

GEORGE W. SWETT ROOT BEER

1845-1952 – Boston, Mass.

By Donald Yates

The second half of our book, *Ginger Beer & Root Beer Heritage*, contains photographs of Bob Avrill's Root Beer Museum in Pottsville, Pa. He was the proprietor and gave us permission to photograph the artifacts in this world class collection. Unfortunately, this collection has been dispersed via auction. Our book is now the only record of this historical collection.

One entire floor of the Root Beer Museum was just for Hires Root Beer. Other rooms were dedicated to each individual brand of root beer. The entire lower floor contained 75 full sized oak root beer barrels that weigh 250 pounds each.

He also had 100 medium size oak barrels that weigh 75 pounds each. He also had 85 small sized oak barrels that were 18 inches high. Every Oak Root Beer Barrel was hand-made by skilled coopers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. See my Federation Article on Coopers and Whiskey Barrels.

John D. Rockefeller was the largest user of wooden barrels in Ohio. He was also the sole proprietor of Dr. Swett Root Beer at one time. The Museum also owned several great oak and brass Dr. Swett Root Barrels.

The Root Beer Museum also owned the most phenomenal collection of ceramic Root Beer dispensers. One interesting style of dispenser is 12 inches high and was shaped like a barrel and had a hand plunger for dispensing the syrup.

These ceramic dispensers were made by The American Standard Company in Toledo, Ohio - the same folks who make ceramic plumbing components. They also owned several other designs of root beer dispensers including small ceramic barrels and the great Bardwell Root Beer Canteen (repros made in Mexico) and Bardwell pitchers.

The stoneware in the Root Beer Museum dates from 1750 to 1920. The

primitive bottles were made by the Edward Merrill Pottery in Akron, Ohio, and also several other New England potteries. Sherwood Brothers Pottery in New Brighton, Pa., made the majority of the stoneware mugs and the transfer type stoneware bottles. They also made the majority of the stoneware whiskey bottles. See Jack Sullivan's Federation Article on the Sherwood Pottery.

Stoneware Transfer Type Bottles:

These were made by casing each half (top and bottom) in clay then, after drying, the top and bottom halves would be joined together by placing them in a ceramic fixture and pouring clay slip around the neck of the bottle. This would allow the joint to be formed that held the bottle together. All of the bottles made this way have a ring mark around the neck, indicating how high the slip was.

The transfer would then be applied after the bottle was removed from the fixture. One type of transfer was a rubber stamp that was dipped in black ink and then directly applied to the bottle.

The earlier type of transfer was made by etching a copper plate in the desired

pattern by highly skilled lithograph artists. The plate was then coated with a special ink and stamped onto a thin pager. While still wet, the transfer would be applied to the stoneware by rubbing it in place with an ivory tool.

The interior of each bottle would then be filled with chocolate brown Albany Slip. After drying for a day, the exterior would be sprayed with a buff-colored Bristol glaze. After drying, the top would be dipped in a dark-colored Bristol glaze, giving each bottle their characteristic two-tone finish. They would then be fired in the kiln for seven days, making it a total of 12 days to make each bottle.

The common Dr. Swett Stoneware bottles say: Dr. Swetts Root Beer Boston. They used an identical transfer for the Tristate Beverage Co in El Paso Texas.

They also had stoneware bottles made for the Kittanning Brewing Co in Kittanning, Pa. There is also an early Dr. Sweet stoneware bottle. The word Sweet was misspelled by the minister who married the Swetts.

The ornate colorful Dr. Swett Stoneware Mugs were also made by the Sherwood Brothers Pottery. The



Dr. Swett's stoneware transfer type bottles

original patterns were carved in a soft material – possibly bees wax. Dr. Swett's portrait had to be hand carved by highly skilled artists. They also carved three dimensional cherubs. Brass coggle wheels were used for repeating pattern around the mug and around the base and on the handle.

Once the wax pattern was complete, it could be used to make plaster molds. The mugs were poured in these hinged plaster molds, a top plug and bottom plug were used to create the interior and bottom space. Each mug would be made by pouring slip clay in the mold and it would be allowed to dry for two days.

The handle would be glued on with the clay slip and it would dry for another day. Each mug would be finished by the painters. Most of the mugs were painted in a cobalt blue, deep green, or chocolate Albany slip. After painting, each mug would be fired in the kiln for seven days. The bottom of each mug is stamped with a mold number, a potters stamp, and a fine check mark, indicating that it has been inspected.

