

“A MANUFACTURER OF SOFT DRINKS”

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CALGARY’S POLAR AERATED WATER WORKS



by

Bruce Dawson

This fire insurance plan shows the original location of Polar Aerated Water Works at 1301–11 Avenue East in Calgary’s Inglewood neighbourhood. The map was published a few years before the bottling plant was built. In the practice of the time, a strip of paper depicting the plant was later glued onto the page. *Insurance Plan of Calgary, Alberta* (Chas. E. Goad Company, Civil Engineers, Toronto, Montreal and Winnipeg, October 1911), sheet 60. *Historical Maps Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary*

“**A** Manufacturer of Soft Drinks” is how a young Ron Pearlman was told by his father to describe the family business in Calgary.¹ Ron’s father, Ben, was co-owner of Polar Aerated Water Works, a family-run business that produced a range of carbonated beverages and marketed and distributed them across southern Alberta. The story of ‘the Polar’² is representative of many of the family-run soft drink manufacturers which established themselves during the early 20th century in western Canada and were part of the move that shifted perception of soft drinks from being a medicinal or speciality product to an indispensable item for the masses.

Today, soft drinks are a dietary staple. In Canada alone, sales of soft drinks totalled \$3.7 billion in 2022, representing over one-quarter of all sales in the crowded beverage market.³ But it was not always this way. When the first soft drinks were manufactured in Europe in the late 18th century, they were developed by doctors and pharmacists and touted as a medical aid for settling upset stomachs and as a safe source of water in an era when clean water, particularly in cities, was hard to find.

Primarily called mineral water, the medicinal and safety benefits were still the focus when the first manufacturers started in Canada in the 1820s and prevailed through most of the 19th century. However, as more regular usage emerged as a status symbol amongst the upper and middle class, and by the 1870s, medical practitioners around the world were experimenting with different flavours and ingredients to woo their growing customer base.

The years that followed witnessed the invention of some well-known brands still available today, such as Coca-Cola, Dr. Pepper, and Hires Root Beer. By 1900, the market had developed so much that in North America, most communities of more than a couple of thousand people had a bottler of carbonated water. Calgary was one such community.

Polar Aerated Water Works began a decade before Ron’s father and uncle acquired the company in 1924. In 1914, William Denby and Gordon Goodison established a bottling plant at the corner of 11 Avenue and 12 Street East to manufacture soft drinks and distilled water.⁴ Both men were originally from Leeds and Grenville County in Ontario, and neither appear to have had previous experience in



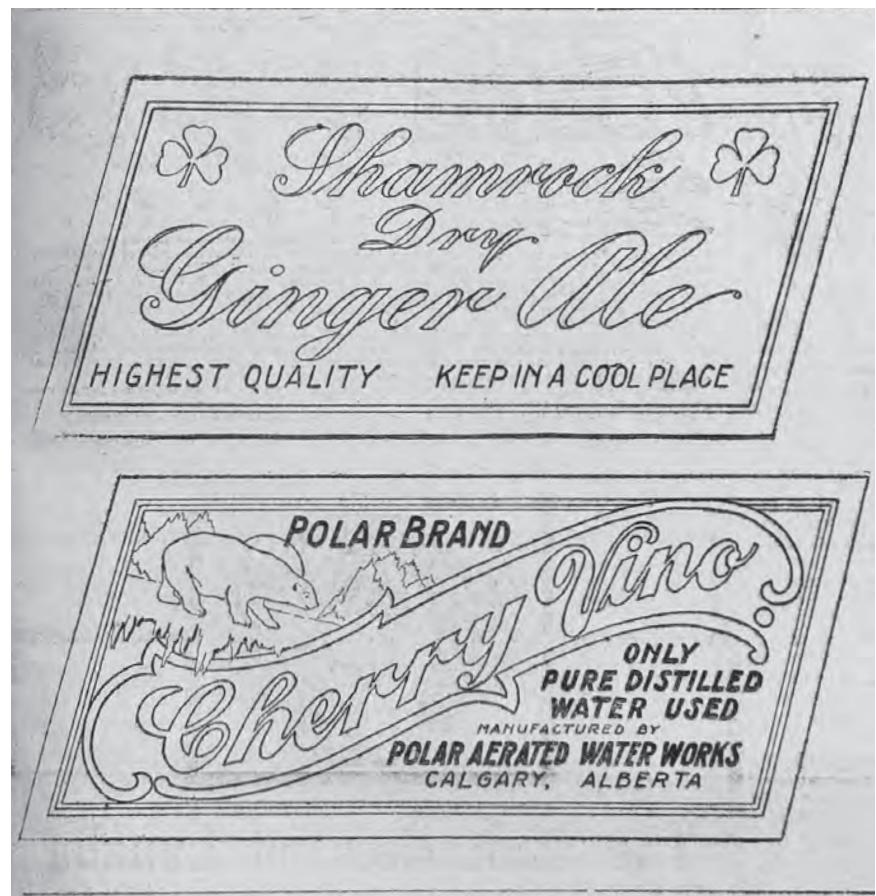
the bottling industry. Denby was a co-owner of the Western Tent & Mattress Co., and Goodison was a partner in a financial and real estate brokerage firm.⁵ But the superintendent they hired, Russian-Jewish immigrant Abraham Winston, had the needed experience; he had previously owned the city's Crystal Aerated Water Company.⁶

Polar was a family business from the outset. While it is not known if Denby and Goodison were related, at least two other members of the Goodison family held significant positions in the company during its first 10 years. Thomas Goodison is noted in *Henderson's Directory* as a teamster in 1914, a salesman in 1915, and a chemist in 1920.⁷ Herbert Goodison is listed in the 1920 edition as Assistant Foreman and as an employee of the firm in 1923.⁸ As well, Melvin Denby, William's brother, is listed as an engineer at Polar from 1914 until 1916.⁹

By January 1915, the company was manufacturing its Shamrock Ginger Ale, a brand which would be a staple for the firm for several decades. That month, the company also published an advertisement for Cherry Vino soda which featured a walking polar bear.¹⁰ Perhaps inspired by presence of at least four other bottlers in North America during this era that used 'Polar' in their name and a polar bear in their logo, in May, the owners registered a patent for this logo, described as "a representation of a polar bear on a float of ice with icebergs and setting."¹¹ The company used this logo for the remainder of its history.

Sometime in 1915 or 1916, William Denby left Polar and started the Standard Vinegar Company Ltd. in Calgary. A few years later, William and Melvin joined their brother Stafford in Vancouver and formed Denby Bros. & Co. Ltd., a longtime boot and shoe business. Goodison continued as Polar's manager¹² while Winston remained as superintendent and lived upstairs at the factory located at 1301–11 Avenue East.¹³

Polar was noted for its range of soda flavours, its distilled waters, and its ginger beer, which was offered in a crockery bottle. In addition to Shamrock Dry Ginger Ale, the company also produced several familiar flavours of soda, such as cream soda, root



beer and grape, as well as ones less common or absent today, such as Iron Brew, Lemon Sour, Cherry Vino, and Loganberry. In the years after 1915, Goodison diversified and expanded the product lines produced or sold by Polar Aerated Water Works.

