**History of the Soda Water Industry
in eastern Connecticut :**

by: Tom Beardsley:

Eastern Connecticut has a long history of soda water manufacture and bottling. The history of soda water, or soda pop, can be traced back to 18th century scientists in London and Paris, attempting to duplicate the natural effervescent, mineral rich waters from springs across Europe. It was believed that the effervescence of the water contained healthful properties. Joseph Campbell, an Englishman, first patented carbonated water in London in the 1790s. Flavoring was added, and "soda pop" was invented. The pop was the sound made when the stopper or cork to the container was removed. In Britain, the word "pop" is used to describe carbonated beverages, in the United States, the "pop" has been dropped, and the drinks are more commonly referred to as "soda." The craze really took of in the recently independent American colonies, and by 1807, bottled, flavored soda water was highly popular in the United States, the young nation having access to literally millions of springs of fresh mineral waters.

John Pemberton (1831-1888), an Atlanta pharmacist did not know what he was starting with the invention of caramel colored syrup in 1886. When diluted and carbonated, it became Coca Cola. This soda was patented in 1893, and sold in every state by 1897. Pemberton's bookkeeper, Frank Robinson, was the marketing genius that developed this "tonic for all ailments." It originally contained cocaine from the coca leaf and was rich in caffeine from the kola nut. The cocaine was removed in 1905. Robinson also pioneered the idea, in 1899, of selling the Coca Cola syrup under license to bottlers and soda water manufacturers around the state. The syrup arrived in Willimantic in 1916, when the Hosmer Mountain Bottling Company began manufacturing Coca Cola under license at premises on Mountain Street.

  The Haran Company's delivery wagons
  appear in front of the 1890 "Haran Block"
  in the summer of 1894. 

The city of Willimantic was built in the Willimantic River valley, in an area containing endless supplies of fresh, clean mountain spring water, one of the reasons why settlements grew here in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. After rapid growth and urbanization after the Civil War, several companies were formed which took advantage of the supplies of clean spring water.

In 1884, Irishman Thomas Haran began manufacturing soda from the local springs around Willimantic, and went on to deal in ale and lager beer. Proof of his success lies in the existence of the Haran block on Main Street, Willimantic. Built in 1890, this fine brick structure housed Haran's bottling works and distribution center. Haran's specialty was the installation of soda fountains in towns around New England. Today the Haran block is home to a "Wink and a Smile." Haran's bottling company went out of business in 1896.

William Clark's daughter sits atop the Hosmer delivery wagon in this 1912 photograph. .

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 John F. Hennessey, an early eastern
 Connecticut soda water manufacturer. 

A Jewett City native, John F. Hennessey, organized a grocery store in 1880, opposite Recreation Park, at 187 Main Street. In 1884 he became a distributor for wines, ale and beer, and in 1892 he opened a bottling and carbonated beverage plant on Valley Street. Hennessey claimed to be a pioneer in the use of "liquefied gas" to "charge the waters," and produce a "purer, more tasteful and refreshing beverage." Hennessey died in 1901, and the soda company ceased production. Michael Sullivan began bottling soda the following year. He formed the Willimantic Bottling Company, located at 623 Main Street, and supplied eastern Connecticut with spring and soda water until 1916. Sullivan retired that year, and left the field open for William Clark's Hosmer Mountain Bottling Company.

Willimantic's well-known Irish-American entrepreneur, Dennis Shea operated a soda bottling works in a large brick building located at the old junction of Main and Union streets. Shea dealt in ale, wines, lager and mineral waters from the late 19th century until 1905. The building was demolished in 1973. Soda manufacturing continued in Willimantic in the 1920s when the proprietors of the new Nathan Hale Hotel, unable to sell alcohol because of prohibition, formed the Nathan Hale Bottling Company in the newly built hotel in 1927. It boasted of its "high grade mineral sodas" and Nathan Hale brand beverages, but it became a victim of the Depression, and ceased operation in 1931.



The Nathan Hale Hotel, pictured in 1931, was the home of the Nathan Hale

Bottling Company during the years of prohibition.

