

# The History of the Can

## The Impact of the Can on Culture and Economics for More Than 200 Years

By the Can Manufacturers Institute

### THE CAN HISTORY BEGINS:

Napoleon's troops were being decimated more by hunger and scurvy than by combat. As his soldiers resorted to foraging for food on their own, Napoleon famously noted that an army "travels on its stomach." Military prowess and colonial expansion required that a way of keeping food unspoiled over distance and time be discovered.

### INVENTION:

A Parisian named Nicholas Appert came up with the idea. A jack of all trades, Appert used his experience as a former candy maker, vintner, chef, brewer and pickle maker to perfect his technique. After experimenting for 15 years, Appert successfully preserved food by partially cooking it, sealing it in bottles with cork stoppers and immersing the bottles in boiling water. His theory of canning was all his own—Pasteur's discoveries regarding bacteria were still almost a half-century away. But Appert assumed that, as with wine, exposure to air spoiled food. So food in an airtight container, with the air expelled through the boiling process, would stay fresh. It worked.

Samples of Appert's preserved food were sent to sea with Napoleon's troops for a little over four months. Partridges, vegetables, and gravy were among 18 different items sealed in glass containers. All retained their freshness. "Not a single substance had undergone the least change at sea," Appert wrote of the trial. He was awarded the prize in 1810 by the Emperor himself. Like all good national heroes, Appert soon wrote a book called *The Book of All Households: or The Art of Preserving Animal and Vegetable Substances for Many Years*. It described in detail the process for canning more than 50 foods and was widely relied upon.

Later that year, an Englishman named Peter Durand was granted a patent from King George III for the idea of preserving food in "vessels of glass, pottery, tin or other metals or fit materials." Durand intended to surpass Appert and fashion containers out of tinfoil. Made of iron coated with tin to prevent rusting and corrosion, tinfoil could be sealed and made airtight but was not breakable like glass. A cylindrical canister and soldered lid would be much easier to handle than a fragile bottle with an unreliable cork.

Bryan Donkin and John Hall, used Durand's patent and, after more than a year of experimentation, set up the first commercial canning factory using tinfoil cans in

Bermondsey, England in 1812. If the French military was to travel farther and longer on their provisions, then the British needed to be able to do so as well. By 1813, Donkin's tins of preserved food were supplying the British army and navy. The Royal Navy used as many as 24,000 large cans—nearly 40,000 pounds—on its ships each year by 1818. The nutritious canned vegetables were a great relief to sailors who previously had relied on live cargo or salted meat and were often plagued by debilitating scurvy. It was believed that the salt caused the condition, when it was actually because the salt-cured foods lost most of their vitamins and nutrients in the preservation process.

### **SEARCH FOR NEW TERRITORY:**

THE GREAT INTERNATIONAL SEARCH FOR NEW TERRITORY further propelled the use and notoriety of the can. Likewise, the advantages of well preserved canned food enabled bolder expeditions. Explorers in search of the elusive Northwest Passage, such as Otto von Kotzebue of Russia, were quick to benefit. He wrote of a "discovery made lately in England" which he thought "too important not to be made use of," and took some canned meats with him on his voyage in 1815.

Sir William Edward Parry made two arctic expeditions to the Northwest Passage in the 1820's and took canned provisions on his journeys. One four-pound tin of roasted veal, carried on both trips but never opened, was kept as an artifact of the expedition in a museum until it was opened in 1938. The contents, then over one hundred years old, were chemically analyzed and found to have kept most of their nutrients and to be in fairly perfect condition. The veal was fed to a cat, who had no complaints whatsoever.

As cans traveled over land and sea, can making spread as well. In Germany, where tins had been invented hundreds of years earlier, tin cans were made by hand by plumbers—artisans who, in those days, worked primarily with lead, zinc, tin and other metals.

The father of the can manufacturing industry in the United States was an Englishman who immigrated to the new country and brought his newfound canning experience with him. Thomas Kensett set up a small canning plant on the New York waterfront in 1812 and began producing America's first hermetically sealed salmon, lobsters, oysters, meats, fruits and vegetables. Kensett began his operation using glass jars but, finding glass expensive, difficult to pack and easily broken, soon switched to tin. He and his father-in-law, Ezra Daggett, were awarded the U. S. patent for preserving food in "vessels of tin" by President James Monroe in 1825.

