

## Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

### Part XLI: A Reversal of Fortune for the Chatsford Teapot



Ron Gacesa (at left) has been employed by *Hall China* for thirty-seven years.

For the past twenty years, Ron has worked in the Mold and Block Shop.

His current position is *Block and Caser*.

Ron was working on a block for the *Chatsford Teapot* during our recent visit.

Working with the *Homer Laughlin China Company* and their sister company, *Hall China*, to produce a new version of the *Chatsford*<sup>TM</sup> *Teapot* has been one of the most interesting projects we have undertaken in our 27 year history. Both companies have a long history in the Ohio River Valley. Upon joining forces under common ownership in 2010, *Hall China's* CEO, Joe Wells III, stated, "The decision for common ownership brings together the most respected names in American china production. *Hall's* durable 'oven to table' products will fit perfectly with *Homer Laughlin's* mission to provide a quality product at a fair price and to continue to manufacture in the United States."

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## ***Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part XLI***

It was at the London shop of *H.R. Higgins (Coffee-man) Ltd.* that the owner of fledgling *Upton Tea Imports* first saw the *Chatsford*<sup>®</sup> infuser teapot. The year was 1989, and specialty tea had just been added to the *Higgins* product line the previous year. Audrey and Tony Higgins, daughter and son of founder Harold R. Higgins (who had died in 1968) were tending the sales floor. What began as a discussion of the world of specialty teas soon turned to a discussion of the merits of the *Chatsford Teapot*.

Thanks to Tony Higgins and his enthusiasm for the *Chatsford Teapot*, *Upton Tea Imports* was the first company to market this unique teapot in the United States, and in the course of 26 years, we have sold tens of thousands of them.

Early production of the *Chatsford Teapot* was limited to two sizes. The small size, intended for the catering trade, yielded 12 ounces of tea. The larger size, which steeped 36 ounces, was for household use. Some of our customers ordered both, but feedback suggested that there should be an intermediate size. One customer claimed that, whenever he wanted to make tea, he felt like *Goldilocks*. He had one teapot that was too small, and another that was too large.

It was not long before the “just right” 24-ounce size was created, and eventually a jumbo 60-ounce size was produced. But just as the size range was being expanded to satisfy all preferences, problems with ceramic quality began to surface, primarily in the earthenware versions of the *Chatsford Teapot*.

One stated objective of *The London Teapot Company*, creator of the *Chatsford Infuser System*, was to offer a superior infuser teapot at the same price as an ordinary earthenware teapot. Ideally, this seems like a desirable objective, but in practice, this may be unattainable. The *Chatsford Teapots* that have had the most positive consumer acceptance have

always been the premium versions, with porcelain, bone china, and fully vitrified ceramics. Those versions are now completely sold out, and no replacement was being considered.

The infuser baskets for the *Chatsford Teapot* have always been produced in the U.K. There has literally been no variance in the size, shape, or structure of these baskets throughout their production history. The ceramic lids and bases, however, have been produced in at least seven countries with varying degrees of success. Today, the only ceramic base and lid for the *Chatsford Teapot* in active production is being manufactured in Thailand.

It was roughly two years ago that we received our last container of earthenware *Chatsford Teapots* from Thailand. Quality issues surfaced early and forced us to reject the entire shipment. Crazing of the glaze was chronic, and once the glaze crazed, the teapot often began to leak! The clay was so porous that glaze defects eventually led to a leaky teapot. We had no choice but to discontinue the line. Some customers actually reported heat-stress fractures while simply pouring boiling water into their teapot. Much to our dismay, the Thai manufacturer refused to admit that there was a problem.

In desperation, we sent a few teapots to the Ceramic Engineering department of Alfred University in New York in hopes that they would identify the cause of the teapot failures. Autoclave tests determined that there were a number of potential issues, including quality of the clay, incompatibility of glaze and clay body, and improper firing. All teapots sent to Alfred University failed.

Although the Thai manufacturer was unwilling to take responsibility for the defective teapots, *The London Teapot Company* stood behind the product and provided a refund for the teapots as well as our shipping costs. But there we were with only a small inventory of teapots from an earlier production run.

It was time for a change. Rather than accept a replacement of the same product, we requested that *The London Teapot Company* grant us a license to have the ceramics for a new line of *Chatsford Teapots* produced in the United States. The first challenge was to find that manufacturer.

Quality and durability would be our first objective. A target price was not considered. It would cost whatever the manufacturer required for the quality we wanted.

Finding the right company for our new teapot proved simpler than first expected. Karen, our Customer Service manager, suggested we contact the manufacturer of *FIESTA*® dinnerware. We soon learned that *FIESTA*® was manufactured by the *Homer Laughlin China Company*, of Newell, West Virginia, which is affiliated with (and under the same ownership as) the *Hall China Company* of East Liverpool, Ohio. Our new *Chatsford Teapot* became a collaborative effort between these two venerable American ceramics institutions.

*Homer Laughlin* and *Hall* are prime examples of U.S. corporations that have survived in a labor-intensive industry within a global economy, where imbalance of wages, environmental regulations, and other factors create an uneven playing field. Yes, they have survived, but not without challenges. At times, their very existence seemed bleak. Key to their success was a persistent focus on quality and innovation that have made both companies paragons in the U.S. ceramics industry.

