

SALTY COMMENTS #35

(Facts and Opinion on Open Salt Collecting)

We have just been studying some of the open salts by the Meriden Britannia Co., and found them quite interesting. Like many other collectors, we've ignored most of the metal salts in the past unless they were Gorham silver or holders with colored glass liners. Now we are inclined to change our tune.

Early metal salts were made of silver, if you could afford it, or of pewter. Since silver pieces were usually crafted individually to order, a family could store part of its wealth in the form of silver tea sets and the like. These could be readily identified if stolen, so they offered a form of protection as well as a display of prosperity. The first plating of silver was discovered in England about 1752. This produced Sheffield plate, which consists of a layer of silver bonded to copper by intense heat. Much less silver was used, so dishes made from it were less expensive. Nearly 100 years later (1840), electroplating was discovered, which used even less of the expensive metal in the finished dish. This process used a battery made from copper and zinc strips immersed in sulfuric acid, and a potassium cyanide bath for the electroplating. The bath was the secret of success - previous attempts with other solutions had plated copper onto silver, but would not work in the reverse direction.

In the United States, the first patent for silver plating was given to the Rogers Bros. in 1847. Their process used much less silver than Sheffield plate, and so their dishes were much more affordable. They set up a business which grew rapidly.

In 1852, the Meriden Britannia Co. was founded in Meriden, CT to make tableware of britannia metal (91% tin, 7% antimony, 2% copper) and nickel silver (also called German silver, 18% nickel, 64% copper, 18% zinc - not a drop of silver in it). These metals were much more durable than pewter (80% tin, 20% lead!), and had the same silvery look. By 1855 they realized that their materials were an ideal base for silver plate, and they began to offer their tableware in plated form. The new line was so popular that in 1862 they bought the Rogers Bros. equipment and introduced the "1847 Rogers. Bros." line of silver plate that continued until the 1930's. By 1867 Meriden B. was the largest manufacturer of silver plated ware in the country. In 1898 they merged with a number of other firms to form the International Silver Co. which is still in business.

Although many of the old pieces sold by Meriden have the "Meriden B." mark, some of their open salts have the "Rogers Smith, New Haven" mark. This was a firm they purchased in 1863, who continued use of the mark for another 14 years, though their output was advertised and sold by Meriden. In 1877 the firm was moved out of New Haven, so any salt you have with this mark must be at least 114 years old. We have several salts like this that appear in the 1867 Meriden B. catalog - there is no way to tell whether they were made before or after the takeover.

Many of the plated salts are marked "Triple Plate" or "Quadruple Plate". This does not mean that they were plated 3 or 4 separate times, but rather that they stayed in the plating bath longer than usual. We have found no standards for what thickness is represented - the marks are like the "Light" and "Lower cholesterol" claims we see on foods today. The heavier plate implies longer wear before the base metal shows through, and justifies a higher price in the marketplace.

We have found two original sources of information on Meriden B. salts - portions of an 1867 catalog and a huge complete 1886-7 catalog that was reprinted in 1982. This latter boasts over 3200 illustrations, each a carefully done woodcut by an excellent artist. It contains over 300 kinds of items, including an extensive tableware line, calling card tables, call bells, lamps, button hooks, brushes and combs, whisk brooms with holders, sardine

(continued on p.4)

SOME MERIDEN BRITANNIA OPEN SALTS

<u>Fig. No.</u>	<u>Their No.</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Catalog Date</u>	<u>Smith No.</u>	<u>H&J No.</u>
1	08	Lion head legs, nickel silver, not plated	1867		
2	010	Plain pedestal, nickel silver, not plated	1867+		
3	020	Ind. size pedestal, also set in lined box	1867+		
4	15	Engine turned design, 3 legs	1867		
5	16*	Engine turned design, rolled rim	1867		4731
6	18*	Griffin legs, set of 2 in lined box	1867+	166-3-1	4327
7	21	Ruby liner in footed holder	1867		
8	22	Conical bowl, set of 2 in lined box	1867		
9	1859	Engine turned design, beaded rim	1867		
10	1835*	Engine turned design, beaded ring	1867		
11	040	Round, embossed design, nickel silver	1886		4156
	0400	Boxed set of #040 with pepper shakers	1886		
12	37	Typical Breakfast Caster with napkin ring	1886		
13	331	Typical Breakfast Caster without napkin ring	1886		
14	9	Round glass table salt on handled base	1886		
15	10	Heavy oblong table salt in handled holder	1886		
16	11	Ruby liner in handled footed holder	1886		
17	28	Slanted eggshell on leaf-like base, pair	1886		
18	29	Eggshell on cattails, pair in lined box	1886		
19	29	Chick emerging from side of egg shell bowl	-		
20	30	Three birds supporting conical bowl	-	372-2-2	
21	31**	Pond lily on lily pad	1886	60-3-1	4780
22	32	Square glass ind. salt on ball-footed base	1886		
23	35	Round tub with loop handles, ringed sides	1886	63-2-2	
24	46	Round shallow salts with handle, boxed set	1886		
25	148	Hammered appearance, urn shaped	1886		
26	149	Round, bulging sides, handles, satin finish	1886		
	1500	Boxed set of #149	1886		
27	151	Double, table salt, faceted bowls	1886		
28	152	Double, table salt, 10-sided bowls	1886		
29	153	Double, table salt, cut glass prism bowls	1886		
30	308	Shaker with agitator	1886		

