

American Can Company

Canning Codes

By Jules Kish #7855

I often wondered why beer can collectors know everything there is to know about every conceivable brewery that ever was, and yet knowledge of the actual thing that they collect—the empty can—is lacking or at the very least, scarce. Many guys would say, “Who cares?” This article is for those who answer “I do!”

The American Can Company (ACCO) was formed in 1901 as a merger of 104 smaller competing firms into one large company that could cut costs through efficiencies of scale and reduced competition. Eventually many of these original companies were closed or were bought out and many new ones opened, but ACCO was still a major packaging manufacturer well into the 1980s.

Each factory from those original companies was given a company designation such as A,C,Co.##-A, with small marks on the tins produced. For “Keglined” beer cans from ACCO from 1935 to 1953, the ##-A is sometimes followed by a symbol that specifies the year the can was manufactured. Why all the secrecy I don’t know. Why not just print the city and year? What follows is an investigation of the mystery of the ACCO can codes.

The original work in determining the codes—or can factory numbers—and date symbols for beer cans was performed many years ago. As far as is known up to the present day, the following list is the accepted city and can code for ACCO beer cans.

10 Greenwich CT	17 Philadelphia PA	23 Baltimore MD	34 Pittsburgh PA	38 Buffalo NY
44 New York NY	47 Atlanta GA	59 Cleveland OH	68 Chicago IL	70 St Louis MO
83 Omaha NE	90 Salem OR	91 Los Angeles CA	94 San Francisco CA	98 Sacramento CA

Currently Accepted ACCO Canning Plant Numbers (Can Code) and Cities

It was sometime during the spring of 2015 when my wife Sandy and I visited Greenwich, CT with the brilliant idea that a find of a lifetime might be made possible by looking up former ACCO employees and then finding any living relatives to see if their ancestors ever left any cans laying around. Well what on earth has this to do with ACCO can codes? The reason we were in Greenwich was because that was where ACCO plant 10-A was located. Imagine; what a ridiculous thought. The lady at the library looked at us like we were nuts and the guy at the Greenwich Historical Society almost had a heart attack. A manufacturing plant? In Greenwich? No way, no how! In case you didn’t know,

Greenwich is home to a lot of biggies who work in New York City. They would never allow any manufacturing in Greenwich.

They did, however, allow the ACCO headquarters building to be built in 1970, but it was on 150 acres and was situated so you couldn't see the building from any surrounding roads. Later, an examination of the *Directory of Connecticut State Manufacturer* provided further proof that there were no ACCO manufacturing plants anywhere in CT during the years 1936 and 1939. What the heck? Where was American Can Co. plant 10A? It wasn't in Connecticut, that's for sure.

Thus I began my quest to determine "WHAT'S GOING ON"? Some quick web searching showed that when it comes to determining where the can was made and by whom, Guys who collect tobacco tins have more knowledge than beer can guys. They have excruciating detail on ACCO canning codes, retaining the original company name, such as "Hasker & Mercuse Mfg. Co., A.C.Co 50-A, Richmond, VA, 1901 to 1951. I have a collection of key-wind coffee cans and the vast majority of them were made by ACCO and have the same can codes as the tobacco tins. When comparing the list of ACCO codes from the tobacco tin guys to the codes from the beer can guys, they were mostly different. How could the same company have different manufacturing designations for its factories? Again I had to ask "WHAT'S GOING ON"? None of this was making any sense.

