

# When Mr. Libbey Went to the Fair

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Special to Bottles and Extras

In my Toledo family, he was always known as "Mr. Libbey." Edward Drummond Libbey (**Fig. 1**), the tycoon who built his glass companies to be foremost in America. My aunt had been his executive secretary and told many stories illustrating his ability and generosity. Only recently, however, have I learned that by going to a fair, Libbey made possible the invention of the automatic bottle machine -- perhaps the most important event in glass industry history for bottle and glass collectors.



**Fig. 1: Edward Drummond Libbey**

The Libbey story begins in 1872 when William Libbey (**Fig. 2**), Edward's father and part owner of the Mt. Washington Glass Company, became an officer of the New England Glass Works located in East Cambridge, Massachusetts. Founded in 1818, the company was struggling financially when William joined it. An effort to revive its fortunes by sponsoring a pavilion at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition had proved a financial disaster and closure threatened. In 1878, William took over as CEO of New England Glass.

Edward Libbey went to work for his father in 1872 as a chore boy, rising to a clerical position by 1874. Originally planning a career as a minister, Edward



**Fig. 2: William Libbey**

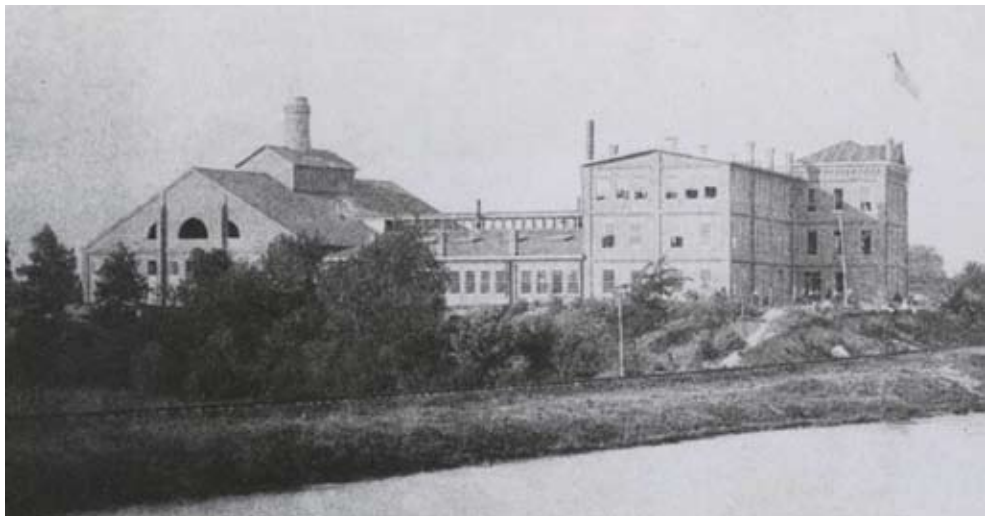
yielded to his father and at 26 became a partner in the firm, precipitating the change in the name of the business to W.L. Libbey and Son. When William died in 1883, Edward Libbey, at the early age of 29, took over the glass works.

During the next five years, Libbey managed to keep the company afloat despite financial woes, chronic fuel shortages, and labor problems. In 1888 he agreed to move his glass works to Toledo, Ohio, in exchange for

some generous concessions from city fathers. They provided him a four-acre factory (**Fig. 3**) and land for 50 worker homes. In August of that year, a special train arrived in Toledo with 50 carloads of machinery and 250 workers. Despite the fact that the new home for the glass works had ample natural gas and good transportation via railroad and Lake Erie, Libbey's company continued to lose money in Ohio.

To be successful, the young businessman believed, his newly named Libbey Glass Company badly needed a national reputation. In order to obtain that recognition Libbey made up his mind to go to a fair. Not just any fair. It was the Columbian Exposition of 1893, a gigantic world's extravaganza held in Chicago (**Fig. 4**), meant to commemorate Columbus "discovering" America. Libbey asked company directors for \$200,000 to build a pavilion.

They vigorously opposed his proposal. The idea was a total waste of money, the directors contended, just at a time when the company was cash-poor. They also reminded him of the financial bust that the Philadelphia Exposition had been. Undeterred, Libbey borrowed money from private investors and plowed ahead. He secured exclusive rights to build a fully operating glass factory at the Exposition



**Fig. 3: The Libbey Glass plant**



**Fig. 4: The Chicago Columbian Exposition**

-- the only American glass firm represented. He also arranged that his pavilion would be located on the Midway promenade where thousands would pass it every day.

He hired a well-known architect, David Stine, to design a building that was both a pavilion able to hold 2,000 people and a factory, including a 10-pot furnace in the design (Fig.5). Visitors could actually watch glassware being made by 40 handpicked glass blowers Libby brought from Toledo.



