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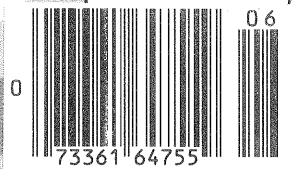
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GO BERSERK
BY PETER BAIDA**

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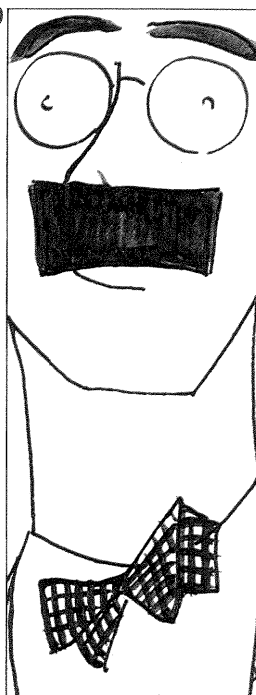
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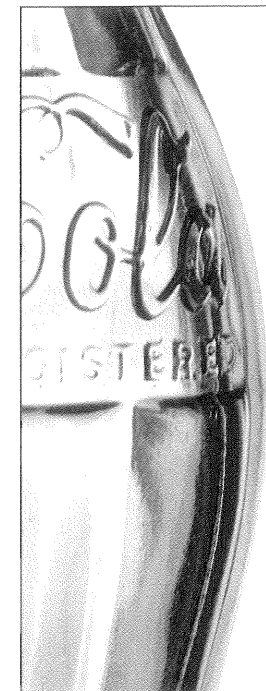
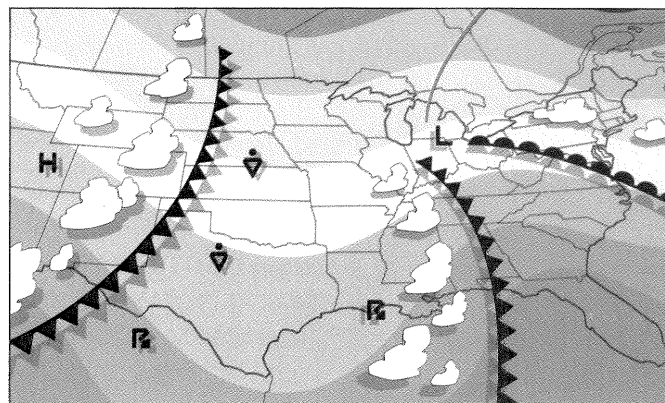
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THE BOTTLE

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 Lundy

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

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 beatification 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 recognize it by sight alone. Ten thousand years from now, our layer of the archeological sandwich may well be labeled the "Coke Age," a prophecy obligingly dramatized on television by a rival soft-drink ad.

The voluptuous 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 inkling 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 beginnings, 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 bottler'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, the 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 1971, 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?' He 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 Hurt; 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 is 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 1923, with only slight variations from the 1915 drawing, Chapman J. Root was named as "Inventor." The 1937 patent

We need a bottle which a person can recognize as a Coca-Cola bottle when he feels it in the dark."



Inspiration for the bottle's shape came from this 1910 drawing of the cocoa bean.

was issued in the name of yet another man. Again it was essentially the original design, altered by Dean, who recalled, "It was in '37 . . . I made a drawing of the Coca-Cola bottle and changed it maybe a matter of 100th of an inch . . . here and there, which is legal enough to carry on a patent."

Because of the patent record, the Coca-Cola Company still maintains its long-standing tradition of naming Samuelson as designer, although the company's archivist, Philip Mooney, does stress that it was a team effort, with Dean playing an important role.

However, Chapman S. Root, grandson of Dean's old boss, and Owens-Illinois, which took over Root Glass, recognized Dean as designer in a commemorative booklet published in 1971 to accompany a limited-edition reproduction of the first bottle. John Zabowski had been requested by Root and Owens-Illinois Glass Container Division, of which he was advertising manager, to investigate the story of the bottle's design. After interviewing a survivor of the Samuelson family and spend-

ing several hours with Dean, Zabowski felt convinced that Dean's claim was authentic.

Until then, only Dean's immediate circle knew of his role, because, his son Robert says, "He was not a man to put himself forward. At the end of his life, he wanted to set the record straight." And in setting the record straight, Earl Dean pointed to Samuelson's actual contribution during the initial brainstorming session—the question "What is Coca-Cola made of?"

Nobody knew. Still, the germ of an idea was growing: a bottle design could be based upon the soda's ingredients, the coca leaf or the cola nut. But what did these plants look like? To find out, Root sent Dean and Edwards, the auditor, chauffeured in a big Peerless limousine, to the Terre Haute Emily Fairbanks Library. The librarian turned up little under *coca* or *cola*, but under *cocoa* in the 1910 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,

they came upon a provocative illustration. In fact, Coca-Cola contains neither cocoa nor chocolate, but Dean and Edwards had found their inspiration.

