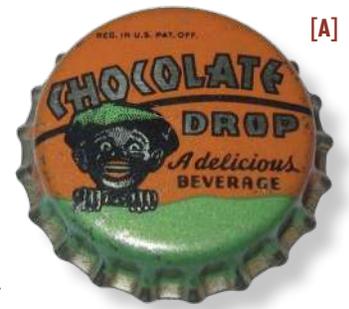


[Mike Dickman]

Politically Incorrect



[A]

Some soda bottles produced during the applied color label (ACL) era, particularly those from the 1930s through 1950s, would not be made today. I hesitate to call them “politically incorrect” since the term is loaded. Still, the ACLs on these bottles reflect an earlier time in the United States when minority feelings and sensibilities were simply not considered. These colorful bottles, however, provide a historical window to our recent past and are highly prized by today’s collectors.

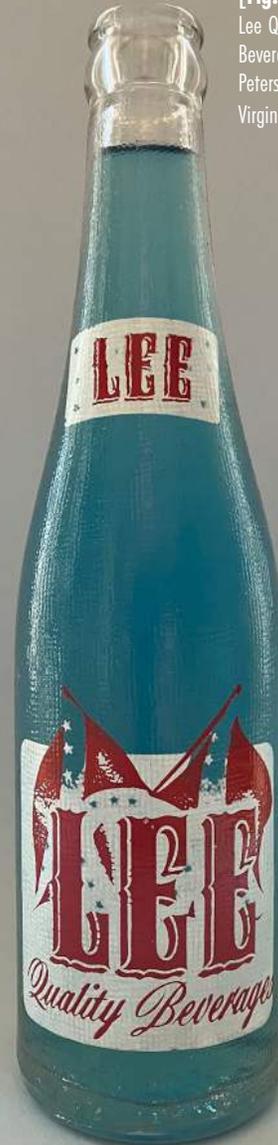
[Fig. 1]
Cotton Picker
Beverages,
Leland,
Mississippi, 1949



[Fig. 2]
Red Race
Beverages,
Valdosta,
Georgia, 1946



[Fig. 3]
Lee Quality
Beverages,
Petersburg,
Virginia, 1956



[Fig. 5]
Heep Good
Beverages,
Wenatchee,
Washington,
1939



[B]



[C]



[D]



[E]



Antique Bottle & Glass Collector

One example is “Cotton Picker Beverages” from Leland, Mississippi. The scarce bottle was made in two variants, one in 1949 with a 12-ounce “squat” shape using a green-and-white label (Fig. 1) and the other in 1951 in a 10-ounce size using a standard shape and all-white ACL. The label (the same on both variants) depicts an African American woman picking cotton from neatly cultivated rows, with a sharecropper’s cabin in the distance, all within the outline of a cotton boll. Sharecropping is an economic system whereby landowners rent small plots of land to sharecroppers in return for a share of the crop (often one-half) to be paid after the harvest. Because landlords often leased seeds and equipment to the sharecroppers and owned local stores that extended credit, the system resulted in widespread indebtedness and poverty. It was the primary agricultural system in the American South for decades after the Civil War. Interestingly, the majority of Southern sharecroppers (about two-thirds) were white. By the time “Cotton Picker Beverages” was bottled, however, the system was almost dead, doomed by the increasing mechanization of agriculture, which made the labor-intensive, hand-picked cotton of the sharecroppers uneconomical.

[Fig. 4]
Brown Boy,
Atlanta,
Georgia, 1953.
Photo courtesy
of Tim Miller,
from his
collection.



“Red Race Beverages” from the Red Race Bottling Company of Valdosta, Georgia, was made in 1946 and contained ten ounces of soda pop, which its neck label touted as being “King Size.” (Fig. 2). Valdosta, nicknamed the Azalea City due to its profusion of azaleas, is located in the far southern part of Georgia near the Florida state line, and is entirely flat, geographically. The reason behind the company and brand name is not clear. Between 1830 and 1850, United States government troops forcibly removed the “Five Civilized Tribes” (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole) from their ancestral homelands in the Deep South, including Georgia and Florida, to Oklahoma Territory, pursuant to the Indian Removal Act. A century later, when “Red Race Beverages” was bottled, Valdosta had a population of just 0.2%



[Fig. 6]
Big Giant (45),
Corpus Christi, Texas,
1963. The bottle is
one of the few ACL
sodas with “Patent
Pending” but, if a
patent was granted,
why do so few bottles
exist? Photo courtesy
of Dwayne Konvicka,
from his collection.

[A] Crown cap from Chocolate Drop, unknown city, 1930s. A similar cap sold for \$500 on eBay a few years ago.

[B] Sharecropper’s cabin, photograph by Dorothea Lange, 1937. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

[C] Crown cap, Red Race Orange Soda, Valdosta, Georgia, 1946. Orange seems to have been the only flavor produced by the company.

[D] Union troops transporting their huge, deadly mortar (nicknamed “the Dictator”) to Petersburg, Virginia, 1864. Photo from the Library of Congress.

