

Here's the Real Dope on *Koca Nola*

by Charles David Head

It's a fact that before the success of the Coca-Cola Company, nearly all sodas sold in the United States were manufactured by private individuals and not known by brand names.

Most sodas of the mid- to late 19th and early 20th centuries rarely were marketed outside the sellers' region or state.

The Coca-Cola Company became a huge success in a matter of just a few years, thanks to its powerhouse advertising program which boosted sales of the beverage to national levels. Consumers couldn't pick up a magazine or newspaper without seeing the name Coca-Cola. Signs and posters proliferated on the fronts of stores and other public places.

Other soda water manufacturers were quick to take notice of the advertising blitz and realized that if their drinks were to succeed in the marketplace, they'd better do something and quickly.

Probably the most popular idea was to manufacture a copycat soda. By 1908, Gay-Ola, Celery=Cola, Taka-Cola and Koca Nola, among many others with similar names, gave consumers a confusing choice. But many companies did not have the money to spend on national advertising and soon disappeared. But while they were alive and well, they may have had a negative impact on Coca-Cola sales.

To avoid direct competition with Coca-Cola, many small bottling works sold their copycat products in small towns where Coke had yet to be established.

An exception was Koca Nola, a brand and company established in Atlanta, headquarters then and now of the Coca-Cola Company. The new drink became successful under the guidance of Thomas H. Austin who, in February 1905, established Koca Nola company offices at 822 Empire Building and the bottling works at 58 Edgewood Avenue.

By spring of the same year, Austin had sold franchises to James Esposito in Philadelphia, Pa., the Macon (Ga.) Bottling Works, the Dixie Carbonating Company of Augusta, Ga., Lemuel M. Keen's Montgomery (Ala.) Koca Nola Bottling Works, the Florida Koca Nola Company in Jacksonville and the Fairfax (S.C.) Koca Nola Bottling Works.

The company's first drinks were sold in Hutchinson bottles and later in the more popular crown top bottles. It's strongly suspected that several other early franchises used the Hutchinson bottle, but the only known embossed Hutchinson Koca Nola bottles are from Atlanta, Macon, Philadelphia and Jacksonville.

The Dixie Carbonating Company, a subsidiary of the Augusta Brewing Company, was organized in 1905 to handle the brewery's soft drink line, may have used Koca Nola labels since no Hutchinsons or crown tops have been found with that embossing. Hutchinsons embossed Dixie Carbonating Company do exist, but not embossed Montgomery Koca Nola bottles are known.

On June 20, 1905, Austin registered a red-letter-greenish-blue background label with the office of Georgia's secretary of state. The diamond-shaped label reads "Bottled by Authority of Koca Nola Co., Atlanta, Ga." It also claimed "The Great Tonic Drink" was "Delicious and Dopeless."

Once he achieved success, Austin worked hard to expand his company. In a letter to Turner Drug Store in Wilkesboro, N.C., dated March 10, 1905, Austin pointed out that Koca Nola was the only drink on



Ginger Ale, Koca Nola
...and Soda Waters...

The Augusta Brewing Co. announces to its patrons and friends that its Soda Water Department will be conducted hereafter under the name of the

Dixie Carbonating Co
AUGUSTA BREWING CO., Proprietors.

and wishes to inform the public that in all its Soda Water Drinks — Spring Water will be exclusively used.

The water used for Carbonating is taken from the Howles Crystal Springs, pronounced by Prof. H. C. White, Georgia State Chemist on Analysis, as a Pure, Healthy and Excellent Drinking Water.


Much money has been spent in improving the Springs named.

DIXIE CARBONATING CO.
AUGUSTA BREWING CO.
Proprietors.

STATE OF GEORGIA.
Trade Mark Reg.

In the Executive Secretary of State, Atlanta:

Filed by *Thomas H. Austin, Secy.*
Koca Nola Co., Atlanta, Ga.



Office of Secretary of State,
Atlanta, Ga.
Filed June 20, 1905
Registered June 20, 1905
T. H. Austin, Secy.

the market absolutely free from dope or injurious ingredients. That statement would be challenged later.

