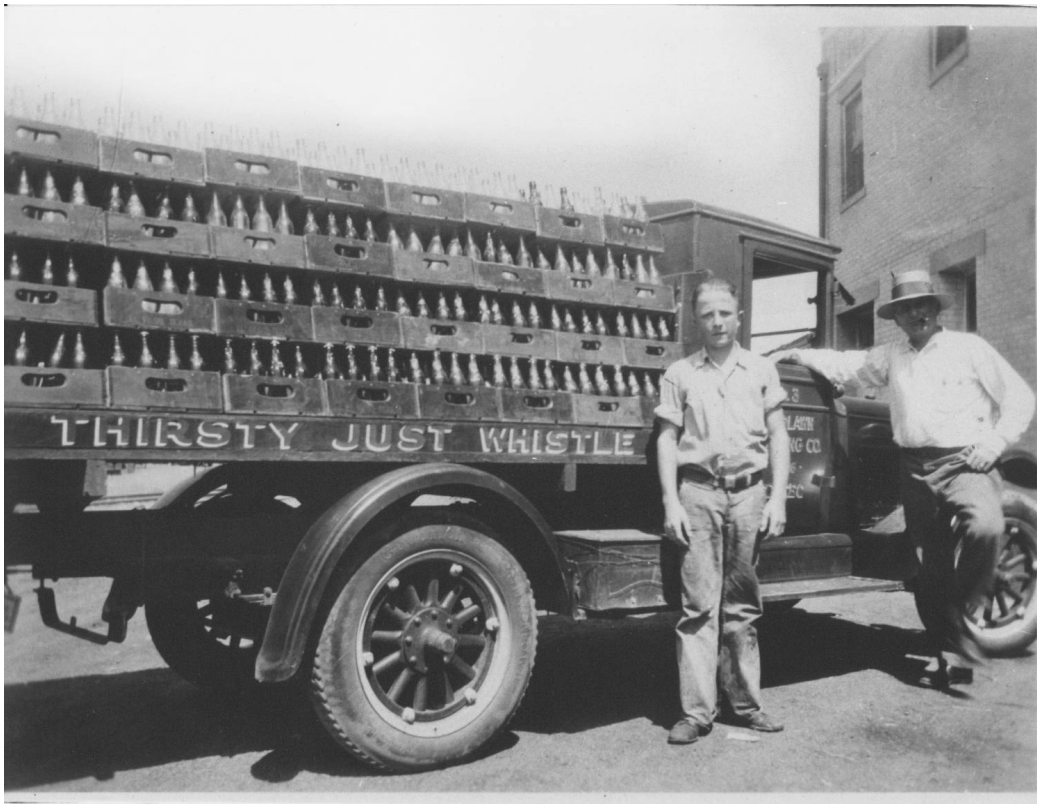


Bottles on the Border:

The History and Bottles of the Soft Drink Industry

in El Paso, Texas, 1881-2000



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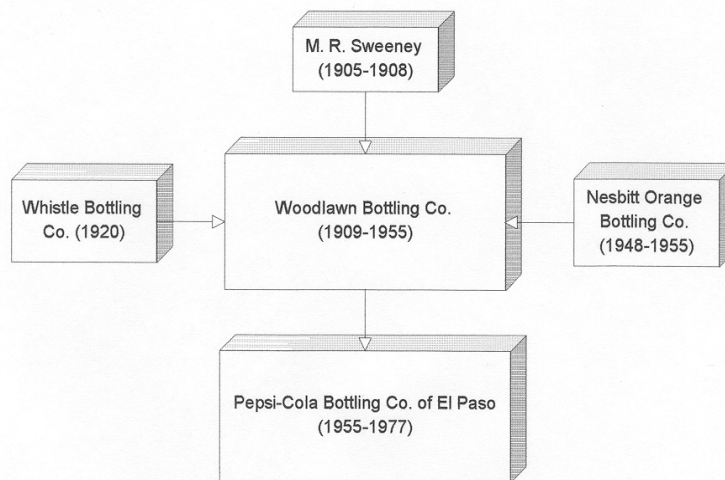
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Chapter 7a

Chapter 7a

Martin R. Sweeney and the Woodlawn Bottling Co.

