

The long-lost memory of watching Coke being made in Sarnia

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - September 2025

It was once a rite of summer.

School was out, and on hot summer days, kids in Sarnia's south end would walk or bike over to 124 Procter Street. The big, barn-like doors of the Coca-Cola bottling plant would be wide-open to the street. We'd watch the assembly line clank along, the familiar five cent Coke bottles filling with a green liquid before the colouring was added.

In 1994, Sarnia historian Glen C. Phillips compiled the Ontario Pop Bottlers List, covering the period from 1931 to 1965. On its cover, an aged delivery truck belonging to the Sarnia Soda Works Ltd. (1931-1958) loaded with crates of Orange Crush makes a delivery to Burwell's Store on Confederation Street. One of the busiest of the 17 Sarnia bottlers and distributors itemized in Phillips' list, Sarnia Soda Works. It produced Pepsi, Canada and American Dry Ginger Ales, and a local product named Gurd's, whose ginger ales, root beers and cream sodas were sold across Ontario. Sarnia old-timers may remember the forbidding Gurd Mansion which stood on the southwest corner of Christina and London Road.

"Pop", reputedly named for the distinctive sound of a bottle being opened, was inspired by an attempt to replicate the healing mineral waters consumed by ancient Romans and Greeks. In 1767, Joseph Priestly, an English chemist, became the first to carbonate water by infusing it with carbon dioxide. By 1783, Johann Jacob Schweppe was hailing Priestly as the "godfather of carbonated drinks." Schweppe commercialized production, selling a drink that became popular across Europe.

Following the 1851 invention of ginger ale in Ireland, American pharmacists began to experiment with carbonated water. In addition to the sweeteners and colourings, they added sarsaparilla, medicinal herbs, ginger and even caffeine. These were served at soda fountains, which became popular social gathering spots.

It was pharmacists, in fact, who were responsible for the creation of the world's two most popular carbonated soft drinks – "soft" as opposed to hard liquor.

In 1886, Dr. John S. Pemberton, of Atlanta, created Coca-Cola, a mixture of coca leaf extract and kola nut caffeine, sweetened and mixed with carbonated water. Originally marketed as a tonic, Coca-Cola rapidly gained popularity with a wider customer base. Seven years later, a North Carolina druggist, Caleb Bradham, created "Brad's Drink," later rechristened Pepsi-Cola. Both drinks were destined for global fame.

Temperance movements in Canada and Prohibition in the United States accelerated the soaring popularity of soft drinks. Beginning in the 1920s, sales skyrocketed. Since then, advances in refrigeration, the advent of plastic bottles, vending machines and aluminum cans have increased global sales. Mass advertising to consumers has created a soft drink market closely identified with youth and pop (forgive the pun) culture.

In recent decades, the soft drink industry has faced changing consumer preferences. Growing concerns over sugar content, artificial ingredients, and links to obesity are witnessing dramatic reductions in per capita use. From 2005 to 2018, annual soft drink consumption in Canada dropped 40 per cent, from about 104 litres to 65. Continuing to decline, that figure is estimated to be only 45 litres per person in 2025.

Coca-Cola was being bottled at that old Procter Street plant from as early as 1953: first under the management of Hambly's Beverages (Sarnia) Ltd.; and later, until 1965, by St. Clair Beverages Ltd. The days of five and 10 cent Cokes, however, began to disappear in the 1950s. Morris Beverages published an apology to customers when they became the first bottler in Sarnia to increase the price of a bottle of pop to eight cents. They blamed the rising price of sugar and bottles, and taxes "imposed by the Dominion government."

Declining consumption or not, you'd be hard pressed to travel anywhere on the globe without finding the ubiquitous bottle of Coke.