

SALTY COMMENTS #30  
(Facts and Opinion on Open Salt Collecting)

The McKee Glass Company was one of the earliest glassmaking operations to survive at least 100 years. The family went into business in 1834, making bottles and window glass. Though it reorganized as different family members took charge, the name McKee stayed with the firm for 137 years until it was purchased by Thatcher, a container manufacturer. Until 1888, operations were in Pittsburgh, near the coal sources. After that time, natural gas was the preferred fuel, and the Company moved to nearby Jeannette, PA where gas was plentiful. The business has operated continuously since then, but it lost the McKee name when the company changed hands about 1950. After several more changes, the factory has now become the Jeannette Shade and Novelty Co., making hand-pressed and hand-blown glass parts for the lighting industry.

The McKee business prospered during the early years. In 1880, it was reported that they made about 20% of the glassware in America. Tableware was part of their line as early as 1860, so their open salts give a good cross-section of what America was buying. We are fortunate that several of their early catalogs have survived and have been published. We have seen pages dating from 1860, 1864, 1868, 1871, 1880 and 1889. We may find more before we are through. Since there is so much material, we have chosen to divide the McKee salts into two groups: before and after 1880. We will cover the first of these groups in this issue.

In this writeup and in the table we have tried to show the names of pattern glass in capital letters, a convention we have borrowed from the Heacock and Johnson book. For salts which were not part of a pattern set, most old catalogs used a numbering system for identifications. McKee used names instead. These we show with the first letter capitalized.

Before 1865, American glassmakers used only flint glass (now called lead crystal) for tableware. They did not know how to make a good product using the cheaper soda-lime formula. As a result, the early McKee salts are flint, and the footed goblet-type ones ring beautifully. We have the Tulip, RIBBED PALM, BELLFLOWER, EUREKA and STIPPLED BAND in flint. Some designs that were made for many years can be found both ways. The early LOTUS must have contained lead, but our copy is definitely soda-lime. If you have any of these in your collection, try "ringing" them to see if they are early or late. When you do, compare the tone to a salt that you are sure is flint. We have fooled ourselves several times when we "ring" a salt without making a comparison. We want the dish to be old lead glass, and we imagine we hear a prolonged sound that really isn't there. Our rule of thumb is, "If it is flint, there will be no doubt. If it might be flint, it probably isn't."

Since McKee made dishes that were in demand by consumers, their salts tell something about what people used in this era. Most were master size; before 1880 the Company offered few individuals, and these were "ordinary" shapes. None of the larger dishes had smaller counterparts before the 1880 catalog. Most salts had names, like Fillmore, Tulip, or Mason, even when they were not part of a set of pattern glass. When patterned sets were made, the dishes were mostly auxiliary pieces like sugars, pitchers and nappies. The only pieces to go with a place setting were drinking vessels, such as goblets and tumblers. The open salts were usually quite heavy to stand abuse from breaking up caked salt.

The attached list and illustrations show the McKee salts that we have seen in the old catalogs. The catalog dates show where we have seen pictures of them. Sometimes the dish was made for years afterward, but since we have not seen a later catalog picture, we show a more limited span of time. Further research may uncover better information; if we find any, we will pass it along

There is one salt in Heacock and Johnson attributed to McKee 1860-75 that we cannot find in the catalogs. It is #3513, the HORN OF PLENTY pattern. The 1860 catalog shows dishes in this design (they call it COMET), but shows no open salt. The price list shows all the salts, but no COMET. The pattern is not in the catalogs or price lists in 1864 or any later years. We have omitted it from our list until we get further evidence of its origin.

One problem with old catalogs is the way the illustrations were made. In the 1800's they did not have the technology to photograph a glass dish and print from the picture. Illustrations were done by hand, usually with woodcuts. The accuracy of the resulting picture depended on the skill of the artist, which was not always on a par with Rembrandt. The two illustrations on the right illustrate the point. They are from two different catalogs, and both show the McKee LOTUS salt. When we saw the first one we said that we had never seen one like it. When we found the second, we realized that we already have a LOTUS salt in our collection.



Lotus Salt.

The inaccuracies of drawings have led to the error in the Heacock and Johnson book, #2835. This is called the "Mason" salt, with a reference to the Stout book, page 75. Close examination of the reference and other old catalogs shows that the Mason is really the shape we show (#6), which H&J has as #3376, correctly identified.