* - We have this with Rogers Smith New Haven mark

** - We have a double in this design marked Rogers Smith New Haven

+ - Also in the 1886 catalog

The above list uses the term "Table Salt" because that is what the catalogs call them. Collectors nowadays call them "Masters".

References:

"The Meriden Britannia Silver Plate Treasury" - reproduction of the 1886-7 catalog by Dover Publications

"Encyclopedia of American Silver Manufacturers", by Dorothy T. Rainwater

"Victorian Silverplated Hollowware", selections from 3 old catalogs, compiled by Pyne Press 1972

"5000 Open Salts" by William Heacock and Patricia Johnson

A series of 10 books, "Open Salts Illustrated", by Alan and Helen Smith



SOME OPEN SALTS BY MERIDIAN BRITANNIA CO.



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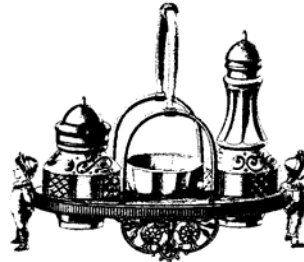
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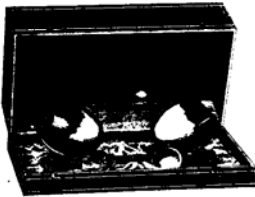
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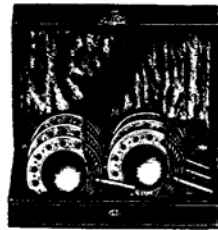
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boxes, shaving tables, statuary, and even firemen's trumpets. All were available in silver plate, and some in gold plate. This was the height of the flamboyant Victorian era, and was the peak for the Company because tastes began to change soon afterwards. Their merger into the International Silver Co. in 1898 reflected a need to become more competitive in a dwindling market. The new firm was the largest silver operation in the country, but had formidable competition from Oneida, Gorham, Reed and Barton and many other smaller companies.

Looking at the huge 1886 catalog gives us an idea about how salt was served at that time. It shows both open salts and shaker sets, so the transition to freer-flowing salt must have started by then. Some of the salt shakers have agitators in them, which indicates that caking could still be a problem. The Dinner Caster sets sometimes have two shakers and sometimes not - again an indication of transition. We did not see any of them with open dishes, so evidently the salt was served in a separate dish if shakers were not used. The 80 Breakfast Casters had open salt dishes about 1/3 of the time, and built-in napkin rings about 1/4 of the time (often both). Some had a salt spoon hanging from the frame. There are also mustard stands, an individual lump sugar, and a sugar and cream set (with ladles) that could be mistaken for salt dishes.

The attached list shows about 30 of the Meriden B. open salts we have identified from the two old catalogs, plus two more from our collection. Only four of the shapes on this list appear in Heacock & Johnson. We cannot show all the caster sets in the space available, but we are including all the separate individual and table (master) salts that we found. H&J shows 12 shapes marked Meriden B. that are not on our list, and we are certain there are many more.

Notes for the list follow:

1. Those whose numbers start with a 0 are not plated, but are nickel silver (German silver). We did not see any identified as unplated britannia metal. The slanting egg in our collection (their #28) looks like britannia - the plating is gone and there are perforations from the salt in the bottom. Nickel silver does not corrode as badly as this one has.
2. A number of the salts are offered as boxed sets as well as separately. The sets usually have spoons, and one has pepper shakers as well.
3. The early salts are identified as "engine turned". This means that there is a geometric design of fine lines impressed in the side using a lathe or some similar machine to hold the piece.
4. We have included a picture of a shaker with agitator to show the Meriden B. method of loosening salt. If you are an open salt purist, we will send you a new copy of this list with the offending shaker removed on request.
5. The two "engine turned" salts in our collection have the Rogers Smith New Haven mark, although the shapes are shown in the Meriden catalog. One is plated on a copper base - we suspect this may have been made before the 1863 merger with Meriden. We also have a cute pond lily double salt with stick shaped handles, also marked Rogers Smith but not shown in the catalogs. We're not sure whether this was made before or after the merger.
6. The salt with the griffin legs (#18) was also made by at least one other company - Rogers & Bro. We have one with their mark.
7. The list includes two salts from our collection marked Meriden B. but not shown in the 1886 catalog. We're not sure whether they were made before or after 1886, but their designs are consistent with those of the period.