



Dr Pepper Museum brings nostalgia at 10, 2 and 4

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WACO – To be entirely honest, I and many others would probably have paid \$6 this week for midday shelter in any building that offered high, airy ceilings and air conditioning and the promise of a chilled beverage served over crushed ice.

But the Dr Pepper Museum and Free Enterprise Institute offers so much more: history, nostalgia, pop culture and Texana, all smoothly blended with a sly dose of free-enterprise indoctrination. The result is as satisfying and successful as its namesake elixir.

And like the drink itself, the 17-year-old institution has succeeded in finding a devoted audience. This week, the little-museum-that-could expects its millionth visitor.

"Well, [Interstate] 35 has been pretty good to us," museum director Jack McKinney said modestly.

But the museum, housed in the 101-year-old bottling plant where Dr Pepper was an early product, is a good mile removed from the beaten freeway path.

People come because they (a) love the stuff; (b) like lingering over all the ads and memorabilia from their own childhoods. After all – tell the truth, now – which do you more readily recall from memory: details of the SALT talks or that guy in the vest singing his zippy: "Wouldn't you like to be a Pepper, too" song?

The corporate big dogs of the soda world have their own museums, of course – Coca-Cola has a vast "World of Coke" exhibit attached to its Atlanta headquarters.

But the Waco plant is unique, Mr. McKinney notes: "This was the first building built to be a plant for Dr Pepper."

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NATALIE CAUDILL/DMN

The millionth museum visitor to see the antique Dr Pepper bottles is expected soon.

The less-remembered "free enterprise" part of the museum's title is a logical extension of the brand's obscurity-to-fame success story of an appealing product, shrewd marketing and clever advertising.

Dr Pepper was, in fact, already a small-but-established brand when the Artesian Manufacturing and Bottling Co. added it to its product list.

The still-secret blend of 23 flavors had been invented by a Waco druggist in the mid-1880s (although there's a small but vocal dissenting minority that still insists Dr Pepper was actually created in the druggist's previous home, a backwater hamlet in Virginia named Rural Retreat).

Back then, Dr Pepper was something of a company stepchild. Artesian's signature product was Circle "A" Ginger Ale ("The official ginger ale of the Armed Forces!").

But by 1924, Dr Pepper was the banner beverage, its status immortalized when its headquarters moved to Dallas, eventually building the huge Mockingbird Lane plant that many of us still sorely miss.

There was, in fact, talk of opening a museum in Dallas at the Mockingbird plant. A Dallas location, Mr. McKinney

said, would likely have meant more visitor traffic than downtown Waco.

But it might also have meant more uncertainty. Preservationists lost a long battle when the old Mockingbird plant was demolished a decade ago; corporate ownership of the company has changed hands and is rumored to be on the sale block again.

So an independent museum in Waco – where real estate costs and development pressures are arguably less intense – has, in the long run, been a successful option. The museum has grown; it recently acquired a century-old building next door, which will house new offices and exhibit space, and its exterior is emblazoned with the huge neon logo that once hung on the Mockingbird plant.

And Cadbury Schweppes has made an enormous donation of an estimated 80,000 photos, documents and memorabilia items that the museum's seven-person staff has barely begun to catalog.

Besides, the museum isn't that hard to find. Nearly a million people have found it so far.

"Friday's my day off, but I'm coming in anyway," said Delores Foster, a sweet motherly lady who has been posted at the ticket booth almost since the museum's opening day. It has been Delores who greeted the majority of those visitors, and she isn't about to miss the millionth.

That lucky guest gets balloons and trinkets and cake and, probably, a picture in the local paper. Best of all is a lifetime token worth a free fountain drink with every visit – and, no matter how much you like soft drinks in the can or bottle, the syrup-and-carbonated-water combo deftly mixed on the spot is incomparably delish.

If you can't make it yourself, raise a silent toast to Texas' own invention, the oft-imitated but unduplicated Dr Pepper.

But go if you can. Wouldn't you like to be the millionth Pepper, too?