"The pod was about the size of a cucumber," said Dean, "with convolutions all around, like a cantaloupe. It had the pinch in there like a Coke bottle and a stem at the top like a squash. So I made a sketch of the whole thing."

Back at the plant, Dean showed his rough drawing to Root. "I told Mr. Root that it could be transformed easily into a bottle. Up there at the top where it's like a gourd, it would have a finish or ring where the cap goes on. He was very enthused and asked me if I could get it done so we could have a mold made before the fire went out in two days."

The "fire" imposed an urgent deadline on Dean's work. Union rules required that bottle-making operations stop

from time to time to permit the repair of the tanks. One hundred and fifty tons of molten glass, like heavy molasses, were poured from each tank into a huge pit, allowing the tanks to cool off for safety inspections. Noon on the last working day of June was the deadline for the fire to go out at Root Glass. If the company was to enter the contest, Dean had to complete his sample bottle before then.

Dean carried his drawing instruments and notes home with him that night. He was not feeling well—"I was bilious and sick"—so he went right to bed. But he arose early the next morning and spread out his papers on the big, round dining table. "I worked on it until my mother got up at 6 o'clock and fixed my breakfast and set it on the other side of the table. So I changed seats and ate, then worked a little more. Then I grabbed everything and ran off to the shop to get the men started at 7 o'clock. I finished the drawing in my little office by the time Mr. Root arrived, about 9 or 9:30. He was very pleased with it."

Now the pressure to complete the mold in time grew intense. "Back in the shop, I started the mold from the rough. I had the preliminar-

ies made on the shaper and the surface grinder and the lathe, which bored a blank hole in the center of two halves of a cast iron mold. Then I worked the rest of the day without any stops until 2 o'clock in the morning, till I could see that I could finish it in time for the factory to get samples made before the fire went out at noon the next day. That made exactly 22 hours straight I worked on it.

"The next morning I started on it again, because there was still a lot to do—cutting with hammer and chisel all those convolutions, lettering and panels. I got it out to the factory about 11:30. It took about twenty minutes to heat up the mold. . . . And we made just a few of the first Coca-Cola bottles in the last fifteen minutes before the fire went out."

For the patent application, Dean had drawn both front and back views of the bottle. The attorney separated the drawing with Root's long scissors, handing Dean the front

design and sending the back to Washington. Dean's sons, 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.

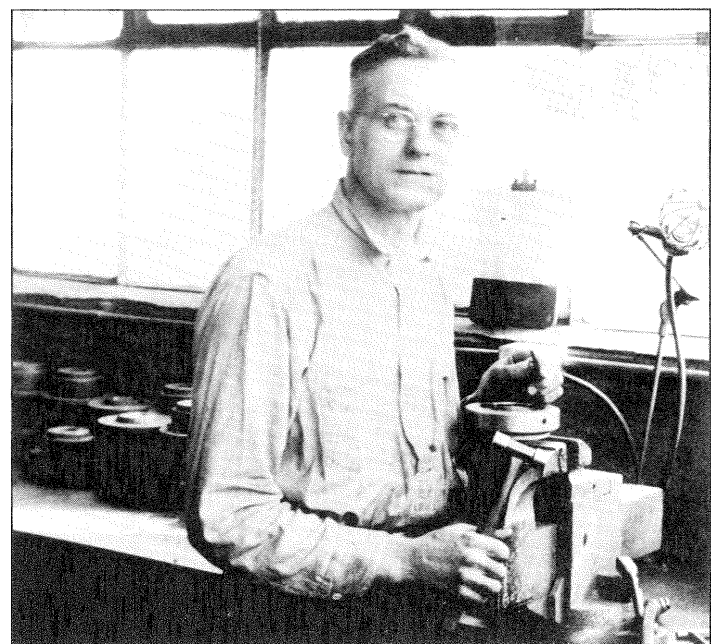
Chapman J. Root approved the prototype, securing his place in Coca-Cola history and reaping millions of dollars in royalties. A patent was issued

on November 16, 1915. At the next bottlers' convention, in 1916, the Root bottle was chosen over all other entries and was on the market the same year. By 1920 the contour bottle was the standard for the company.

Dean was offered a choice between a five-hundred-dollar bonus and the guarantee of a lifetime job at Root Glass. He chose the job and kept it until Owens-Illinois took over Root in the thirties; after that, he went on to work in other Midwestern glass factories.

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 292 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.

Betty Mussell Lundy is a freelance writer living in Illinois.



Earl Dean at his workbench in the Root Glass factory a few years after the breakthrough design.



The patent drawing that launched a classic: later, the bottle's flanks were slenderized.

COLLECTION OF ROBERT AND NORMAN DEAN

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