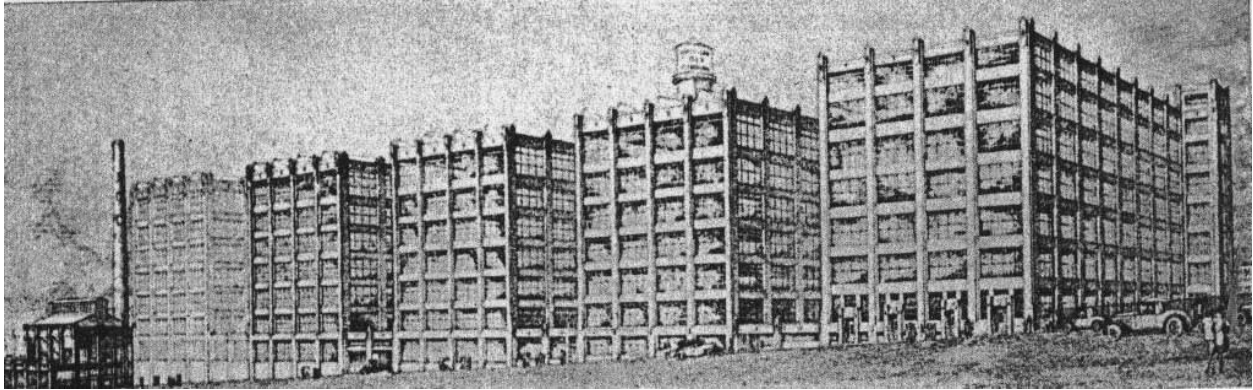
The initial breakthrough occurred when viewing Jim Plant's web site showing a "find" of cans he made in 2003. The web site is "<http://www.greenmon.com/canco/canco.htm>". He obtained these cans from the daughter of a deceased can company employee. I contacted Jim and he informed me that all of the 104 cans were made by the American Can Company and all had code 17-A and therefore they came from Philadelphia.

Several beer can collectors from the Philadelphia/New Jersey area stated that they believed Philadelphia never made any beer cans. The breweries for the beer in Jim Plant's cans came from all over the country and many cans were prototypes. However, the tobacco tin guys' factory number 17-A was not Philadelphia and they were more believable since they were at it for a much longer period of time and the factories were still open or just recently closed when they were collecting tobacco tins, coffee tins, etc.

So, knowing his name, Jim Plant and I proceeded to track down the deceased ACCO employee. Jim traced his birth to 1916 and his death to 1998. Using this data, a search of the 1940 U.S. census revealed that the employee lived on Lenox Avenue in East Orange NJ at the time. The census also has a listing for "occupation" but often this piece of information is missing, as I found from my genealogy research into my family that I had previously conducted. I lucked out in this case with his occupation listed as "inspector, can co.!" Thus, it was the right guy. BUT . . . how could he work in Philadelphia which is 76 miles from Lenox Ave in East Orange? Obviously he didn't work there. The tobacco tin guys say that 17-A was located in Jersey City, NJ. WOW! Lenox Ave, East Orange is only seven miles away. How about that! ACCO code 17-A was in Jersey City!

The Jersey City plant was Immense, being over 1,000,000 square feet and employing more than 3,000 people at its peak. The original plant has recently been redeveloped

into condos. In the first phase of redevelopment, two of the five buildings have been restored into 202 condos with 160 parking spaces. The plan is to restore the entire facility.



Architectural Rendering of the New American Can Company Plant, Jersey City, NJ
Published in the Jersey City Chamber of Commerce, July, 1929 Issue
Courtesy of the Jersey City Free Public Library

A second discovery was the ACCO manufacturing code for Baltimore. The current thinking is that Baltimore was plant 23-A. However, the tobacco tin guys said it was 44-A, again showing a difference. An internet search of the Library of Congress turned up an interesting photo, shown below, taken inside of the Baltimore ACCO factory in the lithography room. The photo is shown upside down next to a Black Label 6 pack so that the comparison can be made between the can and 6 pack holder in the gentleman's hands.



Photo Taken Inside Lithography Room of American Can Co, Baltimore, MD.

From the photo it is obvious that the Baltimore ACCO plant made Black Label beer cans. Coincidentally, there was a Carling brewery in Baltimore. It would make sense that the Carling brewery would use ACCO cans from Baltimore. A search was conducted of the BCCA composite listing of beer cans, which includes canning codes if present. Out of five cans of Carling Black Label brewed at Baltimore all five of them had the 44-A code on them. Carling, as well as many other Baltimore breweries used Continental Can Co. cans more than ACCO cans. Of the other Baltimore breweries, including American, Globe, Gunther, Hamms, and National, 56 different cans were produced by ACCO. Of these 41 have code 44-A, nine have code 17-A, four have code 23-A, and two have code 10-A.