In 1884, E. A Frink began utilizing spring water to manufacture " temperance drinks" at Quinebaug, Connecticut. He moved his bottling plant from Quinebaug to the " Crystal Spring" at Chaplin in the early 1890s. The spring was referred to as " boiling" with " exceptionally pure, crystal-like water bubbling over a rocky ledge." Frink's Crystal Spring Bottling Company boasted " modern facilities" producing many " carbonated beverages." " His preparations are evenly excellent, and his famous specialty, Frink's Root Beer, has attained a widespread reputation. His transactions are at wholesale, supplying retailers throughout a large amount of territory. And though most of his shipments are made by rail, he has two teams in constant attendance on near-by trade"

Dennis Shea's bottling works on
Union Street, and delivery wagon,
are captured in this 1891 photograph.

Frink's Crystal Spring Bottling Company stopped trading in 1900, but reformed in 1913, producing root and birch beer, hop beers, sodas and spring water, operating from the rear of 443 Jackson Street, Willimantic. The proprietor was N. L. Frink, but this operation moved to North Windham in 1915 and 1916. John Latusek also dealt in soda water at 27 Ash Street, Willimantic, and Timothy Sullivan manufactured root beer at 190 Jackson Street, Willimantic.

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The "Cold Spring Bottling Company" operated in 1909 from 112 North Street Willimantic, and in 1924, the D. J. Shippee Bottling Company of North Windham was formed. Duty Shippee and his wife Ella operated the Rocky Spring Bottling Works in North Windham, bottling spring water and series of sodas, including ginger beer, root beer, lemon and lime, Howdie and Canadian Club, until 1935. From that year, the Hosmer Mountain Company became the lone soda manufacturer in the city.

Arthur Potvin was born in Willimantic in 1923, and his family moved to North Windham when he was a teenager. He recalls: "My father and the family moved out to North Windham in 1937 or 1938, and purchased a house on a seven acre lot across from a Mr. Shippee. The house was located on the water side of old route 6, just past where the dike meets the road today. Mr. Shippee was an old man when I was a kid, and I never knew that he'd ran the Rocky Springs Bottling Company from there, because the spring was just a ripple by then." This early exposure to soda water must have made an impression on young Arthur, because he went on to work for many years for Pepsi Cola in Willimantic, and in 1957 he purchased the Hosmer Mountain Bottling Company, and ran it up until his retirement in 1985.


  The city of Willimantic as seen from the peak of Hosmer
  Mountain in 1894.

Willimantic's Hosmer Mountain Soda Company was organized in 1916, as the "Hosmer Mountain Spring Bottling Works," by William Elijah Clark (1878-1951), a Yankee of the old school. Clark was born in Hebron, Connecticut. He arrived in Willimantic and worked as a clerk at a grocery store on Church Street. From 1905 he began investing in real estate, and purchased a lot just north of reservoir road from Charles Young. This land contained the spring that eventually led to the birth of the Hosmer Mountain Soda Company.

The Hosmer "name" derives from Stephen Hosmer of Columbia, Connecticut who purchased a farm in Willimantic containing the "mountain" in 1800. His son, James D. Hosmer (1796-1889), was a well-known local resident and farmer. He was born in Columbia, and came to Willimantic as a young boy when his father purchased the "mountain" property. Stephen Hosmer built a house at the foot of the hill, on the old Columbia turnpike, which later became known as Pleasant Street. James Hosmer also built a house on the farm.

In 1912 William Clark purchased a house, 215 Mountain Street, adjacent to the spring, and started dealing as a spring water salesman, bottling the water from the Hosmer Mountain Spring. He was also working at the same site as an automobile dealer in partnership with his brother George. After George Clark relocated to Holyoke, Mass., in 1915, William Clark concentrated his efforts on manufacturing flavored soda water from Hosmer Mountain spring water. The first ad for the new company appeared in the 1916 Willimantic City Directory, and stressed the fact that the company's high-grade beverages were manufactured from "pure spring water." Ginger ale was a specialty. All flavors were sold in 8, 16 and 24 oz bottles.

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In February 1917, the building on Mountain Street, where Clark stored his water, soda and his new Ford delivery truck, burnt to the ground. An overheated stove ignited the fire that Clark kept lit to stop his bottles of spring water from freezing. Clark salvaged little from the debris, but he was well-insured and received $816 for the building, $800 for the contents and $445 for his delivery truck. The city's fire department stated that Clark's entire bottling factory would have been destroyed, had it not been for the speed of their new Buick fire truck.

