

## KOOL-AID

### “The Most Consumed Beverage for Kids” *and the bottles it came in*

by Cecil Munsey

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#### SECTION I

##### Background bottle history

A very interesting and often overlooked time period in the history of bottles, is the one between **1915** and **1945**. It was during that thirty-year period “**Specialty**” and “**Applied Color Labeled**” (ACL) bottles were invented and first utilized in the soda pop industry.

According to John J. Riley, Secretary of the American Bottlers of Carbonated Beverages from 1939 to 1957 and author of “A History of the AMERICAN SOFT DRINK INDUSTRY, Bottled Carbonated Beverages 1807-1957”:

*“The ‘**Specialty Bottle**’ Vogue. Glass containers of special form, configuration, or surface design were long known. But the development of a beverage bottle of such unique design that it would serve to identify the product contained in it, did not assume particular importance until the **Coca-Cola** patented bottle became widely used, following its introduction in **1915-1916** [Figure 1].*

*“It was during this period that the proprietors of such prominent branded drinks as NuGrape, Orange Crush, Try-Me, Chero-Cola, Whistle, Orange Kist, Dr Pepper, Double-Cola, Howdy, and many others adopted special bottles for their products....”*

According to Cecil Munsey, author of this article and the 1970 classic book, “The Illustrated Guide to COLLECTING BOTTLES”:

*“**Applied Color Labeling (ACL)**. This process is a relatively new method of enameling that was developed around **1920** in the United States but it was not until the **1930s**, however, that it began to replace the popular mold-created embossments [of the Specialty Bottle] as a means of decoration and identification. Applied color labeling is used almost exclusively today on milk bottles, soda water bottles and other common bottles. With this innovation, common bottle decorations became more complicated than they had ever been before.*

*“The process as originally developed consisted of powdering a borosilicate with a low melting point and mixing it with an oxide for color, and oil. The resulting paste was then applied to the bottle through a stainless-steel screen similar to the screen used in silk-screening. The*

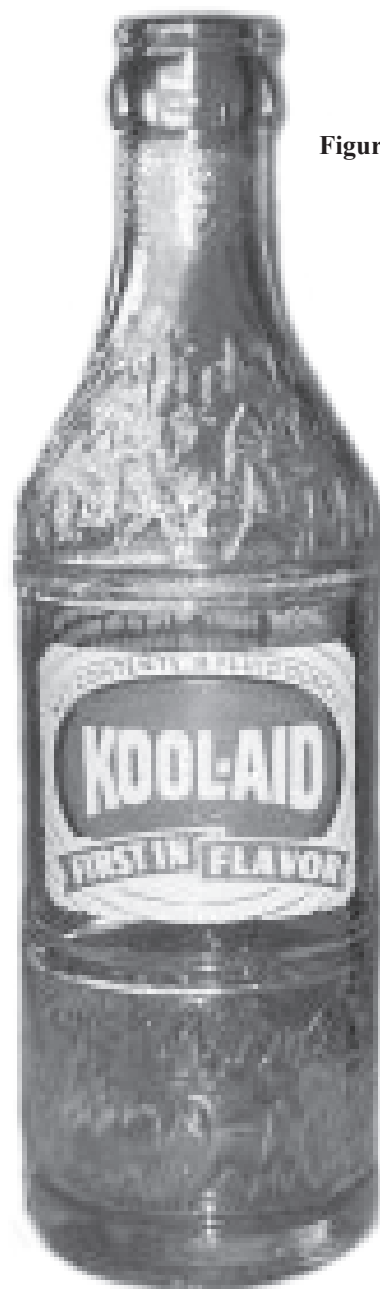
*screened bottle then had to be slowly dried at about 300 degrees in a muffle [oven] before another color could be applied. Since most bottles with applied color labels used two colors the process then had to be repeated for the second color before the bottle was fired in the muffle to fuse the paste with the glass. In the late 1940s it was discovered that by replacing the oil in the mixture with a thermoplastic wax or plastic resin which was solid at room temperature but became fluid and could be screen printed if moderately heated, the drying process was almost completely eliminated. The deletion of the drying step permitted two colors to be printed in rapid succession during a single trip through an automatic printing machine.”*

In Brian Wade’s recently published

Figure 9



Figure 10



book, DECO SODA BOTTLES, A guide to collecting those fancy embossed soda bottles of the 1920s and 1930s,” [see book review reference in the bibliography at the end of this article], he pictures a **specialty** bottle (page 51) and describes it as follows:

“KOOL-AID, clear, 8 oz., straight-sided bottle. Plain bottle, familiar brand. Icicle design on shoulder and lower section. Name on front panel with slogan ‘FIRST IN FLAVOR’. Patent date on bottom ‘JULY 16, 1940’. ‘KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN’ on reverse. I believe this is the same company known for their powdered drink mix.”