*Homer Laughlin* was founded as *The Ohio Valley Pottery* by Homer and Shakespeare Laughlin in 1873. Their original plant in East Liverpool, Ohio opened for production on September 1, 1874. By the end of that year, they had approximately 100 employees. Three years later, Homer bought his brother's share in the business and renamed the company *Homer Laughlin*.

Two decades later, Homer decided to sell the company and move to California. The company was purchased by William Edwin

Wells, with financial backing from Louis I. Aaron of Pittsburgh. Wells had started as bookkeeper in 1889 and rapidly rose to the position of general manager.

In 1896, the company name was officially changed to *The Homer Laughlin China Company*. Under new ownership, the company experienced phenomenal growth. Two new plants were built to keep up with demand. Needing more space for expansion than was available in East Liverpool, the company acquired land across the Ohio River. As further expansion continued, the town of Newell, West Virginia was developed to provide services for employees.

*Homer Laughlin's* fourth plant was built in 1906. At the time it was the largest plant in the world, and their production capacity was raised to 300,000 china pieces per day!

*Woolworths* was by far the largest customer for *Homer Laughlin* in the early decades of the 20th century. Reflecting on the level of business done between *Homer Laughlin* and *Woolworths* in 1916, W. E. Wells noted, "I think that I may safely say that this is the first time in history that the purchases of any one concern from any pottery firm have reached the million (dollar) mark in one year." It is worth noting that the average price of a single piece of pottery, sold to *Woolworths* at that time, was six cents. That translates to nearly 17 million pieces, produced for a single customer.

The *Hall China Company* was founded by Robert Hall in East Liverpool, Ohio in August 1903. Upon his death, just one year later, the company was taken over by one of his eight sons, Robert Taggart Hall. Teapots were among *Hall's* most successful products. Along with *Homer Laughlin*, *Hall China* did a brisk business in toilet sets, which included water ewer, wash basin, soap dish, shaving mug, and the indispensable chamber pot.

Toilet ware was in heavy demand during the nineteenth century. At that time, nearly every household had at least one set for the master bedroom. The better hotels had a set

in every room. Indoor plumbing, even in luxury hotels, did not exist until 1829.

Boston's *Tremont House*, designed by Isaiah Rogers at the age of 27, was the first guest house in America that featured indoor plumbing. The second, also designed by Isaiah Rogers, was *Astor House* in New York.

*Tremont House* is considered to be America's first luxury hotel, and it set the standard for excellence in the hospitality industry. Once indoor plumbing was introduced to the hospitality industry, it became a priority for wealthy home owners, but average Americans would have to wait a century to experience that luxury. In 1920 fewer than 1% of American households had indoor plumbing.

By the middle of the twentieth century demand for toilet ware came to a halt. Simultaneously, teapot sales declined as American tastes shifted from tea to coffee. *Hall* and *Homer Laughlin* were facing hard times.

The most difficult years for *Hall* and *Homer Laughlin* began in the 1950s and continued well into the 1960s. During that time, inexpensive household ceramics from post-war Japan were flooding the U.S. market. In *A Centennial History of The Hall China Company*, Catherine S. Vodrey states:

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Japanese potteries were doing everything possible to stay solvent after the privations of the second World War. Using a population of citizens who were pleased to get any sort of paying work, the Japanese ceramics industry was able to keep operating and wage costs low. By the mid-1950s, Japanese porcelain was being sold in the United States for less than American earthenware. American consumers began buying Japanese porcelain dinnerware in greater and greater quantities.

*Hall China* responded with advancements in automation and technical innovation, which was all they could do to keep labor costs as low as possible. But automation and technical innovation were not enough. Fortunately, management at *Hall China* was quick to respond to a shift in American taste. As stated by Vodrey:

What [*Hall China*] had on its side as far as dinnerware design was concerned was Hungarian

industrial designer Eva Zeisel. Born in Budapest in 1906, Zeisel brought to her work at *Hall China* a disciplined mind and a freewheeling design sense. Before coming to America, Zeisel had lived in Hungary, Austria, and Russia. In the 1930s, at Russia's Duolevo china factory — at that time the world's largest — Zeisel had established a design laboratory. Her work at Duolevo soon led to her being named to the lofty position of Artistic Leader, or Art Director, of the U.S.S.R.'s entire china and glass industry. She subsequently returned to Europe, but soon fled as the Nazis began their dramatic ascent to power.

The most successful of the *Hall* lines designed by Zeisel was named *Tomorrow's Classic*. In its first year, over 71,000 starter sets of sixteen pieces were sold at \$11.95 per set. But the fact that innovative designs are easily copied continued to plague the U.S. ceramics industry.

Both *Hall* and *Homer Laughlin China* redirected their focus from household dinnerware to durable products for the foodservice industry. In the formative years of *Hall China*, R. T. Hall, along with a group of talented ceramics engineers, perfected the single-firing method of producing durable, brightly colored ceramics. With their process, special clay-based glazes were applied to the unfired bisque and heated to a temperature of 2700 degrees. In this single firing, the glaze and bisque bond as a single, non-porous structure that will not craze.

*Homer Laughlin* and *Hall* were united under common ownership in 2010. They retained their individual identities, but now share resources as a single entity. As for the quality and durability of their products, a simple test of an early sample of our new *Chatsford Teapot* says it all. We placed a sample teapot in a 40-degree refrigerator. After an hour we set the chilled teapot in a sink and poured boiling water into the teapot to test its resistance to heat stress fractures. Amazingly, the teapot did not crack or craze. Warning: *DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME*.

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.