Many of these new products were a direct result of prohibition legislation introduced in Alberta in 1916. Under this legislation, the sale of alcoholic beverages manufactured in Alberta was prohibited. However, the legislation did not completely stop the sale of all alcohol beverages, as products with less than 2.5 percent alcohol was allowed, as was the import of products made in other provinces. To help fill the demand for these low-alcohol brews, which came to be called "temperance beers," in 1919 Polar Aerated became the Calgary distributor for Alberta Pride, a product of the Lethbridge Brewing and Malting Company, and for Cascade Beer, which was produced by Vancouver Breweries Ltd. The company also advertised the manufacture and sale of "Temperance wines" and cider.¹⁴

Featured on a colouring page insert in a January 16, 1915 edition of the *Calgary Daily Herald*, this advertisement is amongst the first to feature the walking polar bear logo that would be patented later that year. Postmedia Calgary

Coca-Cola Building (126–4 Avenue West), Calgary, circa 1919. Grant Studio, photographer. Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary, CU1170946



The period immediately following the First World War witnessed a monumental shift in the soft drink industry through the rapid growth of national and international brands. This growth was influenced by four interconnected factors. Perhaps the most influential was prohibition. The anti-alcohol lobbyists reached their zenith in 1920 when all Canadian provinces and the United States had laws banning the sale of alcoholic beverages. The result was a tremendous increase in the demand for other types of beverages, including soft drinks. In the United States, it is estimated that the sale of soft drinks rose by 200 percent in the six months following the introduction of prohibition and continued to rise during the 1920s.¹⁵

The period was also marked by a period of high economic growth across North America. Fuelled by low unemployment, consumer spending grew dramatically through the 1920s, particularly on luxury and non-essential items such as automobiles, labour-saving appliances, and travel. Soft drinks were another non-essential item for which sales benefitted from the heightened levels of disposable income. Between 1923 and 1930, the value of production in U.S. plants increased by over 35 percent to just under \$208 million.¹⁶ While specific sales records are not available, the fact that during this period the Calgary Brewing and

Malting Company's inventory of bottle caps for its various sodas increased by over 75%, from approximately 650,000 to over 1.1 million suggests a surge in sales.¹⁷

A third factor which contributed to the rise of national brands was the advances made in transportation. The expansion of rail and all-weather road networks leading up and into the 1920s made it easier to ship fragile soda and syrup bottles to retailers and factories. Advances in enclosed and heated transport trucks, particularly in Canada, enabled year-round distribution of soft drinks.

The fourth factor was the change and growth in media and marketing opportunities. The developments in transportation also increased the ability to distribute magazines and newspapers and their advertising messages. Radio emerged during the 1920s as a must-have consumer appliance, and it shifted the marketing landscape of North America. In all these forms of media, marketers developed a new approach during this period. They moved beyond providing basic information about a product's utility to focus on the lifestyle that those using the product could aspire to. This change greatly benefitted non-essential luxury items such as soft drinks.¹⁸ Together, these media advances made it possible to launch national media campaigns to support national brands.¹⁹

For the soft drink industry, these factors prompted some manufacturers of locally successful soft drinks to expand their reach nationally and internationally. They did this in two ways. Many took the traditional approach of acquiring or constructing new bottling plants in desired markets. However, a growing number chose to enter into franchise agreements with existing local bottlers to produce their products.

The first national brand to come to Calgary was Coca-Cola, which established a franchise or distribution agreement with Blue Label Bottling Co. in 1918 before building its own factory in 1919.²⁰ Next to come to the city was Orange Crush, whose purchase of the Dominion Bottling Works was announced on January 4, 1921.²¹ Just a couple of months later, Polar became a franchise bottler for an international brand when it began advertising orange and lemon Squeeze.²² Squeeze sodas were created by the National Fruit Flavour Co. of New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1917. The company expanded quickly, and by 1921 it had licensed franchises to manufacture its products in most U.S. states and in five other countries.²³

On the heels of Polar's agreement to bottle Squeeze, Blue Label announced in May 1921 that it was the local manufacturer for Kist products.²⁴ Kist was launched in 1919 by Citrus Product Co. of Chicago to compete directly against Orange Crush with orange and lemon flavoured sodas.²⁵ However, it would seem that this was a short-term relationship as Polar was manufacturing the Kist line by the following year, along with two other national brands, Hires Root Beer and Ka-Ko.²⁶ Hires was an older brand. Developed by Philadelphia pharmacist Charles E. Hires in 1876, Hires Root Beer was initially developed as a concentrated syrup to be prepared and consumed at home. In 1893, the company began selling bottled soda and, by 1920, the firm had expanded to Canada. In 1925, Hires Root Beer was being manufactured by over 4,000 bottlers across North America.²⁷ Ka-ko was a brand of the Standard Bottling Company Ltd. of Medicine Hat which trademarked the Ka-Ko name in 1921.²⁸

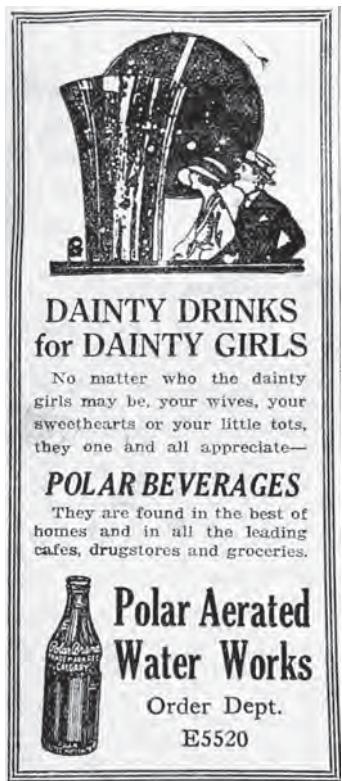
Supporting the increased marketing opportunities for Polar, or perhaps driving it, was John A. MacKay, a former partner at the MaKay Van Buren Advertising Agency.

