

1964 - 1966

Coca Cola (and High School)

Despite the fact that I had been around the plant so much growing up, and I always expected I'd work there, I didn't get any slack when it came time to get a job. When I reached my 16th birthday and was legally employable I had to go in and formally ask for a job. I have to admit that I was a little afraid of Mr. Cassel, the owner of the bottling plant. In fact I was in my mid-twenties before I ever used his first name to his face - and it wasn't just out of respect.

At one time I had been hired to rake the leaves in his yard. This involved filling large cardboard boxes with the leaves, hauling them in his daughter's wagon to the back of the Coke Plant and burning them in the incinerator. It was going pretty well, but the walk back with the wagon and empty boxes seemed to take too long so I figured if I could kneel in the wagon and scoot it back it could go faster. Wes returned home as I was "scooting" and proceeded to read me the riot act. He wouldn't listen to my explanation that what I was doing was faster and told me he was paying me to work not play.

When I went in and asked for the job Mr. Cassel didn't just say "yes" (or "no"). He asked a bunch of questions and made it clear that just because my dad worked there I would not receive any special consideration. In fact he said he would expect more from me than a normal kid.

Like every other new summer employee I was assigned to the production line, only helping with other jobs when we were not bottling. My job was to feed the dirty bottles into the washer and on rare occasions to act as inspector as clean bottles passed the fluorescent backlit screen after being washed.

My pay was \$1.25 an hour (that would be about \$9.60 in 2014) which I thought was pretty good. We worked 40 hours Monday through Friday and 4 hours overtime on Saturday. We kept our own time cards, writing our hours in each day, and got paid every Friday.



Wesley Earl putting bottle into washer

During that summer I first discovered that very often what we can, or can't do, is a direct result of what we think we can, or can't, do. I had been "around" the bottling plant enough that I felt like I was pretty capable. During the summer of '63 I had spent virtually every day with my dad on the delivery routes and through the winter I'd gone in most Saturday mornings to help sort

bottles. Loading the bottle washer went like this: I would place two cases of empty, dirty, bottles on a shelf in front of me, remove the 48 bottles in four series of motions with an uncasing bar, turn the cases over and bang them on the shelf to remove any dirt or debris, and then carry the empty cases to the caser where they'd be filled with full bottles coming off the line. To keep up with the equipment this had to be accomplished in 45 seconds or less. Occasionally extra dirty bottles required special attention if, for example, a bottle was filled with dirt or cigarette butts. These had to be cleaned out by hand before putting them into the washer. If the person loading the washer got too far behind the first thing that would happen is that he'd get a jet of water shot into his face. This jet normally was shot into a bottle to break up dirt and if there was no bottle in the slot you got hit. If you got too far behind the production line would need to be shut down while you caught up - and that upset everyone.

The first couple of weeks I was dead tired at the end of each day but it wasn't difficult to keep up with the machinery until the day we had to use new bottles. Normally the bottles were uncased using a clamping device that allowed us to remove 12 bottles at a time. New bottles, however, came in cardboard boxes, with about 60 to a box, and there were paper dividers woven through them, so the bottles would not shift too much. After a box was torn open the paper dividers needed to be removed and then, because the bottles were staggered they had to be removed by hand, four at a time. After the boxes were emptied the flaps had to be folded in and each box nested into the top of a stack of boxes already emptied. Because of the added steps and need to remove the bottles by hand I could not keep up with the machinery. After not too much time they had me switch jobs with a college kid who was working for the summer. He had no problem keeping up and I was humiliated. Here was a guy who was just there for the summer who was having no problem keeping up, while I'd been around the business "forever" and I couldn't handle it. As I watched him work from across the plant I made up my mind that this wouldn't happen again. The next morning as they prepared to start bottling, again using new bottles, I begged for the chance to try again and, amazingly, I managed to keep up with no problem. I wasn't consciously doing anything different, but guess I was working with an "I can do this" attitude. This was one of many lessons I was to learn while working at the Coca Cola Bottling Company, having to do with self-assurance and positive thinking.

Towards the end of the summer, probably in mid-August, one or two of the college guys who were



loading trucks had to leave for school and football practice so I got the added job of loading trucks. I would work on the bottling line during the day and load trucks afterward. I worked mostly with a guy named Tom Murray.

When school started I asked if I could keep working part-time, loading trucks, and Wes agreed to that as long as they had work for me.