A competitor, Charles Underwood, set up shop in Boston and preserved fruits, pickles, and condiments in crocks. Underwood was also an Englishman and had landed in New Orleans originally, but found no one there interested in his canning idea. After making his way to Boston

on foot, he started his business which shipped its products primarily to South America and the Far East. He too eventually switched to tin.

### **MANIFEST DESTINY:**

Manifest Destiny and the California Gold Rush of 1849 sent miners, homesteaders and trappers into the frontier. A considerable amount of provisions was needed to make the long journey across the plains and the mountainous West. Settlers traveled in wagon trains filled with supplies and herded livestock alongside their caravans. Foods canned in the East were critical for survival.

Still, tragedy and starvation were common. It was the gruesome fate of the Donner party in 1846, an 87-member group reduced to cannibalism when deep snow trapped them in the Sierra Nevada mountains, that set one determined inventor to work on a canned food innovation. Gail Borden was inspired by the need of travelers for nutritious food that took up little space. He first tried a meat biscuit—condensed meat and vegetables—which was a culinary and financial disaster. Borden became an overnight success however when he hit upon canning condensed milk.

Borden was not the first to can milk, but he soon became the best. Not only was Borden's Eagle Brand the most palatable, it was the most promoted. In 1856, he set up a cannery in Connecticut and began to target the New York City market. In those early days of urbanization, the milk that reached the city was often of poor quality. Cows at dairies on the outskirts of the city were fed waste from liquor distilleries and other dubious sources. The milk often required adulteration to make it look more like milk. What's more, it was sold in bulk in open barrels in crowded, dirty stores and transported to market in uncovered containers on the back of a horse-drawn wagon amid the filth and dust of city streets. Borden advertised his product as cleaner, purer and fresher than anything else New York residents could buy.

Another chapter in American history, the Civil War, also features the can in a prominent role. Soldiers, especially from the North, came to rely on canned rations. In fact, Borden's canned milk is credited with saving many lives during the war. Borden could hardly keep up with the Union army's orders and leased milk processing plants all over the country to meet the demand. When soldiers returned home from battle they were familiar with and trusting of canned products and soon made them a regular part of their household.

In 1861, as the war began, an important discovery was made that would help canneries increase output. It was learned that adding calcium chloride to the water in which the cans were boiled raised the temperature and increased the speed of the canning process. Then the can opener was invented in 1865, making canned products more convenient than ever. And since the war effort competed with can making for metal resources, necessity and creativity

introduced thinner cans that remained sturdy while using less tin. Annual production of canned foods increased six-fold—from five million to 30 million—by the end of the Civil War.

### **RAPID GROWTH OF INDUSTRY:**

Fruit and vegetables processing plants sprang up in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and California. Pacific salmon was first canned on the Sacramento River in 1864 and on the Columbia River in 1866. In 1874, A. K. Shriver of Baltimore invented the pressure cooker which enabled canners to control temperatures accurately while cooking sealed cans—preventing them from exploding. The number of processing plants grew from less than one hundred in 1870 to nearly eighteen hundred at the turn of the century.

Norton Brothers merged with 60 other firms, with 123 factories, to form the American Can Company in 1901. Edwin Norton became president of the new conglomerate and kept his headquarters at the original Norton plant in Illinois. Forbes magazine would, in 1941, call American Can a corporation that "shaped the daily lives of man in the United States." In 1904, Norton left American Can to form the Continental Can Company. That same year, the Sanitary Can Company was formed from three New York can companies and began production of the sanitary—or open top—can which, since the lid was crimped on after filling, required no soldering. By the 1920's, the hole and cap model can was history. Meanwhile, can manufacturing became its own niche. The Norton Brothers Company of Chicago, for example, specialized in producing vegetable cans. In 1883, this company invented the semi-automatic body maker, which mechanically soldered seams on the side of the cans and increased production capacity to 2,500 cans per hour; a decade later it would reach 6,000 an hour.

