

Noel's Cola History

By Bill Baab

Sixty-nine years later, Mary Sue Heyer, nee Morrison, remembers the scene like it was yesterday: "I was smaller than most queens, much smaller," said Mrs. Heyer, 80, referring to her being crowned "Noel's Cola Queen" in 1938. "I was just 11 years old."

Herman Ercel Noel founded the company that year in Corinth, Miss., and Mary Sue, whose father was an accountant for the firm, got to ride atop one of the 3/4-ton delivery trucks during a parade that was held just to introduce the soft drink, she said. Noel's son, Stanley, played French horn in the Corinth High School band which marched in that parade.

Check out the owner's initials: H.E.N.

"He was in the chicken business and was called 'Chicken Noel' and I was called 'Little Chick'," said Stanley Noel, 82, who now lives in Franklin, Tenn. "I wrote a gossip column called 'Chicken's Chatter' in my high school's newspaper. I always was supplied with plenty of soft drinks so I was real popular.

"Dad started the chicken business in Cadiz, Ky., later moving to Clarksville, Tenn., and even later to Corinth which was a railroad center. He organized the Noel Produce Co. He'd find out poultry market conditions in Chicago or New York and ship carloads of live birds to wherever he'd get the best price. He had to have someone

on the train to feed them. When refrigeration came along, it put him out of the chicken business."

He later got into the beer business and, after Alcorn County, Miss., voted beer out, set up the Acme Distributing Co., in Birmingham, Ala., and handled Fox Beer out of Chicago, his son said. "Later, he probably thought about the soft drink business as a way to supplement his income."

After the Noels got into the beverage business, they had a tough time naming their beverage, "so Dad just shrugged his shoulders and said, 'We'll call it Noel's Cola'."

The company bought syrup from the Virginia Dare Extract Co., founded by former Garrett & Company chemist Bernard H. Smith in 1923. Garrett was founded in 1835 and in 1919 was ordered to reduce the alcohol content in its wines because of nationwide Prohibition. Smith developed a line of fruit flavors under the Virginia Dare name, which Garrett had adopted as a brand name for its wine.

"The Virginia Dare Company sold us fruit-flavored

drinks (orange, grape, peach and any other fruit flavor you can think of) and a 7-Up-type called 'Korker.' That and a Dr. Pepper-like drink called 'Dr. Davis' were my favorite drinks," Stanley remembered. "They were put up in 6 1/2- and 12-ounce bottles." He didn't recall the name of the glass works that produced the bottles.

The aquamarine bottles had applied color labels featuring the face of a girl "that looked just like Mary Sue's face," he said. The labels are red and yellow and show a girl holding a bottle. "It's a Real Treat," she says.

After the family became involved in the beverage business, Stanley found himself the chief bottle washer.

"We'd use a heavy solution of caustic soda which would eat up anything in the bottle. I had to work all night during the summer months when the soft drinks sold the most. Lots of my friends came in to work during the hot weather months. I learned everything. I took sugar, mixed it with water until it became syrupy and added the Virginia Dare extract. I'd sit there several hours, holding four bottles in my hand. I had to inspect every bottle. During the winter months, our trucks would bring back half a load. We had to unload the trucks to keep the bottles out of the weather so they wouldn't freeze."

After the start of World War II, sugar became scarce, but the senior Noel had cut a deal with a



1938 parade in Corinth, Miss., publicizing Noel's Cola and its Virginia Dare product line. Stanley "Little Chick" Noel played a French horn in the high school band. (Courtesy of Judi Noel Cooke.)



Herman Noel (right) in his produce company warehouse in Corinth, Miss., about 1922. Nay Allen is on the left, but the two young men are unidentified. Noel established branches in Booneville, Baldwin, Toledo, Tupelo and Calham City, Miss., buying poultry and eggs from Jackson, Miss., to Jackson, Tenn. (Courtesy of Judi Noel Cooke.)

candy company in Jackson, Tenn., 50 miles north of Corinth.

“I’d drive a truck to the candy company and pick up a couple of barrels of candy syrup. The metal crown caps also became scarce during the war, so we developed a little mold, made used ones look like new and then spray-painted them,” Stanley said.

The Noel’s Cola bottling plant was located along a railroad siding across from the city jail.

For something to do when times were slack, “I’d watch the police haul people into the jail,” Stanley remembered. “No part of my life was any better than my teenage years.

“Dad was kind of a character. He liked to dance a jig. He’s just pull up his pants legs and dance. He had lots of friends. But he smoked a pipe and contracted cancer of the jaw. His first Social Security check arrived after he died at age 62.”

Noel’s Cola went out of business in 1944 or ‘45. Its bottling equipment was sold to the Royal Crown Cola Company, which is sort of ironic because, Stanley said, the family drink “tasted more like RC Cola than anything else.”

(Thanks to Kathy Hopson-Sathe for providing the Garrett Wine/Virginia Dare history.)

Photo on previous page of bottle: 7-ounce Noel’s Cola bottle featured orange-and-red applied color label. Girl’s likeness said to be that of 11-year-old Noel’s Cola Queen Mary Sue Morrison. (Courtesy of Gregg Farrar.)



Left to right, Herman Noel and his wife, Arizona Mae Noel, with granddaughter, Judi, circa 1949. (Courtesy of Judi Noel Cooke.)



Noel’s Cola used a variety of advertising gimmicks for the beverages it handled, including the pocket pencil clip and matchbook shown here. (Courtesy of Judi Noel Cooke)



Among beverages in the Noel’s Cola line were Virginia Dare fruit drinks and a Seven-Up-type drink called Korker. (Courtesy of Judi Noel Cooke)

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