In 1906, Martin R. Sweeney became dissatisfied with his occupation as a plumber and joined in the competition with Houck & Dieter, Purity Bottling and Manufacturing Co., and Henry Pfaff as an El Paso soda bottler. He soon took on a partner to form Woodlawn Bottling Company and grew into one of the most successful, long-term, family-owned businesses in El Paso. The firm began bottling Pepsi-Cola in 1935 as the first Pepsi franchise in the State of Texas and is known today as the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Co. of El Paso.



Martin R. Sweeney Bottling Works (1905-1908)

History

Martin R. Sweeney was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and arrived in El Paso in 1903 or early 1904. He began his life in the city as a plumber for Frank Riley, but transferred to the Frazer Brothers by 1905. In these early years, Sweeney was somewhat footloose, boarding with a variety of people and changing his living quarters at least annually. In the latter half of 1905, he made the decision that charted his course for the rest of his life. Like Lon Gardner (Purity Bottling and Mfg. Co.), Sweeney saw a need in the young city and set out to fill it. Liquor dealers, like Houck & Dieter and Henry Pfaff, had been the only soft drink bottlers in town, selling carbonated beverages to be used mostly as chasers (EPCD 1904-1905).

Sweeney set up his bottling works in 1905 on East El Paso Dr. The 1905 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map only shows one building that might be Sweeney's plant. The building, marked "Bottle Storage," fronts on an alley that runs between E. 4th and E. 5th Streets in the block between S. El Paso and S. Oregon (Figure 7-1). The building is mostly surrounded by tenements and seems like a probable spot for someone just starting in business. The location, however, may have proven uncomfortable; Sweeney moved to Alameda Ave. two years later. The 1908 Sanborn map shows the adobe building used by Sweeney as "Soda Bottling." The actual location is at the intersection of two alleys, one extending north/south between Alameda and Frutas, the other east/west from N. Latta to the north/south alley – just a block east of the brand new El Paso Brewing Assn. Brewery

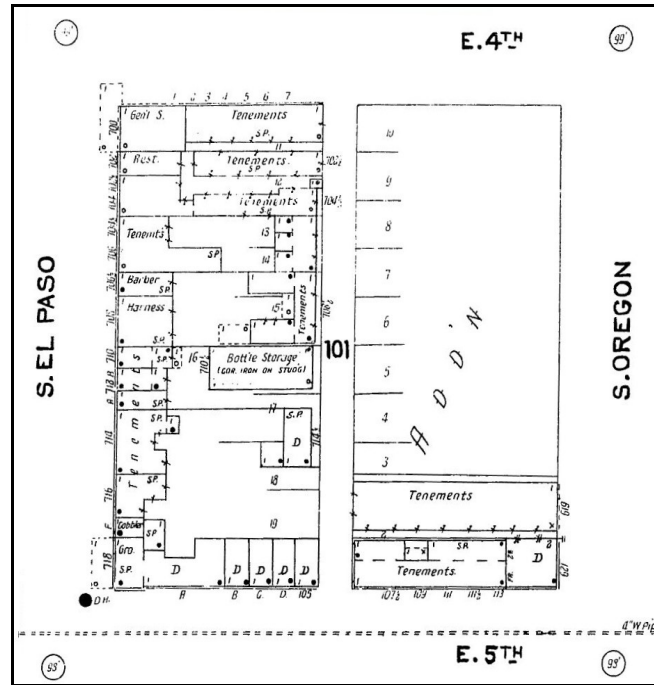


Figure 7-1 – First location of Sweeney's soda bottling operation (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1905)

