

How Sun-Drop Started

Everyone who lives in Gastonia, or even the state of North Carolina, knows what Sun-Drop is, but they may or may not know how it first started.



Like so many great inventions, Sun-Drop started as a new recipe scribbled on a piece of paper by a beverage concentrate salesman in St. Louis, Missouri while riding around town in the family car. This salesman's name was Charles Lazier and the year was 1928. Lazier was a former carnival sideshow hawker of "cure-alls" who became involved in the bottling business.

The Sun-Drop formula was officially patented on April 15, 1930 and marketed in several southern states under the names of Sun-Drop Golden Cola, Golden Girl Cola, and Golden Sun-Drop Cola.

Sun-Drop in Gaston County

Meanwhile, in Gastonia, N.C., a man named Charles P. Nanney had just moved to town in 1917 to start an independent soft drink bottling plant, Bludwine Bottling Co., on East Main Avenue. Nanny partnered with brothers, L.L. and M.O. Mingus, until eventually buying them out in 1939. Outgrowing his original plant, Nanney moved to a new building on East Franklin, where he bottled Orange Crush, Double Cola, Nugrape, Cheerwine, and exotic flavors like peach and hot ginger.

The year 1953 was the beginning of Sun-Drop in Gaston County when Nanney's plant became the first bottler of the beverage in the country. Nanney's nephew, Powell Nanney, remembered this historic event, "Sales were in the area of Coke and Pepsi. In the beginning there was no advertising, just word of mouth." Today, you can see Sun-Drop ads almost everywhere you go.

But how did Gastonia become the first bottler of Sun-Drop? C.P Nanney was attending a national bottling show and became friends with Charles Lazier (inventor of Sun-Drop). Lazier gave Nanney a sample of his invention, which Nanney brought back to Gastonia. After tinkering with the formula to create the taste he wanted, Nanney started looking for places to market his new version of the drink.



He decided to start with his old friend Red Bridges, owner of Bridges Barbecue Lodge in Shelby. In July 1953, Bridges was opening his new restaurant on U.S. 74 Bypass, and as a promotion the

pair gave away free samples of barbeque and 7-ounce glasses of Sun-Drop. The soft drink was a hit, and later that year Nanney's plant started bottling it. The original slogan was "Refreshing as a cup of coffee."

The Rest of the Story

In 1970, C.P. Nanney was approaching retirement age and contemplating what to do with his company. He met a young stock broker, Jim Falls, who had occasionally dropped by the Orange Crush Bottling Company on his walk home from school during the 1940s, where Nanney treated him to a Double Cola. Falls was offered the company, and within nine days of buying the facility, he decided to invest in all new machinery, spending twice the net worth of the company.



Nanney stayed on at Sun-Drop for the next decade as Falls' mentor. "I knew finance, but I knew absolutely nothing about bottling," said Falls. "Mr. Nanney had a real acute palate. He would take Double Cola and pour a little on the cement floor. He could tell from the fizz when it hit the concrete floor if the carbonation was right."

In the early 1970s, Falls was distributing many national brands which included Sun-Drop, Cheerwine, and the Crush line of products, but he wanted to expand his company and start manufacturing private-label soft drinks for other companies. With the addition of these products, Falls began to run out of space, so in the 1980s he bought the old Coca-Cola Bottling Company building.

The company came out with the Choice brand of products in 1987 and changed its name to Choice USA, which is now run by Jim Falls' son, Jay Falls. Choice USA Beverage now produces soft drinks for such well known companies as Wal-Mart and Family Dollar, and starting this year Sun-Drop's parent company, The Dr. Pepper Snapple Group, plans to start selling Sun Drop nationwide. "At long last, the days of smuggling Sun Drop across state lines are over," announces the company's website.



Sun-Drop & NASCAR

Sun-Drop and NASCAR have been associated with each other for decades. It began in the 1980s and early 1990s when the drink was promoted by NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt. "Dale used to buy around 10 cases of Sun-Drop a week and he became friends with John King and his family, a local bottler in Concord, NC. That's how it all started," said Jay Falls, current President of Choice

USA Beverage, Inc.

What began as a small agreement between Earnhardt and Mr. King grew into a five-year personal endorsement and sponsorship of Earnhardt's No. 3 car, making Sun-Drop one of the first major beverage sponsors in the sport.

Since sponsoring Earnhardt, it became difficult for smaller companies like Sun-Drop to stay involved in racing, but beginning in 2009 the popular company "dropped" back into the sport by sponsoring Danny O'Quinn Jr. in the Nationwide Series No. 01 car.

This racing sponsorship trend is continuing with Andretti Autosports revealing its new IndyCar to be driven by Ryan Hunter-Reay during the 2011 IZOD IndyCar Series, which includes prominent branding from Sun-Drop.

