

## Standardized” Coca-Cola Bottles: Contour Bottles Last of the Breed

By Bill Porter

The famous contour or “Hobbleskirt” was not the first standardized Coke bottle. In fact, it was the last.

In late July of 1899, Benjamin Franklin Thomas and Joseph Brown Whitehead had returned from Atlanta to Chattanooga, Tenn., with their contract to bottle Coca-Cola. The only reservation Coca-Cola’s Asa Candler had expressed was that they do nothing to harm its already priceless trade mark.

By late in 1899, the Chattanooga bottling plant was in operation. It was incorporated on Dec. 9. Interestingly, the nearby Chattanooga Glass Company (located just across the Tennessee River in Georgia) did not begin operating until 1901. So who made those first Coca-Cola bottles? No one seems to know.

The new partners have left us with no clue. They were too busy arguing with each other to worry about our interests. One of their principal disagreements was about the color of the new bottle. Thomas believed it should be amber while Whitehead preferred clear glass.

Soon they agreed to disagree – and split up. Whitehead divided a map of the country into two parts and Thomas chose his half: the territory within a 50-mile radius of Chattanooga and much of the east coast (except for New England, which did not bottle until 1916), and the west coast. Thomas, of course, encouraged his bottlers to use amber glass. Most did most of the time.

The crudest-looking Chattanooga amber bottles (and surely Thomas used them in his own plant) do not name the state and have a large “J” in a diamond on their bases. If this is indeed a maker’s mark, it is not listed in Toulouse’s classic *Bottle Makers and Their Marks*.

An early clear bottle from Chattanooga that also omits any mention of its state has a small “C” within a diamond on its base. Could this clear bottle date to the earliest period before the breakup? Both these bottles, as well as many other clear and early bottles from such plants as Nashville, Tenn. (established 1902) and Birmingham, Ala. (established 1902), have the script Coca-Cola embossed on the heel, the lower-most area of the side of the bottle.

Bottles of this design are ideally suited for, and were probably intended to carry

a paper label that further identified their product. While such heel script bottles are undoubtedly very early in Tennessee and other Southern states like Georgia, they can be very late from such states as Rhode Island where one heel script bottle is dated as late as 1924. Of course, Rhode Island is in the New England territory and that was a special case, as we shall see later.

Meanwhile, Whitehead, financed by J.T. Lupton, moved to Atlanta and began bottling there in 1900. His earliest bottles (at least the earliest “looking” bottles) are the large letter PROPERTY OF crown top heel scripts from Atlanta, Gainesville (established 1905) and a few other Georgia cities. Many of these have a “C” within a diamond mark (similar to that from Chattanooga) on their bases. Could these be from an early, as yet unknown bottle maker? Or, for that matter, could they be Chattanooga Glass Company products? (This mark is not listed by Toulouse).

These large letter bottles did not remain long in production, but along with other heel types they were certainly among the first “standardized” Coke bottles. Only a few more plants opened in 1901, among them Cincinnati and Norfolk, Va., but things soon got rolling.

Soon, a more modest middle script with more normal size letters appeared and is seen from nearly every eastern city which bottled before 1908, often with the city in a rectangular slug plate (which could be easily changed). These bottles are well designed and often very colorful. They are immensely popular with collectors.

It seems likely that the bottle manufacturers themselves first tried to standardize their bottles in order to stay competitive.

About 1906, the Root Glass Company (established November 1901), of Terre Haute, Ind., began producing a front-shoulder script bottle with the city’s or bottler’s name prominently displayed in a center oval slug plate. This attractive type is found dated as late as 1911 at perhaps 10 or 12 bottling plants in Illinois, Louisiana, Nebraska, New York and North Carolina. and perhaps others. It was also copied by many other bottle manufacturers.

By 1908, Root was making a strange-looking, bottom-heavy heel script bottle

with “TRADE MARK REGISTERED” at the front side shoulder and “THIS BOTTLE NEVER SOLD” at the rear city side. These are known to me from Columbus, Ga. (established 1902) and Columbus, Ohio (established 1905) in clear glass and in amber (one is dated 1912) from Portland, Ore. (established 1907).

These two Root types were apparently contemporary. The slug plate type was probably directed at those bottlers who claimed their bottles by requiring a deposit (usually 5 cents at that time), while the funny looking heel script type went to those who preferred to claim their bottles by appealing to the honesty of the consumer. I don’t know how a label could have been attached to one of these oval slug plate bottles without obscuring the slug plate, but I believe it was done.

Finally, probably late in 1912, Seymour Hirsch, Coca-Cola’s ever-harried patent attorney, tackled the problem of standardization himself. He ordered that all future bottles bear the trade mark on both shoulders and the base.

So the shoulder-to-shoulder base script Coke bottle was born, and the Coke bottle was “standardized” at last, except, of course, for those many bottlers who preferred to keep their own types – and did! Only the hobbleskirt would solve this thorny problem once and for all. But even that wasn’t a complete solution. At least one plant (Greenville, S.C.) continued ordering a straight-sided bottle that advertised its Verner Springs, until at least as late as 1937!

Many other straight sides with Spenserian script Trade Marks were issued long after they should not have been. Some of these were just careless errors, as in the cases of Richfield, Utah, and Winona, Minn., both of which are dated in the 30s, and Columbia, Mo., in the late 1920s. Others may have been simply continuations of earlier bottles such as Auburn, Maine, which may be found dated 1924 and 1928. Springvale, Maine occurs with the “R” within a triangle on the base, a symbol for Reed Glass that supposedly was in use from 1927 or later. Generally, any script straight-sided dated after 1925 is considered to be an error, but we try to be a little more lenient with New England, since it was a bit “out of the loop,” we might say.