As with most old salts, at least 8 of the shapes we found were also made by other glass companies. McKee undoubtedly copied some from others, and was copied by others in return. Unless someone can produce an Octagon, Cincinnati or Diamond Individual that is indisputably from the McKee factory, we will never be able to tell which of the small differences belong to which maker.

Looking at the positive side, there are at least 20 salts that are only McKee. Getting all of them, especially the pattern glass ones, is a worthy challenge. Start with your present collection - you probably have some that you didn't know about. If you want the ones that are not patterns, you have a good chance of finding them. Most were very heavy to withstand use, and have not been broken over the years. Few people collect the "chunky old master salts", which makes the supply greater and prices lower. For the pattern glass designs, you are competing with a larger group of collectors, so prices will be higher and the supply more limited. If it were easy, it wouldn't be nearly so enjoyable, we keep telling ourselves. We hope you have fun doing the hunting like we do.

Ed Berg  
401 Nottingham Rd.  
Newark, DE 19711

November 1990

References: "McKee Victorian Glass, Five Complete Glass Catalogs from 1859/60 to 1871", by Dover Publications, Inc., New York  
"The Complete Book of McKee Glass", by Sandra McPhee Stout  
"Pressed Glass in America", by John and Elizabeth Welker  
"5000 Open Salts", by William Heacock and Patricia Johnson

OPEN SALTS BY MCKEE - PART I

Illus. No.	Cat. Dates	McKee Name	Comments
1	1860-89	Rope Salt	Master <sup>1</sup> size, like later U.S. Glass design.
2	1860	Mitre Diamond	Master, smooth rim, may be GIANT SAWTOOTH if artist's proportions are wrong.
3	1860	Individual	The picture shows sloping sides. We suspect that it is the Diamond Individ. (see below) poorly drawn.
4	1860-89	Concave	Master.
5	1860-89	Tomato	Master.
6	1860-80	Mason	Master. We have this in two sizes, though the catalog shows only one. H&J 2835 is <u>not</u> McKee's Mason.
7	1860-71	Lotus	Master.
8	1860-71	Tulip	Master.
9	1860-71	Fillmore	Master, apparently named after the President. We don't know what he did to deserve it.
10	1860-71	Imperial	Master. Similar design was made by other companies.
11	1864-68	SPRIG	Pattern glass <sup>2</sup> master, later called RIBBED PALM.
12	1864-89	Stedman	Master.
13	1864	R.L.	Pattern glass master, later called BELLFLOWER. The pattern was also made by others, before and after.
14	1864-89	Diamond Individ.	May be the 1860 "Individual" more accurately drawn.
15	1864-71	Round Individ.	Also made by many other companies
16	1864	PRISM	Pattern glass master.
17	1868	EUREKA	Pattern glass master, matching a spooner, creamer and sugar.
18	1868	N.P.L.	Pattern glass master, later called PRESSED LEAF. Part of an extensive set.
19	1871	FROSTED	Pattern glass master, later called STIPPLED BAND. Part of an extensive set.
20	1871	RUSTIC	Pattern glass master, later called TIDY. Neither name fits the design.
21	1871-89	Cincinnati	Individual size, also made by many other companies.
22	1880	PARIS	Pattern glass master, later called STAR AND PILLAR.
23	1880	SWISS	Pattern glass master, later called AEGIS.
24	1880	BRILLIANT	Pattern glass master.
25	1880	BERRY	Pattern glass master, later called BARBERRY.
26	1880	FRENCH	Pattern glass master, part of an extensive set.
27	1880-89	Cable	Both master and individual sizes. Similar to the rope salt, but shown with it on the same catalog page.
28	1880-89	Octagon	Individual size. Also made by many other companies.
29	1880	Berlin	Similar to the French Footed, but not pattern glass.
30	1880-89	Twin	Double, ribbed bowls, post handle.

---

<sup>1</sup>Old catalogs always refer to the "master" salts as Table Salts. We are using the more familiar term inaccurately because few collectors are familiar with the old catalogs.

<sup>2</sup>Salts called pattern glass are part of a set of matching tableware, all with the same decoration.