Documentation that Austin was successful in signing up the drug store has not come to light, but he did enjoy success elsewhere. By 1907, Koca Nola was being sold in Pennsylvania, North and South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Alabama, Florida and Georgia.

While proof (in the forms of bottles) exists of the beverage being marketed on those states, the author believes it could have been in 14 other states. According to an advertisement in the Feb. 5, 1909 issue of the *National Bottlers' Gazette*, Koca Nola franchises were being offered to bottlers in Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Oklahoma and the Indian Territory in what Austin called its Western Territory. Charles A. Mautz of St. Louis was agent for that area.

Ohio, Indiana, New York, Pennsylvania and Michigan, plus the Anacostia section of the District of Columbia, was known as the Northern Territory with J. Brecmeisen of Kent, Ohio as the company's agent. The Anacostia franchise may have been a soda fountain outlet, or as readers will see later, a setup by the U.S. government as a sting operation to nab Austin. No Koca Nola bottles from that area are known.

The Southern Territory was composed of franchises in Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas and Virginia. That those eight states plus Pennsylvania had franchises is verified by bottles or advertisements.

One advertisement from the home office reads: "We want every Bottler who desires to make more money to write us at once for our 1909 plan. The plan is original and very liberal, a far better plan than you have ever seen – one that will enable you to make a great deal of money, not for a few weeks or months, but regularly – because KOCA NOLA creates a thirst for more. KOCA NOLA is one of the most successful drinks ever offered, and our unique plan is decided the most successful. Write for the plan today – it's an eye-opener."

The company went on to say that it would provide a free quart sample of its drink to anyone willing to pay express charges. It is not known the type of container used for that quart.

While many of the Koca Nola franchisees purchased only the syrup to sell at soda fountains and in restaurants, it may be probable that companies in more than nine states out of the 23 known to have been offered franchises may have bottled and sold Koca Nola. Problem is, no bottles from those areas have yet to be discovered.

Readers having bottles from cities or towns not previously mentioned, the author would like to hear from them.

The Koca Nola Company sold its drinks at 5 cents per bottle, the drink apparently having a little extra "kick" that acted as a pick-me-up on depressing days.

The most successful era for the company came in 1905-1908, in part because Austin had taken a page from the marketing strategies of Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola and Hires' Root Beer and was giving free merchandise advertising his drink. Items known to be listed in a Koca Nola catalogue (copies of which are not known to be extant) included calendars, match safes, watch fobs, ladies' face powder boxes and thermometers, all with Koca Nola

inscriptions and all rare collectibles today. Here are nutshell histories of known Koca Nola bottlers:

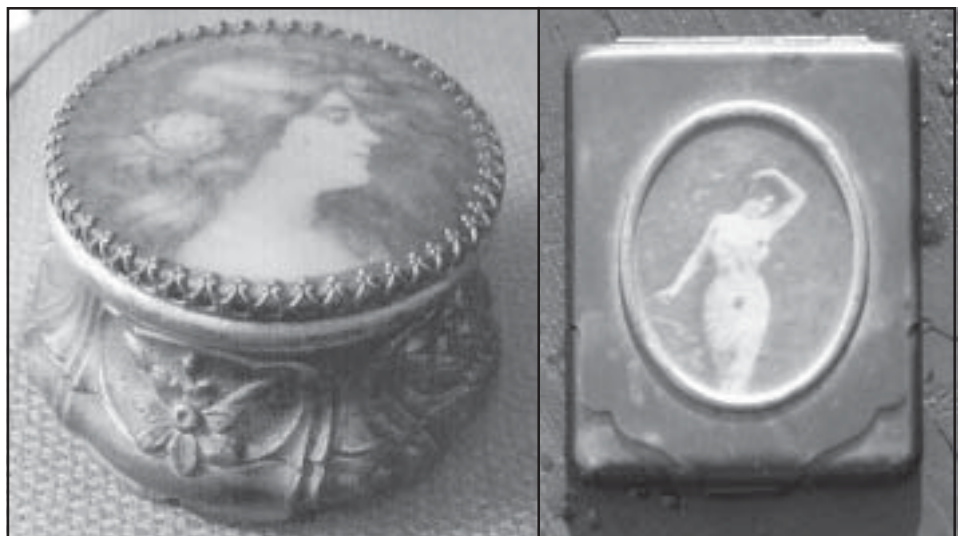
ALABAMA: One franchise was established in Camden by the Farmers' Ice & Oil Company, while Lemuel McGee Keen established his in Montgomery about 1905. Keen may have sold his first Koca Nola in Hutchinson bottles, although none have been found with the embossed brand name. Crown tops embossed Montgomery Bottling Works / Koca Nola (in script) / Montgomery, Ala., are known. An amber variant is known and it's suspected that aqua and clear-glass examples also exist. Keen bottled and sold Koca Nola for five years, but his business failed because of a decline in sales after the home company in Atlanta had been forced into bankruptcy after being found guilty of violating the Pure Food & Drug Act.

