



INTRODUCTION

FIRST ENCOUNTERED HIRES Root Beer at Mary's, a cluttered corner store on Pittsburgh's gritty North Side. Neighborhood teenagers hung out there, determined to boost their blood sugar by devouring Clark Bars, Devil Dogs, and other snacks, washed down with ample amounts of soda pop. Mary chilled her soft drinks in a red chest-style cooler emblazoned with the familiar "Coca-Cola" script. Customers were allowed to fish out their favorites. An icy Hires occasionally came to hand among the more numerous bottles of Coke, Pepsi, 7 Up, and Orange Crush.

My boyhood Hires emerged from the cooler in a sturdy returnable bottle unlike today's flimsy throwaway can. It was sweetened with cane sugar, not high fructose corn syrup, and probably contained fewer, if any, artificial ingredients. I seem to recall it as being more intensely carbonated and spicier than its modern successor, though I cannot say this with certainty. Had I dreamt that my fascination with Charles Elmer Hires would one day spawn the research that led to this book, I would have paid closer attention to his signature creation.

Cursory accounts of Hires' humble origins and meteoric business success encouraged me to delve more deeply. Clearly, this inventive druggist who parlayed a humble home-brewed tea into an iconic brand enjoyed by millions deserves a place among the

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outstanding entrepreneurs of America's Gilded Age. Launched ten years before Coca-Cola, Hires Root Beer blazed the trail for development of the American soft drink industry. And root beer was but one of Hires' successful ventures.

I was surprised to find that the details of his life had not been more fully explored or documented. Despite Hires' accomplishments, he seems to have been oddly underappreciated by succeeding generations. This neglect became more evident as I broadened my search for information that might shed a brighter light on his history. Save for a handful of articles and a few biographical summaries, little of substance had been written about him. Dozens of volumes had been published about the other seminal soft drinks—Coca-Cola, Dr. Pepper, Vernors Ginger Ale, Moxie, and Pepsi-Cola—and their founders. But no biographer had told the story of the man who, in a real sense, started it all. I became convinced that Hires' story deserved a fuller telling.

Creativity, tenacity, and a gift for recognizing opportunities propelled this southern New Jersey farm boy, who left home in 1863 as a twelve-year-old drugstore apprentice, into the ranks of industrial magnates. Nineteenth-century America is fondly recalled as a time of possibility when wits, initiative, and a bit of luck might enable one of modest means and little formal education to ascend to heights of wealth and influence. Like other myths that inhabit our national memory, unfettered opportunity was more an illusion than reality for many. Yet the era certainly did not lack for exemplars of entrepreneurial success.

Several of these self-made men, like Hires, would earn fortunes by introducing products destined to become staples of the nation's diet. For example, Hires' fellow New Jerseyan Joseph Campbell opened a canning factory in Camden in 1869, the precursor of the soup company that bears his name today. Milton S. Hershey, who like Hires apprenticed at an early age, established the Lancaster Caramel Co. in 1886. He would later sell that business to focus his efforts on chocolate bars. Pittsburgh's Henry Heinz began his business career hawking vegetables from his mother's garden. He would later peddle horseradish and other condiments before launching the H. J. Heinz Co., eminent purveyor of ketchup, pickles, and soups.

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Indeed, Horatio Alger Jr., who celebrated rags-to-riches flights like theirs in *Ragged Dick*, *Strive and Succeed* and dozens of other novels, was also a contemporary of Hires. Had they met, the young druggist's precocity may well have impressed the novelist. Hires completed his apprenticeship at sixteen. By age twenty-one he had saved enough money to open his own drugstore in Philadelphia. Here the entrepreneurial flair and marketing savvy that would define his career quickly surfaced. Spotting gold where others saw dirt, Hires transformed a mountain of fuller's earth salvaged from a construction site into a profitable branded fabric cleaner.

Three years later he sold the drugstore to found what would become a prosperous business wholesaling drugs and botanical products. The budding capitalist's career path took a fateful turn following a farm vacation with his recent bride, Clara Kate, in 1875. Their hostess served the prim young couple an herb tea brewed from roots, bark, and berries that she had foraged. Smitten with the drink's flavor, Hires returned to Philadelphia with its recipe in his pocket. Reformulated, refined, and renamed, the concoction that emerged from Hires' drugstore was an early convenience food. No longer would housewives be required to gather and process a slew of ingredients to prepare a refreshing beverage for their families. A twenty-five-cent box of Hires' Household Extract, when combined with water, sugar, and yeast, yielded five gallons of delicious "root beer."

