimensions of this great medicine. I have always called this bottle the un-embossed Swetts mold. Now I take a closer look. The form and dimensions are almost identical; however, the base is completely different. This is something that I have never noticed before, one is flat and one has a recessed panel. Now I have no reason to believe that they are related in any way other than having the same basic form. Both bottles are very rare, but the embossed Swett's Panacea is extremely rare. I was told from a Stoddard factory descendant that there is documentation accounting for only 2 gross of bottles ordered for the Dr. Swett's Panacea... that would be 288 bottles. It is amazing that a dozen or so exist today!



Dr. Swett's Panacea, Exeter, N.H. and an un-embossed example, same forms.

Leaving No Stone Unturned

Similar to the Dr. Swett's bottle, the classic G.W. Stone's Liquid Cathartic & Family Physic bottle also has its un-embossed counterpart. Well, at least I had always believed it to be the case. However, as I am finding with this exercise, there seems to be no real relationship between the embossed bottles and the similar un-embossed examples. After reviewing this pair, I find that the bases are different, and further, the mold seams are in different locations as well, making them completely different bottles. Since the embossed example came first, we may be able to speculate that another merchant wanted a bottle produced for a competitive product. Only the original labels can provide the answers. The un-embossed examples were also made at Stoddard, and later at the Lyndeborough Glass Company. The GW Stone is a very rare and desirable bottle. The un-embossed example is equally rare (if not rarer) but is not as desirable. Let's face it, who can resist a Liquid Cathartic & Family Physic?



G. W. Stone bottle and an un-embossed example, similar forms.

So Close, But So Far Away

What I thought would be a straight-forward story realizing the comparison between these embossed and un-embossed molds, has really taken me down another path. Was any of this intended for production efficiencies? Does the “template” idea have any validity? Were the un-embossed bottles used by the same merchants using the embossed bottles, or was this a clever marketing scheme from competitors, or the glass house? As the story unfolds, I find myself leaning more towards the “competitor” theory.

Product Marketing Strategies!

Without a doubt, there was a dramatic increase in merchandising after the civil war and right up through the turn-of-the-century. A merchant with a substantial brand identity and strong market reach was certainly the target for competitors. Swaim’s Swayme’s, Swayne’s and Swan’s were likely three competitors copying and benefitting from the

success of one merchant's good business. Another example that comes to mind immediately is the "Hood's Sarsaparilla, Lowell, MA" You can find one of these bottles at any New England dump site or flea market, so it goes without question that business was good for Hood! No surprise, there is an un-embossed Hood's bottle, and many competitors that used the exact same design... "Brown's Sarsaparilla", "Rackley's Sarsaparilla", Groder's Botanic Dyspepsia, and the "None Genuine" bottle. I'm sure there are many others, but these are examples that I have encountered. The same can be said for the Dr. Kilmer's and Warner's bottles, and any other successful merchants from this era.



Group of un-embossed mid-19th century medicine bottles

Read Your Bottle... Even If It Is Not Embossed!

So, I conclude my exercise without any real answers, but with some new thoughts regarding these very similar mold forms. It is easy to recognize the relationship between CA Richards and the Dunster & Dingley businesses because of the sharing and manipulation of molds, as is often the case with such business relationships. However, the similar molds or un-embossed examples are probably nothing more than one merchant copying the packaging of another merchant. I don't see any real evidence of a "template" theory, in other words, I do not believe (in these cases) that the glass house used customized plate inserts on a template bottle mold. Most of these molds are all different in some way. So, look over your bottles closely, and make comparisons to same-form objects. I think there is a good story to be uncovered here, and I would love to hear more! One thing is certain; the mid-19th century glass factory had to care for hundreds of large, heavy iron molds. Where are they? I guess that is another story all together.

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