

# St. Louis Silver Company Steins

Edited by Walt Vogdes

This three part article discusses the wares produced by St. Louis Silver Co. between 1904 and 1912. The first part introduces the products, the second will deal with the history of this company and the third part will provide a pictorial description of the restoration of these unique American-made items.

In his patent application of 1904 titled "Metallic Vessel," Clarence M. Perkins of St. Louis wrote:

"My invention relates to metallic vessels, and especially to vessels in the construction of which precious metals are used. It has for its principal objects to provide a metallic vessel reinforced by a protecting part of wood, to provide an ornamental vessel provided with a wooden support for a skeleton framework, to lighten and cheapen artistic vessels in the construction of which precious metals are used, and other objects hereinafter appearing. My vessel consists of a metallic cup protected by a wooden shell and an ornamental metallic skeleton having parts supported and protected by said shell."

Perkins explains that the use of a wooden shell, "preferably of Flemish oak," provides strength to the vessel which could not be provided by the precious metal without significant increases in cost and weight. He also notes that the wood will provide an excellent background for the decorative aspects incorporated in the metal

skeleton. One attribute that he seems to have overlooked is the virtue of wood as an insulator, which makes his invention ideal for beer drinkers who want to keep their brew chilled!

Figure 1 shows a collection of eight St. Louis Silver Co. items. They are all quadruple silver-plated and use Flemish (golden) oak. Seven of the items illustrated are steins, while the one on the right is a surprise, to be revealed in the next part of this article. While most of us recognize these steins from the stein auction catalogues, very little has been previously published about them.

## St. Louis Silver Co.

The following is based on an article authored by Master Steinologist Terry Hill which appeared in *Stein Zeitung* in 1981: The wooden and silver plated steins featured in this article have long been a mystery to stein collectors. The customary search for hallmark data in the literature on American silver produces scant information. The silver experts have, for whatever reason, produced little ink on this subject.

This article is meant to be an introductory exposition of what little data has been found by this writer and others to date. This is not meant as a definitive treatise but merely an opener and hopefully an interested readership will chip in with their bits of information that will unravel the untold story of the St. Louis Silver Co.

First mention of the St. Louis Silver Co. was in the 1893 St. Louis City Directory. They were initially known as the St. Louis Silver Plate Company and were conducting business at 207 Chestnut Street. From



Figure 1. Eight pieces from the St. Louis Silver Co. showing the patented combination of Flemish oak and silver for which they are known.



Figure 2. An illustration from the patent issued in 1905.

1904 until 1912, when they ceased to be listed, they produced ware under the name of the St. Louis Silver Company. The firm during this period had moved to 118 Chestnut.

The Art Department of the St. Louis Public Library further adds that Frank Bayles was the firm's President and William Haeber served as Secretary-Treasurer until 1913, at which time the company had apparently closed its doors. The Art Department also has a letter in its files from "Spinning Wheel" magazine that mentions the company as being in existence from 1880.

In addition to the St. Louis Public Library (of which only the Art Department had information; the History Department was a blank), several other agencies were contacted. The St. Louis Historical Society was unable to supply any data, and the St. Louis Art Museum had been similarly frustrated in preparing for a St. Louis Silver Co. exhibition, being unable to locate even an advertisement for the local turn of the century producers.

The striking Flemish oak and silver tankards produced by the St. Louis Silver Co. first appeared in 1904. Because the St. Louis Silver Co. hallmark had a United States Patent date, a search for the patent documents was undertaken. Figure 2, from the patent that was granted on August 1, 1905 to Clarence M. Perkins of St. Louis, MO, shows the basic elements of his concept: a metallic vessel protected by a wooden support and an outer metallic skeleton. All of the wooden and silver plated St. Louis Silver Co. drinking vessels were produced under this single patent.

