

FRUIT JARS...

A History Worth Remembering

by *Melissa Milner*

The history of preserving our food, the containers and methods go back to the Greeks & Romans. These pottery containers used straw, rags, and leather, sealed with clay, resins and natural waxes.

In the early 1700's, homemakers used crude glass and earthenware vessels sealed with corks, plugs and parchment paper to preserve food. The earliest jars were wax seal. Closures were corks, dipped in sealing wax. When corks weren't available, they used corncobs wrapped in paper or cloth. They also used egg paper for preserving fruit. They would dip several layers of parchment paper in egg whites and tie them over the mouth of the jar. When dry, it would seal so tight, it was preferred over self-sealing caps. Can you imagine how hard it was to keep food from spoiling?

In the early 1800s there was no wholesome way to preserve food for armies in battle. Napoleon was desperate to find anyone that could effectively come up with a way to preserve food. He offered 10,000 Francs to accomplish this feat. Nicolas Appert, a French chef, devised the first recognized method by processing sealed glass containers in boiling water. It would be fifty years later before canning became commonplace.

In 1854, James Spratt, Cincinnati, Ohio, came up with the first groove-ring wax sealer. His was a replacement for soldering tin cans. (Soldering tin cans was short-lived because of spoilage & rancid

taste.) He used a tin can with a screw cap as the primary seal followed by a wax seal over the edge of the cap. It was still less than desirable because the tin affected the taste.

In 1855, Robert Arthur patented the glass groove-ring wax sealer. His patent called for wax to be poured in a groove around the mouth of the jar. All a person had to do then was heat the lid and press it into the wax. Glassmakers produced the glass wax sealer until 1912.

The very early glass jars were pontiled. After blowing the jars in a mold, an iron or glass rod was stuck to the base to hold the jar. Then the top was added. The mark left on the base is called a pontil. These jars predate the Civil War.

The term Mason jar came from its inventor, John L. Mason. His famous patent was a glass container with a disappearing thread molded into its neck, a zinc lid and rubber seal. This is the famous Mason's Patent Nov. 30th 1858. These 1858 jars were produced as late as 1920! The Crowleytown Masons are believed to be the first of the 1858 jars.

In 1859, Mason sold five of his patents to Lewis R. Boyd and his company; The Sheet Metal Screw Co. Boyd is most famous for his milk glass liners for the zinc lids. This was important because, for the first time, it separated the metal lid from the contents of the jar. Boyd and Mason were partners for a short time in the Consolidated Fruit Jar Co. Many other



companies made their jars. (Clyde Glass Works and Whitney Glass Works were just two.)

One of Mason's biggest competitors of the time was Salmon B. Rowley. Rowley specialized on lid design and listed every date possible on his lids and jars. Some of the jars associated with Rowley are Hero, Gem, Pearl, Crystal and Porcelain Lined. Rowley's idea was a top-sealing jar with a metal or glass lid straddling the ground lip, held down by a zinc band.

Jars with stoppers were also popular. These jars had either bell-shaped openings or a depressed mouth. Some of these stoppers were the J. D. Willoughby Stopple (1859), the W. W. Lyman Stopper (1862), C. F. Spencer Stopper (1863) and the Kline Stopper (1863).

The Millville Atmospheric Jar (1861) is an example of the thumbscrew jars that were popular around the time of the Civil



War. It consisted of a yoke style iron clamp with a thumbscrew in the middle. The thumbscrew held a glass lid & rubber gasket in place on the jar. John M. Whittall of Philadelphia, PA invented the Millville jar. The John M. Moore & Co. Manufacturers Fislerville, NJ (1861) is another example of the thumbscrew jar.

In 1882, Henry Putnam came up with a new kind of jar. The patent for the closure belonged to Charles de Quillford of New York City. It was a toggle-type closure for beverage bottles. It had a tie-wire around the neck, securing the lever wires to the jar. The Lightning jars were popular because the glass lids prevented the food from coming in contact with any metal. The metal lever wires were cheap and the lids easier to seal and remove. The name Lightning suggested the jars were fast and easy to use.

The Atlas E-Z Seal is a variation of the lightning jar. The Hazel-Atlas Co., makers of E-Z Seal and Atlas Strong Shoulders jars was in business from the late 1800s to 1964. The shoulder seal jars cracked a lot easier because of the pressure of tightening the lids and gaskets down

on the shoulders. The Hazel-Atlas Co. came up with a jar that sealed on a raised lip, thereby reducing the pressure to the shoulder of the jar. That's how the Atlas Strong Shoulder got its name.