[E] Fan displaying Chief Wahoo, mascot of the Cleveland Indians until 2018 when the team eliminated him. Photo courtesy of *Sports Illustrated*.

Native American. Whatever its meaning, the name evokes the recent and ongoing controversy over Native American names, logos and mascots used for American sports teams, most notably the Washington Redskins NFL team. The Washington Redskins, as everybody knows, became the Washington Commanders in 2022. Perhaps “Red Race Beverages” would be renamed Commander Beverages if the brand still existed today, but the company became defunct in the early 1950s. Its ACL soda bottles (in three variants) are scarce and desirable, and clean examples typically sell as soon as they are offered.

“Lee Quality Beverages” was put up in 1956 by the Lee Beverage Company of Petersburg, Virginia, and contained ten fluid ounces. The ACL depicts Confederate battle flags flying above the name with little stars throughout. (Fig. 3) Petersburg is the home of U.S. Army Fort Lee, named after Confederate General Robert E. Lee. The label evokes a contemporary controversy: the removal of Confederate statues, flags and other symbols from public spaces. Recently, on April 27, 2023, Fort Lee itself was renamed Fort Gregg-Adams in honor of two renowned black Army officers. Petersburg was the object of a siege during the Civil War, which lasted more than nine months and resulted in an astoundingly sad number of casualties, approximately 42,000 men on the Union side and 28,000 on the Confederate side. The siege is said to be the first battle to have involved trench warfare. In addition to the U.S. Army garrison, Petersburg is the site of a National Battlefield memorializing both sides’ patriotism, bravery, and sacrifice during the Civil War. “Lee Quality Beverages” is fairly available to collectors but always in demand.



Confederate soldiers and officers mustered in their trench, Petersburg, Virginia, 1864. Courtesy of the Historic Petersburg Foundation

It is unlikely that a manufacturer of soft drinks today would use a name and logo like those found on “Heep Good Beverages” of Wenatchee, Washington State. Bottled in 1939, the product name and caricature of a grinning Indian brave would be viewed as demeaning and insensitive by many potential consumers. (Fig. 5) Indeed, the logo is similar to several of the sports team mascots that have been abandoned in recent years. Wenatchee (the Apple Capital of the World) lies in the foothills of the Cascades in the north-central part of the state and was the ancestral home to the Wanatchi Tribe of indigenous Native Americans. Multiple bottle crates (with 24 bottles each) were discovered in a warehouse many years ago, making the bottle relatively inexpensive today, typically less than \$50 for a mint example. The ACL uses unusual orange-on-black colors that make a dramatic statement on the bottle shelf. The same company put out many other ACL soda bottles, including some rare ones utilizing detailed, realistic and respectful scenes of Indian life.

With the current controversies surrounding mass shootings,

gun violence and the protection of Second Amendment rights, it is doubtful that any modern company seeking a market for a new product would court controversy by using the type of ACL found on the “Big Giant” soda bottle. Put up by the Ideal Bottle Company of Corpus Christi, Texas in 1963, the fifteen-ounce ACL soda bottle sports a detailed, realistic rendering of a .45 caliber revolver, with the “45” displayed on the handle. The name (“Big Giant”) is not shown on the applied color label but instead is embossed on the neck glass. (Fig. 6) The bottle is extremely rare, with approximately half a dozen examples known, and many collectors, including the author, covet it.

Some of these bottles are not what they appear to be. “Brown Boy” (Fig. 7 & Fig. 8) is one. The brown-and-yellow ACL depicts the right-facing profile of an African-American youngster, with “Brown Boy” in script and the slogans “Every Bottle Sterilized” and “Flavors That Satisfy” above and below the portrait. Unusually, the bottle does not include the name of any manufacturer, distributor, city or state, but the date “1953” is embossed on the bottom. Although the product name and picture come across as racially demeaning in today’s world, my research has shown that an African-American-owned soft drink company actually produced the soda. The Brown Boy Bottling Co. of Atlanta, Georgia, was incorporated in 1939 by Jesse B. Blayton, a CPA and finance professor who also owned a bank, radio station, night club and other businesses along Auburn Avenue, which was the center of African American business and financial activity in Atlanta from 1910 through the 1960s. The soda apparently was a non-carbonated, chocolate-flavored drink. An earlier, embossed-only version of the bottle exists, and the ACL version comes in two varieties, a 10-ounce clear glass, and a 7-ounce green glass. Although the company produced its soda pop for many years, all versions of the bottles today are extremely rare and highly desirable.

The bottles discussed in this article are products of the bygone times in which they were made, but they also reflect the intensely local nature of the soda market during the ACL era. Today, national brands like Coke, Pepsi, Dr. Pepper and 7-Up dominate the market and typically avoid controversial names, logos and themes. In those days, however, distribution often was limited to several square miles or a few thousand consumers and thus could focus on strictly local themes. Truly, these bottles represent glass from the past!

The author welcomes comments, questions and suggestions at mikedickman@yahoo.com

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