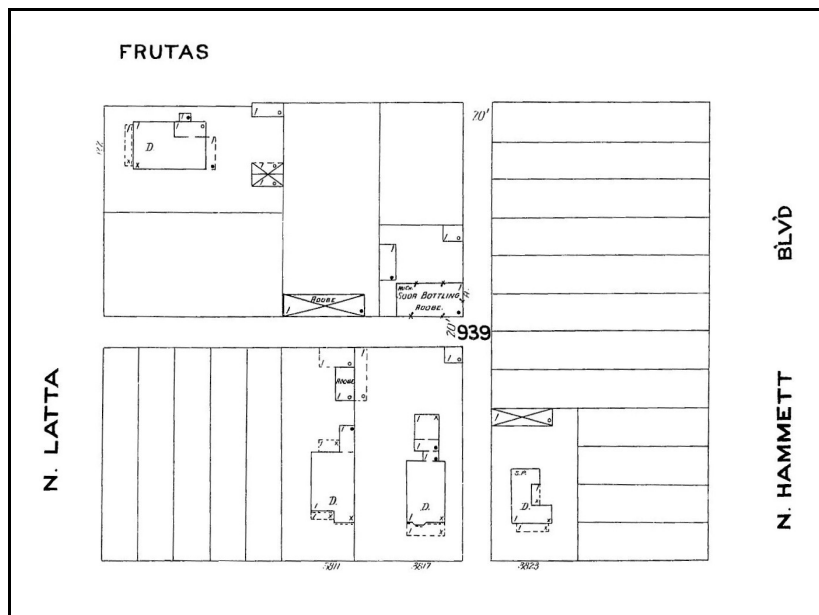


Figure 7-2 – Sweeney's second location (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1908)

(Figures 7-2 & 7-3). Sweeney seems to have been attracted to alleys, although that probably reflects his financial status as a struggling young businessman (Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, 1905 & 1908).

Sweeney also served on the city council later in life and was noted for his performance as an actor in city plays. In 1909 he found a new name for his operation (Condon interview; Condon letter; EPCD 1904-1909; undated newspaper clipping).