FLORIDA: The Pensacola Bottling Works obtained a franchise in 1907, but bad business practices doomed the company which went into bankruptcy a year later. The Florida Koca Nola Bottling Company was established in Jacksonville during 1905-08 and sold the soda in aqua Hutchinsons and clear crown tops. Heels of the Florida bottles are embossed ROOT 368 and ROOT 583, marks of the Root Glass Company of Terre Haute, Ind.

GEORGIA: In addition to Atlanta, the Ashburn Bottling Works in Turner County apparently sold Koca Nola for a year or less during 1907. The B.I. Taylor & Company in Bagley was granted a franchise about the same time, but wasn't long in business. The embossed letters of S.I.G.W. on the heels of Atlanta bottles stand for Southern

Indiana Glass Works of Loogootee, Ind. (1905-13), according to Ted Oppelt in his listing, "Colored Hutchinson Soda in the United States." The Donaldsonville Bottling Works sold Koca Nola in the same time frame as its Georgia neighbors, but spelled the drink KACONOLA, making it a rare and much sought-after bottle. There was another spelling error: Correct spelling of the Seminole County town is Donaldsonville. The Koca Nola bottled by the Macon Bottling Works may have been the first sold after that of the Atlanta headquarters. The Macon company was in business as late as 1909. The Rome franchise was one of the company's most successful and its bottles are among the most common more than 100 years later. The Macon bottle has a small "c" within a diamond embossed on its base, but the glass company has yet to be identified. Also unidentified are the letters C.S. & G. Co., embossed on the Rome bottles' heels. A newspaper ad indicated Koca Nola was sold in Savannah, but no bottles are known. Dixie Carbonating Company of Augusta also sold the drink, but no embossed bottles have been found.

KENTUCKY: The Somerset franchise was established in 1907, but lack of newspaper ads, bottles and other evidence indicate the company wasn't long in business. The author owns a Somerset bottle which presently is unique. It is embossed R.G. Co., which may be the mark of the Renton Glass Company of Renton, Wash., in business from 1905-11, according to *Bottle Makers and Their Marks* by Dr. Julian Harrison Toulouse. The factory began using that mark in 1907, Dr. Toulouse noted. But it also could be an early Root Glass Company mark, according to Roger Peterson in his



book, *Wisconsin Soda Water Bottles, 1845-1910*. Researchers also have not discovered any Oregon or Washington bottles with the R.G. Co., mark.

NORTH CAROLINA: The New London Bottling Works was issued a franchise to sell Koca Nola during 1907-09, but sold it for only a few months, The drink also was sold in Mount Airy for a short time in 1908.

PENNSYLVANIA: James Esposito's soda water company existed in 1905 at 812-814 Washington Avenue in Philadelphia. It was a large and successful enterprise. Koca Nola was his best seller among the sodas he handled. He may have sold more Koca Nola than any of the other franchises, excepting the Atlanta home headquarters, and the evidence is in the number of his bottles known. There are at least eight variations of Hutchinsons and crown top Koca Nola bottles in existence. Yellow- or citron-colored J. Esposito Hutchinsons bring prices in the upper four figures. The D.O.C. embossed on the bottles' heels stand for the D.O. Cunningham Glass Company of Pittsburgh (1882-1937). Amber bottles exist with C.G. Co. 756 on their heels. Those initials may be from the Crystal Glass Company of Bridgeport, Ohio (1882-1907).

