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Bottling Industry Has Deep Roots Here (Part One of Four)

Thomas Haran's Main Street soda bottling and manufacturing plant and premises, pictured in 1893



This column will occasionally examine some of the area's historic businesses. Some are with us, but some are long gone. For the next four weeks we'll look at the area's long relationship with mineral water and 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 off 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 a 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 who 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. That's how it arrived in Willimantic in 1916, when the Hosmer Mountain Bottling Company began manufacturing Coca Cola under license at premises on Mountain Street.

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 was built to house Haran's bottling works and distribution center. Haran's speciality was the installation of soda fountains in towns around New England. Today the Haran block is home to the "Grapevine" and a "Link and a Smile." Haran's bottling company went out of business in 1896.

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. Continued Next Week