These wonderful mugs were probably made from 1890 to 1900. Dr. Swett used a subsequent stoneware mug that has an image of the ornate mug, indicating that it was later than those. There is also a late 1800 tray that has a lithograph image of the ornate mug. This mug had a copper lithograph type transfer.

Dr. Swett's Root Beer:

Research by Ben H. Swett, Colonel USAF.

Dr. Swett's Root Beer was originated by Dr. George W. Swett (1834-1924). He owned two large wholesale and retail pharmacies in the 1800s – one in Boston and the other in New York City.

His root beer was first sold in little packets of dry ingredients and as a soda fountain drink in his pharmacies; then it was shipped to other pharmacies, as syrup to be mixed with soda water and, later it was pre-mixed and sold in bottles.

It was not fermented and contained

no alcohol. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Dr. Swett's Root Beer was available throughout the United States. It may have been unavailable for a few years in the 1930s, but, it was produced by franchised bottling companies until the 1950s.

Everett Stackpoole's Swett Genealogy lists among the children of Stephen Swett and Hannah Knight: Nathaniel born 7 Feb 1804; Amelia Swett, daughter of Captain John Hall. Children: George, Emma, Amanda, and Augusta who married 24 October 1866, James Reed Kimball, and Clark. The 1890 Census shows Dr. George Swett living with his sister, Emma Waldron.

1829 – George W. Swett's parents were married in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, Canada. Nathaniel Sweet of this Parish, Cabinet Maker, and Amelia Hall of this Parish, Spinning Wheel Operator, were married by License with Consent of Parents and Guardians on the 29th of November 1829.

Notice that the Rector misspelled their name Sweet, whereas, the true spelling is Swett. This mistake occurs many times and was even used on some stoneware bottles.

1834 – George W. Swett was born in October, 1834 in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, Canada, son of Nathaniel Swett and Amelia L Hall. St. Stephen is just across the international boundary (St. Croix River) from Calais, Maine.

1845 – Many examples of company advertising state that Dr. Swett's Root Beer was established in 1845 when he was 11 years old, and, although this claim has not been proven, it seems likely that he was experimenting with various concoctions when he was a boy and perhaps even selling something like root beer.

1858 – His death notice says that George W. Swett graduated from New York University in 1858. The 1900 Boston Census states that he immigrated to the United States in 1860.

1859 – He was listed in the Boston City Directory, occupation: Botanic

Medicine, living at 106 Hanover Street. The Business Directory included an ad for the New England Botanic Depot at the same address.

1862 – George W. Strett married Ella Haring on 25 September 1862 in Boston.

1866 – The Bureau of Internal Revenue was created in 1862 to collect stamp taxes and internal duties. The next year it administered the nation's first income tax. It also issued Revenue Stamps. These were legal tender notes, not backed by specie.

The four-cent Private Die Medicine Stamp advertising "Dr. J. W. Poland's White Pine Compound" for sale by Dr. George W. Swett, Boston, Mass, was printed and in use from 1866 through 1879.

Dr. Swett published a brochure entitled "The Illuminated White Pine Alphabet" about 1867. It contained 20 pages and was intended for children, but the entire book is advertising for patent medicines sold by his New England Botanic Depot.

The following paragraphs are condensed extracts of the advertising in his brochures. The price for each of these four medicines was 25 cents. They basically state that Dr. J. W. Poland's White Pine Compound will cure everything.

Fellow's Worm Lozenges are a remarkable power in expelling worms with pleasant taste and perfect safety. They contain no mercury, no mineral, no turpentine, no oil of worm seed, no poison, nothing injurious. They do not act as a purgative or emetic.

1876 – Hires Root Beer made its debut at the U.S. Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia along with Alexander Graham Bell's Telephone, the Remington Typewriter, and Heinz Ketchup. At that time, Charles Elmer Hires (1851 – 1937) was a young pharmacist in Philadelphia.

1880 – The 1880 Boston Census has George W. Swett, wholesale druggist, and his wife, Ella, living with her parents, Lemon and Elizabeth Harding.

1885 – *Harper's Bazaar*, New York, Saturday, July 4, 1885:

Hires Improved Root Beer – package 25 cents. Makes five gallons of a delicious, sparkling and wholesome beverage. Sold by all druggists or sent by mail on receipt of 25 cents. C. E. Hires, 48 N. Delaware Avenue, Philadelphia, PA.

Dr. Swett's Root Beer – Packages contain Sarsaparilla, Checkerberries, Juniper and Wintergreen. It acts mildly and beneficially on the Stomach, Liver, and Kidneys. Each package will make five gallons. 25 cents by mail prepared and packaged by the New England Botanic Depot – 245 Washington Street, Boston, George W. Swett, MD Proprietor.