There were many reasons for brewers to switch can companies during production, the foremost being the date the can was made. For example, research shows that plant 17-A was the first to open, followed by 10-A, and then 44-A in Baltimore. This would explain how some Baltimore brewing company cans were made by plant 17-A and 10-A as well as 44-A since 44-A wasn't open at the time these cans were made. Delivery schedule is the possible second reason for switching canning plants. Since it was all within the same ACCO plant system, it can readily be seen that American Can could switch can manufacturing to another ACCO plant when the Baltimore or other plants were busy. Based mainly on the tobacco tin guys numbering ACCO Baltimore as plant 44-A, and based on the preponderance of evidence above, ACCO code 44-A was Baltimore.

The verification of Chicago as code 68-A was really quite simple. Almost all beer can people know the story of the way that the Tiger and Rosalie cans were found. A bar owner, who's establishment was across the street from the American Can Co. plant in Chicago, offered a free beer to anyone who would give him a can he didn't have in his beer can bar display. Both of these cans have the ACCO code 68-A on them so the ACCO code 68-A is verified as Chicago.

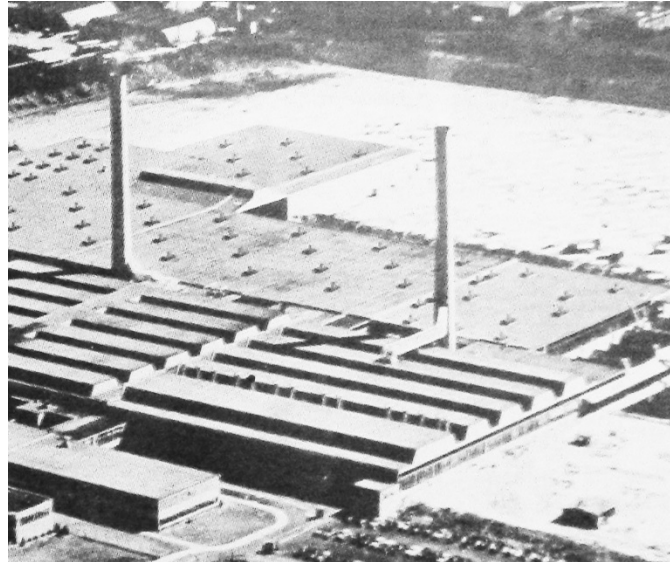
My next thought was to discover where ACCO 23-A was located since it was now known that they were not in Baltimore. To track down where plant 23-A was, Sandy and I visited New Jersey libraries in Newark, Hillside, and New Brunswick (Rutgers). There were seven ACCO factories listed in New Jersey and the codes were known for only Jersey City, 17-A, and New Brunswick which had two plants, 25-A and 27-A. Several prominent New Jersey beer can collectors believed that 23-A was in Hillside NJ so Hillside became a prime suspect. New Jersey library searches showed all of the other five ACCO factories and listed their products as "tin cans". There was only one which listed its product in another source as "beer cans" and that was in Hillside. The Hillside Public Library visit turned up an interesting book entitled *Along the Upper Road, a History of Hillside*. In this book was a very brief but informative description of the American Can Company facility. Some key quotations are as follows:

"The close of World War II saw the movement of more industries into the township. Included were American Can Company, Western Electric . . .etc."

"The American Can Company on North Union Avenue vies with the Bristol Meyers Products Division as the township's largest employer, with a work force ranging from

900 to 1,000 persons. Opened in 1949, the company specializes in the manufacture of metal containers, such as beer and soft drink cans."

From a news article appearing in the May, 1949 issue of *The Keglined Merchandiser* with the headline "New American Can Plant Opens In Hillside, N.J.," the opening date was confirmed. The *Keglined* paper also stated "As exemplified at Hillside, New Jersey, Canco plants and facilities are being increased this year to such an extent that by 1950 its capacity to manufacture beer cans will be twice as much as in 1948."



Aerial View of the American Can Company, Hillside, New Jersey.
From *Along the Upper Road, a History of Hillside*.

