7-UP RELICS from the Middle-Aged Dump

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It was an important year in American history. U.S. population was at almost 106 million. A depression was troubling the country. The first radio broadcast was made. With almost $103 million invested, $5,194 soft drink bottlers reported annual sales of just slightly more than $135 million. The transition to crown caps and crown-finish soft drink bottles was virtually completed. Yes! 1920 was an important year; and during that year in the city of St. Louis, a 51-year-old businessman (destined to create the important soft-drink 7-Up) helped start The Howdy Company.

In January of 1920, Charles Leiper Grigg founded The Howdy Company with a former coal merchant named Edmund G. Ridgway. Grigg was born April 11, 1868 in Price’s Branch, Missouri, where he eventually acquired and operated a general store. Around 1900, he moved to St. Louis and made a career of working for several dry goods firms, advertising agencies, and finally, a soda water bottling plant. Grigg always had ideas of how to do things “better.” As a result of that trait, he lost more than a few jobs during his checkered career, including his last one with the soda water bottler. His new partner, Edmund Ridgway, had owned coal mines and was a coal merchant for a number of years. In 1919, after selling that business, he decided to throw in with Grigg. Jokingly, his reason was so he could “…wish for heat waves instead of cold weather.”

The Howdy Company’s first soft drink was predictably called “HOWDY” - it was a mostly-orange-with-a-“smack”-of lemon drink in a six and one-half ounce bottle. In 1920, orange was the favorite carbonated beverage fruit flavor, closely followed in the same category by lemon. There was something else different about Howdy: it fell into the category of “cloudy orange.” Until around 1915, fruit-flavored soda pop was made with soluble flavors. Orange Crush (1916) was one of the first of the so-called cloudy orange drinks. They were called “cloudy” because they contained real fruit juice for flavor. Howdy was one of the next to qualify in the category.

In 1921, a third partner was added to The Howdy Company. Frank Y. Gladney, a 43-year-old St. Louis lawyer, liked what he saw in the way of financial potential while drawing up legal papers for the next company, and convinced Grigg and Ridgway to let him invest.

Not a great deal is known about the early years of The Howdy Company. Howdy, an orange-lemon beverage, was franchised and sold nationally, as determined by advertisements in the National Bottlers’ Gazette and the National Carbonator and Bottler. Bottles for Howdy were of plain glass during the early years. Those bottles were identified with paper labels, but by 1928, Howdy was being offered in a Howdy “Hi-Bottle.” The six and one-half ounce bottle was unique in shape with “HOWDY” highly embossed in acrostic lettering.

In 1925, the National Bottlers’ Gazette presented an ad announcing that C.L. Grigg had expanded his line as a result of a questionnaire sent to “6,300 bottlers.” The new product was “HOWDY GINGER ALE” with the substitute of “A Friendly Tipple.” Howdy Ginger Ale’s paper label proclaimed it “neutralizes acidity.”

Howdy itself was introduced as national Prohibition (Volstead Act) became a fact of life in the U.S. Grigg and his partners promoted the beverage as a “thirst drink,” contrasting that with a “chaser” - a drink to be used with alcoholic beverages. Howdy Ginger Ale’s claim to neutralize acidity would in the next decade be reminiscent of many such claims for the soon-to-be-invented 7-Up.

Seven-Up Introduced

After experimenting with eleven different formulas, Grigg developed a soft drink which began its life with the less than catchy name “Bib-Label Lithiated Lemon-Lime Soda.” By the time of the Stock Market Crash in October of 1929,
The new product had been renamed 7-Up. The “Seven” part of the name could have come as a result of the drink’s seven-ounce bottle or the idea later used on bottle caps, “Seven times as good” or an early thought later manifested (1929) in the advertising promotion featuring the slogan, “Cure for the Seven Hangovers.” The “Up” part of the name was most likely from the thought that the drink was one which “picked one up.” “A Fresh up drink” became one of almost a dozen slogans used by The Howdy Company during the toddler years of 7-Up.

Grigg, Ridgeway and Gladney proceeded to merchandise in a most unusual fashion for the times. With soft drinks selling for 60-cents a case, or wholesale three cases for $1.00 with no bottle deposit, they decided to sell 7-Up for two to five times the prevailing price: 80-cents a case with no quantity discounts! Their reason for the high price was simply that in a market which was traditionally an extremely low-margin one, they were determined to price their new product for “reasonable profit to the Company, bottler, and dealer.” Put another way, “...80-cents says plainer than words that 7-Up is a better piece of goods. We don’t want a bottler that hasn’t the courage to get top prices.” (The soft drink industry is as profitable as it is today, partially because of the 7-Up Company’s pioneering attitude: Good profit margin and volume sales.) That, with lemon-flavored drinks not being the most popular; and with over 600 other lemon brands on the market; and introducing a new product during the Depression; and medicinal claims (to be discussed further along); and promotion as a mixer with alcoholic beverages, makes one wonder how the Seven-Up Company and its flagship product survived to become the large firm that it is today.

Seven-Up Promotion
To compete with those 600 other lemon flavors, 7-Up was advertised as a “Super Lemon Drink” because it contained “two and one-quarter times the prevailing price: 80-cents a case with no quantity discounts!” Strong stuff indeed!