It was that final wondering and tentative sentence in his description that started the research trip I took to learn the history of Kool-Aid and to be able to answer the question – did Kool-Aid, the famous powdered drink mix ever come in bottles?



Figure 1

under the patented brand “**Onor-Maid**” [Figure 4]. In 1922 he added to his line of more than 125 different items ranging from face creams and lotions, medicines and salves, soaps and toilet waters to food flavorings, jelly making products, a soft-drink syrup called “**Fruit Smack**.” It was sold in four-ounce corked glass bottles (none of which seemed to have survived) and came in six flavors – Grape, Cherry, Raspberry, Orange, Root Beer, and Lemon. It was concentrated so that a family could make a pitcher full of the beverage for only pennies. But shipping it presented problems of breakage, leaking, and the weight of the glass when it was transported.

Perkins – who had admired Jell-O (itself a powdered concentrate) since he was first introduced to it as a youngster and had already perfected fruit pectin powders to make jelly at home – felt that Fruit-Smack could be reduced to a dry, concentrated, easily-

soluble form capable of being packaged in an envelope. He also reasoned that such a powdered drink mix could become a national product that would be of great interest to food brokers, especially if the product was attractively packaged. And that might allow him to get out of the time-and-product-intensive trust agent and mail-order business he had started to develop in 1900 when he was only 11-years-old.

His objective was to dehydrate Fruit-Smack by tinkering with the recipe, focusing on the right mixture of dextrose, citric acid, tartaric acid, flavoring and food coloring. By 1927 he had a Fruit-Smack-modified product he named “**Kool-Ade** [Figure 5].” He maintained the same six flavors and later added Strawberry. He trademarked “Kool-Ade” in 1928 in the name of the Perkins Products Company.

Government regulators eventually contacted Edwin Perkins and complained that “*Ade*” was a name reserved for fruit juice products, so the name was changed to “*Aid*.” The product became “Kool-Aid.” Perkins Products Company trademarked the “**Kool-Aid**” name in

## SECTION II

### Origins of Kool-Aid

“Fruit Smack” to “Kool-Ade”  
to “Kool-Aid”

By 1922 Edwin Perkins [Figure 2], a 33-year-old mail-order entrepreneur from Hastings, Nebraska [Figure 3] owned and operated the Perkins Products Co. He sold products by mail order and by trust agents

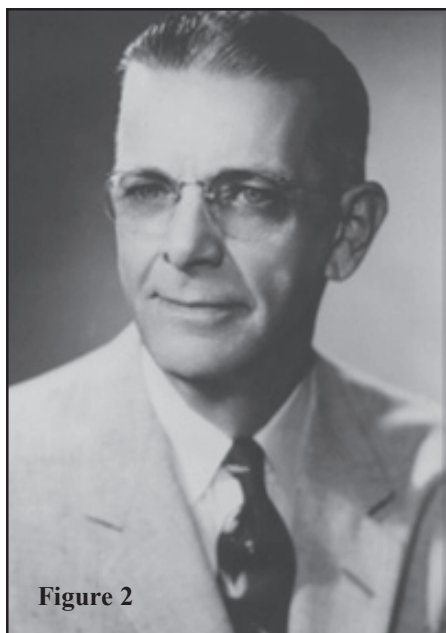


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



### 1934 [Figure 6].

There were other setbacks. Packaging took longer to perfect than expected, and the company missed the 1927 summer season. After experimenting with “asphaltum-laminate paper” (which leaked black, tarry material into the product) and hard waxed bread wrapping paper (resulting in envelopes which wouldn’t stay glued shut), Edwin settled on a soft waxed paper inner liner and a lithographed outer envelope in bright colors [Figures 5 & 6].

By 1929, with the Stock Market crash, the Great Depression had started and although banks all over the country were closing their doors and men were losing their jobs, the demand for Kool-Aid escalated. At ten cents a package (enough to make two quarts of fruit-flavored drink), Kool-Aid made enough glassfuls that families could have whole pitchers full on hot summer afternoons. It was also during this period that young pint-sized entrepreneurs learned to set up Kool-Aid stands on card-tables in their front yards [Figure 7]. From that time to this, almost every neighborhood in America features youngsters selling lemonade and/or Kool-Aid at stands in their front yards.