He is listed as Sales Manager for Polar in 1921.²⁹ That year, the advertising changed dramatically for Polar, both in the number of newspaper advertisements, as well as the style. The ads became conversational rather than just factual, and featured consistent and modern design elements, such as depictions of the company's bottles or a stylized "P", which was also stamped on the base of Polar bottles of this era. In 1922 and 1923, MacKay is listed as Polar's secretary-treasurer, reflecting his increasing stature in the company.³⁰

To further support the growing aspirations of the company, on February 21, 1922, the owners registered for incorporation.³¹ Declaring a value of \$35,000, incorporation would enable the owners to generate funds to support additional growth of the company. In 1923, the *Red Deer News* reported that Polar had inquired with the city about potential sites for a factory.³²

The most momentous change in the history of Polar took place sometime in late 1924 or early 1925 when Goodison sold Polar to brothers Abraham (Abe) and Benjamin (Ben) Pearlman. Abe and Ben were born in Russia in 1893 and 1901 respectively, and they emigrated to Canada in 1911. The brothers came with their parents and four siblings to join their brother Hershel (Harry) who was already living in Winnipeg.³³ Abe and Ben brought both business and soda bottling experience to Polar. From approximately 1918 to 1920, they had been partners in a garage and tire retailer in Estuary, Saskatchewan.³⁴ In 1922, Abe is listed as being a general merchant living in Burstall, Saskatchewan.³⁵ At this time, Ben had returned to Winnipeg to live with his first cousins, the Boroditsky family, who had been operating a soft drink factory since 1918.³⁶ It has been suggested that Ben and his brother Louis (Lou) worked at the bottling plant during this period.³⁷

Of the two brothers, it appears that Ben was the first to become directly involved in the operation of Polar. In 1924, John Mackay was no longer with the company, having left to join the *Albertan* newspaper, and Ben Pearlman is listed in *Henderson's* as the secretary-treasurer, while company founder Gordon Goodison is listed as president.³⁸ It is not known if this overlap



An example from Polar Aerated Water Works of advertising that emerged in the 1920s which promoted the lifestyle benefits of using the product. This ad was published in the *Calgary Daily Herald*, May 28, 1921.
Postmedia Calgary

was planned as part of the transition of ownership or if the information recorded in *Henderson's Directory* was not up to date. References to Abe being resident in Calgary do not appear until 1926 when *Henderson's* lists him as president of Polar Aerated Water Works.³⁹ Goodison remained in Calgary and became an oil broker, and he died in the city in 1960.

Entering the soft drink field in Calgary in 1924 would have been a risky endeavour. On May 10 that year, prohibition ended in Alberta. With the return of legal access to alcoholic beverages, it was unclear whether the boost that prohibition provided to the sale of soft drinks would end. However, it was found that demand for soft drinks continued to grow as consumers continued to purchase the beverages they had become accustomed to during the prohibition period.⁴⁰ While specific information regarding Polar's sales are not available for that period, the fact that the company constructed a new factory in 1929 at 129–3 Avenue East (later expressed as 129–3 Avenue SE) suggests that business was sufficient to require and support the building of a new facility. The more central location of the new factory, close to the bridges crossing the Bow River, made for more efficient delivery routes.

While equal owners of the company, Ben and Abe had very defined roles in its operation. Abe assumed the role of president and was focussed on general direction and oversight of the company and serving as the public 'face' of the business through activities such as media interviews and

participating on provincial and national bottling associations. Ben continued in his role as secretary-treasurer and concentrated on oversight of the daily operations and corporate affairs. In this role, Ben was responsible for more daily tasks, such as the bank deposit and engaging with the various department managers. An easy-going and respected man, Ben also managed some of the key business relationships, such as those with the 7-Up Corporation.⁴¹

By the 1950s, in addition to their responsibilities with Polar, Ben and Abe were partners in Aspen Wholesale, which provided retail goods to confectionaries. While this company was separate from Polar, Ben oversaw its operation from a warehouse and garage at the rear of the Polar property on 3 Avenue SE.

As it had been under Goodison, the Pearlman brothers continued to operate Polar as a family business. In the years following their acquisition of the company, Ben and Abe were joined by their brothers Lou, who used his university training in medicine and chemistry to oversee syrup development, and Harry, who had various jobs with the company during a 19-year career.⁴² As well, several children of these four brothers worked at the plant between the 1930s and 1950s. These were primarily summer jobs or short-term employment at the beginning of their careers. However, Harry's son Sidney served as the bookkeeper and accountant for the company from 1947 until 1973.⁴³

In addition to these direct family members, the company also employed an extended

Polar Aerated Water Works trucks, Calgary, 1928. Abe Pearlman is standing beside the truck to the left; George Gerlitz is at the wheel. Glenbow Library and Archives, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary, CU1145271





Pearlman family in Ben and Rowena's home in Calgary, 1940.

Front row, L-R: Ben Pearlman; Rowena Pearlman (née Perlman, Ben's wife and Adella's sister); Harry Pearlman; Adella Pearlman (née Perlman, Harry's wife and Rowena's sister); Nathan Selchen (Molly's husband); Molly Selchen (née Pearlman, Abe and Ben's sister).

Back row, L-R: Clara Pearlman (née Mogel, Isaac's wife); Isaac Pearlman (a brother of Abe and Ben); Sophie Pearlman (née Leve, Abe's wife); Abe Pearlman; Edythe Pearlman (née Rosen, Lou's wife); Lou Pearlman.

Missing: Clara Pearlman (née Orlikow, Hyman's wife); Hyman Pearlman (a brother of Abe and Ben).

Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta #1077

family comprised of several long-term employees. One of these employees, Roy Dorsch, had already been with the company for six years when the Pearlmans assumed ownership, and he remained as plant foreman until 1965. Several other employees joined Polar in the years after the Pearlmans took over, such as John Caron, Conrad Spielman, Ernest Caron, and Christine Wallis, and were to remain for over two decades. As well, there are several surnames which are repeated in the company's employment roll through this period. When reflecting on the staff relationships, Ron Pearlman noted:

Polar was a positive place to work. There was a good relationship between management and employees. Ben and Abe understood everyone's contributions and employees were consulted on decisions for the company. They also made sure that the employees, especially the long-term ones, were respected and looked after.⁴⁴

Ron also remembers participating in many staff picnics and holiday parties and that the Pearlman family members who worked there were accepted by the employees as part of the team. The company also sponsored staff sports teams, with a team playing in the

1939 commercial section of the Calgary Tennis League sporting the Polar name.⁴⁵

In addition to their associations with the "Polar family," the Pearlmans were active in the community. Ben and Abe were heavily involved in provincial and national bottlers associations and Calgary's Jewish community, helping found the I.L. Peretz Institute, a cultural and educational organization for adults that also oversaw the I.L. Peretz School, Calgary's first Jewish day school. Both men took leadership roles with the Calgary chapter of the Canadian Jewish Congress.. Ben also served as Secretary for the Calgary Branch of the ORT Committee.⁴⁶

In 1929, Ben married Rowena Perlman, who was also involved with the I.L. Peretz Institute, serving as the first kindergarten teacher, and later serving on many committees of the Congress along with Abe's wife, Sophie.⁴⁷ This work included efforts in the late 1940s to settle post-war refugee children and families with foster families.

Lou and his wife, Edythe, were also very involved with the I.L. Peretz school with Lou serving terms as the school's cultural coordinator and Edythe coordinating musical activities.⁴⁸ Lou and Edythe were



Interior of Polar Aerated Water Works plant, Calgary, circa 1955. Rosettis Studio, photographer. Glenbow Library and Archives, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary, CU1145205

also involved in the Calgary activities of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, including hosting meetings and events in their home and serving on committees and conference delegations.⁴⁹

Under the Pearlmans, Polar continued to follow the general trends in soda manufacturing. This included bottling an increasing number of national brand franchise products. These included Squeeze and Hires Root Beer through the 1920s and Califruit in the early 1930s. In 1935, Polar scored a major success in obtaining one of the first 7-Up franchises in Canada.

