January 1973

The Archives of the Coca-Cola Company

Linda M. Matthews
Emory University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive

Part of the Archival Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol1/iss2/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.
The Coca-Cola Company was fifty-three years old when Ralph Hayes, then a vice-president, sent a memo to Board Chairman Robert W. Woodruff, "Let's have an archives!" Hayes was not a frustrated archivist, nor was he thinking of the numbers of researchers who would be eager to tell the story of his company. He was a practical man who felt that the company should have its records close at hand, organized and supervised by an archivist trained in the techniques of records control and knowledgeable about the business operations and the history of the Coca-Cola Company.

The historic memo was written in 1939. In 1941, the Coca-Cola Company hired its first (and present) archivist, Wilbur George Kurtz, Jr. Because of the unsettled conditions during the war and post-war years, and the difficulty in dealing with executives ignorant of, or indifferent to, both the purpose of the archives, and the sheer magnitude of the task of establishing a formal archival operation for so large a company, Kurtz was unable to get his archives in operation until 1958. The seventeen years between the dream and the reality were not wasted. Kurtz used those years to learn about every phase of the company's operations and to become conversant in economics, finance, corporate law, and trademark law. When the archives opened its doors, Kurtz knew his company and its holdings.

*Mrs. Matthews is Reference Archivist, Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, and a member of the editorial board of Georgia Archive. Except where otherwise noted, the information in this paper was obtained from two interviews with the Archivist of the Coca-Cola Company, Wilbur George Kurtz, Jr., on December 8, 1972, and January 19, 1973.
Like all business archives, the Archives of the Coca-Cola Company was created solely for the benefit of that company, to enable it to "use its past to promote its future," and not necessarily for the sake of historians, sociologists, or other researchers. Archivist Kurtz likes to say that the company uses its archives defensively and offensively. Defensively, the archives is called upon to furnish evidence of the advertising claims, slogans, and promotions of the Coca-Cola Company and "to support positions and arguments taken by legal counsel."\(^1\) On the offense, the archives provides information for sales promotions and advertising, and its resources are used in indoctrinating new personnel. In addition, the archives helps to promote a good public image by making items of memorabilia available to film companies, to merchandising firms for special promotions, and to authors writing about collectible items, and it serves as a display center to portray and dramatize the history of the company's business. In this way the archivist functions as a public relations representative, and the good public image of the company often depends upon his effectiveness in handling his records and his responsiveness to public interest in Coca-Cola.

The holdings of the Coca-Cola Company archives exist on at least three levels of visibility and accessibility: (1) the art and memorabilia collections; (2) the advertising and promotional material, audiovisual records, and marketing research; and (3) the recollections, interviews, and other materials relating to the company's "personal" life.

The most visible and accessible is the collection of art and memorabilia. These pieces have been described and indexed in Cecil Munsey's *The Illustrated Guide to the Collectibles of Coca-Cola* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1972), an informative and attractively assembled picture catalog for the rapidly growing coterie of memorabilia. On this level the archives functions, in addition to its "offensive" role in the company, as an historical museum reflecting the changing tastes and attitudes of the

---

\(^1\) Wilbur G. Kurtz, Jr., "Business Archives in the Corporate Function," a speech delivered before the American Records Management Association, 1969.
American public. This memorabilia collection includes the fountain trays advertising Coca-Cola, small change trays and larger serving trays, many bearing the image of the "wholesome" American girl so dear to company founder Asa Candler's heart; the bottle for Coke in all its changing shapes before the hobble-skirt bottle was adopted and standardized in 1916; the fans, calendars, thermometers, wall clocks, and numerous other items given away as promotions. The illustrations on trays and calendars have made collecting them part of the current wave of nostalgia. They are not merely quaint, but provide a whimsical and sometimes poignant view of a nation's aging process, its passing fancies and changing concerns.

In addition to the memorabilia, the archives holds an art collection valued in the millions of dollars. These are the original oil paintings for many advertisements promoting Coca-Cola by such artists as N. C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell, and Haddon Sundblom, the latter being the artist who gave several generations of Americans their image of Santa Claus as the rosy-cheeked, round-bellied jolly man who was often caught resting after a hard night's labor with a "delicious and refreshing" bottle of ice-cold Coke.

In the history of the Coca-Cola Company, the power of advertising looms large. The company has spent over $700 million on advertising through the years. As one might expect, files of the company's advertising are an important portion of the records in the archives. An extensive print and negative file, occupying approximately 10 feet of shelf space, contains glossy prints of all the illustrations used in advertising Coca-Cola since 1886. The prints are arranged by types (i.e. posters, magazine advertising, motion picture stills, calendars, and historical photographs), each in chronological order. Included in the section of posters and magazine advertising is a special section on World War II advertising. The historical portion of the print file contains photographs of early wagons, trucks, bottlers, executives, and early homes of the Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta, the latter being prints of original oil paintings by Wilbur G. Kurtz, Sr. Each print is given a code number; the entire file is subject-indexed as well. When a copy of a particular print is needed, the code number serves as an easy retrieval guide to the negatives.