Of the ware manufactured there were many variations in the ornamental framework and the vessel shape. The original patent model featured a dragon-like motif

in the metallic skeleton and handle. Figure 3 shows this stein to the right, with a larger mate to the left. Figures 4 and 5 show two more beautiful steins with different designs crafted at the Chestnut Street workshop of the St. Louis Silver Co. Note the variety in handles and thumblifts and the placement of the thumblifts on the steins in these photos. Figure 6 begins to show the versatility of Perkins' patent, in this case a wine bottle holder, which also appears at the right of figure 1. In figure 7 we see yet another variation, where the decorative touches have been reduced to a simple shield applied to the oak, making the stein an ideal presentation piece. Figure 8 shows two further examples, a wine cooler and a three-handled pass cup.

The late Dr. Joseph Hersh, ex-SCI President and prolific stein scribbler, featured several of the company's products in his article "Wooden Tankards Through the Decades." Hersh's piece appeared in the August 1975 issue of *Antique Journal* and in it he likened the appearance of these American tankards to ancient 18th century wooden and pewter vessels from Thuringia.



Figure 3. The model used in the original patent to the right of its larger cousin.

The unobservant viewer of these pieces can easily be fooled about their capacity. Because of the small container that is encased by the wooden support, the vessel looks much larger than its actual capability.

### Restoration of St. Louis Silver Co. Steins

by Milton Schnitzlein

Silver tarnishes. Even quadruple plating wears off. Wood shrinks and splits as it ages. As a result of shrinkage it is even possible for a piece of wood to slip its bounds and be lost! Although they were unlikely to be exposed to dishwashers, St. Louis Silver Co. steins are commonly found to have suffered the ravages of time, and many a prospective buyer has been put off by these effects. But for those who appreciate the original beauty of these items and are willing to undertake restoration, the task is not complex and is highly rewarding.

The process of restoring one of these items involves separating the wooden and metal portions using the same approach as when they were originally assembled, and then dealing with each of these components separately before reassembling.

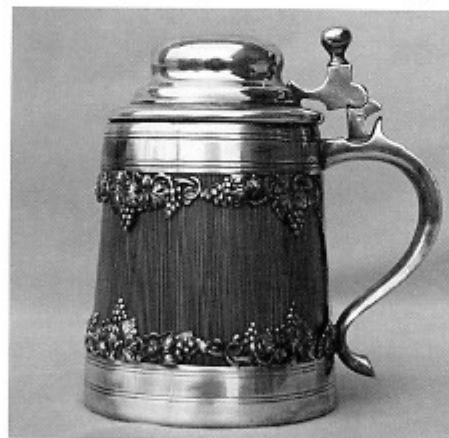


Figure 4. 1/4 L stein with grapevine motif.



Figure 6. A wine bottle cooler masquerading as a beer stein! Complete with hinged lid and handle as shown at the right in figure 1, the base may be removed to stow a cooled bottle.

Figure 9 shows the cup as it was brought in to be restored. The metal is quite dull and has an uneven finish, and the wood has lost its original luster.

The wood is removed from the cup by opening the metal that was rolled over the edge of the wooden bottom. It is now easy to see the metal cup suspended in its skeleton framework, and the relationship of the wooden insert, which is actually a barrel, comprised of a number of staves and tapering toward the top (figure 10).

Figure 11 shows the wood liner after it has been re-glued, cracks removed, new pieces fitted (if necessary) and the staves now perfectly matched to the shape of the body. In figure 12, the wood has been sanded and completely repaired. Figure 13 shows the finished wooden insert after several coats of polyurethane have been applied.

Turning now to the metallic body, in Figure 14 the plater is about to strip the old silver plate off completely. It has to be taken down to base metal in order to provide a clean surface for re-plating. After the old

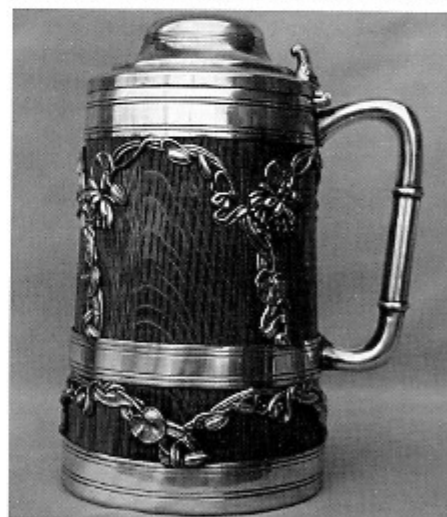


Figure 5. A larger stein using a water lily motif, popular in the period.