7-Up was created in 1929 by Leiper Grigg of St. Louis, Missouri. Like many sodas of that period, 7-Up was billed as a fruit-inspired beverage that had health benefits. It quickly became popular as a refreshing alternative to the cola-style drinks and as a mixer with alcohol. Grigg pursued an aggressive franchising approach for his beverage across the United States in the early 1930s and, in 1935, expanded to Canada. By the 1940s in southern Alberta, in addition to Polar, 7-Up was being bottled in Medicine Hat and Coleman.

It was during this decade that 7-Up became the third most popular soft drink in the United States, trailing only Coca-Cola and Pepsi, a position it held until the 1960s.⁵⁰ Sales records

from Polar attest to its popularity in the Calgary area. In 1953, Polar sold over 175,000 seven-ounce bottles of 7-Up, accounting for nearly 47 percent of the company's bottled pop sales. By 1966, 7-Up accounted for over 68 percent of the 375,932 total units of soda sold by Polar.⁵¹ Included in these totals is a small amount of canned 7-Up. The first Polar 7-Up cans rolled off the assembly line in 1960 and continued until 1963. Sales were slow, with only a total of 1,620 twelve-ounce cans sold during the period. Polar returned to canning in 1965, with 3,882 cans being produced by the end of 1966.

In 1939, Polar secured another significant franchise when it secured the rights to bottle Orange Crush in the Calgary area. Established in Chicago, Illinois in 1917 as Ward's Orange Crush, this company also followed an aggressive expansion program across North America. Entering the Canadian marketplace in 1919, the company initially set up its own bottling plants, often by acquiring existing bottlers. By February 1923, there were seven Orange Crush bottlers in western Canada alone, including the plant established in Calgary in 1921.⁵² In the late 1920s, the company restructured and divested of most of its bottling plants and focussed on franchising bottling rights for its products. Calgary Brewing and Malting held the franchise for Calgary prior to Polar.

Like 7-Up, Orange Crush became a mainstay of Polar's product line. In 1953, Polar sold nearly 95,000 brown seven-ounce Orange Crush bottles, accounting for nearly 25 percent of all bottles sold. Sales of Crush bottles dropped nearly in half by 1958, likely due to most other local bottlers having transitioned to 10-ounce bottles earlier in the decade.⁵³ When Polar finally switched to the "King Size" 10-ounce bottle in 1959, sales rebounded to over 80,000 bottles sold in 1960.⁵⁴ That year, Polar also began producing Crush flavour lines, beginning with Grape and, in 1962, adding Cream Soda, Root Beer, Grapefruit, and Crush Cola. Crush Root Beer was dropped in 1963 when Polar began again producing Hires Root Beer, a brand which had been acquired by Crush International in 1962 and made available to its franchisees.⁵⁵ Despite early success, sales of Orange Crush and its products decreased by nearly 27 percent between 1962 and 1966 to just over 118,000 bottles.

While both Crush and 7-Up proved to be long-lasting franchise relationships for Polar Aerated Water Works, not all were successful. In the early 1940s, Polar began bottling Wynola, a line of Cola and other flavoured sodas that was franchised to several local bottlers across Canada at that time, including the Pearlmans' Boroditsky cousins in Winnipeg.⁵⁶ However, Polar and several other bottlers produced Wynola for only a short period of time while the brand became a staple product for the Boroditskys' Winnipeg-based Bell Bottling Company through the 1950s.⁵⁷

In addition to the franchise brands, like many other local bottlers of the 1930s, Polar continued to bottle their own soda flavours, fronted by Shamrock Dry Ginger Ale. Some of the original flavours that were associated with alcoholic beverages, such as cider and Iron Brew, were phased out. In their place, flavours associated with exotic fruits, such as Dry Orange, Fruity Lemon, and Grapefruit were promoted.⁵⁸ By 1953, the list of Polar brand flavours had been reduced to five, but nearly 110,000 bottles were produced, representing just under 30 percent of the entire bottle run for the year.⁵⁹ One of these flavours was Jersey Creme, which was a special 'family' flavour provided to them by the Pearlmans' Boroditsky cousins.⁶⁰ However, sales of Polar's own flavours dropped dramatically through the decade, both in volume and as a percentage of overall production, bottoming out at just 7.5 percent of all bottles sold in 1960. Polar ceased producing its own flavour lines in 1961.

In its operations, Polar maintained three distribution routes across southern Alberta, titled in the late-1950s as "Lethbridge", "East Coulee" and "J. Serra-Banff."⁶¹ Based on listings in the company's Bad Debt and Doubtful Accounts Ledger highlight, the territory extended to Pincher Creek and Raymond in the south, Red Deer and Sylvan Lake to the north, Brooks and Hanna to the east, and Banff to the west. In these communities, Polar was distributing its product through expected locations, such as convenience and grocery stores, auto garages, cafes, coffee shops, as well as ballrooms, social clubs, churches, and theatres.

Polar also made special arrangements to sell its products at the Calgary Stampede. Ron Pearlman remembers as a teenager convincing his dad to be allowed to be part of the crew that arrived on the exhibition site at midnight on the last day to collect all the bottles that were sold through the concessions. He described this as an exciting, "all hands" event which would see the trucks return to the plant at about three o'clock in the morning.⁶²

Polar's acquisition of the franchise rights for Orange Crush in 1939 were significant for the company as the brand became their second largest seller after 7up. This advertisement appeared in the *Calgary Herald* on June 30, 1939. Postmedia Calgary

