

May 17, 1997

City's Soda Company Outlasted Competition (Part Four of Four)

The Hosmer Mountain trucks prepare for delivery on a snowy morning in early 1966.



Abraham Beller was born in Russia. He came 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 blossom not 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 today 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.

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 remembers the business, just after he purchased it. This is an excerpt from an oral history interview with Mr. Potvin, conducted on April 2, 1997:

"The bottling plant was ancient when I purchased it, and it 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 a 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 which 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. Earlier this year I conducted an oral history interview with current co-owner, Bill Potvin. Here's an excerpt:

"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." This was cooked up by my father, 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."