

'Popping' the lid on early soda business

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Whether you call it "pop," "soda," "soda pop," or, the accepted term in this part of the country, "tonic," it's the same thing — a carbonated, non-alcoholic beverage.

For about 25 years, Chelmsford was the source of a complete line of these drinks.

It all began in 1902, when C. George Armstrong moved here from his home in Sussex, New Brunswick and established the Chelmsford Spring Company.

Armstrong built his plant on the site of the Byfield Machine Shop on Littleton Road, which had been razed by fire several years before. It was located opposite the cemetery where the present brick warehouse stands.

Our town was a logical choice for Armstrong as he was married to Mary Hendricks Hallett, granddaughter of Rev. John Parkhurst, minister of the First Baptist Church in the South Village for a quarter of a century and later at the Central Baptist Church.

Also, he had worked here as a salesman for the Byfield company, which had been owned by his relatives.

The newspaper report of August 30, 1901 stated a special railroad siding would run to the building for handling freight.

"The products of the manufactory," stated the article, "will consist wholly of light, non-alcoholic beverages, such as ginger ale and other preparations of that class, and the business will be strictly wholesale, the goods being shipped to points of distribution in carload lots.

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



"In the manufacture of these beverages pure water is an important consideration and this will be obtained from a noted and never-failing spring on the northerly side of Robin's Hill, (near #101 High Street) about half a mile from the plant on Littleton Street. It will be brought in pipes of non-corrosive material laid along the roadbed of the railroad company and will be received in its original purity."

The project received a setback on Dec. 14, when a gale wind toppled the walls of the structure during construction. However, it was eventually completed and served the needs of the company until 1912, when it was destroyed by fire.

Business was interrupted only long enough to erect a new plant with its fountain and landscaped front lawn. However, the beautiful grounds fell victim to "progress" with the conversion of the building to the present warehouse years later.

The company made two other products in the early days: ginger beer and "Manola."

Ginger beer was sold in stone bottles imported from England but it had to be dropped from the line when the opaque bot-

tles became illegal. The stoneware bottles have since become a collector's item.

This writer has not been successful in locating a Manola bottle although photographs of it exist. The label on the Manola bottle carried the following message: "An invigorating beverage and nerve food obtained from a South American plant possessing peculiar health restoring power. Absolutely free from alcohol or any poisonous stimulant. Manola is wonderfully refreshing and invigorating. It restores tired nerves, removes fatigue and creates a healthy appetite."

Later, the corporate name was changed to Chelmsford Gingerale Company and several branch plants were set up, including ones in Boston, Worcester and Florida. In 1928, the company was sold to Canada Dry Ginger Ale, Inc., which continued to operate the Chelmsford plant for several years. Although no longer operating locally, they still produce a product bearing the Chelmsford name.

Chelmsford Gingerale was a truly community-oriented company, employing mainly local workers. Armstrong was an organizer and one of the original commissioners of the Chelmsford Water District and continued to serve as a commissioner for many years.

Times have changed but that's the way it was.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.