ORANGE CRUSH
LIMITED

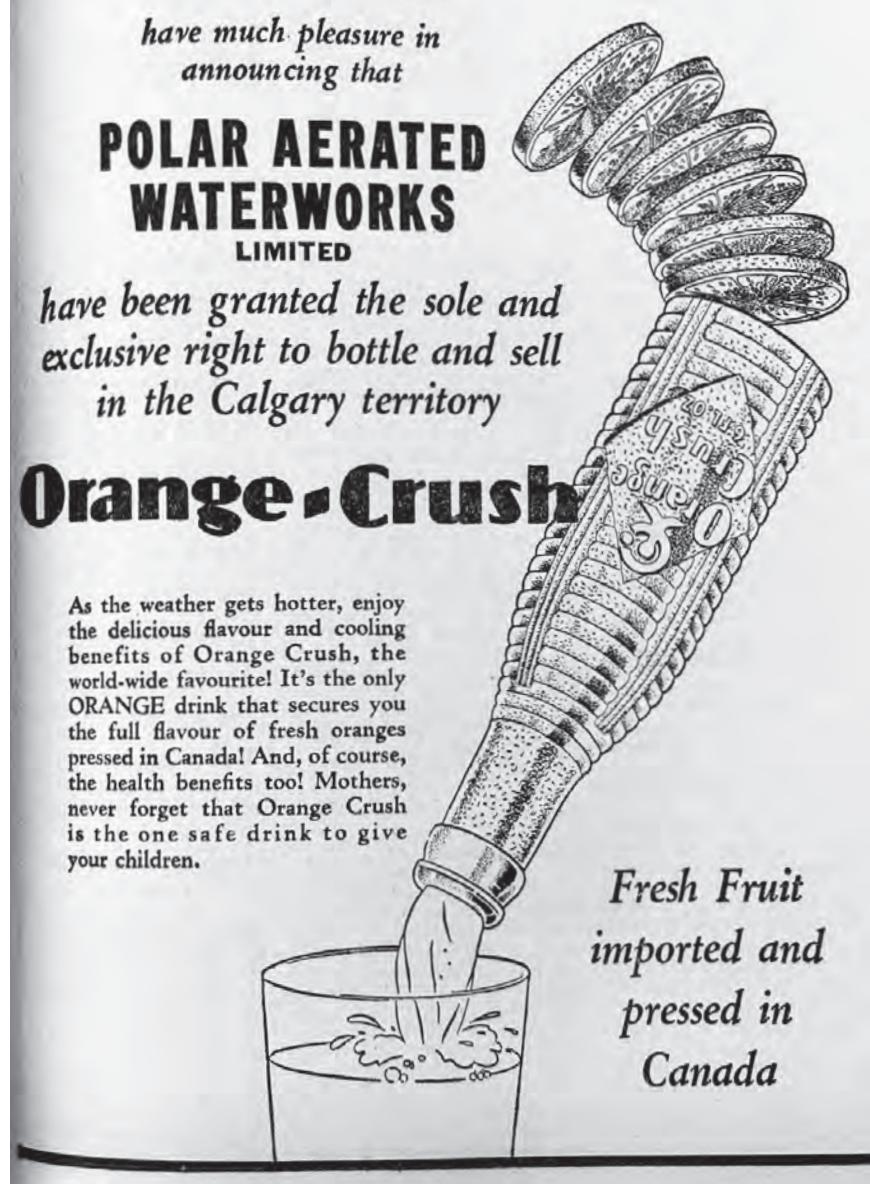
*have much pleasure in
announcing that*

**POLAR AERATED
WATERWORKS**
LIMITED

*have been granted the sole and
exclusive right to bottle and sell
in the Calgary territory*

Orange - Crush

As the weather gets hotter, enjoy the delicious flavour and cooling benefits of Orange Crush, the world-wide favourite! It's the only ORANGE drink that secures you the full flavour of fresh oranges pressed in Canada! And, of course, the health benefits too! Mothers, never forget that Orange Crush is the one safe drink to give your children.



*Fresh Fruit
imported and
pressed in
Canada*

All products were produced in the Calgary plant, although the company did have a warehouse in Lethbridge as early as 1940.⁶³ In 1946, the company purchased three lots from the City of Lethbridge for the purpose of building a bottling plant, but decided not to proceed.⁶⁴ In 1951 and 1952, the Polar warehouse in Lethbridge was located at 1518–3 Avenue South with longtime salesman Walter Spielman identified as the contact.⁶⁵ In the 1953 edition, the name associated with that address is Seven Up (Lethbridge) Distributors with Abe's son-in-law Samuel Hamer listed as the proprietor.⁶⁶

The 1960s and early 1970s were a challenging period for family-run soda manufacturers of southern Alberta. Competition increased due to increasing public interest in national soda brands and national grocery store chains launching their own soda lines. Improved highways and the launch of canned soda, which could be more easily shipped across the country, reduced the need for local bottling plants. This, in turn, led to consolidations and plant closures. Changes to liquor advertising laws in the province made it illegal for breweries to brand and market soda in ways in which it might promote their beer. This contributed to both Sicks Brewery in Lethbridge and the Calgary Brewing and

Malting Company selling off their soda lines in the mid-1960s. In 1960, there were 514 registered soft drink manufacturers in Canada, with 24 in Alberta.⁶⁷ By 1979, the national total had dropped by over half to just 253, with 15 in Alberta.⁶⁸

For Polar, this period was transformational. In 1960, Polar invested in constructing a full factory in Lethbridge under the Seven Up (Lethbridge) Bottling Company name, with Hamer as manager.⁶⁹ This move improved service delivery to southern parts of the territory while bringing the next generation into ownership of the family business. In announcing the factory opening, the *Lethbridge Herald* noted that the new factory could produce approximately 90,000 cases per year, would produce Mission brand soft drinks in addition to Seven-up, and that its territory would extend from Granum to the United States border. In 1965, the Seven-Up Bottling Company began bottling and acquired the rights to all the soda products of Sicks Lethbridge Brewery, notably its Ginger Ale, as well as its Orange Crush franchise for the area.⁷⁰ The Lethbridge plant, like the Calgary factory, had a family feel, remembered Samuel Hamer's son David, who recalled that his father was very hands-on in its operation.⁷¹

The Polar factory at 129–3 Avenue SE in Chinatown, 1960. Rosettis Studio, photographer. Glenbow Library and Archives, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary, CU1132316



Polar was not immune from the pressures of consolidation which impacted the industry during the 1960s. In 1963, Ben and Abe received an offer of \$375,000 from Seven-up Vancouver Ltd. to purchase the company.⁷² The Vancouver firm was owned by the Gray family, which also owned Blackwood Beverages, which had the 7up plant in Winnipeg and, at times, in several other smaller cities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. This offer was not accepted, but Abe Pearlman's passing on March 16, 1965, changed the discussion.

Though 71 years old at the time of his passing, Abe was still integral to the operation of Polar and the public face of the company. Ben, now 65, assumed sole presidency of the company and began taking on many of the roles formally done by his brother. Behind the scenes, Ben also discussed with others in the family, including Abe's three sons-in-law who were serving as the executors of his estate, the next steps for the family business. Seeing an opportunity, the Grays submitted a revised offer to purchase in September 1965, increasing the monetary amount to \$490,000.⁷³ This second offer was given significant consideration as the first version features notarized edits which are reflected in a second version of the document.

However, the family chose to not accept the Grays' second offer. Instead, on November 11, 1965, Ben and Rowena, along with Ben's brother Lou and their nephew Sidney (Harry's son), agreed to purchase Abe's shares in the company for \$245,000.⁷⁴ Doing so enabled operations to continue as they had been prior to Abe's passing. However, it was a short-lived arrangement.