As production increased, so did the number of things you could purchase in cans. The investment canners had made in their production lines required that they find new foods to can and keep their businesses running year round. Campbell's condensed soups were introduced nationally in 1899 and sold for a dime. The red and white labels were inspired by Cornell University's football jerseys and the gold medallion at center represented a gold medal the soup won at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris. Tuna fish was first canned in 1909 when one processor ran out of the sardines he usually canned. By then, 63 different kinds of meat were available in cans. Citrus fruits and tomato juice first appeared in cans around 1920.

Industry's inventions brought greater success, new capabilities, and more competition to the canning market. The railroad transferred goods across the country. A new type of labor force emerged to work the production lines. Conveyor belts and automatic machinery such as washers and fillers moved the products through at astonishing rates. Still more machines shucked corn and peas, trimmed kernels off corncobs, pitted cherries, even peeled and sliced fruit. Factories hummed and Americans bought more and more quantities and varieties of canned goods. The onset of winter previously had meant that households had to put up

provisions—dried meats and fruits, potatoes stored in root cellars, and vegetables canned at home. Now an endless variety of foods were available year round. Some were so exotic and foreign that they were being tried by American consumers for the first time.

The earliest cans were laboriously made by hand. Iron was pounded into sheets and dipped into molten tin. The resulting tinplate was then soaked in brine baths, creating a hot and odorous atmosphere. Using considerable skill and muscle, artisans cut the sheets into rectangular bodies and round ends. The body pieces were bent around a cylindrical mold and the seams and ends were soldered in place. One of the ends was made with a circular hole through which the food would be stuffed. Once filled, the holes were plugged with a soldered metal cap. This soldering process sometimes left a bit of soot mixed in with the can's contents.

This process allowed even the most skilled workers to only make about ten cans per day. Eventually mechanization and the invention of the "sanitary can" sped these processes. The "sanitary can" folds the edges of the can and ends over twice, forming a strong seal. This method eliminated the need for the hole and cap method of filling as well as the residual soot from soldering. Mechanical body makers, industrial die cutting, and machine-pressed tinplate all improved can making during the early part of the century.

Today there are more than 600 sizes and styles of cans being manufactured. The amount and combination of tin and steel used to form the tinplate varies as well, depending upon the function of the can. The tin coating is usually as thin as a human hair, but still serves to protect the can inside and out against rusting. Protective coatings applied to the inside of the cans also ensure the integrity of the contents and have allowed cans to hold many products, such as citrus fruits, which would otherwise be too corrosive. Tin-free steel and aluminum have added even more flexibility and versatility to the modern day can line.

### **PROSPERITY:**

If the French and English armies had originally benefited from the convenience and portability of canned provisions, American troops fighting in Europe and Asia depended on them even more. Soldiers went into battle with a can opener hanging around their neck alongside their dog tags. It was a vital tool for survival. The government allocated scarce metal for can production because nearly two-thirds of the Allies' food supply was in cans. For example, the U.S. War Department bought 75 percent of all available canned salmon and 40 percent of canned tomatoes during war time. And, as had been the case with the Civil War, the soldier's trust of canned foods returned home with him after the war.

There, the post-war boom and a new age in American consumerism were waiting. Suburban living, household appliances, and supermarket shopping dramatically changed the landscape for the average American family. Cans appeared in every facet of a busy and rich life: house paint,

shaving cream, hair spray, tomato soup, pet food, Coca-Cola... a well-stocked pantry and a station wagon full of grocery bags were signs of prosperity and affluence.

The pre-packaging and labeling of products, enabled by the can and other containers, had fundamentally changed the relationship between the consumer and the shopping experience. Whereas previously a clerk stood behind a counter and between the consumer and the goods—setting prices, measuring out parcels, recommending brands—the availability of packaged items allowed the shopper to see and choose goods for themselves. Shelves lined with cans depicting bright illustrations of tender peas, glistening pears, golden pastures and healthy babies allowed everyone the democratized shopping opportunity of choosing among a rainbow of enticing goodies. Their labels educated shoppers about the products inside and allowed consumers to form brand loyalty to favorites. Canned products had appealed to homemakers for decades (canned baby food, for instance, appeared in the 1920s), but never before had the housewife been in command of such a disposable income or so jealously courted by makers of household goods. What is more, the convenience and familiarity of canned products had created a near revolution in the way women did their shopping in the previous years, culminating in the prevalence of the chain grocery store.

The first A&P's (named after the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company) opened in 1849.