Strangely, the Hutchinson bottles, which are undeniably an earlier type, never seem to precede the crown tops at any given plant. A recent small hoard of Jasper, Ala., Hutches occurred with a similarly small number of middle script crown tops. Jasper, as well as Bessemer, did not even begin operations until 1907, by which time several hundred plants were busily filling all the crown top bottles they could buy.

The fact that Hutchinson bottles were banned by the then new Food and Drug Administration the year before seems to have been irrelevant in rural Alabama at least. The only other named city to issue a script Hutchinson Coke bottle is Birmingham, which began operation in 1902. Interestingly, their Root Glass Company Hutchinson is a number behind their crown top – indicating that it was a less important bottle – at least as far as Root was concerned. And with a shelf life of 10 days or less, one can easily imagine it would not have seen more than very specialized use.

Yet as late as 1902, Biedenharn was still ordering Hutches. Perhaps he had developed a following down in Vicksburg, Miss. But watch out – many of these high grade survivors so prized by collectors today were made by Root Glass – indicating they cannot possibly date from before November 1901 when Root began operations.

The “PROPERTY OF” Hutch has been attributed to Atlanta, but I’m not sure on what grounds, except perhaps the wording is the same as on those early Whitehead bottles.

The story of crown top manufacturers could not be told in an hour (or a day), even if it was well understood, which it is not.

There are many different named manufacturers, which are fairly straight forward, but there also are apparently a great many unnamed ones and they can make any real understanding difficult. Maybe next year, one of you can tackle this problem. I recommend you start with a copy of Toulouse’s book.

Hobbleskirts arrived on the scene slowly. Apparently, they did not begin to become available until early in 1917. The root bottles are dated (all Root bottles from 1909 onward are), and a collector friend who looks for these has found several dated 1917 and 1919, and of course many later dates. But he has seen only a couple dated 1918, which indicates there may have been some early resistance to the newfangled thing. No bottle I have ever heard of is

dated 1916 and a letter dated in the fall of that year on display at the (now defunct) Schmidt Museum in Elizabethtown, Ky., says, “The new bottle should be available by early spring.”

An odd situation developed in which Spartanburg, S.C., had hobbleskirts in 1917, but little Lake City, S.C., was still ordering straight-sides in 1920. The older bottles seem to have been much loved and saved. (This situation repeated itself in the early 1960s when many small plants like the one in Montross, Va., on the northern neck began hoarding any embossed Coke bottles that came through the line. Many of these had the Montross name on the base).

The last era of personalized Coke bottles was ending. I know I hated to see it go. I despised the white-letter Coke bottles, as I call them. The ones I remember had blank bases. I still don’t think much of those. But now many of the early white letter bottles (those few that still had city names) are very hard to locate in nice condition. Those dated before 1964 are from named bottlers, so they are real and not the meaningless “random” base plates invented to satisfy customer demand from 1965 on.

Of course, many late embossed bottles are tough, too, but not those from Montross, Va.

So I believe the straight-sides were saved, if not hoarded, while the 1915s, still unloved, were left to circulate in the same way the white letter bottles were 50 years later.

The earliest hobbleskirts, other than Root’s, have no date or manufacturer’s marks. Often they have very thick base plates and very often they are that pretty light blue color.

By order of the Coca-Cola Company dated July 23, 1919, manufacturers had to identify their bottles with a discrete mark and usually a date. But they were still thick-based and blue for a while. All bottles before 1925 are bubbly. In that year, glass makers learned to draw the batch from the center, rather than at the top of the mix. That put an end to most of the bubbles.

City names were officially required by an order dated May 13, 1918, and the wording of this order answers a question I have always had about this: why did they need to use city names this late? By then, surely no one cared whose bottles they used anyway. But Coca-Cola did! Here is what was said: The city and state of each bottling plant location must be shown on the bottom of each bottle “so that we could

keep a record of the plants that are bottling Coca-Cola and make certain that bottles are being sold to only authorized bottlers.”

There are many blank-based 1915s. One would expect these to be the earliest bottles, but in fact, they tend to be the later dates of the 1915 patent period. I don’t know why this is, or why blank base bottles are very rarely seen from the 1923 patent date period (1928-38).

There are many unusual hobbleskirts, but none more so than the primitive hand-finished ones produced by the Laurens (S.C.) Glass Works until 1919. That was the year they finally got a fully automatic bottle machine. The Laurens bottles are almost always a pretty bluish color, but I have one in green and one (believe it or not) that’s half blue and half green!

Coca-Cola wanted its bottles to be a standard “Georgia” (or really a Terre Haute) green color. But many bottle makers produced only beautiful blue-colored glass. In order to obtain the required green, they added metals like copper to their mix.

During World War II, copper was needed for the war effort (some of us still remember the steel pennies of 1943). You will find that many, if not most, of the Patent “D” bottles dated from the war years. Those from the Chattanooga Glass Company and Laurens Glass Works are of a more bluish tint than earlier or later ones. This also applied to bottles from western Owens-Illinois plants.

Lynchburg, Va. Glass Works had a neat gray-colored bottle that’s very hard to find with city names and virtually all were dated “20.” I have seen one 1919.

Pink bottles were supposed to be a thing of the past by the hobbleskirt period, but they occurred at Laurens Glass in 1925 on 1915s and again in 1928 on 1923s. Some of these are occasionally offered in a deep purple color that was artificially enhanced (“nuked.”) There are a few light blue 1923 bottles. Those I have seen are usually Chattanooga Glass Company products dated 1929.

Speaking of color, I want to say a word about the amber hobbleskirts that are suddenly appearing everywhere. A few experimental dark amber hobbleskirts were made in the early 1960s. They have no city names and they were never put into circulation. Those that appear on the market with city names are being produced by a Florida dealer who sells them for \$3 each at bottle shows as curiosities.