Figure 7. Two steins decorated simply with presentation plaques.

silver plate was removed, the cup is de-rusted in a cleaning solution. In figure 15 the plater is about to scratch-brush the soft rust from the cup.

Figure 16 shows the cup after it has been plated. The wooden support has been temporarily put back in place. While the piece could be finished at this point, the fresh silver plating is too bright for my taste, and I prefer to tone it down.

In order to achieve a more natural appearance of the silver decorating this object, which is after all, about 90 years old, the silversmith oxidizes the finish. This is accomplished by rotating the new silver-plated cup over several inexpensive candles which emit a high carbon smoke. The carbon adheres to all the cracks and crevices in the new silver plate. The highlights are then buffed, leaving the black oxidation in the recesses (figure 17). I call this a "butler finish", providing the look of antique silver.

In figure 18 the cup has been clear-lacquered, and is ready to have the edge rolled back over the bottom. With the lacquering of the finished product, it will not have to be polished for 5 to 8 years. This fully restored piece was shown earlier in figure 8.

I have had 13 steins restored, some of which have found new homes with people who also enjoy the beauty of wood and silver plated steins made in the early 1900's. I'll be happy to help any readers who have St. Louis Silver Co. steins and are considering restoring them. Write to Milton Schnitzlein, 4217 Soth Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21236, or call me at (410)256-5765.

Acknowledgments for their contributions to this three part article go to Milt Schnitzlein for providing the stimulus for this article along with photos and the description of the restoration process; to Terry Hill for his original article in Stein Zeitung; to Bob Wilson for his work in searching the patents; to St. Louis denizen Leonard Schenk, for his inquiries at the Public Library and elsewhere in St. Louis for historical data; and to Frank Loevi and Milt Schnitzlein for providing photos from their collections.



Figure 12. After all repairs are made to the wood, it is sanded prior to finishing.



Figure 8. A wine cooler and a pass cup.



Figure 9. St. Louis Silver Co. pass cup prior to restoration.

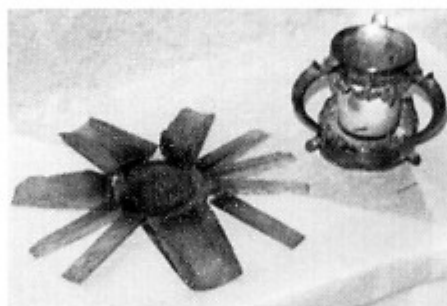


Figure 10. The cup has been disassembled, showing the barrel-like construction of the wood, including the base, which supports the rest of the vessel when assembled.



Figure 11. The wooden liner after regluing.



Figure 13. The color of the oak comes back after several coats of polyurethane.

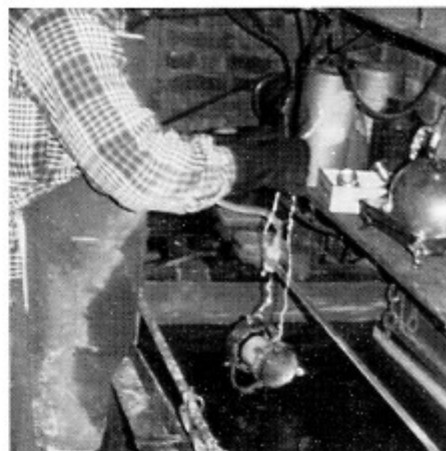


Figure 14. The plater prepares to strip the remaining finish from the cup.



Figure 15. A dip-solution and scratch-brushing removes rust from the cup.



Figure 16. The bright finish of freshly re-plated silver.



Figure 17. Buffing now restores the highlights, while leaving carbon in cracks and crevices.



Figure 18. The last step - rolling the edge back over the wooden bottom.