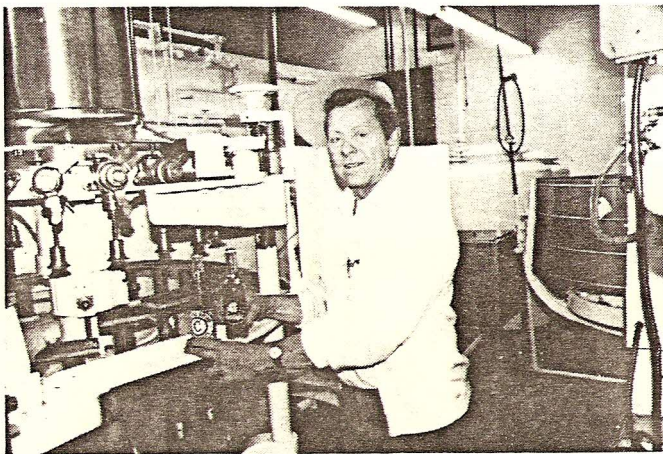


# Willow Springs/Cornhusker Beverage

By Art



*George Riedmann with 5,000 cases of Goody pop ready to go.*



*George Riedmann, chief bottler of Willow Springs soft drinks.*

When early day Midlands medicine men made a persuasive pitch at fairs, carnivals, circuses, etc., extolling the virtues of their bottles of elixirs of life, guaranteed to cure everything from asthma to zymosis, chances are the medicinal concoction might have been formulated and bottled at the Willow Springs Distilling Company of Omaha.

George Riedmann, present owner of the Willow Springs Bottling Company and Cornhusker Beverage Mart, 8510 "K" Street in Omaha, likes to walk down memory lane and relate how his grandfather, also named George, settled in Omaha early this century. Grandfather George was employed as a brewmaster at the Willow Springs Brewing Company, prior to the Prohibition era, thus becoming the forerunner of the present day family business.

The Willow Springs name was first attached to Omaha's only spirits distillery which at one time paid in excess of \$2 million every year for a quarter of a century in federal alcohol taxes. In its heyday the distillery employed 125 men and was reputed to be the third largest distillery in the world.

Riedmann recalls being told the distillery's most popular product was a health tonic — a mixture of herbs and potions but basically formulated with alcohol. Most of its output was sold in drug stores and in all probability peddled by medicine men.

Eventually the regulation of the manufacture of medications by the government spelled cessation of this type of disease cure-all.

According to an Omaha historical record, the firm traces its actual origination to a government condemnation sale in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1866. Two Omahans, James G. and Samuel D. Megeath, bought the equipment of the McCoy Distillers at the sale and moved it to Omaha.

The Megeaths eventually sold their interest to a Mr. Ilers and Mr. Kennard who incorporated the Willow Springs Distilling Company in 1872.

After the turn of the century the distillery became a branch of Standard Distilling and Distributing Company, located at 4th & Pierce Streets which had an auxiliary branch — Willow Springs Brewing Company. About that time Riedmann relates his grandfather stepped in as brewmaster.

Due to the health tonic business bent on a downward course the company digressed more to brewing beer and the quarters were moved to 4th & Woolworth Streets. Riedmann's father, Alfred, became an apprentice of the brewery in 1915. With Prohibition shutting down the manufacture of alcoholic beverages the firm embarked on making near beer, soft drinks and malt syrup. People bought the malt syrup to make home brew.

Disaster struck when an employee, known as "Uncle Charlie," allowed a huge vat of malt to accidentally burn. Frightened that he might lose his job "Uncle Charlie" did not report the grave error. The malt was canned and distributed to

# Mart — A Century Of History

## Grossman

retail outlets. Customers soon returned the spoiled malt demanding their money be refunded. The expense of making restitution convinced the company to get out of the malt business.

Later Alfred Riedmann and a partner, Ed Nelson, bought the plant and moved to 13th & Jones Streets, concentrating on bottling soft drinks. Riedmann was production manager and Nelson handled sales.

The plant turned out a variety of pop flavors, the most popular being strawberry which contained ether. There was a serious epidemic of diphtheria at the time in and around Tekamah, Nebraska. The doctor there prescribed Willow Springs strawberry pop for his patients. Railroad carloads of strawberry soda were shipped to the area as a result. One suspects that doctor would be suspect today.