As seen from the discussion and from the photo, the plant was very large and capable of a large output of cans. Another date clue came from the Hillside library in the form of a pamphlet dated *Town of Hillside, 1913 to 1963*. The pamphlet states that in 1961, Hillside listed 132 widely diversified industries including "tin cans" . . .etc.

Thus from these references, it was discovered that the Hillside plant opened in 1949 and was still in operation in 1961, that they manufactured beer cans, and that they had a large work force. From another reference, in 1982, it was learned that Hillside was closed by then.

So with this information, one would think it would be easy to prove that Hillside was not plant 23-A by finding and dating 23-A cans. The date codes from the earlier referenced work appear to be correct. There must be some ACCO 23-A can dated prior to WWII. This could easily be ascertained by examination of 23-A can date codes and from the "Keglined" statements that listed "2 patents, other pending" as being a pre-war can. The "Keglined" statement that listed 3 patents was postwar from 1947 to the late '50s and "Keglined" surrounded by an oval, was indicative of a later period from the '50s to the early '60s. I only had 15 or so cans with 23-A on them available for examination. Of

course Hillside could have been 10-A but again, it was believed by the tobacco tin guys that 10-A was in Brooklyn, NY.

It was truly surprising that of fifteen or so cans with 23-A on them, only two had date codes. The other thirteen either listed three patents, with no date code, or had the Keglined in an oval so they could have been from Hillside. The two cans with date codes were Old Bohemian Light Beer and Old Bohemian Bock and they both had the same date code with three vertical dashes with a horizontal dash over them. This is of course the code for 1952. So these fifteen cans marked 23-A proved nothing since the sample was too small.

I then called on Joe Pac (leaving out the zkowski). Joe was instrumental in assisting me with whatever wild idea I had to run down, and was a tremendous help to me with research data. I believe at times he became more enthused than I upon discovery of some minute point.

Out of Joe's collection of 55 cans with 23-A, quite a few had date codes, the earliest being 1949. Others were dated up to 1953 where the date codes ended and many were of later vintage. I then checked Dan Morean's web site and located 20 more cans with 23-A can codes. Again the earliest date was 1949 with all being after that date. Therefore, out of 90 cans examined with can code 23-A, none were dated earlier than 1949. This was proof enough for me that ACCO plant 23-A was Hillside, NJ.

Again with a flash of enthusiasm, Joe Pac found another reference to the American Can Co. at the Penn State University Special Collections Library. In looking through their special collections from the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), 64 references to ACCO files were found. This was truly a gold mine for ACCO data. The Library of Congress only had five references. The United Steel Workers of America had their unions in canning plants because steel was the major commodity resource used. Penn State was the repository since the USWA were located in nearby Pittsburgh.

The special collections are intended for use by academia for research mainly by undergraduates, graduates, and faculty. A person like myself who fits none of the above categories is viewed suspiciously. After a rigorous process with the need for due diligence on the part of the PSU Special Collections Library, Sandy and I were given permission to view the ACCO data we requested. The process is somewhat like getting permission to see the Pope.

From the BCCA beer can composite list, there are recorded 23 ACCO plants that manufactured beer cans. This was determined by searching through the entire BCCA composite list of cans and recording the different ACCO canning plant numbers.

Sandy and I arrived at Penn State eager to go since this was to be the accumulation of our investigative efforts. Upon our arrival a small rolling cart was wheeled in with two boxes of ACCO files. Although only 64 "files" were listed; each file had from two or three to up to 20 to 50 articles referencing ACCO. Surprisingly, the first file we opened contained a list of the plant numbers for all ACCO plants circa 1950. This list had every ACCO plant number that produced beer cans except 75-A and 126-A. Little did we know when we started with our plant number investigations that we could have visited

the Penn State Special Collections Library and saved hundreds of hours of research. It was interesting to note, however, that the United Steel Workers Union ACCO archives confirmed the plant numbers we had previously established. After searching through the majority of the files, I finally came upon a map of the U.S. dated 1940 with all ACCO plant numbers. From this map code 75-A was determined to be located in Maywood, IL. This one map from 1940 was the only reference to plant 75-A in all the data, the reason being that the Maywood plant was closed after WWII and the vast majority of the ACCO files are dated post-WWII. There were many references to the other 21 plant numbers in the hundreds and hundreds of articles we examined. We never did find any data on plant 126-A. I believe the reason is that this plant was opened after 1975, which is where the American Steel Workers Union files ended. There could have been other ACCO plants opened after 1975 also but by then the plant numbering system was dropped and cans were either unmarked or simply had an “A” symbol.