1885 – New York City: **George W. Swett & Company – Wholesale and Retail Druggists, No 29 Park Row.**

This is an important business in this city that is owned by George W. Swett & Company, and specializes in wholesale and retail drugs. The business dates its inception from 1836 and controls a trade which already large, is constantly expanding. This establishment is conducted as a branch of the New England Botanic Depot of Boston. This firm is owned by Dr. George W. Swett and Alfred B. Mitchell. Mr. Mitchell conducts the New York business. The building occupied is large and well adapted for the business and contains a very full and complete line of drugs, chemicals, medicines, etc. Special attention is given to the selection of medicinal roots, herbs, barks, leaves and flowers and physicians prescriptions are accurately prepared of the best materials. A specialty is also made of natural mineral waters. The establishment owns a splendid soda fountain.

1890 – The Boston City Directory for 1890 states: George W. Swett, drugs and medicines, 245 Washington Street, Boston, 28 Worchester Square, Boston and 29 Park Row, New York.

The liquid concentrate (syrup) was mixed with soda water at drugstores and soda fountains. The stoneware dispenser was shaped like a large root beer bottle and would be readily available behind the counter and,

probably dates to 1890. The stoneware dispenser was made by the Sherwood Brothers Pottery and the bottom was completed in a buff Bristol Glaze and the top was done in a chocolate Albany Slip. The transfer was done with a five-inch diameter rubber stamp, similar to those used on the stoneware bottles. Dr. Swett also made a Canadian Root Beer dispenser for Montreal. These large dispensers were 22 inches tall.

The ready to drink version of Dr. Swett's Root Beer was sold in stoneware bottles, probably before 1892, because the first ones used Lightning Toggle Stoppers. The Sherwood Brothers were proud of their smooth Bristol Glaze stoneware. This allowed them to use a transfer stamp, which could be seen through the transparent glaze. The Bristol style glazed bottles were developed by the Powell family in Bristol, England in 1835. See our book, ***Ginger Beer & Root Beer Heritage***, for a complete history by Tim Newell Price. His father was the last owner of the Price-Bristol Pottery.

The Sherwood Brothers Pottery probably started making Bristol stoneware bottles in the 1870s. We have all seen the Christian Moerlein bottles from Cincinnati. These used the copper plate transfers and were highly ornate.

1900 – The 1900 Boston Census has George W. Swett, physician, widower, born October, 1834 in Canada age 56, living in the home of his sister Emma Waldron at 579 Columbia Rd.

1903 – The first automatic bottle blowing machine was put in operation by its inventor, Michael Owens, an employee of the Libby Glass Company. By 1910, this new machine could produce over 57,000 bottles each day. The previous production by hand blowing was about 1,500 bottles per day.

1906 – Congress passed the First Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, including provisions that were intended to stop the fraudulent advertising of patent medicines and required open disclosure of their contents.

Dr. Swett used an advertising folder

that shows a young boy drinking his root beer and a reflection of an old man in the background. It gave reasons why you should drink his root beer:

Made from the juices of such beneficial berries, barks, roots, and herbs such as checkerberry (tea berry), sweet birch, sassafras, sarsaparilla, spikenard, juniper, wintergreen, ginger and hops.

Beer made from this extract is in every respect the most refreshing and beneficial drink of its kind manufactured. Its medicinal properties render it exceedingly valuable in any disorder of the stomach, liver, or kidneys.

Dr. Swett Root Beer was first offered to the public of Boston more than 60 years ago; each year adds to its popularity and reputation for being the purest and most healthful of all temperance drinks.

The following article was published in the Boston Post Newspaper and will especially interest those who in childhood had their thirst quenched by homemade root beer.

“About half a century ago, a little youngster roamed the Massachusetts hills with an odd fancy for collecting herbs and carrying them home to his mother.

“Sometimes, his patient mother insisted that the herbs might be of doubtful origin, but the little fellow always insisted that they be cooked up in some sort of brew that would be better even than the one he made the last time.

“Every day he went farther into the hills and, once in a long time, he came upon a new thing that seemed a savory bit to add to his brew. He knew the home of all the checkerberries, and when they grew ripest. He could tell the shadowy little hill where the sassafras grew, and the pleasure to be derived from digging into the soil for the reddish brown roots.