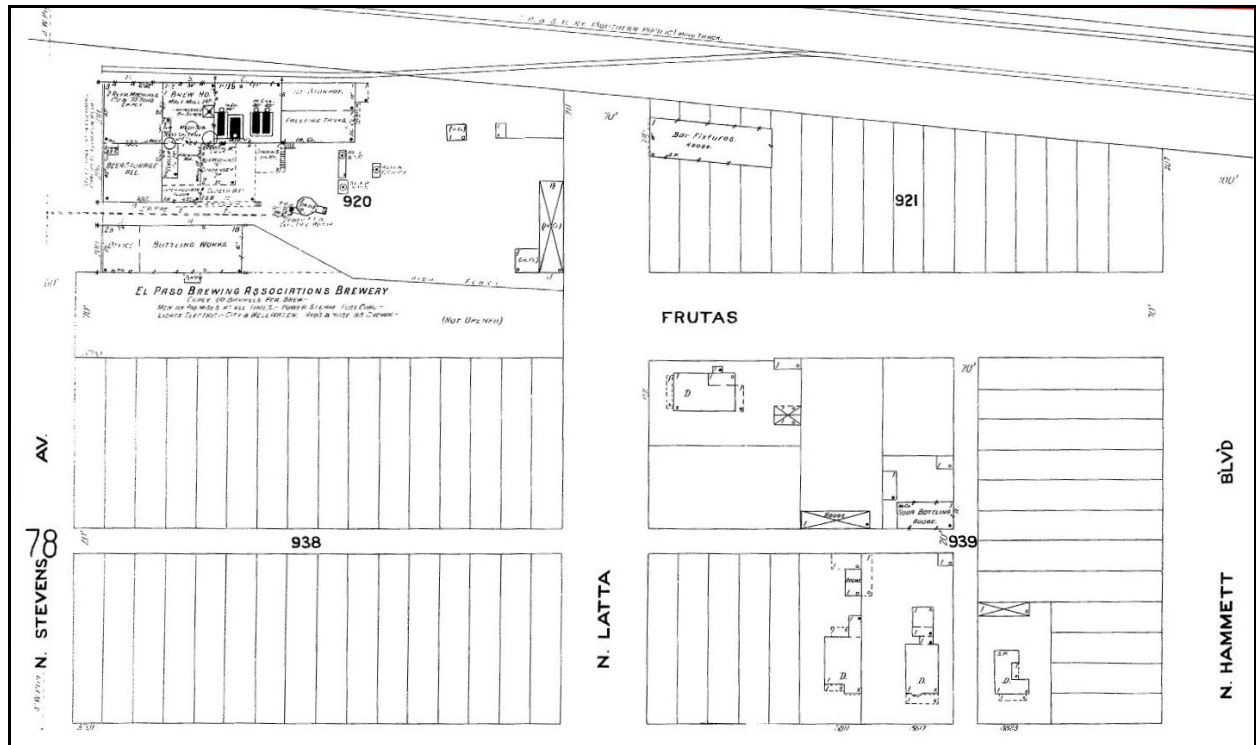


Figure 7-3 – Sweeney in relationship to the El Paso Brewery (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1908)

Bottles and Artifacts

M.R. Sweeney House Brand

Sweeney left no indication through advertising in the El Paso newspapers or city directories of what he bottled, and I have been unable to locate any examples of the early bottles during his first four years in business. It is probable, however, that such bottles would either be embossed with Sweeney's name or have paper labels that identified the firm, would have crown finishes, and could be dated to the years 1905-1908 when he was in business. Sweeney's bottles would have been mouth blown, as machine-made bottles were not in general use in El Paso until about 1912.

Woodlawn Bottling Co. (1909-1955)

History

The new business, Woodlawn Bottling Co., opened its doors on Frutas Ave. in 1909 under the proprietorship of Martin R. Sweeney (Figure 7-4) and John J. McArdle. McArdle came to El Paso about the same time as Sweeney and entered into the junk business. McArdle seemed to be an unusual junkman; in 1908, he advertised, “horns, hair, bones.” According to Angus and Harris, the company may have been named after Woodlawn Park, a favorite picnic spot as far back as the 1890s (EPCD 1904-1909; Angus & Harris 1993:145-146; Condon interview).



Figure 7-4 – Martin R. Sweeney (Courtesy of the Condon family)

By 1911, Sweeney was again the sole proprietor of the firm, and he moved the operation to 913 E. Second St. Woodlawn was an obvious success, relocating again to larger quarters at 800 S. Florence St. in just two years. Shortly thereafter, in 1915, Sweeney



Figure 7-5 – Margaret “Maggie” Sweeney (Courtesy of the Condon family)

married Margaret Condon, a choice that proved to be a wise one. Margaret (always called Maggie) took an active part in the business from the start and became a valuable asset (Figure 7-5). Prior to her marriage, Margaret had been a school teacher. She began her career in 1907 as the principal of Concordia School, No. 1, but changed to a regular teaching job at San Jacinto School the following year. She continued teaching at San Jacinto until her marriage to Sweeney. Margaret remained an integral part of the company for the rest of her life (EPCD 1907-1913).

The Florence St. plant was a two-story building where Maggie worked upstairs in the mixing room (Figure 7-6). When she changed mix (e.g. from grape to ginger ale) she would tie a cork labeled with the appropriate flavor on a string and pass it down to the family on the lower floor. On Friday afternoons, they would pool the money they had made that week, pay off the bills, and split up the rest (Condon interview).