In an era marked by the advent of home economics, good housekeeping, and "boomer" babies, canned products became the housewife's best friends. Not only were canned goods more cost-effective, but more convenient as well. A variety of nutritious ingredients were at her fingertips when preparing meals for her family. A food writer in 1953 called the can opener "the open sesame to freedom . . . from tedium, space, work, and your own inexperience." Women's magazines featured recipes such as chicken and mushroom crepes or tuna-noodle casserole using canned condensed soups. Now anyone could easily be a good homemaker. Canned goods not only aided her in the kitchen; furniture polish, disinfectants, aerosol sprays and talcum powder helped her keep house and still have time to pamper herself. These stores were the first to recognize the efficiency of self-service. What started out as a high-end tea and coffee store rapidly multiplied into a prolific chain of no-frills markets. With a few hundred items, one clerk to ring purchases, and very low overhead, A&P paved the way to the future of grocery shopping. Piggly Wiggly opened in 1916; King Kullen added a new size dimension in 1930; soon, Krogers, Safeway, and Jewel moved into every town. In 1937, the collapsible grocery cart was invented, allowing shoppers to easily wheel their purchases through the store and freeing them from the limits of their own strength. High volume provided lower prices so that canned goods helped to reduce the percentage of its income the average family spent on groceries.

#### **A TIME FOR INNOVATION:**

As early as 1930, can manufacturers had begun to explore the possibility of adapting cans to package carbonated beverages. And beer and soft drink companies eagerly anticipated a means of delivering more volume, more efficiently to consumers. Cans would be sturdier than glass bottles and their shape more amenable to transportation and storage. But the can first had to be strengthened to accommodate higher internal can pressures created by carbonation—especially during warm summer months. Without increasing the thickness of the metal used, distortion of the end would strain the seal, potentially causing leaks and making the cans unstackable.

Tobacco, cigarettes and cigars were among the first products to be commonly sold in tins of various shapes and styles including the infamous Prince Albert in a can.

Another concern for the new beverage can was its shelf life. Even small amounts of dissolved tin or iron from the can could impair the drinking quality of both beer and soft drinks. Fortunately beer, which is only mildly acidic, is relatively non-corrosive. In addition, beer ages naturally so it has a limited shelf life of about three months in any package. In contrast, the carbonic, phosphoric and citric acids in soft drinks presented a risk for rapid corrosion of exposed tin and iron in the can. To solve the problem, organic coatings were used to line the inside of cans making them heavier and more encasing.

A scientist from the University of Wisconsin, H. L. Russell, determined in 1894 that it was living organisms in spoiled cans of peas that caused them to mysteriously burst in a local warehouse. Legend has it that the professor was called in when the explosions kept the warehouse superintendent, who slept above the warehouse, awake at night. His discovery led to an increase in the time and temperature of boiling during the canning process, as well as greater safety in canned food products.

The National Canners Association was established in 1907 to make use of such knowledge and built laboratories to study canning techniques. The association published reports on sterilization, sources of spoilage and safe cooking times and temperatures.

Cliquot Club ginger ale was the first canned soft drink in 1938. They used a cone top can produced by Continental Can Company, but the sodas were beset by leakage and flavor absorption problems from the can liner. It took several years for the glitches to be worked out, but finally in 1948, with an improved design, Continental Can Company and Pepsi-Cola launched the first major soft drink in cans. Twelve ounces sold for ten cents.

Soft drinks appeared in cans as early as 1938. This Pepsi can design dates from the 1960s.

The James Vernor Company of Detroit introduced its ginger ale in a twelve-ounce flat top can it called the "Vernor Picnic Can" in 1955. It was sold in six-can cartons that retailed for 79 cents. The company expected the pricing of the package to limit its use to outdoor activities such as

picnics, camping and boating. Dr Pepper introduced cans into a few select cities that same year. Dr Pepper Company president Leonard Green called it "the most significant packaging development in our history."

The Coca-Cola Company introduced the "Harlequin" design in 1966. Coca-Cola had tested their product in cans as early as 1940. They tried a 16-ounce and 32-ounce cone top can with a red, green and white logo that read "canned specially for use at home and on outings." Coca-Cola began selling cans to overseas armed services in 1955 and, in 1959, test marketed cans in five U.S. cities. By 1960, however, it was Royal Crown that was selling the most canned soft drinks. Inspired by the new competition, Coca-Cola began using and promoting cans on a large scale soon thereafter. The soft drink maker even introduced a new label design specifically for their canned product called the "Harlequin" which featured a pattern of diamonds and proved popular with consumers.