At school the decrease in student body size turned out to be fairly beneficial to me. I had not been inclined to get involved in very many extra-curricular activities, and in those I did join, I was a follower not a leader. The smaller enrollment and the changes that come with being an "upper" classman forced me to get more involved and I worked on both the school newspaper and yearbook. Between my Junior and Senior years I attended Boy's State along with Gordon Whirry and Vic Velk. I was the second student in the history of Havre Central to win the Optimist Club Outstanding Youth award and in the spring of 1966 placed second in the Elks Leadership contest.



After Christmas Wes told me that he didn't need me after January 1st for the rest of the winter so I talked with Russell Fisk, the basketball coach, and got the "job" of manager for the basketball team. I'd done some of this in Junior High so was familiar with the duties. As a result I was given a sports letter at the end of the year.

About March or April I was asked to come back to the coke plant with a raise to \$1.50 (\$11.30 today) an hour and I think this was about the time that Dave Craig started. The Craigs lived across the street from Wes's son Phil, who was vice-president of the company, and Dave's mother taught 6th grade at St. Jude's. Dave was a year behind me in school, was on the basketball team, and, as I mentioned earlier, had been on the 8th grade altar boy trip to Spokane in 1962. While I didn't know him real well I remember being happy that he was going to come to work at the Coke plant. Maybe that was mainly because being the "new guy" he would be on the bottling line and I'd be doing more interesting things.

It was some time that spring that I saw another side of Wes Cassel and realized that I was possibly a worthwhile employee after all. One Sunday morning I was loading trucks with Tom Murray. We'd just finished loading one truck and I was to back it out of the plant while Tom brought the empty over from the warehouse. There was just room to clear the door of the plant before the back of the truck got into the street, so we'd always stop as soon as the cab was clear of the door to check for traffic. I didn't see anything coming from either direction so proceeded to back into the street. This was done slowly with a lot of mirror checking to make sure that we were clear on both sides as we backed into the street. All of a sudden I saw a car coming out *from behind the truck* crossing from my right to left and I slammed on the brakes. I was baffled as to where the car came from but before I could get out of the truck Tom was there. He told me to let him talk to the lady and that we should let her believe that he had been driving because I did not have a commercial license. It turned out that she was coming home from church and thought that she could squeeze by behind me before I got all the way into the street. She cut it too close and scraped her quarter panel along the back bumper of the truck.

The next day, after school, I went into work knowing that Wes would want to talk with me about the accident so I went straight to the office. I had some clean aprons that I was bringing from home and I laid these on the counter as I walked in and went over to his desk to talk. His first words floored me when he said, "You're not going to quit are you"? I actually sensed concern in

his voice! That thought had never crossed my mind, but I quickly realized that bringing the aprons and laying them on the counter could appear as the first step in telling him I was going to quit. I was so relieved that he apparently didn't want me to quit (and therefore wasn't going to fire me) that I honestly don't know what he had to say about the accident!



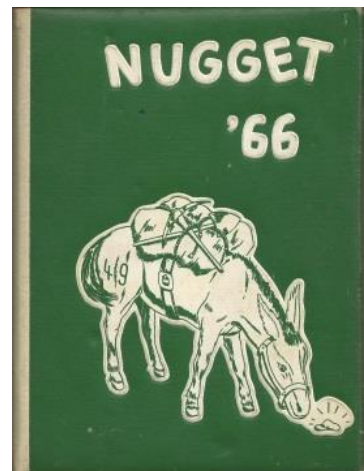
The last couple of months of my junior year a bunch of stuff happened. I ran against Gordon Whirry for Student Body president and Gordon won. It also must have been about this time that it was decided (I don't remember how) that Gordon and I would be co-editors of the yearbook for the 1965-66 school year.

Until this time the school had used student snapshots or pictures taken by Mr. Miller who was a professional photographer. I assume that he took the pictures and in return maybe his daughters' tuition was reduced, but I don't really know. Mrs. Bronson was the advisor for the yearbook and school paper and she wanted the school to buy a camera and have a student photographer take most pictures. Again I don't know what transpired, but a day or two before the end of school she told me that the school had purchased a camera and she wanted me to be the photographer. I tried to beg off as I had never used a camera more sophisticated than a Brownie Starmite (a point and shoot snapshot camera) and the school had purchased a twin lens reflex with adjustable everything. Her response, as she handed me the camera and a bag of film, was that I had all summer to learn.