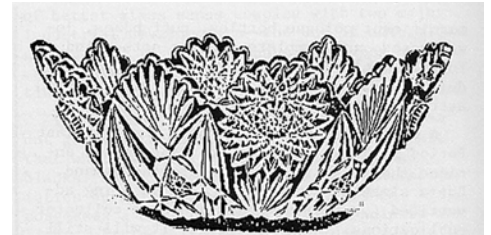
**Fig. 5: The Libbey Fair Pavilion**

Libbey's most popular exhibit was an entire room with glass furnishings, including screens, window curtains and lamp shades. Enchanted with these items, a well-known stage actress asked Libbey to make a glass dress. He obliged and she, as shown here, modeled it (Fig. 6). The dress became one of the most popular exhibits at the fair. Although a New York Times writer predicted that glass dresses would become the fad of the future, the garment proved too brittle for general use.

Enter Her Royal Highness, the Spanish Infanta (Princess) Eulalia (Fig. 7). After a visit with President Grover Cleveland in Washington, she traveled to Chicago to represent Spain at the Exposition. A world celebrity, the mere mention that Eulalia would be visiting the fair on a particular day reportedly could increase attendance by 50,000.

The Infanta, fascinated by the glass dress, made repeated visits to the Libbey Glass Pavilion. Her presence generated tremendous publicity for the glass company. The Princess asked Libby to

make a second glass dress for her. He obliged and in gratitude Princess allowed him to use the Spanish royal insignia in his advertising. Libbey in turn had his craftsmen create a new cut glass pattern he called "Eulalia," (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8: The "Eulalia" pattern bowl**

Unlike many of the exhibitors, Libbey charged to get into his pavilion. It cost a dime and when the factory proved very popular, Libbey raised the tariff to a quarter. For that fee, visitors could observe his workers hand-blowing and cutting glass. The price of admission could be applied toward the purchase of glass souvenirs. Popular among them was a glass inkwell in the shape of the Fair's Administration Building (Fig. 9).



**Fig. 6: The glass dress**



**Fig. 9: Fair headquarters glass inkwell**

Paperweights were another specialty item, made and sold on the premises. The Libbey factory turned out a wide range: Some depicted other pavilions at the fair, including the Indiana State Building (Fig. 10), the Ohio State Building (Fig. 11), and, in color, the Horticultural Pavilion



Fig. 10: Indiana Pavilion paperweight



Fig. 11: Ohio Pavilion paperweight



Fig. 12: The Horticultural Pavilion



Fig. 13: Libbey building paperweight

(Fig. 12) and Libbey's own glass factory (Fig. 13). Other subjects were the Liberty Bell (Fig. 14), Columbus landing in the New World (Fig. 15), and a glass ax that featured the face of George Washington, an obvious allusion to the cherry tree legend (Fig. 16).



Fig. 14: Liberty Bell paperweight



Fig. 15: Columbus landing paperweight



Fig. 17: Art Nouveau paperweight



Fig. 18: Salt and pepper shakers



Fig. 19: Libbey logo



Fig. 16: Washington's hatchet paperweight



Fig. 20: "American Brilliant" punch bowl



Fig. 21: "American Brilliant" decanter



Fig. 22: "American Brilliant" perfume bottle

More expensive cut glass also was offered for sale. One highly popular exhibit was a huge ornate cut glass punch bowl hewed from a single block of glass that subsequently was exhibited in the Toledo Museum of Art. It was masterpiece example of a style called "American Brilliant." Libbey Glass Co. became identified as a prime creator of this form of art glass. Shown here are examples of the Libbey's "Brilliant" craft (Figs. 20-22) as displayed in a punch bowl, decanter, and perfume bottle.

When the Chicago Columbian Exhibition closed, more than two million people had visited Libbey's pavilion. An estimated 20 boxcar loads of glass had been sold. The company, as hoped, had received considerable national media attention. The name Libbey had become synonymous with fine glassware. Edward now was able to place his fine cut glass products at some of the most prestigious stores in America, including Tiffany's in New York. His American Brilliant glass products would become the popular rage for two decades. A company catalogue reflected the fashion (Fig. 23).



Fig. 23: Libbey 1896 catalogue

With his glass company enjoying prosperity for the first time, Libbey was able to maximize another resource -- Mike Owens (Fig. 24). Owens was an Irish-American employee of Libbey, a self-taught genius who had been working, with the blessings of the boss but highly limited funding, to mechanize glassmaking. The enhanced company profits allowed the inventor to flourish. After designing



Fig. 24: Mike Owens

machines to produce light bulbs, tumblers, and lamp chimneys, Owens in 1903 invented the automatic bottle blowing machine (Fig. 25) for Libbey. It was perhaps the most important advance in the history of glass, resulting in a wide range of products that were now made affordable to the general public. It also helped launch bottle collecting as a popular hobby.



Fig. 25: Owens with his bottle machine

Owens subsequently invented a machine that made flat glass. Out of his inventions grew three new firms -- Toledo Glass Company to make tumblers and lamp chimneys; the Owens Bottle Company, and Libby Owens Sheet Glass Company. They established Toledo as the glass capital of America and made rich men of Libbey and Owens.

All this resulted, remember, from Edward Drummond Libbey's historic decision, overcoming strenuous opposition, that he and his glass works go to the Fair.

**Notes:** This article and illustrations is drawn from a variety of Internet and printed sources. Portions have previously appeared in the Swirl, the magazine of the Ohio Bottle Club, and in my blog, bottlesboozeandbackstories.