During Prohibition, Sweeney briefly tried a cereal beverage (near-beer) called Barlo and distributed Blatz, formerly a Milwaukee beer. Mostly, however, Woodlawn bottled normal soft drinks, selling Whistle, Toltec Punch, Toltec Ginger Ale, and Toltec Grape along with “Pure Apple Cider In Bulk And Glass Jars” by 1920 (Figure 7-7). Woodlawn was one of the first bottlers in Texas to obtain a franchise for a company other than Coca-Cola. In fact, Woodlawn may have had the first Whistle franchise within the state. By 1922, only three Texas bottlers had obtained a Whistle franchise. The only other franchises within the state (30) were with Coca-Cola (Dunagan 2002).

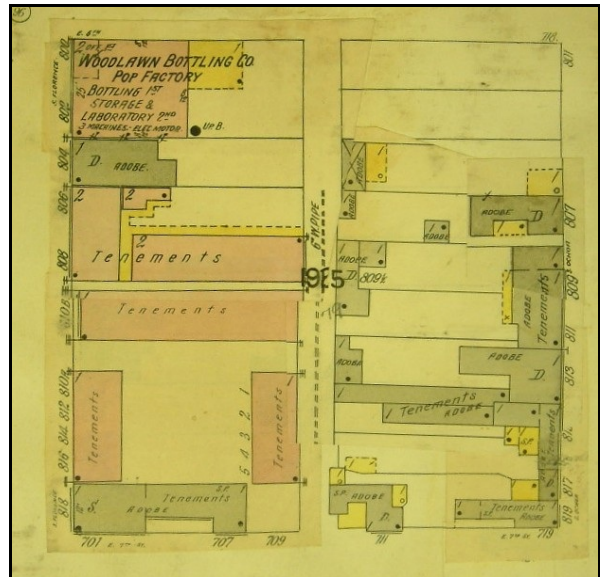


Figure 7-6 – Woodlawn Bottling Co., 800 S. Florence St. (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1927)

At some point, the company added Hires Root Beer.¹ The new drinks improved sales to the point where Sweeney bought a second delivery truck. About this time, Sweeney also operated a small bottling works in Juárez, a location where the family used to visit and picnic. Because of the growth in customers during Prohibition, Sweeney expanded his plant taking over most of the block. The following year, the company added True Fruit Beverages and boasted “We Control Whistle Syrup Rights for New Mexico and Arizona” (Condon interview; Condon letter; EPCD 1914-1921).

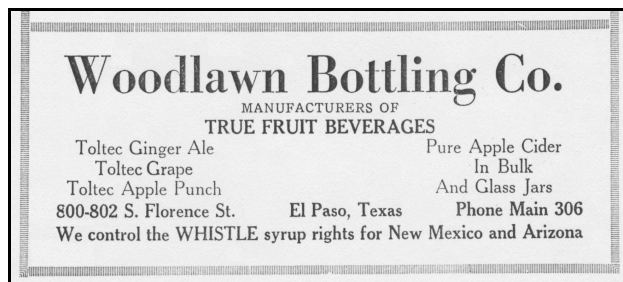


Figure 7-7 – Woodlawn ad (El Paso City Directory 1923)

Woodlawn incorporated in 1926 with Sweeney as president. Two years later (1928) Martin R. Sweeney died, setting a precedent that would later be followed by Empire Products Corp., Magnolia Coca-Cola Bottling Co., and other El Paso bottlers, where women became heads of bottling companies. These widows were *quite* successful in the El Paso soft drink business. As controlling stock owner, Martin’s widow, Margaret E. Sweeney, became president of Woodlawn Bottling Company and Whistle Company of El Paso (EPCD 1926-1928).

¹ I have never found a Hires bottle with either the Woodlawn or El Paso designation.

The stunning loss was followed almost immediately by the stock market crash that heralded the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929. The new president added Whiz and the newly-franchised Vess Dry Ginger Ale (the precursor of the later Vess flavors that were to become popular in El Paso in the 1960s) to the list of Woodlawn products (Figure 7-8) in hopes that the new drinks would help the company weather the Depression (Riley 1958:265; EPCD 1926-1928).

