Salty Comments

Facts and Opinion about Open Salt Collecting

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The Rise and Fall of Open Salts

During the past 20 years (has it been THAT long?) we have covered the rise and fall of open salts a few events at a time. When someone comes in our door and says, "What are all those things in the cabinets?", we find ourselves pulling the pieces together to give her/him a rundown on why they were made and how they developed over the years. We thought it would be worthwhile to put the story in writing. Perhaps some of you could help us elaborate it by offering worthwhile additions or corrections.

Our tale starts with salt itself. This was a valuable thing centuries ago when there was no refrigeration and salt was needed to preserve meat. The salt was obtained by evaporating sea water or by digging, if you were lucky enough to own a mine. When Lewis and Clark reached the Pacific Ocean, they lingered there for 6 weeks, boiling sea water to make salt for the trip home. Making salt was big business in some places – in 1837, Cape Cod had 658 companies with evaporation basins for sea water and shipped over 26,000 tons of salt to market. In every case the final product was what came from the sea or the mine, complete with impurities and a mixture of crystal sizes. These two features made the salt particles stick together when sitting around in humid weather. Attempts were made to make the salt "shakable" by building agitators into small bottles with perforated tops. The first patent for something like this was in 1863, and featured a wooden "agitator" inside the bottle. Many other versions were patented, but the most successful (judging from the number that have survived) was the Christmas Salt, patented December 25, 1877. It had a metal agitator whose shaft stuck out the top with a knob to move it. It wasn't until the end of the 19th century that industry started making "shakable" sodium chloride that had uniform crystal size and few or no impurities. Us older folks remember the Morton's "When It Rains, It Pours" slogan. This had real meaning when it was first introduced.

Harvesting Sea Salt

1863 Patent Shaker

1877 Christmas Salt

Given that salt caked, and that you wanted some on the table to flavor your food (or to hide the flavor if the meat had started to spoil), people put it in open dishes, called Salt Cellars. The oldest ones that have survived are fancy works of art by silversmiths that date back to the 14th century. We have not tried to get any of this kind for ourselves – they wouldn't fit on our shelves. Our collection starts with a silver one dated 1785. The British were very careful about marking their silver objects with the City Assayer's mark (which guarantees the dish is really sterling), the maker's mark, and a date code. If only our other salts were as easy to identify! While silver salts were and still are made, we find the glass and china ones more interesting (and affordable).

1785 London Salt

Glass is a natural for holding salt – it doesn't corrode like metal. In the mid-1700's, Baron Stiegel built a glass works in Manheim, PA that produced salts, among other things. Unfortunately there are no catalogs or pictures of his wares, so we can't verify the shapes attributed to him. When his factory went bankrupt, the workers migrated to the north and west to work for other companies who were mainly in the window glass, bottle and drinking glass business. We've heard a rumor that Stiegel shapes were reproduced in the 1930's. We've not been able to confirm this, but there sure are a lot of "Stiegel Type" salts around 200 plus years after they were first made.

Stiegel Type

Most glass salts made about 1800 were blown and cut. The shape was formed by hand, sometimes using a mold to shape a bubble of molten glass. We believe most of these were Anglo-Irish – we have not heard of any American manufacturers. The decoration was cut into the glass with small wheels. Since labor was cheap in those days the hours of effort required was not a problem. About that same time they made salts by blowing a bubble of glass into a wooden mold which had a pattern carved on the inside. The French took this one step further. A glass blower named Robinet developed tuberculosis, and his lungs became too weak to do his job. Rather than retire, he invented a hand pump that attached to the end of his blowpipe. It gave more pressure than lung power, so it gave greater detail in the design. One characteristic of salts made like this or with lung power is that the design can be felt inside the bowl from placces where the glass moves outward to leave depressions on the inside surface.

Blown & Cut

Blown Pattern

Robinet Pump Example

The next advance was using a hand press to form a foot separately from the blown bowl. The "presses" were nothing more than a small hand-held plunger which was pushed down on a glob of hot glass which had been dropped into a shaped hole. The foot often had raised prisms around its inside, and is called a "lemon squeezer foot" today. Decorations on the bowl were still hand cut, or less frequently were formed by the "blow into a mold" process.