The final results are shown below.

1 Fairport ⁽¹⁾ NY	10 Brooklyn NY	17 Jersey City NJ	23 Hillside NJ	36 New Orleans LA	41 Tampa FL
42 Houston TX	44 Baltimore MD	51 Forest Park ⁽²⁾ GA	56 Milwaukee WI	57 Blue Ash ⁽³⁾ OH	60 Terre Haute ⁽⁴⁾ IN
61 Austin ⁽⁵⁾ IN	68 Chicago IL	75 Maywood ⁽⁶⁾ IL	82 St. Paul MN	83 St. Louis MO	87 Denver CO
90 Seattle WA	94 San Francisco CA	98 Los Angeles CA	100 Ogden UT	126 ? ?	

Notes:

1. Suburb of Rochester, NY
2. Suburb of Atlanta, GA
3. Near Cincinnati, OH
4. Near Indianapolis, IN
5. Near Louisville, KY
6. Suburb of Chicago, IL

The 22 can codes listed above are found on cans from the BCCA composite can list published in 1979. There may be some codes missing because the list may have been incomplete at the time of publication.

ACCO Can Codes Updated 2016

I leave it to some future researcher to establish the plant number canning code for plant number 126-A.

A few thoughts crossed my mind while conducting research for this article. With some quickie back-of-the-envelope calculations, using data from the Jan 24 BCCA SPECIAL EDITION and the article “Birth of the Beer Can,” I estimated that a single can manufacturing line could possibly produce 210,000 cans per day working three shifts with 9% downtime. Probably 180,000 was more likely a good average. Another interesting thought was that a new canning line would incur in excess of \$5 million in capital expenditures. It is no wonder then that the Jersey City plant was operating at full capacity with a single can manufacturing line in 1935 and can orders were going elsewhere. ACCO was not asleep at the wheel. They were already working furiously day and night on new canning lines at their machine shops in Newark and elsewhere.

The thought was to move these new facilities to locations other than Jersey City to be closer to the breweries. The Brooklyn plant, 10-A, was the second to come on-line. This was quickly followed by Baltimore and other plants all over the country. Assuming a cost of approximately one cent per can to the brewers and a profit to ACCO of 0.4 cents per can, it would take about two years for a new canning facility to pay for its initial cost. Not a bad business proposition.

The cans shown below are actual photos from Jim Plant's ACCO find of 2003. As seen, the cans are from breweries as far away as California and are also the first of the beers and ales produced by those breweries. Why didn't these brewers seek to procure cans closer to the brewery site instead of from Jersey City? Because in 1935, when these cans were distributed, ACCO in Jersey City was the only place that American Can Co. could fabricate beer cans on a production scale. Other facilities were not up to speed yet. National could produce flat tops and Continental could produce cone tops cans but ACCO with its Keglined cans was the trusted name.



Sample of ACCO 17-A Cans From 2003 Find, Courtesy, Jim Plant

One last thought, Jersey City, New Jersey, is the true location of the birth of the beer can and not Philadelphia as some may have assumed. Special thanks to the then young man, working in Jersey City, who decided he would like one of each of the new cans as they came out. Special thanks also to the Penn State Library Special Collections, United Steelworkers of America, Labor Archives. Many thanks also to those who helped me in preparation of this article including Sandy Kish, Jim Plant, Joe Pac, Larry Handy, Reed Phillips, John Ahrens, Bruce Gregg, and Dan Morean.



The First Beer Can
Produced at American Can Co. in Jersey City, New Jersey
Digitally Created Photo Courtesy of BCCA