“He found the dandelion with its fuzzy yellow top, and came under his eye for the herbal brew. The juniper tree had a special charm. All these went

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Wanted: FRUIT JAR! Always looking for odd original closures (i.e. Newman, CF Spencers), Van Vliet pint, Hiltons, JJ Squire, also color excites me! Contact: **Phil Smith** 2281 Clarkston Ln, Union, KY 41091, ph: (859) 912-2450, email: phil.smith@insightbb.com.

Wanted: The following NEBRASKA hutches: Auburn Carbonating/Auburn, John Lance & Putnam & Sons/Fall City, Schmid & Johnson/Holdredge, Carl Grunz/Grand Island, Hebron Bottling/Hebron, W.C. Clemens, E Herbertz and Standard Bottling/Lincoln, Donaldson & Bauer & Joseph Sheer/Nebraska City, Daly & Landgraf & Jos Landgraf/North Platte, RO & Co/Omaha, W Weber and Weber & Brekenfeld/Plattsmouth, Emil Fisher/Wahoo, F Garenicht/York. Contact: **Vince Bramer**, 18048 Trail Ridge Rd, Omaha, NE 68135, ph: (402) 895-2274.

Wanted: Coke bottles pre 1947. Long-

time collector seeking singles or collections for study and possible publication. Many common types needed. Contact: **Bill Porter**, 1329 Grandin Ave, Rockville, MD 20851, ph: (301) 309-0509, email: oldcokes@aol.com.

Wanted: Hutchinson sodas from Pendleton, Oregon. Contact: **James Dennis**, 1625 E 9th, The Dalles, OR 97058, ph: (541) 298-1979.

Wanted: bottles and stuff from Modesto, California. Also bottles embossed Frazier or Guzzi. Contact: **Mervin Frazier**, 1216 Trombetta Ave, Modesto, CA 95350, ph: (209) 527-1209.

Wanted: Sodas, historical flasks, bitters – one or a collection. Immediate payment. No premiums, free appraisals. Contact: **Jim Hall**, ph: (847) 249-3715, email: jim_hall@baxter.com

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into the little basket that the youngster carried under his arm, and it wasn't very long until the mother found that she was becoming almost as interested in the root beer as her son.

"It wasn't long before it was more than an experiment and, the neighbors from far and wide recounted the beverage that little George Swett had found out himself in the woods.

"Of course, there were many village people who indulged in these quiet mixtures of the hills, but, they were most of them for medicinal use, and, not one of them had the sharp refreshing taste that the little boy's had.

"This is the story of the beginning of Dr. Swett's Root Beer and, one would almost say, after hearing it first hand from the kindly old doctor, that there is a flavor of all the wood plants in it. Elsewhere, there may be rivals in the field, but New England is faithful to Dr. Swett. He has never advertised greatly, and the others have perhaps outstripped him in notoriety in the West, but in his native country, the herb brew that contains the essence of his boyhood days is still the favorite.

"When this youngster grew up, he went to college, and, then with a liking for medicine, graduated in New York as a physician.

"Dr. Swett said yesterday, in talking of the beverage, "This will stand the test of all the pure food laws in existence." And

at the factory, one may get a glimpse of Dr. Swett himself overseeing things, and still looking after the oldest root beer in existence."

The last page of this brochure had drawings of eight plants with brief descriptions of their uses:

Hop Flowers – have been commonly used as a tonic for the nerves and have also been used in the treatment of Dyspepsia. They were also widely used in the brewing of beer. They were considered a vital flavor of beer.

Spikenard – is a New England plant and was much used by the Indians and through them became a home remedy. It is a very pleasant aromatic stimulant and also helps digestion.

Birch Bark – depends for its activity on its volatile oil, has been largely used in domestic practice for its domestic properties. It is widely employed as a flavoring agent. The chemical compound in birch bark is nearly identical to that of wintergreen. Birch beer was often brewed as a sole flavor beverage. It was still available here in the 1950s. The White Castle Restaurant had birch beer as their specialty. A lot of people stated that they loved their birch beer. Chances are that it included a few other spices.

Most English people have had their palates compromised by the chemicals in wintergreen. Their ointments and other medicines have been flavored with wintergreen, which is fine,

except they find United State root beer to taste medicinal. Ginger beer was the favorite beverage in England for over two hundred years, but root beer has never been sold in England. Root beer is an American product and can only be appreciated by us. Our Northern Neighbors have used 5,000 different brewers of ginger beer and perhaps 20 brewers of root beer. You get the idea.

The Sassafras Root – is an aromatic stimulant and is used as an adjuvant to other ingredients to improve their flavor and render them most acceptable to the stomach.