Abraham Beller was born in Russia. He immigrated to the United States with his parents, and lived in New York City. He came to Willimantic in 1923 and purchased the Hosmer Mountain Bottling Works (Telephone number 425) and buildings, located at 215-217-219 Mountain Street, and moved in with his family. 
The first ad for the new Hosmer Mountain Company appeared in the Willimantic Chronicle on June 30, 1923, urging readers to purchase for July 4. "Ask for Hosmer Beverages because they're bottled with the best of flavors and Spring Water right from the Hosmer Mountain Spring." The special flavors were advertised as ginger ale, coca cola, root beer, birch beer, orange crush, lemon crush, lime crush and cherry blossomnot forgetting many other "delicious and refreshing drinks" bottled at the company's "sanitary plant." Beller had purchased the right established by William Clark, to bottle Coca Cola from concentrate supplied by direct from the company. This practice probably ended at the time that Coca Cola built their own bottling works in town in 1940. This building is now occupied by Blockbuster Video.

Abraham Beller became known as "Mr. Willimantic." From the end of Prohibition until 1950, Beller and his wife Lena owned and operated a well-known and popular package store on Main Street. He also built the "Beller Block" on Main, next to the Capitol Theater. He was president of Temple B'nai Israel from 1940 until 1957, and was a member of the board of directors of the synagogue and served as chairman of the cemetery committee, being partially responsible for the building of the new Temple B'nai Israel at 327 Jackson Street. In March 1945, Beller sold the Hosmer Mountain Company to Frederick W. Meyer (1903-1957) and Herman W. Neher of West Hartford.

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The 1945 transfer of ownership included 217 Mountain Street, the entire plant and a water spring considered then to be one of the best in the state. The Bellers moved to 209 Mountain Street. Meyer and Neher expanded their business in 1955 by purchasing the Mathieu Bottling Company of Taftville. Meyer also ran the Credit Bureau of Greater Willimantic from 217 Mountain Street. Fred Meyer died on August 19, 1957. Since 1957, the Hosmer Mountain Company has been a part of the Potvin family. Arthur Potvin recalls the business just after he purchased it.


A Hosmer Mountain Company ad from 1923.

"The bottling plant was ancient and needed a lot of maintenance. I learnt the soda making business as I went a long. The soda syrup salesmen were very helpful, and they supplied a lot of the recipes for good soda. The biggest seller was ginger ale, followed by orange and root beer. Coke and Pepsi had the market tied up for cola, but I eventually made a cola from syrup produced by a manufacturer in Manchester. The work of manufacturing soda was more labor intensive in those days. The carbonization for the soda was supplied indirectly from dry ice, which came in big chunks and had to be chopped up. A main ingredient of the syrup was 100% cane sugar, and that came in large bags that had to be manually hauled. It was hard work. Today, the sweetness comes from fructose. I retired when I was 62, on February 8, 1985, and my sons Andy, John, Chucky and Bill took over the business."

Despite intense competition from the major companies, the Hosmer Mountain Company brings a little of Norman Rockwell’s "Americana" to eastern Connecticut. It also retains the name of the city's historic northern landmark, Hosmer Mountain.

Bill Potvin, the current co-owner of the company remembers that, "the Hosmer Corporate logo was adapted in 1960, and by that time every company and organization was beginning to adapt a logo, an identity." We also had a slogan "Delivered to your door for less than at the store." My father cooked this up, and it appeared on the delivery trucks. We actually never had a permanent fleet of trucks. We had independent deliverers who painted our logo on their trucks. In the sixties home delivery was very, very, popular. A lot of soda was sold by people waving the trucks down in the street, in a similar fashion that the ice cream vendor is waved down today, and people would buy soda there on the spot. Times have changed, and we have changed to some extent, but we still try and keep the old heritage alive. Soda sale and consumption is very much a part of Americana, particularly in the returnable, glass bottles we use."

Support your local soda company and contact Hosmer Mountain for details of their home delivery service and information on their new line of gourmet sodas.

And for those who live across America and around the world, why not try some genuine American soda pop -- the way it tasted before Coke and Pepsi dominated the world market.