I don't remember a whole lot of detail about that summer between my junior and senior year, but probably spent most of it loading trucks and sorting bottles (and taking pictures). When school started I didn't even have to ask about continuing to work - it was just assumed that I'd stay on part-time.



At the beginning of my senior year I was elected class president. I kind of looked on this as the result of losing the student body election, but was proud never the less. In addition to being co-editor of the yearbook I was co-editor of the school newspaper. I don't recall a lot about the newspaper, except that, as school photographer, I took most of the pictures and did some of the layout work. Gordon and I worked very well together on the yearbook. I'd become proficient with the camera and, with the exception of pictures that I had to be in, and a couple that we wanted, but couldn't figure out technically, I took virtually all the pictures in that book. We asked Mr. Miller to come over for the "technically difficult" pictures and Dave Craig, who was to be my replacement as photographer took the pictures I was in.



Gordon and I were in the math-science curriculum. For example he and I (and Janet Zartman) were the only students in the advanced math/trig class. Gordon had decided that he wanted to be an architect and wanted to get into the mechanical drawing

(drafting) class but wasn't free during the periods they taught it. I was also interested in mechanical drawing so we talked to the principal and worked out a deal that we could take a semester of mechanical drawing during a period we had free. As a trade-off they "made" us take typing during the first semester. I hated the typing it turned out to be one of the best things I did because most of the jobs I've had required decent typing skills.

The mechanical drawing was a blast. Mrs. Bronson taught the course but she had another class during the period we were free. Consequently she gave us our assignments for the week on Monday and we'd work independently. Because we were alone in the drafting room, with no distractions, we would normally finish our work in the first 2 or 3 days of the week and then we would work on the yearbook. We did a good job with the drafting too because at the end of the school year I received recognition for having the best grade in mechanical drawing and Gordon was second (and this was from among all students taking the class!)



One of the nice things about working part-time at the Coke plant was that we were given a lot of discretion on when we worked. If we had school functions, or other commitments, we could come and go as necessary. We knew what work we needed to accomplish and so long as it was done and the drivers had no complaints about our truck loading we worked without a great deal of supervision. Dave Craig quit working in the fall to play basketball and came back about April. It was about this time that I got chewed out by Wes for working too hard.

We'd received a semi load of sugar and the pallets, each with eight or ten 100 pound bags of sugar were crammed into the warehouse. These 100 pound bags had to be "stacked" in one corner of the warehouse and this was what I was directed to do when I got to work after school one afternoon. The process was to use the forklift to raise a pallet of sugar to the top of the stack (about 10 or 15 feet high and growing) and then move each bag onto the stack. Once a pallet was empty I had to climb down and get another pallet. It took 2 or 3 hours to complete the task and when I was finished I took the forklift back into the plant. Wes thought Dave and I had been working on this together and when he found out the Dave hadn't come in that day I got a lecture about how we were not supposed to be lifting the 100 pound bags alone. The irony was that because of the height and precarious positions required when on top of the stack it was actually harder for two people to try and handle the bags than it was for one person.

There was also a supply of sugar kept in the syrup room on the second floor of the plant in the syrup mixing room and every few weeks sugar was brought in from the stack in the warehouse. This required the reverse process of taking sugar from the stack, putting it on pallets and driving the forklift with sugar over to the plant. We had two forklifts so naturally



Dave Craig unloading a truck (1966)

this created the potential for forklift races. The older forklift wasn't very fast and took a while to master but it was nimble. It was a tricycle arrangement with the driver standing on a platform above the single (steering) wheel. Because of this arrangement steering was reversed (to turn right you turned the steering wheel to the left) but it didn't take long for the steering to become second nature. It had levers to tilt and raise or lower the forks and a third lever controlled the forward-reverse drive. There was no brake so to slow or stop the driver moved the directional lever opposite to the direction of movement. The other forklift was more conventional with 4 wheels, clutch, shifter, brake, gas pedal and a seat inside a roll cage. One day when we were moving sugar (and racing) I managed to tip the old forklift over. Fortunately, because there was no seat or cage I was able to jump off as it tipped and we quickly got it upright again using the other forklift - but the races were over for the day.



After the school year, in the spring of 1966, I got a raise to \$1.75 (\$12.85 now) an hour and that spring I bought my first car, a black 1958 Dodge, for \$450.00.