Hires' success, however, was not primarily due to his drink's distinctive taste or pure natural ingredients, although many purchased and obviously enjoyed it. Charles Hires was a born innovator and entrepreneur, to be sure. But perhaps his greatest gift was his ability to harness and exploit the nascent power of advertising. His ad campaigns, bold and persistent, catapulted his humble homemade beverage into millions of households and transformed the country's drinking habits. It began with a daily one-column by one-inch ad in Philadelphia's *Public Ledger* that a hesitant Hires felt he could not afford. Despite his anxiety, something in the young man's character inspired confidence. The newspaper's publisher agreed to delay billing Hires for the ads until sales increased enough to cover their cost.

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To Hires' good fortune, advertising in America was becoming a potent force for selling products of all kinds. A second industrial revolution was transforming an agrarian society of small producers into an urban society where large industries held sway. Aided by new technology, manufacturers had begun to churn out standardized products ranging from cigarettes to soap in massive quantities. They turned to advertising to create markets for their wares. The medium's surge was fueled by the growth of large-circulation newspapers, the advent of color trade cards, and the emergence of national magazines. Pitches for patent medicines, which had dominated the rural journals of the early nineteenth century, were joined by ads for the products of mass production. Advertising agencies began to shed their traditional roles as mere space brokers to become the catalysts of an advertising age.

Hires exploited these trends with the optimism of youth and the commitment of a convert. Adopting a strategy many regarded as foolhardy, he poured every spare penny of profits from his botanical drug business into promoting his root beer. As sales increased, Hires pressed the *Public Ledger* to abandon newspaper tradition and allow his ads to run across multiple columns. Hires Root Beer ads in color began to adorn the pages of *Ladies' Home Journal* and other national magazines. Trade cards and billboards also were fair game for Hires' blitz. After a modest start, root beer sales achieved astonishing momentum. Hires' unprecedented advertising campaign propelled his once obscure beverage extract into a national brand within ten years. "Doing business without advertising is like winking at a girl in the dark," Hires was fond of saying. "You know you are doing it, but nobody else does."¹

Despite the heady results of his extraordinary promotional push, Hires' feet remained firmly planted. He understood that advertising might persuade a buyer to try his product, but that its quality was crucial to repeat sales. He insisted on using only the finest natural roots, herbs, and berries obtainable. It was said that he complied with the strictest provisions of the pure food laws years before the enactment of such statutes.

Hires earned his reputation by perfecting his root beer and building it into a national brand, but his commercial interests

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ranged beyond soft drinks. He invented other products, including patented cough remedies, colognes, and a line of flavorings and extracts that were used by other manufacturers. He also presciently marketed spring water and instant coffee while growing his botanical drug business into one of the largest on the East Coast. One botanical, the vanilla plant, held a particular fascination for Hires. He mounted an expedition through Mexican jungles to view its growth firsthand and became an acknowledged expert on the exotic bean.

In 1900 he incorporated the Hires Condensed Milk Co. Canned milk was a growth industry that fulfilled an important nutritional need in an era lacking home refrigeration. Hires' initial investment grew into a chain of twenty-two condenseries.

While my book chronicles the commercial ventures of this extraordinary entrepreneur, it also seeks to examine Charles Hires, the person. What traits of character, beliefs, and morals defined his personality and motivated the decisions that shaped his life? Information about Hires' personal life is admittedly fragmentary, but the existing pieces offer revealing insights.

From an early age, Hires displayed an independent nature. He declared that he had left home at age twelve determined to make it on his own without assistance from his family. Hires used \$400 in personal savings to outfit his first drugstore. He got some help from drug wholesalers who, impressed by the young man's ambition, advanced credit for the store's initial inventory. There is no evidence that he sought or received other aid.

A letter to his brother William reveals an idealistic twenty-three-year-old correspondent clearly focused on making his mark in the world. But his writing resonates as well with the spirituality and moral purpose that would come to characterize his life and work. "Truthfulness, integrity and goodness form the essence of manly character," Charles reminded his brother. "I should always be happy if I followed the directions of my own conscience and leave the consequences to God."²

Religious faith was a guiding force in Hires' life. Raised in a staunchly Baptist family, he conscientiously transferred his membership from the rural church of his youth to another in Philadelphia. Here he also forged a life-long friendship with prominent

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Baptist clergyman and Temple University founder Russell Conwell. Like Conwell and other religious leaders of the day, Hires would become a vocal temperance advocate. Over the years Hires became increasingly attracted to the Quaker faith. He donated generously in support of Quaker causes, including the restoration of the historic Friends meeting house where William Penn had worshipped. At its dedication, he exhorted Quakers to fulfill their obligation to God to live a pure and correct life.

