

HISTORY FROM OHA

Clinton's Ditch Cooperative Company, Inc.

■ BY THOMAS HUNTER

Clinton's Ditch Cooperative Company, Inc. was founded in 1967 on the 150th anniversary of the groundbreaking of the Erie Canal. Started in 1817, the original Erie Canal, stretching 363 miles from Albany to Buffalo, took eight years to complete, officially opening in 1825. Known locally as Clinton's Ditch, for New York State Governor Dewitt Clinton who supported the venture, the water transit system existed in Syracuse until the 1920s when it was filled in to become Erie Boulevard.

One hundred fifty years later, a bottling cooperative formed to make Pepsi Cola products at one central facility and then distribute those products to member distribution centers located near the route of the old Erie Canal. It was the first facility of its kind in the country, eventually 40 more would develop. Several of the founding members were Erie Canal aficionados who wanted to honor the milestone transportation system with their innovative bottling and canning enterprise.

Groundbreaking at Clinton's Ditch Cooperative Company, Inc. in Cicero occurred in July 1967. The Edward Irish Construction Company of Syracuse built the complex on a 10-acre site, at a cost of \$1.5 million.

Pepsi Cola soft drinks would be mixed and canned in the facility, designed by Continental Can Company of Syracuse, and then distributed by 18 cooperative members throughout the Northeast. The original cooperative members, located in Albany, Batavia, Binghamton, Buffalo, Elmira, Geneva, Glens Falls, Jamestown, Keeseville, Newburgh, North Tonawanda, Ogdensburg, Olean, Rochester, Schenectady, Syracuse, Utica, and Watertown, benefited from lower prices established by a central canning location and less inventory stored at their respective distribution centers.

The one-story, 47,000-square-foot plant opened in April 1968 and was capable of producing 384,000 cans of soft drinks per day or 2.5 million to 3 million cases per year. The facility was divided between high-speed machinery and warehouse space, and employed about 20 workers.

Clinton's Ditch Cooperative was dedicated in

July 1968 to much fanfare. The Academy Award winning actress, Joan Crawford, came to cut the ribbon at the grand opening. Along with Frank G. Staropoli, president of the cooperative, Miss Crawford officially dedicated the recently opened factory. At the time, Crawford was member of the board of directors of Pepsi-Cola Company, since the death of her fourth husband, Alfred Steele, the board chairman of the company, in 1959.

Dorothy Newer, covering the event for the Post-Standard, described the actress as wearing a green, orange, and yellow geometric print shift, a broad-brimmed, turned-up hat, and sparkling earrings and necklace. In 1968, Crawford was spending about five months per year as a good will ambassador for Pepsi Cola and Frito Lay. After the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the plant, about 200 government officials, business leaders, as well as Pepsi-Cola and cooperative executives, celebrated the opening with lunch at the Hotel Syracuse Country House. Rev. Vincent Ryan of Christ the King Retreat House gave an applause-drawing invocation in the name of "Him who summoned the thirsty and at Cana made the water blush."

In 1968, Pepsi-Cola officials were already expecting to expand the facility at Clinton's Ditch. By 1973, the size of the original plant had almost tripled to 138,000 square feet. The number of soft drinks canned jumped from 800 per minute to 1,100 per minute, increasing the total daily output to 1.3 million. A bottling line installed in 1971 produced about 1.2 million bottles per day. Each day, about 35 tractor trailers transported the



Joan Crawford cuts the ribbon at Clinton's Ditch in 1968.

canned and bottled drinks to the 18 cooperative members.

In 1978, the Onondaga County Industrial Development Agency issued \$2 million in bonds to finance an 11,400-square-foot expansion of Clinton's Ditch. The addition included water-treatment facilities and a second canning line. The company also hired about 12 new employees to work in the expanded plant.

In 1982, Pepsi-Cola introduced the first caffeine-free cola to consumers. Two years later, the company introduced the first soda containing fruit juice. In 1986, Pepsi-Cola acquired Mug Root Beer. In 1997, the company introduced Aquafina bottled water to consumers. In 2003, it added Sierra Mist, a lemon-lime soda to its line

of soft drinks.

Today, Clinton's Ditch Cooperative Company, Inc. continues to make and market a wide variety of canned and bottled soft drinks, as well as energy drinks, tea, and seltzer and purified water names owned by Pepsi-Cola Company.

The current size of the manufacturing and warehouse space is 274,000 square feet. About 155 employees make and ship between 19 million and 20 million cases of canned and bottled drinks per year. Its annual revenue is \$158 million. ■

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