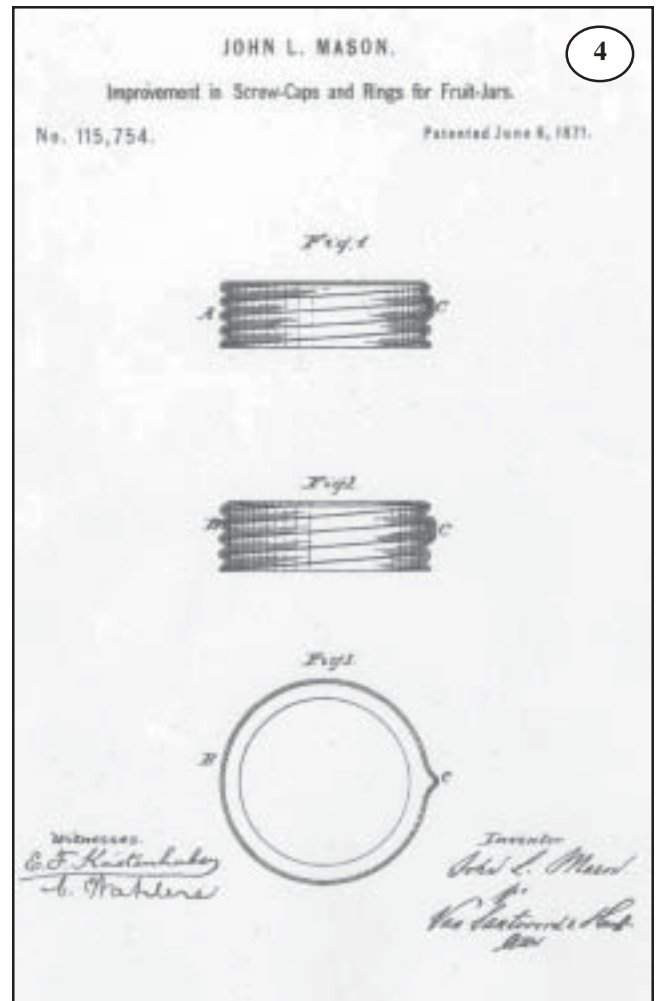
In 1903, Alexander Kerr and John Giles founded the Hermetic Closure Co., Chicago, Ill. to make metal lids and spring clips. In 1904 Kerr changed the name to the Kerr Glass Manufacturing Company. Kerr came up with the idea of a lid with a permanently attached gasket and a threaded metal ring to hold the lid down. This was the first of the type of lids used today. Kerr is associated with the Economy jars and the Kerr Self Sealing jars.

What history of fruit jars would be complete without the Ball Company? In the early 1880s, William Charles Ball, his brothers, Edmund Burke, and George Alexander began making wood jacketed tin cans for the storage of oil, lard and paint. In 1883, they switched to glass and three years later to fruit jars. Their company became successful by mass-producing and distributing trainloads of fruit jars. They took over smaller

companies to grasp control of the industry, many times closing the plants soon after purchasing them. The license for the Owens Automatic Bottle Making Machine was obtained when they took over the Greenfield Fruit Jar and Bottle Co. This significantly reduced labor costs and increased production. They also had a waste not policy. They reworked old molds and used every resource to produce more. What jar collector is not familiar with the Ball Perfect Mason? There were millions made!

There have been many significant contributions along the fruit jar history. I have highlighted only some of them. When I think of my jars, I consider all the places the jars have been, the early settlers carrying these jars from place to place in wagons. The women working over wood cook stoves or just a large kettle and a fire to preserve the food. Some of the older closures were so intricate it must have been difficult to fasten the closure with the hot contents of the jar. It is a miracle any of these jars survived.

There are thousands of varieties of jars. Value depends on many things such as



scarcity, color, crudity, closures, size and demand. A good value guide is "The Collector's Guide To Old Fruit Jars Red Book 9" by Douglas M. Leybourne, Jr. Many of my fellow collectors have excellent websites on the Internet. The Yahoo E-Group is a site where expert and novice collectors alike give and seek advice. (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/fruitjars/>) Another informative site is Fruit Jars.com. This site has information on reproduction jars, irradiated jars, many of the old patents and much more.

No matter what the reason for collecting fruit jars, it is a very exciting and enjoyable experience. There is a price range out there for everyone. I'm always looking for "my next favorite jar".

Canning is a passing way of life in our modern society. Hopefully, there will always be people to collect fruit jars and "preserve" a wonderful history.

References:

Hinson, Dave. *A Primer of Fruit Jars*
Toulouse, Julian Harrison. *A Collectors' Manual - Fruit Jars*



Photos:

1. Just one display wall of Melissa Milner's collection of fruit jars.
2. Stoneware Mason Fruit Jar.
- 3-4. Copies of patents for J. L. Mason's "Glass Jar" and "Screw Caps and Rings."
5. Heavily whittled early pontiled corker.
6. Half-gallon Lafayette jar, with matching lid.
7. Wood case for a dozen Mason fruit jars.
8. F.B. Co. (on base) quart jar, in yellow-amber.
9. Display of other stoneware Mason's and wax sealers.
10. Ball quart jar in an uncommon green color, with amber swirls.
11. Amber Mason "Cross" jar, "Pat Nov. 30, 1858."
12. Ball Perfect Mason in rare deep amber color.
13. Improved Mason in deep amber.
14. Green Hartell's jar. Around the edge of the lid: "Hartell's Glass Airtight Cover. Patented Oct. 19, 1858."
15. Tradecard for Mason's case.
16. Half-gallon Griffen's. "Pat. Oct. 7, 1862" on lid.
17. Midget Franklin fruit jar with the correct two-prong lid.
18. Gilbert's Improved "Star" jar. The wire closure goes all the way around the jar.
19. Mason's Pat. Nov. 30th 1858 "Crowleytown" jar. This is the first jar that actually came out after the patent.

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