Hires' business dealings at times fell short of his religious rhetoric. For example, he steadfastly rejected the pleas of Chester County dairy farmers who suffered when his condensery abruptly reduced the price it paid for their raw milk. Hires maintained that industry competition had forced the cut. Later, he sheepishly threw a grand party to assuage his dismayed suppliers. The erstwhile apprentice had by then become a seasoned capitalist with a well-honed survival instinct.

Hires was devoted to Clara Kate, whom he wed at age twenty-four, and their five children. Letters to his wife and family reveal a touchingly compassionate side of his personality. He was devastated when Clara died unexpectedly in 1910. The lonely widower married again at age sixty to a family friend who shared his dedication to Quaker beliefs. Hires would later formally join the Society of Friends.

In a reflective moment Hires attributed his business success to "a great deal of ambition and absolute honesty."³ Certainly, a strong will to succeed was key to launching and sustaining his several businesses. Evidence also suggests that his integrity, if not always absolute, figured prominently in his business dealings and personal life. The truthfulness of some of his more outlandish advertising claims is open to challenge, especially those extolling the health benefits of Hires Root Beer. Yet his dedication to producing honest products using only pure natural ingredients was exceptional given the standards of his time. Hires adamantly refused to follow the competition by adulterating his root beer with synthetic flavors, caffeine, or other habit-forming chemicals.

Hires has been described as a tycoon with the soul of a chemist. He continued to refer to the factory floor where his root beer

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and other products were blended as the “laboratory.” At times his continuing experiments with flavoring extracts and scents lured him from the demands of routine business. He seemed most contented while fine-tuning the formulas of existing products and concocting new ones. He compiled his favorite “recipes” in a do-it-yourself manual for pharmacists that he marketed for a dollar.

There were other diversions from Hires’ workaday world—namely, public speaking, amateur theater, and sports. A bit of a ham, he did not shy from the opportunity to present his thoughts in a public setting. He burnished his oratorical skills with readings and recitations before church and civic groups. The title of one such talk, “Orators, Ancient and Modern,” suggests his desire to master that art. He also performed in numerous amateur theater productions. His acting credits, gleaned from playbills and reviews that he saved, indicate a seamless segue from dais to stage.

Hires admired fine horses. Once he could afford to own one, he purchased a sleek pacing mare to pull his private carriage and, in winter, his sleigh. Slower traffic scattered as Hires competed with other gentleman racers in dare-devil contests on the streets of Philadelphia and Camden. In his later years, Hires took up deep-sea fishing with equal enthusiasm. He relished carefree days aboard his modest yacht with family and friends pursuing marlin and other trophy-worthy denizens of Florida waters.

Charles E. Hires and the Drink that Wowed a Nation relates Hires’ story in the context of his place and time, America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His long life (1851–1937) spanned eventful eras of the nation’s history from the Civil War through World War I onward to the Roaring Twenties and ensuing Great Depression. The dynamic economic and social forces that thrust the nation into a new century exerted a gravitational pull on the trajectories of Hires’ life and career as well. These included the surge of native ingenuity that paved the way for modern America, the rough-hewn capitalism of the Gilded Age, the evolution of the neighborhood drugstore, the rise of advertising in creating mass markets, and the emerging temperance movement.

Although the milestones of Hires’ attainments have been documented, the details are often unrecorded or ambiguous. Apart

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from a few personal recollections gleaned from articles in newspapers and trade journals, his paper trail is sparse. Hires, of course, must share responsibility for his relative neglect. He was a doer with little time or inclination to chronicle his insights or polish his legacy. He left no accessible memoirs or diaries to illuminate the experiences of a long and productive life and business career.

Moreover, ostensibly factual accounts of Hires' life are frequently dogged by inaccuracies, contradictions, and myths. For example, one major achievement frequently attributed to him is patently false. Charles Hires did not invent root beer! That drink had existed since Colonial times in America and earlier in Europe. Other significant events in his life are difficult to confirm through primary sources.

In recounting Hires' story, I have relied upon published interviews, correspondence, newspaper reports, magazine articles, financial data, and a small family archive. I have endeavored to stick to verifiable information and to highlight historical inconsistencies where they exist. Hopefully, I have managed to avoid most of the mythology and tall tales however beguiling.