The use of cans for carbonated beverages was delayed, however, because of material limitations mandated by the government during the Korean War. When the restriction ended after the war, the new beverage can was introduced and marketed nationwide. However, a new competitor to the market—aluminum—would soon inspire can manufacturers to embark on a program of cost savings to reduce both the amount of steel and coatings used in can making.

The first aluminum beverage can was manufactured by Reynolds Metals Company in 1963 and used to package a diet cola called "Slenderella." Royal Crown adopted the aluminum can in 1964, and by 1967 Pepsi and Coke followed. This was an exciting innovation for the packaging industry because the aluminum can was made with only two pieces—a body and an end. This made 360-degree printing possible on the body of the can, increasing store display potential and shelf appeal. A can could now advertise its contents with dramatic and colorful graphics, drawing the consumer's eye to the package and creating a visual draw to purchases of one brand over another. This market advantage was further leveraged by the introduction of the multi-pack, which allowed for twelve cans to be packaged together in a compact paperboard box. The secondary packaging of the multi-pack, in addition to the graphics on the cans themselves, created a billboard for product advertising. Even more importantly, multi-packs increased sales. Consumers could easily and cost-effectively stock their refrigerators and pantries with their favorite beverages, and bottlers could move significantly more volume. Pepsi-Cola first introduced a twelve pack of cans in 1972, noting that once consumers chose a product and a brand they would happily buy larger units.

Canned soft drinks were first dispensed in vending machines in 1961, joining glass bottle and paper cup machines, and by the late 1960s, dominated the vending market. Some years later, in a popular series of national television ads, both space aliens and supermodel Cindy Crawford would choose cans of Pepsi from a vending machine. By 1985, the aluminum can was the most

popular beverage package in any market. Today's consumers buy soft drinks from their grocery stores in aluminum cans four times as often as in plastic bottles, and thirty-eight times as often as in glass bottles.

#### **A RENEWABLE CAN:**

THE ALUMINUM CAN WAS EASILY INTEGRATED into the package market because of its ductility (ability to be molded), its support of carbonated pressure, its lighter weight and its resistance to corrosion (aluminum does not rust). But perhaps the most critical element in the aluminum can's success was its recycling value. Aluminum can recycling excelled economically in its competition with steel because of the efficiencies aluminum cans realized by using recycled materials instead of costly and non-renewable virgin aluminum ore. Steel did not achieve similar economies in the recycling process. Aluminum can recycling became common and responded to the growing concerns of environmentally conscious consumers about the depletion of natural resources and the consequences of what was feared "a throwaway society." The opportunity to market the all-aluminum can as recyclable and environmentally friendly led to its growing acceptance as a product package.

The can's convenience, popularity and versatility attract an increasing variety of products.

Prior to 1970, both steel and aluminum cans were made from virgin materials, with the exception of small amounts of scrap recycled from the manufacturing process. Both industries, however, came to realize the importance of reducing their impact on the environment in the late 1960's and early 1970's as environmental awareness developed. And there were other incentives to initiate recycling. Problems with litter, which was noted by the consumer campaign to "Ban the Can" in the late sixties, provided an additional reason to remove cans from the waste stream. At the same time, manufacturers began to recognize the economics of recycling—namely lower costs from using less material and energy.

Three-piece steel beer can.

Aluminum companies and can makers began to create a nation-wide recycling infrastructure of buy-back centers and by America's first Earth Day in 1970, it had begun to take hold. Cash was paid for empty cans to create value and motivation for consumers to bring back their used cans. Within a decade, recycling had become a way of life. Aluminum can recycling has become a billion-dollar business and one of the world's most successful environmental enterprises. Over the years, the aluminum can has come to be known as the most recyclable package with over 60 percent of cans recycled annually. Of the 51.9 billion soft drink containers recycled in 1998, 44 billion were aluminum cans—compared to 7.6 billion plastic bottles and 300 million glass bottles.