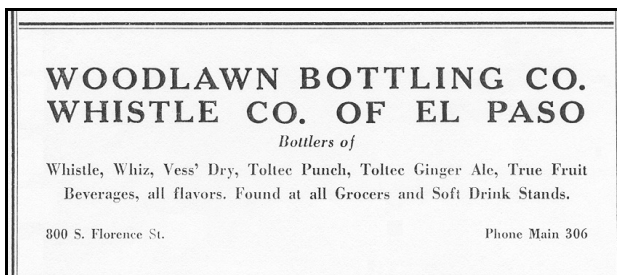


Figure 7-8 – Woodlawn ad (El Paso City Directory 1928)

Times were indeed tough, although El Paso's suffering was relatively light until late in 1931. In that year, Woodlawn plant workers labored nine hours a day, six days per week and supported four one-ton capacity trucks. Only three plant workers operated during most of the year with an increase to four and five during the peak summer months. In 1931, Woodlawn sold 16,652 cases of six- or seven-ounce bottled product and 931 cases in twelve-ounce containers for a total of 17,463 cases of carbonated soft drinks at an average case price of 77¢. In addition, the company sold 5,192 cases of still (non-carbonated) beverages (U.S. Census of Manufactures, 1931).

By 1933, times were desperate, indeed. The number of plant employees dropped to only two who worked four, seven-hour days. The average price per case rose to 92¢ although total sales of carbonated drinks plummeted to just 6,516 cases, a decrease of 62.7%. Still beverage sales also fell to 2,596 cases of all sizes (U.S. Census of Manufactures, 1931 and 1933). In order to survive, the plant geared up to produce Mar-Dale Table Syrup (named for Marshall and Dale Condon, Sweeney's nephews), vinegar, chilies, and even bluing (unidentified 1980 newspaper clipping). Marshall Condon later confessed, "We bottled anything that might make a dollar" (Condon interview).

Before Martin Sweeney's death, Margaret Sweeney had been joined in the business by her sister, May Condon (Figure 7-9), and brothers, John C. and James Leslie Condon. James Leslie (always called, Leslie or Les, to distinguish him from his father) began his working career as a clerk for Lapowski Mercantile Co.



Figure 7-9 – May Condon (Courtesy of the Condon family)

in 1908 but soon quit to work in father's grocery store. From 1912 to 1917, he held a variety of jobs, including driving for J.C. Peyton, clerking for Mine & Smelter Supply Co., and driving for James Nations, Nations Packing Co., suppliers of wholesale meats and cold storage. Les joined what was to become the Condon family business at Woodlawn in 1918 and, except for a brief stint in the Army the following year, continued with Woodlawn as a driver, clerk, salesman, general manager, and production manager for the rest of his life (EPCD 1908-1945).

As her first job, May joined Les as a clerk at Lapowski Mercantile Co. in 1908 but changed to the Popular Dry Goods Store the following year. In 1910, she rejoined Les at her father's grocery but left the next year to become a clerk at Pioneer Abstract & Guarantee Title Co., a position she retained for over twenty years. Although May did not join her brother and sister at Woodlawn until about 1934 (originally as a bookkeeper), she outlasted all of her siblings and was sole owner of the company in 1950 (EPCD 1908-1950).

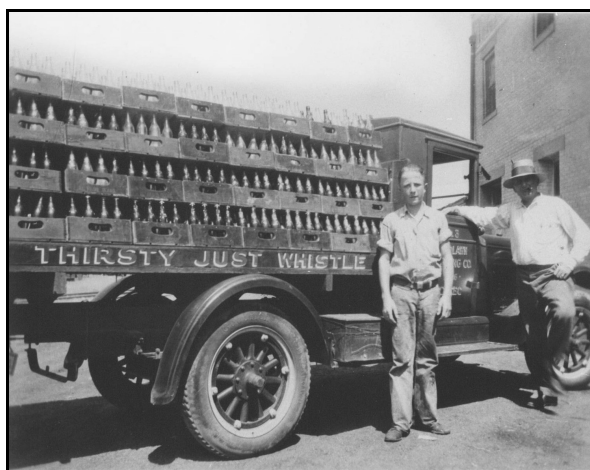


Figure 7-10 – Marshall Condon and his father at one of trucks (Courtesy of the Condon family)

