

How Old is Your Ball?

By Trail End State Historic Site Superintendent Cynde Georgen; from *Trail End Notes*, March 2012

Several of the canning jars on display at Trail End are blue Ball canning jars produced between 1923 and 1933. Many of us have these same types of jars in our homes, perhaps not giving them much thought except that your family has had them “forever.” Well, if you’re wondering how long “forever” is, there is a quick and easy way to determine the age of your jars: just look at the way Ball is written on them.



Ball Jars, undated (Private Collection)

The Ball Brothers Glass Manufacturing Company first started production in 1885, in Buffalo, New York. At that time, the letters *BGGMCo* were embossed on the glass. After a fire destroyed this factory, Ball relocated to Muncie, Indiana.

In 1892, the company was putting *Ball*, *The Ball*, or *The Ball Jar* on their jars in block letters. By 1893, the name *Ball* was being written in script, sometimes with an underscore and sometimes without. Until 1923, the script-style *a* in *Ball* had a little tail in front of it. In 1923, the tail was dropped and hasn’t been back since. Also, from 1923 to 1933, the underscore was dropped. (That’s how we know our jars at the museum are from this period: the *a* does not have a tail, and there is no underscore.)

Ball’s famous blue color was a product of minerals found in the sand they used (from the shores of Lake Michigan) and the amount of oxygen used in the furnaces to melt the sand into glass. These original blue jars were only produced between the late 1890s and 1937.

Another quick way to determine a rough age for your jar is to look at the shape of it. Before World War II, all Ball jars were round. In 1942, the War Board required all glass manufacturers to adopt a “rounded square” shape as a way to save glass.

About 1956, Ball was the first company to add English measurements (ounces and cups) on the side of the jars. Metric measurements appeared in 1974.

Today you can buy Ball jars in many shapes and sizes, from a few ounces to a half-gallon. The one constant over the past 120 years is the name Ball clearly visible on the side.

By the way ... ever wonder where the term *Mason jar* came from? John Landis Mason was a Philadelphia tinsmith who, in 1858, patented the first metal screw-on lid for fruit jars. The Mason jar had a threaded neck, which allowed the zinc cap to screw down to the shoulder of the jar, thus forming a safe seal. *Mason* soon became the generic name for threaded jars.



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