By 1931 business was so good that Perkins Products Company became a national firm by relocating the company to Chicago, a better distribution point and closer to sources of supply.

In 1933 the price of Kool-Aid was cut in half, from ten cents a package to five cents to ensure sales would continue to increase. It worked – the price stayed at a nickel for over thirty years. Net sales of Kool-Aid increased from \$383,286 in 1931, to \$1,564,292 (five years later) in 1936. The decrease in price, according to a 1956 article in *Advertising Age*, was “a daring gamble that made the company.” [One of the proofs of that 1956 statement is in the fact that by 1950 the company was producing 323,000,000 packets of Kool-Aid annually, for a net sales of ten and a half million dollars.]

Since Kool-Aid was a seasonal product and didn’t fit into the regular merchandising pattern, Perkins developed the successful marketing concept he called the “Silent Salesman.” Kool-Aid was packaged in one-ounce envelopes, forty envelopes of six assorted flavors in one colorful lithographed counter display carton which showed the range of flavors [Figure 8]. The forty-package carton was



^ Figure 5



Figure 7 ^



Figure 6 >



Figure 8

an innovation in display techniques at the time and helped promote Kool-Aid even as it sat on the grocery shelf.

### SECTION III

#### Kool-Aid in bottles

While never approaching the sales of Kool-Aid in traditional paper packages, beginning in 1936 Kool-Aid was sold in bottles [Figures 9 and 10]. From the mid-to late- 1930s, as described in the early paragraphs of this article, the bottles used were “Specialty” bottles [Figure 9].

During the 1940s and 1950s, the newer

“Applied Color Labeled” (ACL” or “painted-label”) bottles were utilized [Figure 10].

Both types of Kool-Aid bottles utilized the popular Crown Cork closure. [Figure 11].

Kool-Aid in bottles was selling well, being bottled in franchised plants around the country. It required large amounts of sugar and as a result wartime sugar rationing handicapped the sale of the drink in bottles. A traditional packet of Kool-Aid was a flavored concentrate to which sugar and water had to be added. As a



Figure 11

result, packets outsold the bottled product. By 1950, the Perkins Products Company was producing 323,000,000 packets of Kool-Aid annually, for a net sales of ten and a half million dollars. Kool-Aid was one of the most recognized products in the country. The trademark was also registered in Canada in 1938 and Mexico and Cuba in 1951.

In 1953, Perkins sold the business to General Foods (which would merge with Kraft in 1989). Within a year, General Foods introduced a new advertising campaign for Kool-Aid, featuring the Smiling Face Pitcher [Figure 12] that remains Kool-Aid's trademark today. Root Beer and Lemonade flavors were added to the original six flavors in 1955 and pre-sweetened Kool-Aid was developed in 1964 and redeveloped in 1970.

#### SECTION IV

##### Edwin Perkins and the days before Kool-Aid ("The beginnings are here at the end.")

Black inventor Edwin Elijah Perkins (1889-1961) developed "Kool-Ade" in 1927 [Figure 5] – a modification of an earlier product named, "Fruit Smack." It was, however, in 1900 that the complete story of the entrepreneurial Edwin Perkins

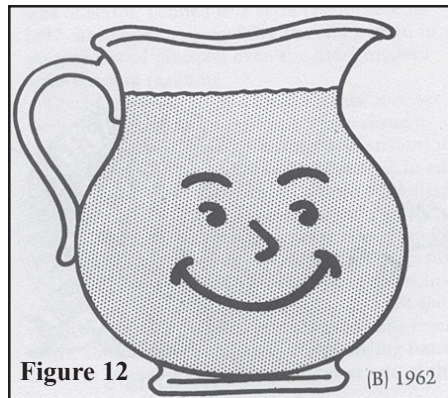


Figure 12

(B) 1962

begins. He was 11-years-old in 1900 and his father had just traded a farm near the village of Hendley (Nebraska) for a general store that later became known as "D. M. Perkins-General Merchandise."

In his after-school hours, Edwin began clerking in the store. Kathryn ("Kitty") Shoemaker, a friend of the Perkins family and the girl he would marry in 1918, brought to the store some packages of a new product she had purchased in Hastings – the new product was called "Jell-O," and it came in "Six Delicious Flavors." Edwin was entranced with the new product and persuaded his father to carry it in the store. For the rest of his life, he recounted how the Six Delicious Flavors influenced his decision to get into the pre-packaged food business.