Pressed Foot

Foot Interior

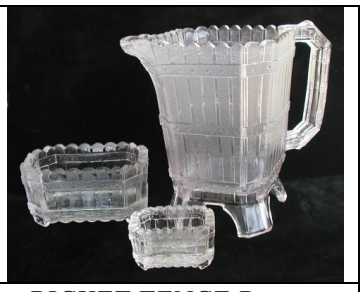
The big change in open salts came with the introduction of the mechanical glass press. This let relatively unskilled people form a glass shape in less than one tenth the time it took previously. This was a US invention, and our glass tableware industry began a period of rapid growth that went on for about 75 years. The Boston and Sandwich Glass Co. was a leader, making a large variety of lacy salts including colored, covered, and even the boat-shaped "Lafayet" salt. Their non-lacy shapes included the rectangular "beehive' ones, which are rugged enough to survive to this day. The "Lacy Era" lasted from about 1825 to1850.

Sandwich Boat

Sandwich "Beehive"

After the “Lacy Era”, pattern glass emerged. This featured many matching pieces of tableware which had the same design on the outside. A typical set might include open salts (sometimes both table and individual sizes) along with sugar bowls, pitchers, and celery vases. By 1900 it was not uncommon to have a set with 30 or more matching pieces. The most extensive set was made by the Fostoria Company. There were over 250 different shapes in the AMERICAN pattern.

BANDED STAR Pattern
Sauce, Salt, Table Salt



PICKET FENCE Pattern
Table Salt, Salt, Creamer

Fostoria’s AMERICAN Pattern
Creamer, Salt, Sugar Bowl

After 1875, glass “novelty’ salts came into fashion. These were shaped like wagons, birds, wheelbarrows, or whatever the maker thought would appeal to people with money to spend. About the same time, colored glass became popular, with many companies making, amber, blue and vaseline as well as clear. The number of pressed glass companies grew as well – there were 70 of them by 1890. Each would start its business where there was ample fuel. The oldest companies had used wood, but the timber near their factories was used up after a few decades. Natural gas was discovered in Ohio in the 1880’s, and many places believed the supply would last forever. Cities offered free land and free gas to anybody who would build a glass factory there. Those who took advantage of the offer found out after a few years that nothing lasts forever, and most of these companies soon closed or moved east to places where coal was available.

Stove

Jockey’s Cap

BARLEY Pattern
Wheelbarrow

Greentown’s
Nile Green Wheelbarrow

In the 1890’s, most of the glass tableware companies were losing money.. There was too much production capacity, people weren’t breaking glass dishes fast enough, and the union was demanding more money and production limits. The majority of them merged into two conglomerates – US Glass and National Glass. Both struggled to pull out of the situation, but by the time the next 10 years passed most of the factories were closed and only a few of the independents remained.

Porcelain salts came into fashion about 1900, when Japan realized that their “open door” policy was sending a lot of money to the USA because their people bought the new (to them) western goods. They realized they had porcelain superior to most western china, and decided to develop that material as an export to fight the trade imbalance. Soon porcelain tableware began to replace glass in the USA.

At the same time, salt shakers were becoming practical, so open salts were mostly used for dipping vegetables. Sets were made with a larger dish for holding the radishes, celery or scallions and with matching smaller salts for each place setting. These sets were popular until World War II, when anything from Japan became "enemy goods". About this same time the medical profession decided that too much sodium chloride was bad for you. This marked the end of the open salts era.

Today only a few glass companies make open salts. Most of their output is for collectors. Some are sold in museum stores, some are made by independent glass companies, some are made in Asia for importers, and a select few are financed by salt clubs to mark anniversaries or National Conventions. The museum and club ones are always marked – most of the others are not. They frequently copy old designs and are usually either lead crystal or colored. Very few of them are ever exposed to sodium chloride.

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<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>Salt Dip Marked Nippon</td><td>Celery Dip, Comes with Matching Celery Tray</td></tr>
<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>Celery/Radish Marked 2/25¢</td><td>Lacy Reproduction Made for Metropolitan Museum</td></tr>
<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>1997 Convention Salt</td><td>Rabbit on Nest - Boyd</td></tr>
<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>Hen Marked "Made in Taiwan"</td><td>China Fish – Pier 1 Imports</td></tr>
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We have not covered everything by any means – pewter salts, silver salts, china salts, and other kinds should be part of the story, but our audience has been yawning and it's time to move on.

We undoubtedly left out a number of your favorite shapes and materials, but we have been addressing a curious person who never heard of open salts before. We just hope she/he has spotted a few dishes they like, that the hobby will take root, and that she/he will become an avid open salt collector like we are.

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