John, the older brother, was a clerk for D.H. Curran in 1907 before changing to Lapowski Mercantile Co. with Les and May the following year. In 1908, he again joined Les and May in working for his father, James. John married in 1912 and moved to Anaheim (or possibly Canoga Park), California, where his wife gave birth to two sons, Marshall (born September 15, 1913) and Dale (born January 2, 1916). John's wife and their third child died during its birth, and a grieving John carried on in California. By 1922, he had returned to El Paso and become a foreman for the city engineers, but he soon decided to join Les as a salesman for Woodlawn (Condon interview; Condon letter; EPCD 1907-1937; 1980 newspaper clipping).

By the early 1920s, the entire family helped run the plant as a loosely-knit partnership, and the boys, Marshall and Dale, grew up as a part of the business, working after school (Figure 7-10). The boys learned to operate the bottling machinery as well as to drive a truck and become familiar with the route procedure. Later, they became full-time employees, Marshall in 1936 and Dale the following year. Marshall, the more serious of the two brothers, married Julia Conolly in 1947; Dale, described as more happy go lucky, remained single until 1955 (Condon interview; Condon letter; EPCD 1922-1937; 1980 newspaper clipping).

During the next decade, Woodlawn changed very little, although the company experimentally sold Dr. Wells, a Dr. Pepper imitator, for a short period around 1934-1936 (Condon journal 1934-36). The Condons made a major change, however, in 1935 with the addition of the Pepsi-Cola franchise, one of the first in the State of Texas.² Long-time family friend, Clinton L. “Bud” Jones, was the territorial representative for El Paso and a vast area that included the Dakotas, Montana, Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, California, Arizona, and New Mexico. Pepsi presented Jones and the other three territorial representatives with great incentive to sell franchises. Each received a two-cent royalty for every case sold within his territory (Martin 1962:63-34; Condon interview).

Bud Jones was understandably happy to present such a mutually-satisfying opportunity to his good friend, Margaret Sweeney, and Sweeney, wisely, accepted. Duffy’s Draft Beverages,³ a company operated by Jones, distributed pre-mix fountain syrup for Pepsi-Cola in El Paso and throughout the Southwest from the early 1960s to 1993 when the firm finally disbanded (Anonymous 1985:19; Condon interview). The addition of Pepsi-Cola boosted the company’s flagging sales, and, by the end of the decade, Woodlawn distributed Pepsi in West Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona (El Paso Times and El Paso Herald Post Classified Booster Directory 1938-1939).

Pepsi-Cola was very lenient with their franchise agreements at that time. All that was required of Margaret Sweeney was a down payment of \$320 to cover the initial supply of bottles, labels, concentrate, and other necessities. The original bottles came with paper labels which caused constant problems. The glue used to affix the label to the glass bottle had to be adhesive enough to maintain contact but solvent enough to be removed by the bottle washing equipment. An acceptable compromise was never achieved. Most stores at the time employed “wet” coolers, usually a box or barrel filled with ice. As the ice melted, the cooler filled with water, frequently washing off the labels (Condon interview; 1980 clipping).

With the acquisition of Pepsi, the company dropped Whistle and Whiz. But soft drinks remained Woodlawn’s primary product. In 1941, the firm added Clicquot Club mixers, out of

² Although the Condon family tradition claims their Pepsi franchise to be the first, Jodie W. McCarley “and a partner secured a Pepsi-Cola franchise for sixty-four counties” on April 1, 1934. “McCarley was the first Texan to bottle Pepsi-Cola” (Dunagan 2002).