When Ed Nelson became seriously ill Riedmann purchased his interest for \$5,000 and became sole proprietor. In 1955 the bottling plant moved from the Jones Street location to 18th & California Streets. Soda pop was bottled under the Willow Springs label and the major customers for the soft drinks were Omaha's city parks refreshment stands handling the line exclusively.

During that era Willow Springs obtained the Squirt franchise for Omaha and did extensive promoting in bars and lounges. One of the more successful undertakings was the introduction of a drink called Snowman consisting of gin and Squirt. A small styrofoam snowman was affixed to mirrors on back bars calling attention to the drink.

Gin wasn't one of the most popular drinks in Omaha at the time but the Snowman promotion increased gin volume to the degree that one day a representative of Hiram Walker Distillery visited the Willow Springs plant and thanked Riedmann for a noticeable increase in the sale of Walker's gin in the city.

Riedmann also introduced Dr. Pepper and Orange Crush, two outstanding brands, to Omaha.

In 1964 the Willow Springs plant was sold to the Omaha 7-Up Company and George Riedmann became associated with Crystal Beverage in South Omaha.

An arrangement was set up where Riedmann did Crystal's bottling and in turn was permitted to bottle Willow Springs flavors utilizing Crystal's equipment. Riedmann maintained his own sales and delivery departments.

During this episode in Riedmann's career a glass strike curtailed shipment of bottles. He arranged to purchase a supply of Crystal's bottles with Goody labels embossed on them. Crystal had used these primarily to bottle root beer. That was the genesis of the Goody label which Willow Springs continues to use.

In 1968 Riedmann moved the operation to its present site. Today, Cornhusker Beverage Mart is a major package liquor

operation and the bottling plant is one of only three remaining in Omaha.

The plant is capable of producing about 900 cases of various soft drinks per day. An inventory of approximately 5,000 cases is on hand for distribution at all times. Aside from his own in-store sales Riedmann distributes to other retailers including several package liquor operators.

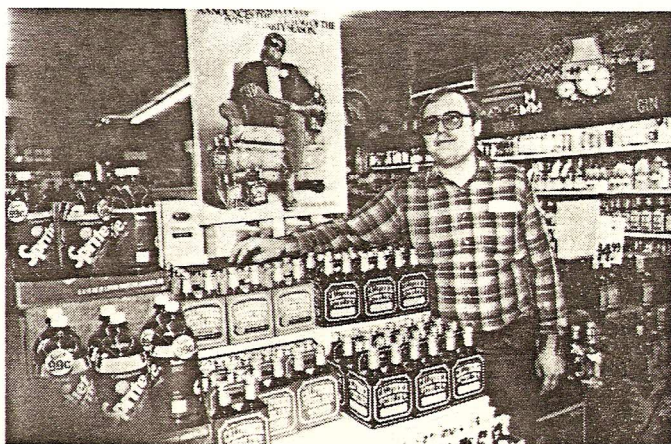
Goody retails at \$3.29 per case of 24 — 10 ounce bottles. A \$4 per case deposit brings customers back. There are 24 flavors in production including such unusual drinks as sarsaparilla, peach, birch beer, cherry-nut besides the usual complement of standard flavor varieties.

Syrups are supplied by a company in Indianapolis, Indiana that specializes in manufacturing quality flavors which are shipped to Willow Springs in gallon glass jugs. The syrups contain bottling formulae that are followed precisely thus maintaining quality controlled products.

Riedmann's son-in-law, Jim Sobczyk, manages the companion liquor department but is capable of operating the pop equipment if necessary. The store also has a substantial deli business which is sub-leased.

Riedmann is grateful for the pop processing phase of the business noting the independent liquor retailer is confronted with the advent of major food chain stores increasing their thrust into the beverage alcohol business. He asserts the availability of spirits, wine and beer in these large chain operations is the greatest obstacle for the continued survival of the independent liquor store owners.

Riedmann is entertaining no thoughts about retiring. And if somewhere down the years ahead he does decide to sit by a river bank attempting to snag a fish or two, there are grandchildren coming up the path who just might keep the Willow Springs dynasty going on and on.



*Jim Sobczyk, Cornhusker Beverage Mart package store manager.*