Just over a year later, on December 31, 1966, Ben and the other Pearlman investors sold the company to Abe's three sons-in-law, Samuel Hamer, Ben Torchinsky, and William (Bill) Tax. The purchase price was just over \$482,000 and carried stipulations that perpetuated the involvement of those in the family still working for Polar. These included requirements that Ben would be retained for six months, until June 30, 1967, to train new management, that Sidney would retain his position in the firm, and that Louis would be retained as a special consultant for up to five years. The sale was formally announced on



Tuesday April 18, 1967, and Ken Taylor was named as the successor to Ben as the manager of the company.⁷⁵

One of the first actions of the new owners was to begin planning for a new factory for what they were now publicly referring to as Polar Beverages Ltd.⁷⁶ Construction on the facility proceeded quickly and by November 1968, the new 56,000 square-foot plant, located at 1010–42 Avenue SE, was officially opened, featuring a new bottling plant and Southern Alberta's first soda canning line.⁷⁷ While administered concurrently with the bottling operations, the canning plant was formally registered to a new company, Polar Canning Ltd. Products being bottled by Polar included 7up, Crush, Hires Root Beer, Like, Howdy Cola, and America Dry Ginger Ale.

In February 1969, Polar acquired the rights to Calgary Ginger Ale and other Calgary flavours from Calgary Beverages Ltd, which had taken over production of the venerable brand from Calgary Brewing and Malting in 1964.⁷⁸ Through this purchase, Polar also acquired franchise rights to bottle Royal Crown and Diet Rite colas. Polar Canning was contracted by most national brands to can their products for distribution in western Canada.

Early in 1969, Polar underwent another change in ownership. On May 7, 1969, Ben Torchinsky, President of AGRA Vegetable Oil Products Ltd (AGRA) of Saskatoon, announced that his brother-in-law Samuel Hamer had joined AGRA's Board of Directors.⁷⁹ In this announcement, it was also noted that AGRA had recently purchased Polar Beverages and would be maintaining the same management.

Abe Pearlman's three sons-in-law, L–R: Ben Torchinsky, who married Sarah Pearlman; Sam Hamer, who married Lily Pearlman; and William (Bill) Tax, who married Ester Pearlman. The three men purchased the company in 1966. The man on the right is Ken Taylor, who succeeded Ben Pearlman as the manager of Polar Beverages in 1967. Glenbow Library and Archives, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary, CU1145353

AGRA Industries started in Saskatoon in 1963 as an engineering firm owned by Torchinsky. As the decade progressed, AGRA underwent significant diversification, adding companies involved in edible oil crops, cable television, and soft drink manufacturing. In the latter case, AGRA acquired not only Polar from Abe's sons-in-law, but also Hamer's Seven Up (Lethbridge) Bottling Company.⁸⁰ Soon after these acquisitions, in mid-1969 AGRA acquired Chinook Beverages, also in Lethbridge, to further solidify their position as a major soda manufacturer in southern Alberta.⁸¹ Through these acquisitions, AGRA held franchise and canning agreements for most national brands.

On the surface, the takeover of Polar by AGRA by a large and diversified corporation that had its roots in other industries, may be seen as the end of the family-run business. Of this transition, David Hamer suggested it was “a professionalization of the business” whereby “old style entrepreneurs were replaced by new style specialized managers.”⁸² However, in the 1972 Annual Report, Torchinsky indicated that the company still valued its familial roots in its operations, stating:

On the surface, AGRA may seem to consist of a widely assorted group of companies with no common ground, but there are in fact two common denominators. Firstly, all four of our operating divisions represent areas of activity where my associates and I, or my family, had established profitable operations long before these activities became part of AGRA. In bottling, for example, my father-in-law obtained the original Seven-Up franchise in Calgary in 1936.... My second point is that, without underrating the fact that special knowledge and skills are required in various commercial areas, I have found that successful results can be achieved in any business—if sound principles are followed.⁸³

On April 19, 1971, the name Polar Aerated Water Works Limited was stricken from the Alberta Register of Companies and replaced with Polar Beverages (1970) Ltd.⁸⁴ At the end of that year, AGRA initiated a process of consolidating its bottling operations in Alberta by amalgamating its Lethbridge

operations under one company called Chinook Beverages Ltd, which manufactured 7 Up, Pepsi, Crush, Hires Root Beer, and Canada Dry products. This move also resulted in the closing of the former Lethbridge Bottling plant in that city.⁸⁵

In 1972, AGRA applied the Polar name to a new product called PolarPak, a tetrahedron-shaped container made from plasticised paper to use for non-carbonated fruit drinks. This form of beverage container did not capture the North American audience the same way the ‘drink box’ did, and it is unknown how long the company made these products. As a sign of the times, the company noted in its annual report that two benefits of the new packaging were that they “can be burned after use like a paper cup, to leave nothing but a trace of ashes” and that they were excluded from Alberta’s recently-implemented beverage container deposit program.⁸⁶

AGRA furthered its investment in soft drink manufacturing in 1973 through the acquisition of Blue Label Beverages of Calgary, who held the Pepsi and Schweppes franchises for southern Alberta.⁸⁷ This move had significant impacts for Polar Beverages as, in 1974, AGRA consolidated its Calgary bottling operations at the Polar factory and decided to drop the public use of Polar Beverages in favour of the Blue Label brand.⁸⁸ While ‘Polar’ lived on as a corporate entity under the AGRA umbrella, for the first time since 1914, the name was not being published on bottles in the Calgary area. The final physical association between Polar and the soft drink industry ceased in 1982 when AGRA built a new \$15 million bottling facility in Calgary and sold the former Polar factory.

Polar epitomizes the small, family-run soft drink manufacturers that emerged in western Canada during the early 20th century. Seeking to capitalize on the growing interest and disposable income amongst the residents of the region, Polar was one of several soda bottlers that started in the region in the years prior to the First World War. Polar-branded products would be available in southern Alberta for 60 years, a testament to the ability of the owners to seize upon the current trends in the soda market to ensure they had desired products available at the right time.

Most notable was its timely choice to become one of the first franchise bottlers of 7up in Canada, followed a few years later by its acquisition of the Orange Crush franchise for the region. This success must also be attributed to the personal acumen of Abe and Ben Pearlman during their forty-plus years of ownership in creating a productive and family-like work environment as well as contributing to the social fabric of Calgary and area. Prudent decisions to incorporate the next generation of the family into business ownership in the 1960s enabled Polar, in an era of growing consolidation in the industry, to emerge from the decade as a company that was still controlled by the family and a trendsetter in the canning of beverages for the marketplace.

The continued consolidation and nationalization in the industry in the 1970s led to the disappearance of the Polar name in 1974 and eventual sale of its remnant legacy assets and franchise rights to an even more successful family-run soft drink conglomerate, Blackwood Beverages, in 1984. However, the legacy of Polar lives on in the memories of the family, past employees, and purveyors of their various products, as well as in the various bottles, caps, and advertising items produced by the company that are now treasured by collectors and nostalgists.

