

Today's Willow Springs Bottles Pop, Not Whiskey

Firm Follows Beverages From Tonics to Soda

This article is one in an occasional series about long-time businesses in the Midlands.

By Steve Jordon

World-Herald Staff Writer

If the Willow Springs Bottling Co. still makes old-time sarsaparilla, peach soda and birch beer, it's no accident.

The small soda pop company traces its history to the early 1880s when Willow Springs was a name attached to Omaha's only distillery, a spirits factory that employed 125 men and was reputed to be the third largest in the world.

"We were surprised that the company went back that far," said George Riedmann, now owner of the company operating at 8510 K St.

Three generations of Riedmanns have worked for Willow Springs, dating to German immigrant George Riedmann, the present owner's grandfather, who was a brewmaster before prohibition.

Today, Willow Springs mixes and bottles its own brand of soda, Goody, in-



John J. Gaps III/World-Herald

George Riedmann at Willow Springs Bottling . . . Grandfather was a brewmaster.

Cola, Nesbitt, Frosty Root Beer and Clicquot Club mixes.

Riedmann said the company produces about 800 cases of soda a day when its machinery is running, usually five or six days a week during the warm months and three days a week in the winter.

Willow Springs — Riedmann said he doesn't know the origin of the name — once produced nearly 2.5 million gallons of spirits, alcohol and whiskey a year, according to historical reports on early Omaha commerce.

An Omaha history written by Judge Arthur Wakeley traces the firm to a government condemnation sale in 1866.

James G. and Samuel D. Megeath bought the outfit and equipment of the McCoy Distiller in Council Bluffs at the sale, Wakeley wrote, moving the plant to Omaha.

The Megeaths in turn sold their interest to Ilers and Kennard, who incorporated the Willow Springs Distilling Co. in 1872.

The company paid over \$2 million every year for 25 years in federal alcohol taxes, the history said.

Health Tonic Popular

Riedmann said he understands that the company's most popular drink was a health tonic, an alcohol mixture commonly used by people as a remedy for all sorts of ailments before the standardization and regulation of medicine in the early 20th Century.

By 1916, the distillery was a branch of Standard Distilling & Distributing Co. at Fourth and Pierce Streets, and had a neighboring branch: Willow Springs Brewing Co.

Riedmann said that's where his grandfather, George, came in.

As the health tonic industry slacked off, Riedmann said, the company turned more and more to beer, moving to Fourth Street and Woolworth Avenue.

Riedmann's father, Alfred, became an apprentice at the company about 1915.

When prohibition began in 1920, the firm turned toward making malt syrup, a non-alcoholic product which people bought to use in their own home-brewed beer, and soft drinks.

Riedmann said that, according to company lore, an employee who was supposed to be supervising a huge vat of malt accidentally let the mixture burn.

Afraid of losing his job, the man did not report the burning. The malt was canned and sold. Customers soon returned the spoiled malt and asked for refunds. The expensive refunds convinced the company to get out of the malt business altogether.

Soft Drinks Only

Alfred Riedmann and a partner, Ed Nelson, later bought the plant. When Nelson's health failed after World War II, Riedmann became the sole owner, passing the firm to two of his sons, Al and George.

The company was the first to introduce Squirt in Omaha, and produced Dr. Pepper and Orange Crush, Riedmann said.

When the bottling industry changed so that franchise agreements with national brands were the key to sales and expansion, the Riedmanns sold their plant at 18th and California to 7 Up and moved first to 20th and N Streets and to the present location in 1968.

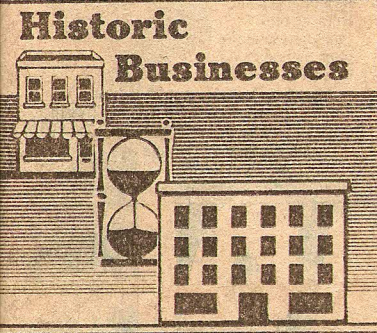
Riedmann said he didn't fully appreciate the company's history until last fall, when officials from River City Roundup contacted him as part of a recognition of long-time Omaha companies.

Will the company continue?

Riedmann said there is still room in the marketplace for small bottlers. The bottling operation does about the same amount of business as the companion Cornhusker package liquor and soft drink store.

Together, the two had a 28 percent increase in business last year. Riedmann's son-in-law, Jim Sobczyk, manages the retail store.

"He might be the next generation," Riedmann said.



cluding such flavors as lemon sour, orange pineapple, cherry cola, carbonated lemonade, raspberry, cherry nut and pale ginger ale.

Sixteen distributors in Omaha, Norfolk and other communities sell Goody pop, including Riedmann's own store, Cornhusker Beverage, next door to the bottling plant.

The firm also custom bottles pop for other companies, including Double