Bob Donaldson, who lived across the street diagonally from Wes Cassel came to work and was the "new guy". The friendship between Bob and I had become strained over the years and I wasn't that thrilled when he came to work. It always seemed that he was just there for a pay check and was never willing to do more than what he was told to do.

I was "head" truck loader and Dave and Bob took turns working the production line and sorting, so at the end of the day two of us would end up loading trucks.



I've mentioned sorting bottles quite a bit and should explain the process. Wes had devised a "sorting table" that was about six or seven feet long and about five feet wide. The surface of the table had a moving chain type track driven by a motor. There were adjustable bars that separated the table into rows. Each row was "assigned" for a different kind of bottle (i.e. Coke, Seven-Up, Sunrise, Squirt, etc.) One worker would pick up a case of mixed empty bottles and place it on a shelf at the top end of the table. He would quickly evaluate the contents of the case and decide what kind of bottles were most predominant. All other bottles would be removed and placed in their appropriate row on the sorting table where the moving track would carry them to the lower end of the table.

There was a roller track on the side of the table so as soon as all but the predominant bottles were removed he'd send the partly filled case down the track.

At the bottom of the track another worker would move the bottles from the individual rows and fill the partially filled cases coming down the track. A third worker would then carry filled cases of empty bottles from the track and stack them to be removed later.

Depending on the number of people available and their skills (or work ethic) sometimes two or three would be carrying cases to the stacks and sometimes a second person might help the guy at

the top feed the rows. It was the kind of work that took some teamwork and we could sort bottles pretty fast without having to concentrate very much.

One day while we were sorting and chatting, Wes came up and began lecturing us that talking slowed down the work. In passing he made the comment that he figured with the sorting table we should be able to sort about 50 cases per man per hour. None us had ever heard that number before and never really kept track of how productive we were - so we decided to see how many cases per hour we were sorting. It turned out we were doing about 75 per man hour without straining ourselves. I don't know if this was intentional reverse psychology but the next day we decided to see how fast we could go. And off and on for the rest of the summer we'd test ourselves and found that with some effort we could get to 150 cases per man hour.



There was a cooler in the office for employees and we could drink all the pop we wanted but when the production line was running we'd often take a bottle right off the line. One day when they were making Seven-Up I was sorting bottles with Bob Donaldson and someone else. We took a break and each grabbed a bottle of Seven-Up off the line. As we were drinking it Bob said it didn't taste right. No one else noticed anything particularly wrong but Bob was insistent. The quality control representative from Seven-Up was visiting the plant that day and he thought it tasted OK and said that everything looked OK although the sugar tested just a tad low. Bob was so sure there was something wrong he wouldn't back off so they kept checking and eventually discovered there was a problem. When making Seven-Up syrup the procedure was to mix the water, sugar and preservatives the evening before bottling. Then, because the lemon lime extract was so aromatic and the flavor was so subtle, the lemon-lime extract was added to the syrup just before bottling was to start each morning. This time, probably because of the visitor, the routine was disrupted and the production manager failed to add the extract.

A normal Seven-Up run was about 7000 bottles and by the time the problem was discovered about 5000 bottles had been produced. The next day we had to open every one of those bottles by hand and pour the contents down the drain.



A few of times a year we'd have a semi arrive with a load of sugar and every two or three years we'd get railroad boxcar full of new bottles. During the summer of '66 both happened at the same time. We had a box car full of bottles parked on a railroad siding and a semi-trailer of sugar parked on the street in front of the plant. The trailer had to be unloaded immediately and the sugar, in 100 pound sacks, stacked in the warehouse as described earlier. The box car had to be emptied within 3 days to avoid extra fees and we, of course, still had the normal bottle sorting and truck loading to do.

By Monday afternoon we got the semi unloaded onto pallets that we stuck in the warehouse. Then for the next three days we'd start about 5 AM unloading the box car and hauling 2 or 3 loads of bottles to the plant until it got too hot to work in the box car. Then we'd stack sugar, sort bottles and load trucks until we were done. On Thursday we finished the box car and stacked the

last of the sugar. Then we loaded trucks and sorted bottles, finishing about midnight. I can't remember being so tired - it was like working on auto-pilot and not being able to really think. As I recall I had something like 65 hours in the 4 days between Monday and Thursday, most of it from Tuesday to Thursday.