A couple of years later in a magazine (sold in the general store) Edwin saw an advertisement, "*Be a manufacturer – Mixer's Guide tells how – write today.*" He did write to the advertiser in Ft. Madison, Iowa, to get some formulas and labels with his name printed on them. The labels read "Manufactured by Perkins Products Co., Hendley, Nebraska."

He made a nuisance of himself in his mother's kitchen, making pungent extracts, medicines and other concoctions suggested in the "Mixer's Guide" packet of materials he had sent away for.

During the following years, Perkins graduated from high school, published a weekly newspaper, did job-printing (on his own printing press), served as postmaster and set up a mail order business called "Perkins Products Company" to market the numerous products he had invented. (Perkins and his printing press in 1909 is featured here as Figure 13). During those early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he also made and sold bluing, perfume, and other preparations that he made in his mother's kitchen.

He sold his products through sales agents who were sent merchandise and rewarded with a premium when they sold the goods and sent in the money.

In 1918, Perkins married his childhood sweetheart, Kitty, and developed a remedy to kick the tobacco habit called "Nix-O-Tine" (pronounced almost like "nicotine"). When veterans

returned home from World War I, many with the cigarette habit picked up in the army, the tobacco remedy business prospered. The patent medicine was composed of herbs to be chewed, large flat herbal tablets to be swallowed, a hideous-tasting mouth wash with silver nitrate in it and a powerful herbal laxative. The combined effort was guaranteed to cure anyone, and for those who stuck to the program, it probably did.

Business was so good that in 1920 Edwin and Kitty moved to Hastings, eighty miles east of Hendley. Its location on several railroads and highways made it a better distribution point than the small village of Hendley.

In 1921 he went to St. Louis for a month to learn more about the household products business. He worked with a small firm which contracted to make bulk orders of lotions, creams, patent medicines, and the like and studied their production and distribution techniques.

When Perkins returned to Hastings, he spent a year preparing to introduce his own "Onor-Maid" line of products [Figure 4]. During that time he supported his family by "Nix-O-Tine" sales.

To sell the household products, Edwin set up a nationwide system of representatives who sold door-to-door from sample cases, using the same procedures as salesmen for Watkins, Jewel Tea, Fuller Brush and similar companies.

Continued on page 67

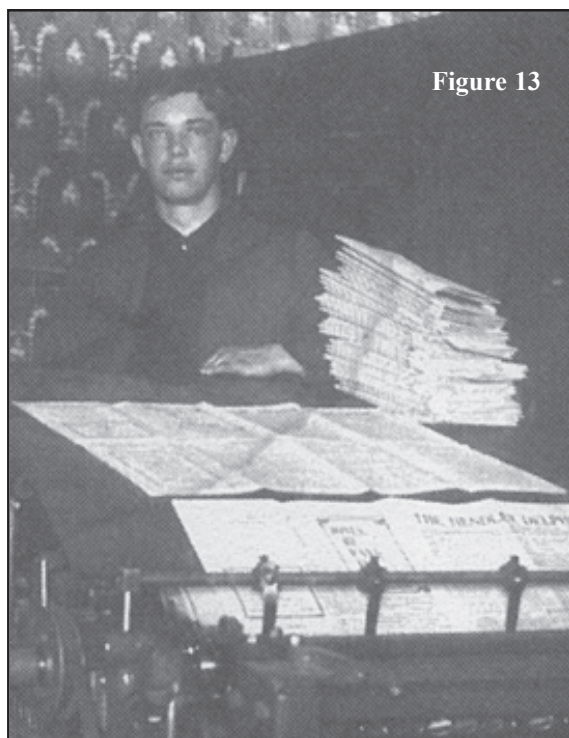


Figure 13



His door-to-door salesmen came from advertisements he printed and distributed himself. One flier read, "I Want You to Be My District Manager," post cards soliciting product representatives who could "Earn \$10 a Day," and booklets telling managers how to secure Perkins agents. "Our District Managers are now permitted to appoint both men and women agents." Another advertisement offered new Ford or Hudson automobiles to the most enterprising managers. Edwin made a "Personal Guarantee" that any hard worker with a \$3.50 sample kit could succeed as a Perkins agent.

One of the most popular items in the sample kit turned out to be the summer soft drink "Fruit-Smack," a liquid put up in four-ounce corked bottles. It came in six flavors. It was concentrated so that a family could make a pitcher full of the beverage for only pennies and a cup or two of sugar.

Those were the days **before** Kool-Aid. See previous **SECTIONS II & III**, as already presented, for a comprehensive explanation of the invention of Kool-Aid and how it became "**The Most consumed**

**Beverage for Kids" and all about the two types of bottles it came in."**

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