

THE DOUBLE EAGLE DRINKS OF JOHN POTOKAR

By Jack Sullivan

An immigrant to the United States in 1900 with only a fourth grade education, John R. Potokar founded the Double Eagle Bottling Company (Fig. 1), a Cleveland institution for a half century and one that left behind a multitude of bottles and other artifacts by which to be remembered.

Potokar was born about 1875 in Slovenia, the homeland of our new First Lady, Melania Trump. John's education was terminated early as he was put to work to help support his family. At the age of 25 he determined to find his fortune in America and immigrated to America, settling in Cleveland about 1900. By 1909 Potokar had founded a business that he called the Double Eagle Bottling Company, located initially at 1839 St. Clair Avenue. Within a year, needing more space for operations, he moved down the street to 4126 St. Clair.

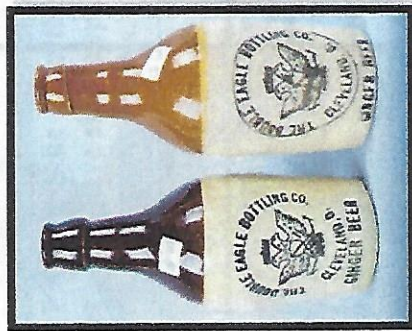


Figure 2

At the beginning Potokar's company appears to have made and marketed only ginger beer. This beverage may

have had an alcoholic character. An early partner, an immigrant from Germany named Joseph Miller, was an experienced whiskey salesman and liquor dealer. Potokar's ginger beer initially was packaged in stoneware. Shown here (Figs. 2, 3) the bottles came in several two-toned styles, some with a two-headed eagle within a circle, some open. The logo was applied with a rubber rocker on the ceramic that often left only a crude imprint.



Figure 1

Another early Potokar container for ginger beer was a Hutchinson bottle with a heavily embossed two-headed eagle (Fig. 4). This symbol obviously had a special meaning for the owner. During the period that Potokar's native Slovenia was part of Austria, it appeared on the national flag. Even today the mutant bird appears on the flags and crests of Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and the Russian Federation.



Figure 3

Potokar's stoneware bottles, as well as the packing crate (Fig. 5) with the company name, can safely be identified as pre-Prohibition, and thus already 100 years old or approaching that milestone. Some believe that when Ohio went "dry" Potokar dropped the alcoholic content of his ginger beer and while he did not change the name, the beverage now was carbonated and a soft drink. In 1920 the owner also moved his bottling company to a new location at 6519 St. Clair, expanding the facility by building a large brick building on the property next door.



Figure 4

In the meantime Potokar was having a personal life. In 1902 he had married Anna, an immigrant from Slovenia

and while he did not change the name, the beverage now was carbonated and a soft drink. In 1920 the owner also moved his bottling company to a new location at 6519 St. Clair, expanding the facility by building a large brick building on the property next door.



Figure 5

In the meantime Potokar was having a personal life. In 1902 he had married Anna, an immigrant from Slovenia

to Cleveland who had arrived a year earlier. The close dates indicate that they had been sweethearts in Slovenia and that, once settled in the U.S., John had sent for her. He was 35, she was 25. They would have at least two children, Edward born in 1904 and John in 1906.



Figure 6

After 1920 Potokar made a dramatic shift in his packaging. Gone were the stoneware



Figure 7

containers and the Hutchinsons. Glass bottles sealed with crown tops were used exclusively. A tin sign of a Double Eagle Ginger Beer (Fig. 6) illustrates one with the paper label that covered the bottle. Virtually all such labels presumably have been lost over time. The label covered a heavily embossed double eagle (Fig. 7).

Beginning about the mid-1930s, Potokar made another change in packaging. Gone were the paper labels and embossing. Like other beverage bottlers of his time, he embraced painted labels, including an elaborate motif for his ginger beer (Fig. 8). By this time he also had branched out into other flavors of soft drinks, including cherry and strawberry. Those beverages, in both clear and green bottles, also employed painted labels (Fig. 9 - 11).

A longtime Clevelander who lived two doors down on St. Clair recalled hearing the noise of machines filling the bottles at Double Eagle Bottling every morning and the

clanking sounds as cases of bottles were loaded onto trucks. On Saturdays and holidays Potokar with employees would fill an open truck and drive to picnics and festivals, selling bottles of their soda pop for a nickel.

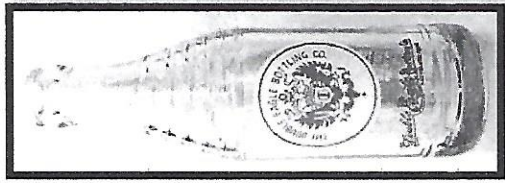


Figure 9



Figure 10

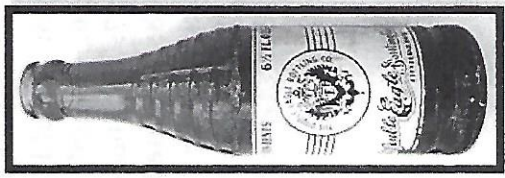


Figure 11

Even as he aged John Potokar continued to serve as president of the Double Eagle Bottling Co., bringing in to assist with day-to-day management his son, Edmund, whom he had been able to send through college. With the father's death in November 1958 at the age of 83, Edmund Potokar took over the company but suffered his own untimely death the following year. With that loss, the company disappeared from local business directories. Some have attributed the shut-down to the result of competitive pressures from larger soft drink companies. The death of the Potokars obviously was a contributing factor.

For almost 50 years a Slovenian immigrant with slight education had guided the Double Eagle Bottling Company through Prohibition, the Great Depression, and two World Wars, changing as the times changed and finding success. Moreover, John Potokar left behind a rich legacy of bottles to be discovered and collected.

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