Howdy Coolers
Better Than Ever
$7.00 Each

The chassis or frame proper is much heavier—die formed—very solid, and a beautiful design. The embossing on bottom, sides and ends is 1½ inches thick and most carefully fitted.

Takes quart bottles or 96 small bottles. Roomy and with the close-fitted top to hold the cold. Double doors permit you to open one at a time. Shipped knocked down in corrugated containers—total weight, 50 pounds. Set up with a screw driver in just a few minutes.

The sides and ends carry the very attractive Howdy signs—three colors. There can be no change in the particular sign.

Orders should come through the Howdy Company as soon as Howdy bottlers can have Howdy coolers this year. All coolers are shipped direct from Lima, Ohio, on a C.O.D. basis; unless check accompanies order.
From its inception, 7-Up was promoted as sort of a proprietary medicine. This was an interesting tactic for Grigg and his partners, since Coca-Cola, Moxie and other soft drinks had long since given up that promotional approach. As a “Lithiated Lemon Soda,” the drink contained lithium, which was supposed to be (but was not) good for gout, uremia, kidney stones and a few other things. Seven-Up was advertised as an “Anti-Acid” and as a product which “Settles the stomach.” “Keeps you alkaline” was another claim. Perhaps its most interesting medicinal slogan was, “For the stomach’s sake,” which seems too close for coincidence to, “Drink no longer water but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine often infirmities,” from First Epistle of Paul to Timothy in the New Testament.

After the repeal of Prohibition, the beverage was heavily touted as both a good mixer for alcoholic beverages and as a hangover cure. In some cases, Grigg did it all in one statement, e.g. “7-Up is more than a mixer...it blends out the harsh features. Dispels hangovers. Takes the ‘ouch’ out of grouch.” Charles Grigg’s son joined the firm in 1929 as the company’s resident artist. Young Hamblett C. Grigg drew up the first promotion for 7-Up. It featured flapper boys and girls, and the slogan: “Cure for the Seven Hangovers.” (Some have speculated that the “seven” in “7-Up” comes from that promotional effort. Some say, no.)

Early Seven-Up Bottles

As was typical for the times, 7-Up...
bottlers were asked to supply their own bottles. In that request, and the resulting variety of bottles, lies the inspiration for this article. By the late 1930s, the odd supply of 7-Up bottles had settled down to the standard “ho-hum” green seven-ounce version that popular archaeologists are beginning to save and cherish from digging in the middle-aged dumps. But for the first few years, 7-Up was being sold in a wide variety of bottles sporting claim and slogan-laden labels, all of which provides the stuff for interesting study.

By far, the most curious and valuable of the 7-Up bottles of the 1930s are the seven-ounce amber ones which came in both the traditional 7-Up shape and the stubby-beer-bottle shape. Thanks to David Meinz, a Carlinville, Illinois, collector who studies such matters, we now know that amber bottles were used in at least ten cities: Charleston, S.C.; Houston, Tex.; Nashville, Tenn.; Harlingen, Tex.; New Orleans, La.; Shreveport, La.; Dallas, Tex.; Knoxville, Tenn.; Johnson City, Tenn.; and San Diego, Calif.

Gradually, as clear glass embossed bottles with paper labels gave way to amber bottles with paper labels, advertising claims softened a little. “A cooler off” and “A fresher up” were typical brags. As amber paper-labeled bottles gave way to amber ACL bottles, and then to green ACL bottles, promotional slogans became such as, “You like it. It likes you.”

For a long time, collector-archaeologists-historians have speculated about 7-Up bottles. Early ideas regarding the amber bottles were that they were ordered by mistake by bottlers not paying attention to home office instructions to use green bottles. It makes a good story, but is not accurate. Amber bottles can be identified by Owens-Illinois Glass Company mould markings as having been made in two basic amber styles (first traditional and then the stubby bottle) from 1936-1939; and maybe a bit earlier and later. That’s too long a period for a “mistake” to go unnoticed or uncorrected. Besides, the first advertisements for bottlers reflected some change in philosophy regarding the kind of bottle to contain 7-Up: “...we do require green or brown bottles, labels and top prices.” Further instructions to bottlers serve to explain why amber bottles gave way to green ones: “The 7-ounce green bottle is the better bottle. It brings larger dollar volume.” So, it is that clear and colored glass bottles with embossments, paper labels and ACL all exist by design, not mistake.

**Seven-Up Company Formed**

The variety of 7-Up bottles was at its greatest in 1937, the year the Seven-Up Company was organized as successor to The Howdy Company. In 1939, just after the last 7-Up territory in the U.S. had been allocated, E.G. Ridgway died. A year later, in 1940, Charles Grigg died at age 72. H.C. Grigg, who had worked for his father since 1929, became president of the company. Howard E. Ridgway, Edmund’s son, because executive vice-president. And Frank Gladney, the only original partner, remained as secretary-treasurer, legal counsel and director until his death in 1961, at the age of 83. In 1938, Ben H. Wells, a son-in-law of Gladney, became an active participant in the business and eventually worked his way up to the presidency when H.G. Grigg became the chairman of the board. The firm continued to be family-managed and family-owned until 1967, when it went public, and in 1978, was purchased by Philip Morris, Inc., for $450 million.

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