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Coca-Cola's Funnier Moments

by

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Throughout the years, Coca-Cola has employed its fair share of celebrity pitch-people, not the least famous of whom was Joan Crawford. That's right—Pepsi-Cola's pitch-lady for many years and one of Hollywood's biggest stars from the 1930s to the 1960s.

But then, as some remember, she went on to wed Al Steele, president of Coke's arch enemy, Pepsi-Cola. For years after ending her relationship with Coca-Cola, she was seen on movie sets, in magazine ads, on television, and at bottling plant openings always with a can or bottle of Pepsi in her hand. Why even hubby Al Steele wasn't exactly weaned on Pepsi. In fact, Steele, like Crawford, launched his soft drink career in Coke's marketing department.

A funny thing happened to Coca-Cola on the way to China. The brand was introduced there in 1928 to a throng of eager, albeit confused, consumers—the words Coca-Cola had been transliterated to Chinese characters with peculiar after effects.

To find the nearest phonetic equivalent to Coca-Cola required a separate Chinese character for each of the four syllables. Out of the nearly 40,000 Chinese characters, there are only about 200 that are pronounced with the sounds Coke needed, but many of those had to be avoided because their meaning was inappropriate.

While Coke was looking for its own answer to the Chinese tongue-twister, many local Chinese retailers were having their own problems. Some had made

their own signs to tout the availability of Coca-Cola, but they used any old group of characters that sounded remotely like Coca-Cola. One of these homemade signs sounded like Coca-Cola pronounced, but the true meaning of the characters in combination was "female horse fattened with wax." Another version read, "bite the wax tadpole." [A similar thing happened to the famous Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound on its way to China. The product's name as translated became "Smooth Sea's Pregnancy Womb Birth-Giving Magical 100 Per Cent Effective Water."]

The no-caffeine explosion caused quite a marketing stir a few decades ago, but did you know that it was an even bigger issue at Coca-Cola 90 years ago. In 1909, the State of Alabama drafted a bill to prohibit the sale of Coca-Cola "in the shape of drinks or syrup" because it contained caffeine. The politicians there recommended a fine of \$100 to \$500 for any violators, as well as a prison sentence of six months.

Obviously, the State of Alabama eventually acquiesced to the popularity of the beverage, but in retrospect, maybe Coca-Cola should have given in. As it turned out, Seven-Up got the jump in the no-caffeine segment back in the 1930s.

Sure you knew that Coca-Cola was promoted as an ideal brain and nerve tonic at the turn of the century. Still today some credit the beverage with specific medical properties. Pediatricians sometimes still prescribe Coke syrup for babies because "it soothes colicky infants."

In the early 1900s Coca-Cola was employed as a contraceptive, and it is still used for this purpose today in certain segments of our society. How many of you guys and gals ever carried a bottle of Coke on a date?

Not long ago a team of doctors at Harvard Medical School found that Coca-Cola classic is "four times better as a contraceptive than is new Coke. But diet Coke is best of all." The findings of these medical braintrusts was based on mixing sperm samples with each Coke variety.

Innovative people over the years have used Coca-Cola for many things. It has been used as a furniture polish, chrome cleaner, fire extinguisher, and even as part of a hypo solution in developing photographs. Several cookbooks have been published promoting the beverage as something that could be blended with solid foodstuffs.

While Coca-Cola Clothes had their official debut in 1985 via a licensing agreement between the soft drink marketer and Murjani International, Coke apparel had a much more inauspicious unveiling many years back.

Sometime in the early 1930s, a San Blas Indian found a metal Coca-Cola sign wedged in the bottom of a native canoe. Impressed by the sign's brilliant red color and unique symmetry of the script, the curious Indian took the sign back to his village on one of the San Blas Islands off the Central American coastline some 50 miles south of Canal Zone City. There the sign quickly became a needlework pattern for one of the kimono-shaped garments worn by the San Blas women.

As the story goes, Mrs. James F. McKinley, wife of Brigadier General McKinley, purchased one of the "shirts" from a local Indian as she was passing through the village. Mrs. McKinley was attracted to the garment because of its bright color scheme and quality needlework. But at the time, she had no idea that the shirt bore the Coca-Cola trademark. She learned of the shirt's true inspiration only after she had the opportunity to give it a thorough cleaning

Warning: Ordering a rum and Coke could be hazardous to your legal standing. In a 1934 issue of *The Coca-Cola Bottler*, then executive vice president Harrison Jones cautioned bottlers to guard against the use of Coca-Cola in the concocting of any other beverage—especially those with an alcoholic content. The warning was meant to block any trademark violations. Jones suggested that highballs made with Coca-Cola should be labeled with some pet name. His recommendations? How about "Cuba Libra," or "Hobble Skirt Cocktail" (the latter a reference to the soft drink's traditional bottle shape).

The first bottler of Coca-Cola. The idea came to Joseph August Biedenharn almost causally in the summer of 1894. At the time, Biedenharn, age 28, operated a candy store in Vicksburg, Mississippi and supplied Coca-Cola fountain syrup to soda fountains in the town. He also bottled flavored soda waters which were very popular with the "country trade."

Noting that more and more people were asking for Coke on their visits to town, the idea struck him: why not pre-mix the Coca-Cola syrup and carbonated water in bottles, just like sarsaparilla, and extend the market beyond soda fountains.

Reminiscing on the event fifty years later, in 1944, Biedenharn is quoted as saying: "I just went to work and bottled Coca-Cola. I did not say anything to Mr. Candler [owner of the Coca-Cola company in 1894] about it, but I did ship to him the first two dozen cases of Coca-Cola I bottled. Mr. Candler immediately wrote back that 'it was fine.' You know, to this day he has never returned my bottles."

The hobble-skirt bottle has been used for many things other than to contain Coca-Cola. A favorite use was by the Seabees during World War II. They converted Coke bottles into electrical insulators.

What to do with an "empty" never posed quite the perplexing problem it does for a Kalahari Bushman in the 1984 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation's comedy-adventure, "The Gods Must Be Crazy." When an empty Coca-Cola bottle tossed carelessly from an airplane window over the South African desert region lands miraculously intact amidst a group of bushmen who have never seen a glass bottle—let alone one bearing the famed logo—the fun begins.

Coke's packaging and marketing strategists could not have envisioned more imaginative uses for the now classic bottle. From stamp printing fabric to pounding cornmeal flour, from a digging tool to a musical instrument, every member of the bushman tribe discovers a use for this gift from the gods. Unfortunately, there is only one Coke bottle, thus its possession becomes a cause of strife among the hitherto carefree natives. Even a passing baboon covets the prize.

Tribal leader, Xi (N!XAU), takes it upon himself to respectfully return the gift to the gods, but this proves easier said than done. Therein lies the tale and one primitive man's odyssey into the 20th century.

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