Checkerberry Leaves – are found throughout New England, have an aromatic odor and taste due to the Volatile Oil Of Wintergreen, which they contain and act as a mild stimulant.

Juniper Trees – are also quite common and are found throughout New England. The branches are very valuable as stimulant, stomachic and carminative, also in mild forms of kidney affections.

Juniper Berries – are gently stimulating and diuretic and like sassafras are largely used as adjuvants.

Wintergreen – is a diuretic, acting mildly on the kidneys. Wintergreen is the primary flavor of root beer.

Sarsaparilla – has a world wide reputation and the American variety which is used in this root beer is considered by many physicians to be far superior to the imported variety. It is an excellent blood purifier. The medicinal product also contains other herbs to make it more pleasant. It tastes like root beer.

All of the above ingredients were added to improve the flavor to make this root beer pleasant, while quenching the thirst.

1919 – Dr. Swett's Root Beer was sold by the Tri-State Beverage Company in El Paso, Texas, which was in business from 1919 to 1923. This was during Prohibition, when the demand for root beer accelerated. These bottles are quite unusual in that they are the only stoneware bottles known to have carried the name of an El Paso firm. This bottle had the normal Dr. Swett's Root Beer on the front, Boston, Mass, and Tri-State Beverages – El Paso, Texas on the back.

The oak Dr. Swett's Root Beer Barrel Dispenser had a pump for the syrup and button to release the soda water at the end of the pump stroke.

1920 – Prohibition – The 18th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. This act prohibited the manufacture, import, export and sale of alcoholic beverages. One of the results was a huge increase in demand for root beer. Many breweries went bankrupt. Others started to bottle soft drinks.

1920 – Dr. Swett's Root Beer Company of Philadelphia placed a full page advertisement in the Philadelphia Record Newspaper on June 17, 1920. It shows a clear glass bottle with a bottle cap and a paper label. This was their first glass bottle. They were made in the automatic bottle machines and were filled in the automatic bottle filling machines.

They were great early lithographed colored labels. They have a yellow foreground and a red background. They state: Dr. Swett's Original Root Beer. The best in the world. Originated

in 1845. Delicious and Refreshing. And they show the young boy drinking Dr. Swett's Root Beer and the shadow of an old man.

1924 – George W. Swett died on March 12, 1924 in Malden, Massachusetts. His death certificate gave his age as 93 years.

1925 – This letter, typewritten on the letterhead of the Dr. Swett Root Beer Company or Portland, Maine, lists subsidiaries in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Oakland, New Orleans and Montreal. The logo is still the shadow of an old man in the background and a young boy in the foreground. The left margin has drawings of some of the herbs used in Dr. Swett's Root Beer – Hops, Birch, Sassafras Root, Wintergreen, Juniper and Checkerberry.

1928 – The Portland Main City Directory of 1928 still lists the Dirigo Bottling Company.

1929 – The Great Depression. Many of the small companies that bottled soft drinks went out of business in 1929 or shortly thereafter - another affect of our government, who enacted Prohibition in 1920. Many states immediately went bankrupt.

1932 – The Baker and Malaspina Company of Danbury, Connecticut, was listed as a manufacturer of Dr. Swett's Root Beer from 1924 to 1932.

1934 – The end of Prohibition. The 21st Amendment repealed the 18th Amendment, thus again permitting the legal manufacturer of alcoholic beverages.

1934 – Applied Color Label (ACL) is a baked enamel process still used today. Each color is applied separately and then baked so that the cost of labeling is proportional to the number of colors used. It is a benchmark for dating bottles because it was developed in 1934.

1937 – Dad's Old Fashioned Root Beer began about 1937 in Chicago. How could it be Old Fashioned when it was introduced so late?

1938 – A new Dr. Swett Root Beer Company was started in the late 1930s by four stockholders, including Nelson Rockefeller.

1939 – Franchises for Dr. Swett's Root Beer were advertised in the First Annual Blue Book of the National Carbonators and Bottlers Association – February 1939. This book contained detailed information on what was available to the bottlers of soft drinks.

1940 – The advertisement of the Second Annual Blue Book of the National Carbonators and Bottlers Association, February 1940. The company now changed their address from Boston to Rockefeller Plaza, New York. Nelson Rockefeller was the main shareholder in the new company.

The information in this article was from Ben H. Swett, Colonel, U.S. Air Force; also from our book, ***Ginger Beer & Root Beer Heritage***, available for \$29 including shipping.

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