In addition to the visual advertising records, the
archives has a complete collection of all advertising copy used since 1886, arranged chronologically and bound in scrapbooks. All slogans used by the company over the years have been arranged chronologically, indexed and cross-indexed. Comprehensive files are maintained on advertising and promotions for every phase of the company, no longer a one-product business. A separate file covers overseas advertising copy and art. The company's four-volume study, "A History and Analysis of Advertising for Coca-Cola," offers an evaluation of advertising copy used in all media between 1934 and 1955. Tapes of radio commercials, dating from "Singing Sam" in 1935, have been preserved and indexed, as have both audio and video tapes of television advertising. These are arranged by product title, then chronologically.

Supplementing the collections of advertising and memorabilia are statistical records from the company's research in marketing and market psychology, fields in which the Coca-Cola Company has long been a leader. Over the last fifty years, the company has conducted thousands of interviews to determine the general public's habits, likes, and dislikes, and has studied traffic patterns on streets and highways and growth rates in urban areas. Summaries of the data from this market research are preserved in the archives, including records of distribution, sales, field programs, and schedules for promotions from the company's earliest days.

While a company's advertising, memorabilia, and research data are indispensable to the concern itself and to scholars, the history of an organization is often the story of the men who made it and the decision-making processes in which they participated. Unfortunately, few of these records are available for research.

The early records of the Coca-Cola Company and its founding fathers are scarce. For example, most of the detailed account of John Styth Pemberton's discovery of the sweet syrup later known as "Coca-Cola" and the development and circulation of ideas among the men responsible for the product's success, was recorded by Hunter Bell, an earlier executive of the company. Bell's research was done both before and after Kurtz began organizing the archives. The fruits of his research are retained in the archives and in company publications, although the sources for his research are not.
Research done by Bell, Kurtz, Franklin Garrett, an authority on Atlanta History and author of several articles on Coca-Cola, and others is carefully preserved in the "R" file. This "R" file is the archivist's ready reference for any research paper that has been written about Coca-Cola or any significant information that has required some research. The papers and information therein are subject-indexed in a card file.

The efforts of the archivist to obtain recorded and written recollections of early company executives have helped to overcome the deficiencies of company records. A considerable portion of Kurtz's time between his appointment as archivist in 1941 and the opening of the archives in 1958 was spent talking with and learning from the founding fathers, urging them to write their reminiscences or to allow tape-recorded interviews. Most of the recollections that have been acquired are written, although the archives does have the beginnings of an oral history collection.

One of the earliest of the written recollections was that of Charles Howard Candler, son of Asa Candler, the founder of the Coca-Cola Company. Kurtz persuaded the son to write his account of the elder Candler and the early days of the company, with which Charles Howard had also been associated. In 1945, Candler presented Kurtz with a typescript, "Thirty-three Years with Coca-Cola, 1890-1923." Inspired by this effort, Candler went on to write a biography of his father: Asa Griggs Candler (Emory University, Ga.: Emory University, 1950).

Another pioneer whose memoirs are a part of the archives was Joseph August Biedenharn, the man who in 1894 first bottled Coca-Cola, and who eventually established a great Coca-Cola bottling empire. Kurtz interviewed Biedenharn in 1944 and wrote an article about the venerable bottler. In the mid-1950s Biedenharn was persuaded to repeat his recollections before a stenographer and a recording machine. Although the recording was accidentally destroyed before it ever reached the archives, a transcription of the stenographer's notes survives.

G. Clyde Edwards and Chapman Root, Jr., with the Root Glass Company of Terre Haute, Indiana, the firm that designed and first manufactured the famous hobble-skirt Coke bottle, were brought to Atlanta in 1949 to tell the
story of the creation of the familiar bottle, now one of the company's trademarks. Locked in a room with Kurtz, Franklin Garrett, young Root, and Coke-bottling executive DeSales Harrison, Edwards told for the first time the detailed story of the creation and design of the famous contour bottle. Kurtz took notes, the typescript of which is now in the archives.

Other leading men in the story of Coca-Cola whose recollections are preserved in manuscripts, special publications, and/or on tape are Harrison Jones, Chairman of the Board, 1942-1952, Samuel Candler Dobbs, Advertising Manager and later President, 1919-1920, W. F. Barron, a pioneer bottler of Rome, Georgia, 1901- , DeSales Harrison, Chairman of the Advisory Committee, Coca-Cola Bottling Co. (Thomas), Inc., Chattanooga, Tennessee, W. F. Landers, Chief Accountant, the Coca-Cola Company, 1910-1948, and Ross C. Treseder, Vice President, Fountain Sales Division, 1913-1934. For the most part, these written and taped recollections and interviews are not open to researchers.