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Notes

I wish to thank Ron Pearlman, son of Ben Pearlman, and David Hamer, Ellen Hamer and Gerry Hamer, sons and daughter of Sam Hamer and grandchildren of Abe Pearlman, for allowing me to interview them for this paper. I would also like to thank Michael Moskovich, a friend and lawyer of Sam Hamer's, for his interview. I would further like to thank J.R. Reid for sharing photographs of Polar Aerated Water Works bottles in his collection.

- 1 Interview with Ron Pearlman, May 1, 2022.
- 2 Both Ron Pearlman and David Hamer noted that their families always referred to the company as 'the Polar.'
- 3 "2023 economic trends: Soft drinks and alcoholic beverages" (<https://www.fcc-fac.ca/en/knowledge/2023-economic-trends-beverages> Viewed July 8, 2024); "Canada Carbonated Soft Drinks Market Summary, Competitive Analysis and Forecast to 2027: (<https://www.researchandmarkets.com/report/canada-carbonated-soft-drink-market> viewed July 8, 2024).

- 4 *Henderson's Calgary City Directory*, 1914: 809, 318 & 533.
- 5 Calgary Board of Trade, *Calgary Alberta—The Land of Plenty*, 1907: 8; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1913: 492. *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1911: 399; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1914: 593.
- 6 In 1913, *Henderson's Calgary Directory* (p. 844) lists Abraham Winston as proprietor of Crystal Aerated Water Co., which is recorded as being located at 1011-18 Avenue East (p.481). The February 18, 1913, *Calgary Daily Herald* (p. 4) features a classified advertisement soliciting for investors in an unnamed aerated water business located at the 18 Avenue East location, perhaps offering an indication as to why this business was only listed for one year and his interest in associating with Denby and Goodison. Thank you to J.R. Reid for alerting me to the existence of Abraham Winston and his role in Calgary's soft drink industry.
- 7 *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1914: 529; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1915, 528; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 424.
- 8 *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1920: 424; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1923: 396.
- 9 *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1914: 533; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1915: 485; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1916, 486.
- 10 *Calgary Daily Herald*, January 16, 1915: 9 February 6, 1915: 14.
- 11 *The Canadian Patent Office Record*, Vol. 5: May 31, 1914: 1674. At the time, bottlers in Ontario, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Texas were known to be using the Polar name and a Polar bear as a logo.
- 12 In the 1916 *Henderson's Directory*, Denby is listed as president of Standard Vinegar (p. 486). An advertisement for Polar Vinegar appeared in the *Calgary Daily Herald* on February 6, 1915 (p. 14), but no further advertisements or references have been located. It is possible that Denby assumed that aspect of the business in starting his new firm.
- 13 *Calgary's Henderson Directory*, 1915, 308; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1917: 601. In 1918, Winston is listed in the Directory as the manager of Western Bottling Works (p. 679).
- 14 *Calgary Eye-Opener*, November 11, 1919: 2; *Morning Albertan*, October 11, 1919: 16.
- 15 Tristan Donovan, "The Four Horsemen May Charge Over the Earth—but Coca-Cola Will Remain," *The Atlantic*: November 6, 2013.
- 16 John J. Riley, *A History of the American Soft Drink Industry*, New York: Arno Press, 1972: 275.
- 17 Taken from an inventory of bottle caps and labels compiled by Wally Aeblie in 2016 and published on the Calgary Brewery Collectables Group on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/733968513396804/permalink/923596517767335>.
- 18 Donovan, "The Four Horsemen..."
- 19 Riley, *A History of the American Soft Drink Industry*, 135.
- 20 Advertisements for Coca Cola listing Blue Label Bottling Co. begin appearing in the *Calgary Daily Herald* on September 21, 1918 (22). Reference to Coca Cola Company building its own factory appears in the March 29, 1919 edition (25).
- 21 *Winnipeg Tribune*, January 4, 1921: 2.
- 22 *Calgary Daily Herald*, March 11, 1921: 10.
- 23 *The National Fruit Flavour Company, New Orleans, Louisiana*. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/25229906@N00/32890344242>.
- 24 *Calgary Daily Herald*, May 13, 1921: 17.
- 25 <https://www.madeinchicagomuseum.com/single-post/citrus-products-co/>; <https://www.antique-bottles.net/threads/orange-kist-citrus-products-co-canada.687607/>.
- 26 *Henderson's Calgary Directory*: 590.
- 27 Bill Double, *Charles E. Hires and the Drink That Wowed A Nation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018): 185.
- 28 *Canadian Patent Office Record*, Vol LXIX—45 (November 21, 1921): 1.
- 29 *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1920: 525.
- 30 *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1922: 520; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1923: 590.
- 31 Province of Alberta, Certificate of Incorporation dated February 21, 1922. (in possession of the author).
- 32 *Red Deer News*, September 26, 1923: 4. No further information has been found which indicates that the expansion progressed beyond this initial letter.
- 33 <https://www.jhssa.org/book/260.html>: Accessed July 10, 2022.
- 34 *Empress Express*, June 3, 1920: 5. Featured is an advertisement for K&S Tires outlet in Estuary, SK owned by Rabiner and

Pearlman Brothers. The author has in his possession a Land Transfer Deed for a lot in Estuary acquired by Abe Pearlman in January of 1918, as well as several bank notes made out to Rabiner and Pearlman Bros. in Estuary ranging from March 15, 1919, to August 5, 1922. The 1921 Census lists both Abe and Ben as living at the same residence in Estuary, along with Abe's wife and two young daughters. On the census, their occupation is listed as Storekeeper of General and Dry Goods. <https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/item/?app=Census1921&op=&img&id=E003121668>.

