HOW WAS THE WEATHER?

The Historical Answer

AMERICAN HERITAGE

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BY PETER Baida

CIVIL WAR GHOSTS

THE MODERN NAVY
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THE COVER: Tom Parker's impressionistic weather map is based on the versions that appear in newspapers and on television. A special section on the history of American weather begins on page 22.
Seventy-one years ago, a designer working frantically to meet a deadline for the Coca-Cola Company produced a form that today is recognized on sight by 90 percent of the people on earth.

by Betty Mussell Lundby

A rotund prototype (left) is one of two still in existence.

THE BOTTLE

The cries of the thirsty faithful resounded across the land last year when after refreshing Americans for the better part of a century, the Coca-Cola Company announced it was introducing a new Coke and retiring the old version. Eventually, the company recanted, of course, and depending upon which story you prefer, either bowed to popular demand or played its next card. The original soft drink is now back on store shelves, but not before having undergone a sort of corporate beautification process — now it’s Classic Coke.

That’s only fitting; the 6.5-ounce green glass bottle that says “Coke” to most people has always been a classic. From its inception seventy-one years ago, the famous sculpture has delighted consumers, inspired artists, fascinated collectors and competitors. The industrial designer Raymond Loewy called it “perfectly formed” and ascribed its appeal to its “aggressively female” quality, while another authority claimed to discover “twenty cleverly concealed devices ... to lure and satisfy the hand... firmly establishing a tactile and visual relationship with the product.” According to packaging experts, 90 percent of the world’s population recognizes it by sight alone. Ten thousand years from now, our layer of the archaeological sandwich may well be labeled the “Coke Age,” a prophecy obliquely dramatized on television by a rival soft-drink ad.

The volupitous Coke bottle is so right, it’s hard to imagine a time or place without it. But it did not exist until 1915, the year the Coca-Cola Company challenged its suppliers to “design a distinctive bottle.” As mold-shop supervisor for the Root Glass Company of Terre Haute, Indiana, Earl R. Dean had executed dozens of bottle designs for clients. He had no idea that this design, apart from all others he had drawn and molded, would create marketing legends, raise up millionaires, receive acclaim as art. To Dean, the Coca-Cola bottle was just another job. It’s likely that he had heard of Coca-Cola, widely dispensed at soda fountains and in bottles by 1915, but it’s unlikely that he knew much about its history. At twenty-nine, Coke was only four years older than Dean. Despite its informal beginning, brewed in a cauldron over a wood fire by an Atlanta druggist, the soda had developed into a popular fountain drink and then, almost accidentally, into a bottle’s gold mine: Bottlers bought the syrup from the Coca-Cola Company and in turn received territorial monopolies to sell the drink in plain, straight-sided containers resembling most other beer and soda bottles of the day.

Coke’s popularity and its generic package invited imitators. Fighting back, a Chattanooga bottler named Ben Thomas saw a way to thwart the competition: “We need a bottle which a person can recognize as a Coca-Cola bottle when he feels it in the dark.” Thomas told an associate, “...so shaped that, even if broken, a person could tell at a glance what it was.” When the Coca-Cola Company finally announced its competition for a new design, its letter that was circulated to all bottle suppliers listed only two requirements: first, the bottle must be distinctive, and second, it must fit the existing equipment.

According to Earl Dean, this letter reached Root Glass in June of 1915. In 1917, six months before he died, he recalled those long-ago events in an interview. “One day I got a telephone call from Mr. Root at the main office. He always said, ‘Earl, can you come in here a minute?’ It was like an admiral, a wonderful guy.”

Assembled in the office were the auditor, T. Clyde Edwards; the plant superintendent, Alexander Samuelson; the secretary, Roy Hart; and Chapman J. Root, the president. Root read the letter outlining the competition. “Mr. Root jokingly said, ‘Whoever comes up with a design we can submit will get a leather medal.’ He had a sense of humor.” Then Samuelson asked, “What is Coca-Cola made of?” This was the first, last, and only word or thing or action that Samuelson made, connected with the Coca-Cola bottle.

Dean was referring to the long-standing confusion about the bottle’s designer. Over the years, credit has been widely ascribed to Alexander Samuelson, whose name appeared on the first patent of 1915. Nobody really knows why this occurred, perhaps it was because patents customarily were assigned to a company official. When the 1915 patent expired and a new application was submitted in 1925, with only slight variations from the 1915 drawing, Chapman J. Root was named as “Inventor.” The 1925 patent
We need a bottle which a person can recognize as a Coca-Cola bottle when he feels it in the dark.

In 1915, the design and sending the back to Washington. Dean's son, Norman and Robert, now own the drawing, as well as an actual bottle from the first run. The green glass is slightly flawed with bubbles where the mold did not heat up completely. The archives department of the Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta owns the only other existing bottle, a gift from Alexander Samuelson's son.

Earl Dean's beautiful bottle was only one link in a chain of golden corporate decisions that made Coca-Cola into a soft-drink giant. Today, despite greater sales of Coke in cans, plastic, and larger glass bottles, fifty glass plants in the United States continue to produce the 6.5-ounce bottle. In 1985 alone, more than 282 million of them were sold. That graceful little contour bottle, created during a hot Indiana summer some seventy years ago, is still the perfect package for a cold drink—a true classic.