In general, records of the legal transactions and litigations of the company and information on quality control are not available in the archives. The financial and legal records of the company are held by the Legal Department. The archives does have summary material on the "chain-of-title" documents, including the inventory drawn up on July 21, 1887, listing the physical assets which John Styth Pemberton sold to Asa Candler and his partners, and the famous $1 contract, often called the most incredible document in the history of American business, by which Candler sold the rights to bottle Coca-Cola in practically the entire United States for one dollar. The original of the transfer of title when Asa Candler, in 1919, sold Coca-Cola to Ernest Woodruff and the Trust Company of Georgia is framed and hangs in a prominent spot in the new Visitors' Center, an adjunct of the archives, opened early in 1973. The archives also holds the minutes of the Georgia Corporation, 1892-1919, but all records of the Delaware Corporation (since 1919) are retained by the Secretary of the Company.

The Coca-Cola Company does not have a records management program according to the classic definition. The records management function lies with the Computer Group known as Management Information Systems. Archivist
Kurtz is informed when a decision has been made in a particular department to dispose of certain records and is usually given the opportunity to examine the records for possible preservation in the archives. Those items having some historical significance or useful information are saved. For the most part, the records scheduled for destruction are routine and no longer useful to the company, but the archivist occasionally discovers records that he feels should be saved for history's sake. In this way the archivist has built a considerable file of correspondence from Coca-Cola bottlers, not a complete file by any means, but correspondence which gives some information and insight into the history and problems of the bottling industry and its relationship to the parent company. Many of these letters are saved simply for the letterheads alone, since these often give information not readily available elsewhere.

The archives has a "Moon" file. It contains perhaps a half dozen or more letters from private individuals, as well as from bottlers of Coca-Cola, dated in the early 1960s, requesting bottling rights on the moon. The interest in such rights was generated by the planning for the moon missions early in that decade. The letters from private individuals, having no business ties with the Coca-Cola industry, were rather serious in approach. The bottlers' letters were written in a tongue-in-cheek manner, but Kurtz knew that the bottlers were serious in their zeal to take advantage of every opportunity to add to their territories, however distant such might be.

The Archives of the Coca-Cola Company suffers from the malady of all such repositories—a lack of space. The reception room, work rooms, and offices on the main floor of the Coca-Cola USA building in Atlanta, although occupied only since January, 1972, already are crowded. The archives does have two storage areas, one in the basement of the Coca-Cola USA building (Archives I), the other in a warehouse (Archives II), totaling approximately 3,200 square feet of space. Here are preserved records which deserve retention, but which, in the archivist's words, are not really "exhibitable."

Researchers from outside the company are allowed use of source materials in the archives on application. They must make appointments for use in advance and be
prepared to discuss their specific research projects with the archivist. The archives in the past has assisted students of business administration, marketing, and history; sociologists investigating the impact of advertising; fashion designers surveying older fashions to anticipate and direct future trends; and professional as well as amateur writers.

The company has never opened its full archival and legal records to scholarly scrutiny, nor has it ever commissioned its own history, though it is considering doing so. The only book-length treatment of Coca-Cola and the men who made it is The Big Drink by Ely J. Kahn, Jr., which developed from a series of articles Kahn wrote for The New Yorker. Mr. Kahn freely admits that his book is not definitive. Although he alludes to sources of information within the company, the author does not name them or document any of his information. The Munsey book, The Illustrated Guide to the Collectibles of Coca-Cola, is devoted primarily to information concerning materials promoting Coca-Cola through the years. Munsey discusses the history of the company and its bottling industry, but not thoroughly.

However frustrated scholars may be over their inability to gain access to the more substantive records of the Coca-Cola Company, they should be grateful that the company has preserved its heritage. Only the tenacity of the archivist and a few others who understood the importance of preserving the records of the company's history have kept the archives going in the face of occasional corporate hostility.

Business historians are not without hope. Probably no one could have predicted that Standard Oil would open its records to Ralph and Muriel Hidy to write what has become the most famous history of an American corporation. Surely a scholarly history of the Coca-Cola Company,

\[2^2\text{The address is: Wilbur G. Kurtz, Jr., Archivist, Coca-Cola Archives, The Coca-Cola Company, P. O. Drawer 1734, Atlanta, Georgia 31701.}\]

one rich in lively anecdotes and peopled with strong and colorful characters, would be widely read and further enhance the company's reputation.

Who could resist reading about an institution which could welcome astronauts returning from a moon expedition with a sign lighting Broadway in New York City: "Welcome back to Earth, the home of Coca-Cola"?