- 35 Taken from an application to the Merchants Casualty Company, Winnipeg Manitoba, dated August 23, 1922. (copy in author's possession).
- 36 Interview with Ron Pearlman, May 1, 2022; Quaternary Consultants Limited, *Archaeological Monitoring of the Panam Cauldron Piling Installation*, July 2020: 3, as viewed at: <https://www.theforks.com/about/history/bibliography/61/Archaeological-Monitoring-of-the-PanAm-Cauldron-Pilings-Installation>. The firm was originally named for the Boroditsky Brothers but renamed Bell Bottling Works in 1924.
- 37 Lily Hamer, "Polar Aerated—Pearlman Brothers," *Discovery: The Journal of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta* (Vol. 11, No. 3, 2001): 1. Interview with Ron Pearlman May 1, 2022. Ron Pearlman noted that his family maintained regular contact with their Boroditsky cousins through his youth.
- 38 *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1924: 474, 532; *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1925: 544.
- 39 *Henderson's Calgary Directory*, 1926: 637.
- 40 "PROHIBITION: Beer, Milk, Soft Drinks", *Time*: October 12, 1931, as viewed at: <https://content.time.com/time/subscription/article/0,33009,742370,00.html> November 16, 1922; Donovan, "The Four Horsemen..."
- 41 Interview with Ron Pearlman, November 13, 2022.
- 42 Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta, *Family Histories – Pearlman Family*: 260–61. Viewed at <https://www.jhsaa.org/book/260.html>.
- 43 Hamer, "Polar Aerated..." 6.
- 44 Interview with Ron Pearlman, November 13, 2022.
- 45 *Calgary Herald*, July 14, 1939: 7. The Polar Team would go on to lose the league championship match in August of that year.
- 46 *Calgary Daily Herald*, August 4, 1933: 18. ORT is a Jewish aid organization founded in Russia in 1880 to provide vocational training. The name is an acronym for the Society for Trades and Agricultural Labour as expressed in Russian.
- 47 Interview with Ron Pearlman, November 13, 1922. *Calgary Daily Herald*, October 10, 1929: 20.
- 48 Obituary for Edythe Pearlman, 2003. Viewed at <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/legacyremembers/edythepearlman-obituary?id=44166137>.
- 49 *The People's Weekly*, the official publication of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation from 1944 until 1952, noted several references to Lou and Edythe Pearlman's involvement in CCF activities in Calgary, including the October 14, 1944, 5; November 11, 1944, 5; April 7, 1945, 5; November 1, 1947, 7 and November 22, 1947, 5 issues.
- 50 Encyclopedia.com viewed at <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/culture-magazines/7>.
- 51 From Corporate Sales Ledger in the author's possession.
- 52 *Winnipeg Tribune*, February 7, 1923: 7.
- 53 Pepsi Cola was made available in a 10oz bottle in the Calgary marketplace in 1951 (*Calgary Herald*, March 15, 1951: 11). Calgary Brewing and Malting introduced 10oz bottles in 1954. Lethbridge Brewing and Malting began using 10oz bottles in 1956. Coca Cola began bottling 10z bottles in Calgary on April 27, 1957 (PA-1599-61-2D, Glenbow Collection, University of Calgary) Nationally, Orange Crush introduced 10oz bottles in several marketplaces in 1955, but some franchisees, such as Polar, did not transition to the new bottles until the late 1950s.
- 54 Polar's switch to the 'King Size' 10 oz bottles was announced in *Calgary Herald* on April 21, 1959: 5. The article also noted that they were the 2nd last bottler in Western Canada to make the switch.
- 55 *The Province*, November 21, 1963: 15.
- 56 Based upon the labels on early 1940s Wynola bottles, several bottlers in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta were bottling Wynola products. Two advertorials in the *Calgary Herald* (March 7, 1942, p 3; June 6, 1942, p15) reference Polar Aerated Water Works as manufacturing Wynola.
- 57 Based on the scarcity of Wynola advertising references and bottles marked for Polar. A similar situation exists for several other Canadian bottlers who started bottling Wynola in the early 1940s.
- 58 Through the 1930s and 1940s, Shamrock Ginger Ale and Califruit products were the most referenced brands in Polar advertising along side their national franchise brands. A full list of Polar's own flavours appears in the *Calgary Daily Herald* on September 14, 1934, p. 14.
- 59 Corporate Sales Ledger, 1953. Polar flavours produced that year included Creme Soda, Root Beer, Grape, Fruity Orange, and Jersey Creme.
- 60 Email from David Hamer dated August 29, 2024. David also recalled hearing from his mother, Lily Hamer (née Pearlman) that her father Abe received advice on the bottling industry from his cousin A.I. Boroditsky, co-owner of Bell Bottling Works.
- 61 This is believed to be Jim Serra, the co-owner of a grocery store in Banff. See: https://moosehotelsandsuites.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/BanffLodgingCo__Stories_CornerHouseLaunch_FINAL.pdf.
- 62 Interview with Ron Pearlman, November 13, 2022.
- 63 *Henderson's Lethbridge Directory*, 1940: 315. The address of the facility is identified as 525–4 Street S. Interview with Ron Pearlman, November 13, 2022.
- 64 On September 9, 1946, the City of Lethbridge passed a bylaw to sell a parcel of land to Polar Aerated Water Works for the purposes of establishing a factory; *Lethbridge Herald*, August 31, 1948: 6.
- 65 *Henderson's Lethbridge Directory*, 1951: 299. *Henderson's Lethbridge Directory*, 1952: 284.
- 66 *Henderson's Lethbridge Directory*, 1953: 328.
- 67 Government of Canada, Soft Drink Manufacturers—1960 (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962): 8.
- 68 Government of Canada, Soft Drink Manufacturers—1979 (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1982): 13.
- 69 The June 3, 1960, *Lethbridge Herald* (p 7) announced the opening of the new factory located at 237–12 Street. The article notes that the plant was owned jointly by Polar Aerated Water Works and General News Company Ltd., which was owned by Sam Hamer.
- 70 <https://www.facebook.com/LethbridgeHistoricalSociety/posts/soft-drinks-and-lethbridgewhat-they-called-soft-drinks-back-then-is-not-necessary/930351043659152/>
- 71 Interview with David Hamer, September 5, 2024.
- 72 Seven-up Vancouver Offer of Purchase to Polar Aerated Water Works dated November 1963. Copies in possession of Ron Pearlman.
- 73 Seven-Up Vancouver Offers of Purchase to Polar Aerated Water Works dated September 1965 and October 1965. Copies in possession of Ron Pearlman.
- 74 According to an agreement of sale between the executors for Abe's estate and Ben, Rowena, Sidney and Lou Pearlman, a majority of Abe's 125 shares in the company were acquired by Ben, with smaller amounts going to Sidney and Lou.
- 75 *Calgary Herald*, April 19, 1967: 51.
- 76 *Calgary Herald*, March 26, 1968: 41.
- 77 *Calgary Herald*, November 6, 1968: 8.
- 78 *Calgary Herald*, February 6, 1969.
- 79 *Calgary Herald*, May 6, 1969: 13.
- 80 In an email from David Hamer dated September 9, 2024, he noted that his father's decision to sell at that time, just prior to his 50th birthday, reflected his interest in retiring early after working hard to build his businesses right out of high school, and his mother's desire to live in a larger, more cosmopolitan city. Sam and Lily Hamer moved to Vancouver shortly after the sale of the business in 1969.
- 81 *AGRA Industries Limited—1970—Seventh Annual Report*, 19. Viewed at: https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/images/hrcreports/pdfs/A/Agra_Industries_Ltd_1970.pdf.
- 82 Email from David Hamer dated September 9, 2024.
- 83 *1972 Ninth Annual Report—AGRA Industries Ltd.*, 23. Viewed at https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/images/hrcreports/pdfs/A/Agra_Industries_Ltd_1972.pdf.
- 84 Province of Alberta, Certificate of Registration dated April 19, 1971. Copy in the author's possession.
- 85 *1972 Ninth Annual Report—AGRA Industries Ltd.*, 13.
- 86 *Ibid.*
- 87 *1973 Tenth Annual Report—AGRA Industries Ltd.*, 12. Viewed at: https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/images/hrcreports/pdfs/A/Agra_Industries_Ltd_1973.pdf.
- 88 *Calgary Herald*, February 6, 1973: 46.