Consumers help divert more than two billion pounds of aluminum each year from the solid waste stream, keeping it out of landfills. Additionally, making new cans from recycled aluminum saves 95 percent of the energy needed to make aluminum from virgin material. Energy savings in 1998 alone were enough to light a city the size of Pittsburgh for six years. Thanks to developments in the can making process, new cans are now made from an average of 54 percent recycled aluminum and old cans are collected, recycled and returned to the grocer's shelf as new cans in as few as 60 days.

Since recycling began, consumers have earned more than ten billion dollars by returning their aluminum beverage cans to the more than 10,000 buy-back centers that now operate nationwide. More than 9,300 cities and counties offer curbside collection, which makes aluminum beverage can recycling easy. Each year, thousands of groups across the country turn cans into cash by collecting and recycling. Many organizations, including schools, Boy and Girl Scout troops, 4-H clubs, and other non-profit and community groups are able to raise money to complete worthwhile projects that may have otherwise gone unfunded.

Advances in can manufacturing technology have also brought lighter aluminum cans. The first two-piece aluminum cans weighed three ounces, while they now each weigh only slightly more than one-half ounce. In 1972, one pound of aluminum yielded only 21.75 cans. Today, by using less material to make each can, one pound of aluminum makes approximately 33 cans—a 52 percent improvement. Even can ends have been made lighter: ends used to weigh about 8.12 pounds per thousand and have been reduced to a mere 6.07 pounds per thousand. This may not seem like much of a difference, but multiplied by the 100 billion cans that are made each year the weight savings is a phenomenal 200 million pounds of aluminum.

Steel cans are recycled too, at a rate of about 58 percent. Approximately 17 billion steel cans are recycled every year, yielding enough recovered steel to build 20 Golden Gate Bridges. And every ton of steel recycled saves the natural resources that would otherwise be used to make new steel: 2,500 pounds of iron ore, 1,400 pounds of coal and 120 pounds of limestone. Consumers can recycle their food cans, as well as all steel cans found at their home or business, including paint and aerosol cans.

Today the can is so ubiquitous, it functions as part of our everyday lives without our even noticing. There are, for example, more than 1,500 varieties of food available in cans and in our fast-paced world we depend on them for their ease and convenience more than ever. Statisticians have estimated that American families spend less than one-seventh the time preparing meals in the nineties as they did just two decades ago. From single-serve to family-size portions, cans provide the perfect package at mealtime. And Americans have, in these health-conscious days, come to rely on the fresh, preservative- and sodium-free foods they reliably find in cans. Because foods harvested for use in cans are packaged within hours of

being picked from the fields, they retain as many and often more nutrients than their produce department counterparts.

And Americans more often purchase their beer and soft drinks in cans than any other package. They prefer cans because they are light weight, transportable, unbreakable, and keep their beverages colder. And the can is still the only beverage package that stacks for easy storage in the refrigerator, cooler, or pantry.

### **A PROMISING FUTURE:**

Soft drink producers and brewers are expressing a unique image for their products with high profile aluminum beverage cans. In all shapes and sizes imaginable, with six and eight color graphic capabilities, the possibilities are endless: a tea with textured ice crystals "frozen" to its sides; a shaped soda can with its contours molded for the ultimate grip; a commemorative brew with spiraled ridges to celebrate a world championship. Sleeker, cooler, and impossible not to touch. Today, when you buy a canned product, more than likely its packaging will have been tailored especially for the ultimate enjoyment of that product. Cans of Guinness contain a mechanism that releases carbon dioxide through the beer and creates a thick, creamy head as authentic as a slow pour from the draught in an Irish pub.

And the food can is not to be outdone in the search for revolutionary packaging. New easy-open ends put convenience literally at your fingertips—soon even a can opener will be too much trouble by comparison. And their smooth edges are child and family friendly. White can linings are a bright new addition, reassuring consumers that canned foods are fresh and wholesome. And shapes abound on the canned food aisle as well. What better way to distinguish a product and help convey its preeminence in the marketplace?

Whether in the home, office, garden, garage, ballpark... anywhere in the world, one thing will never change. The can is the most reliable, recyclable and versatile package. Its long and distinguished history describes a remarkable role in the unfolding of civilization through periods of invention, imperialism, expansion, prosperity, innovation and renewal.

