

Proud to be an American

By Charles David Head

In 1893, James Esposito and his brother, Vincent, who were emigrating to the United States from Casoli, Italy, were thrilled to see the Statue of Liberty as their ship entered New York harbor.

After passing through immigration on Ellis Island, the brothers made their way to Philadelphia, Pa., where they found work as bakers in a predominantly Italian neighborhood. They boarded at Frank Pumbo's halfway house at Eighth and Catherine streets. (Pumbo later opened a popular nightclub).

They worked hard and saved enough money to open a bottling business at 706 Fulton Street. In addition to becoming distributors of Poth's Beer, they manufactured a wide variety of soda waters, selling them in a wide variety of Charles Hutchinson's bottles embossed with an American flag. Hutchinson was the son of a Chicago bottler who patented his internal stopper system in 1879.

It was the brothers' way of paying homage to their adopted country, letting everyone know they were proud to be Americans.

Their bottling business was successful, but about 1900 for reasons unknown, James Esposito, just 24 years old at the time, decided to pull out of the partnership and establish his own soda water business. He purchased adjoining houses at 812 and 814 Washington Avenue, with the larger, five-bedroom house at 812 serving as the

family's living quarters because he was married and had fathered children. The house next door sometimes served as a temporary residence for other Italian immigrants who sometimes worked at the bottling business located in a garage between the two dwellings.

As his business grew, James built a large, two-story addition to the garage-bottling plant that extended all the way to Alter Street. During the renovations, the business was moved to 612-614 Fitzwater Street and Hutchinson bottles bearing that address exist. Later, the business returned to its Washington Avenue addresses.

He continued the tradition of ordering flag-embossed Hutchinson and crown-top bottles that saluted the country's free enterprise system. Only in America could a poor Italian immigrant achieve great success at business through hard work, honesty and shrewd business sense.

Bottles embossed Giacomo Esposito and Giacomo Esposito, the equivalents of "James" in Italian, also exist. (Note: There is no "J" in the Italian alphabet, so Giacomo is a misspelling).

In the spring of 1905, James Esposito became one of the first bottlers to be awarded a franchise from the fledgling Koca Nola Company in Atlanta. Entrepreneur Thomas H. Austin organized



James Esposito holds his horses as a friend occupies the wagon seat. Check out those wooden Koca Nola cases.

the soda water company in February of that year. That same year, James also helped organize the South Philadelphia Sons of Italy.

He probably sold more Koca Nola than did bottlers of the drink in 15 other states and the bottles in which it was sold have become collector's items. The Hutchinsons come in aquamarine, citron, straw yellow and honey amber. Later crown tops came in clear, aqua, teal and amber.

The Coca-Cola Company in 1912 took James to federal court to stop him from using the Koca Nola bottles because of the similarity in names. He lost the case and changed the name to Espo Cola and later Trio Cola, but the federal judge blocked those names, too. So James again switched names, to Primo Cola, and the judge approved the name. Perhaps there was a family joke there. Primo in Italian means first. James marketed Koca Nola through 1913 when the Koca Nola Company began closing out its business. The Austin company itself in 1910 lost its case after being sued by the federal government for reportedly having cocaine in its formula. The appeals process kept it in business, still shipping the syrup to its franchised bottlers, until 1914.

Later during the 19-teens, James began bottling a lemon-and-lime soda he named "Primo Gassosa." The second word meant



James Esposito, 60, founder of PRIMO Beverages from 1900-1938.



His son, Anthony Esposito, who owned the business from 1938-1974.



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carbonated soda in Italian and the syrups from which it was made were imported from Italy.

According to family members, the drink became very popular and James thought it was the best carbonated soft drink. James became famous in his native Italy and in 1922 traveled back there to accept an award for achievements in business at the Italian Manufacturing Exposition.

His daughter-in-law, Mary Cipollone, nee Esposito, was an artist who turned her talents into designing paper labels for the company soda bottles, as well as many marketing items.

During the early 1930s, representatives from the 7-Up Company in New York approached James in hopes of interesting him in a Philadelphia franchise. He turned them down, saying he would make his Primo Gassosa soda bigger and better than their drink.

In 1938, James passed away and his 37-year-old son, Tony, took over operation of the family business. Like his father, Tony was an astute businessman who took pride in his work. He kept the business thriving even as other South Philadelphia bottlers went out of business, no longer able to compete with the big brands.

However, during the early 1960s, the family business started to decline as bigger soda bottling manufacturers were able to operate more cheaply than Mom and Pop operations. In 1974, Tony Esposito closed the business, ending the family's 75-year-run.



4. James Esposito and friends, each with a Koca Nola in their hands, celebrate circa 1910-14



AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am indebted to R.J. Brown of Tampa, Fla., for permission to use his images of the flag-embossed sodas; to Robert "Bob" Esposito, James' grandson, for his Esposito Family History; to the *South Philly Review* story, "Bubbling Up," by Lorraine Gennaro. Material also was used from my story in the October 2004 issue of *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector*, "J. Esposito, The King of the Koca Nola Franchise." I would like to hear from anyone with information about the James Esposito family and artifacts such as bottles, business envelopes, letterheads or billheads. Charles David Head, 23549-001, P.O. Box 150160, Atlanta, GA 30315.

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