³ See Chapter 5d for a discussion about Duffy’s Draft Beverages.

Millis, Massachusetts, to the beverage list, followed by Nesbitt's Orange in 1943 (Figure 7-11). Margaret Sweeney instituted other practices to increase sales, like the 1940 Pepsi-Cola contest. Two hundred eighty-nine contestants shared \$1,500 in prizes with a \$500 first-prize winner. By 1945, national products were in fashion, and the long-standing Toltec flavors were listed by Woodlawn for the last time. The firm dropped Clicquot Club in 1947, the same year Margaret Sweeney hired W. J. Diebels as manager (Condon interview; EPT 5/19/1940 8:2).

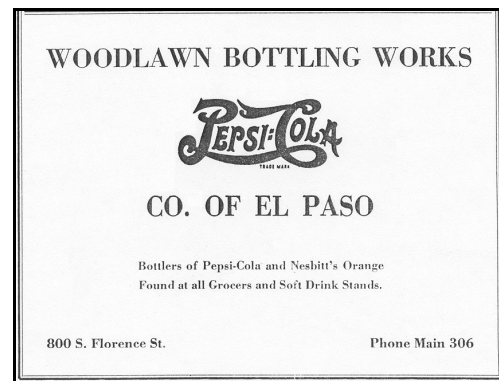


Figure 7-11 – Woodlawn Pepsi-Cola ad (El Paso City Directory 1947)

During World War II, both Condon brothers became members of the armed forces – Marshall in the Army, Dale in the Navy. Both saw service from 1943 to 1945. Interestingly, Jesse Lowe, who gave Marshall his second job (as a typist) in the Army, became Condon's employee after the war. Lowe found the heavy work required in handling cases of soft drinks too physically demanding and switched to Nabisco, but he remained a life-long friend of the Condons. Woodlawn was hit by the same problems caused by wartime sugar shortages as other bottlers across the nation, but conditions never became so bad that the company had to shut down operations (Riley 1958:286-287; Condon interview).



Figure 7-12 – Marshall & Dale Condon in 1949 (Courtesy of the Condon family)

By 1949, only May Condon and Margaret Sweeney were left on the Board of Directors as both John and Leslie Condon had died earlier in the decade. Margaret Sweeney joined her brothers in death the following year, leaving May as the sole owner. May Condon soon sold her interest in the business to her nephews, Marshall and Dale (Figure 7-12), both of whom had been active in management since their return from the service in 1946. The brothers abandoned corporate status in favor of running the business as a partnership. By that time, the plant employed sixteen people. Woodlawn was the first in El Paso to raise its wholesale

case price to \$1.00 in 1950. After a period of fifteen months, other bottlers followed Pepsi's example with Hope Smith of Coca-Cola being the last holdout (Condon interview; Condon letter; EPCD 1949-1957; EPT 4/5/1953 B6:1; 1/1/1987 D7:1).

During this period, Marshall (Figure 7-13) managed production and the office staff, while Dale supervised sales and routes, often running a route personally. The firm operated ten routes during the summer in both El Paso and Hudspeth Counties and boasted annual sales of 300,000 cases. The Condons attributed the high annual sales at least in part to the wise use of



Figure 7-13 – Marshall Condon (Courtesy of the Condon family)

advertising – ten radio spots per day for both

Pepsi and Nesbitt's Orange. In 1954, the company received Pepsi-Cola's Per Capita award, and May, Marshall, and Dale accepted the plaque on behalf of the company (Figures 7-14 & 7-15). The Condons renamed the business as the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Co. of El Paso in 1955, and reincorporated the following year with Marshall as president and Dale as vice-president (Anonymous 1954; EPCD 1957).



Figure 7-14 – Marshall & Dale Condon receiving the Per Capita Award in 1954 (Courtesy of the Condon family)



Figure 7-15 – Marshall, Dale, & May Condon receiving the Per Capita Award in 1954 (Courtesy of the Condon family)