No doubt, new opportunities and challenges will continue to arise. And if the past is any indication of what is to come, can manufacturers and their customers will be prepared to satisfy the evolving needs of the modern day consumers and industries they serve.

## **BREWERIANA:**

### **Love of a Good Beer**

Is it the love of a good beer, the fascination with brewery, or the original and eclectic art work adorning rare beer cans that makes them hot collector's items? For "breweriana" fans, the images on beer cans reflect something of the flavor of days gone by.

The Beer Can Collectors of America has over 5,000 members nation-wide that make beer cans their passion. The group was founded in St. Louis in 1970 and holds regular "Conventions" that draw more than 1,000 collectors and over one million cans. Some enthusiasts have collected as many as 12,000 vintage beer cans.

Scarce brands are particularly valuable. In the 1970s, a collector paid \$6,000 each for vintage cans of "Rosalie Pilsner" and "Tiger" beer, brewed in the '30s by the Manhattan Brewing Company of Chicago. Generally, short-lived brands with appealing graphics are the most popular. Imagine the labels, for example, for "Playmate Beer;" it folded after a lawsuit by Hugh Hefner. "Orbit Beer" was marketed in Florida in the 1960s hoping to capitalize on the nation's burgeoning space program—but it never took off. Even James Bond has his own brand, "007 Beer," a seven-can series featuring the villains and beauties of Bond films. And beer cans that commemorate an event can also make a collection. America's Bicentennial celebration in 1976 inspired 50 commemorative can designs.

Remember "Billy Beer" of the late 70s, fashioned after President Carter's brother? Too many cans were manufactured for this trendy brew to be of value for collectors today. But new and rare finds are being made everywhere—maybe even in your own home. The space behind the drywall in your house, where carpenters may have swept old cans during construction, is often a can collector's gold mine.

The first can of beer was sold January 24, 1935 in Richmond, Virginia. It was brewed by Kreuger Beer and came in a steel can made by the American Can Company. This tall cold one—a flat or punch top can—required a can opener. By August of that year, Pabst had become the first major brewer to add canned beer to its regular product line. And shortly thereafter, in September 1935, two beer makers, Schlitzlager and Heilman Lager, introduced the cone top can made by the Continental Can Company which, because it was similar in shape to a bottle, could be run through existing glass bottling lines. Schlitz had experimented with a barrel-shaped can, but introduced their beer in a spout-topped can that year as well.

The shift from bottles to cans was expensive and slow for brewers. But they would soon recoup their costs because of the can's distribution benefits. Delivery trucks could carry twice as many lightweight, stackable cans as bottles and distribute them much further. Returnable bottles could only be sold within 30 miles of the brewery, whereas cans could be sold as far away as

400 miles. Between 1942 and 1946, beer cans were used primarily by military forces in the war effort and were even protectively camouflaged in drab olive color so as not to reflect light. Soldiers appreciated the coldness and convenience of their canned beer and brought this preference home with them after the war. A 1947 study showed that families of veterans bought beer in cans at a rate 32 percent higher than the national average.

It didn't take long, however, for the popularity of canned beer to spread. While cans made up 26 percent of the packaged beer market in 1950, that share rose to 52 percent by 1970. This increase was no doubt due in part to convenient innovations in can making. In 1958 the first aluminum beer cans were sold and in 1959 the ring pull opener was invented by toolmaker Ermal Frazee. The ring pull proved so easy to use that the last cone topped can was filled in 1960 and this can design was retired for good. Once the aluminum can had proved its metal, the three-piece steel beer can was retired as well in 1984. The first non-detachable tab opener, which most beer cans feature today, was introduced in 1975 by the Falls Brewing Company. This important alteration cost a bit more in production but went a long way in reducing litter.

In an era of American history marked by a virtual explosion of improved and easy-to-use consumer products, the beer can revolutionized the way we package beverages. Lightweight, compact, durable, and quick-chilling—these features made the beer can a welcome invention over 60 years ago. The beer can provides the freshest product as the flavors are locked in due to the inability of light to penetrate the can and the tight seal. Cans are endlessly recyclable and composed of a high amount of recycled material causing them to be extremely environmentally friendly. As more and more craft brewers adopt the can as their package of choice, the proof is in the product.