

Shapely Icon

With the debut of Coca-Cola's unique contour bottle, the company's fortunes were set

BY MARIA BLACKBURN

It is the bottle that launched a billion sips.

The Coca-Cola Co.'s contour bottle, introduced in 1916, isn't just a soft drink container. It's an icon. With its feminine curves, compact shape and sleek lines, this is a bottle so distinctive that it is reportedly recognized by 95 percent of the world's population. Nicknamed the "hobble skirt" for its resemblance to a popular fashion of the early 20th century, the bottle was termed "a masterpiece of scientific, functional planning" by noted industrial designer Raymond Loewy. "The Coke bottle," he said, "is the most perfectly designed package in the world."

The legendary design has its origins in a contest that the Coca-Cola Co. held for bottle manufacturers in 1915. At the time, bottled soft drinks were all packed in almost identical straight-sided bottles. Shopkeepers cooled the drinks in tubs of cold water and often the bottles' paper labels peeled off. "The Coca-Cola people wanted a design that could be recognized even by anyone just feeling the bottle in their hand," Earl R. Dean, mold shop supervisor for the Root Glass Co. in Terre Haute, Ind., recalled in an oral history that his son Norman recorded in 1969.

A supervisor at Dean's company named Alexander Samuelson, who was

part of the initial meeting, offered a kernel of an idea when he asked, "What is Coca-Cola made of?" Thinking something in the appearance of the coca plant or kola nut would lend itself to their task, Dean and Root Glass auditor T. Clyde Edwards set off for the public library to find images of both ingredients. They failed. But they did find a small diagram of a cacao pod, and Dean immediately saw the bulbous, gourd-shaped bean as the perfect inspiration.

He sketched a design for the bottle and showed it to his boss. "I told [him] it could very well be transformed into a bottle, and at the stem end we could place a ring for a cap," Dean said. In 20 hours Dean crafted the mold, then they produced a dozen samples, and sent one off. Out of more than a dozen designs, the contour bottle was deemed the winner and from the time it hit the shelves the following year, the Coca-Cola contour bottle was a huge success.

However, it would be decades before Dean's work would be publicly recog-

nized. Samuelson, not Dean, was listed as the inventor on the company's Nov. 16, 1915, design patent. And to this day many people credit Samuelson with designing the iconic packaging that's still being used to bottle the soft drink some 95 years later.

Jeff Dean, his grandson, isn't one of them. For the last 30 years or so, he and his father have worked to make sure Earl Dean's contribution to history is not forgotten. In 1998 he created an online tribute to his grandfather (<http://www.thecontourbottle.com>) and just last year Norman Dean, Earl Dean's son, published a book about the invention of the contour bottle called *The Man Behind the Bottle* (ExLibris, 2010).

"My grandfather was a nice guy who never wanted to make waves, but the shape of that bottle is an important part of how Coca-Cola markets and sells that drink," says Jeff Dean, a purchasing manager who lives in Santa Clarita, Calif. "If it wasn't for that bottle, I'm pretty sure Coke would be no more distinguishable than any other soda." 