SOUTH CAROLINA: A lone example embossed Koca Nola Bottling Co. / Fairfax, S.C., exists in a private collection.

TENNESSEE: In New River and South Pittsburg, A.Y. Keen owned and operated the Keen Bottling Company. He sold many different sodas including Koca Nola, which was sold in 1907. Since he owned the South

Pittsburg branch, his bottles were embossed New River & South Pittsburg, becoming the only Koca Nola seller with two towns listed on his bottles. According to Keen family history, his Koca Nola venture lasted only six months, but he bounced back by renaming his company the Keen Gay-Ola Bottling Company. He added NEHI in 1927 and sold it in nine different flavors. Only three examples of Keen Koca Nola bottles are known, making it a rare challenge for collectors to locate others.

VIRGINIA: The Holston Bottling Company of Bristol, Tennessee-Virginia advertised Koca Nola in the *Bristol Herald-Courier* on April 6, 1907. There also was a Koca Nola Bottling Works in Gallatin.

The author has documented about 35 variations of the Koca Nola bottle from 17 different companies. There may be more in existence.

Whatever became of Koca Nola? Why did it not last as long as Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola, NEHI or Dr. Pepper?

On July 3, 1909, the U.S. District Attorney filed charges claiming the Koca Nola syrup contained cocaine, according to an article in the *National Bottlers' Gazette*. According to Internet sources, government agents intercepted a one-gallon jug of Koca Nola syrup en route from the Atlanta office to Anacostia in D.C. The jug was labeled "Delicious. Dopeless. Koca Nola. The Great Tonic Drink."

After government chemists determined the syrup contained cocaine, the government charged the company that the syrup was misbranded. The jug containing the syrup also bore the wording that it was guaranteed under the 1906 Pure Food & Drug Act and failed to carry a statement on the label indicating the amount of cocaine present.

The U.S. Attorney quoted the law, saying it was "the object of the law that the public shall be put distinctly on notice, and cocaine, among other things mentioned in the act, if present in any preparation of food or drink, it must be so stated on the label," according to Internet sources.

In a January 1992 *Federation Glass Works* article copyrighted by Cecil Munsey*, Austin was quoted as denying the charges, citing chemical analyses of the syrup in his defense in the *Gazette*.

"There is not now, and never has been, any cocaine used in the manufacture of Koca Nola sirup (sic)," Austin said in the

Gazette article. "It not only does not contain cocaine, but contains no harmful ingredients of any kind, and on the contrary contains ingredients that have a decidedly beneficial and tonic effect upon the drinker."

Federal authorities disagreed.

Munsey pointed out that the American Medical Association's book, *Quackery & Nostrums*, noted that the Koca Nola Company "was found guilty on two points: (1) failing to declare the presence of cocain(sic) and (2) adulteration. The Government made two seizures and the company was found guilty in each case and a fine of \$25 on each count was imposed, making a total of \$100."

The Koca Nola Company filed for bankruptcy on Nov. 24, 1910, just five years after it was founded, according to Munsey's article. The company held on until 1913, according to listings in Atlanta city directories. After it went bankrupt, Austin formed the Southern Beverage Company, manufacturing Capitol Club Ginger Ale and at least four other flavors, according to Munsey. Then Austin faded from the scene.

The *Federation Glass Works* was the official publication of the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs (later renamed Collectors) and predecessor to the current *Bottles & Extras*.

*-Excerpts used by permission of Dr. Cecil Munsey from his January 1992 article, "Matches, Match Safes and the History and Relics of Koca Nola, (c) 1991 in the January 1992 *Federation Glass Works* journal. Dr. Munsey also credited Gene Bradberry, Memphis, Tenn.; Jane Rotella Coyle, Camillus, N.Y.; Ron Fowler, Seattle, Wash.; Phillip F. Mooney, archivist, The Coca-Cola Company, Atlanta, Ga., and Dennis L. Smith, Getzville, N.Y., for assisting in the research for his article.

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