

Formula of Friendship

Ellis-Lazenby Relationship Held, Even When Klan Threatened

By: John Young, Waco Tribune-Herald

As much as museum curators scour the planet for artifacts, quite often the most important finds walk through their door.

Finds like Arhoda Hutchinson.

In 1992, months after the Dr Pepper Museum opened at the abandoned 1906 bottling plant on Fifth and Mary, she was among the visitors viewing images from Waco and soft-drink history.

She brought guides' attention to one image in a long-ago group photo taken in front of the plant.

"That's my father."

That may not sound significant. A lot of people have worked for America's oldest soft drink.

But only one man, Ellis R. Booker, had the honor that R. S. Lazenby bestowed. He mentioned him in his personal formulary book.

Lazenby was the first president of the Dr Pepper Bottling Co., the man who took Charles Alderton's Old Corner Drug invention, refined it and started mass-producing it.

He also was as close to Ellis Booker as a white man could be to a black man then -- even if it wasn't good for business.

Booker began working for Dr Pepper at the turn of the century cleaning bottles in a wash tub. Eventually he rose to become Lazenby's most valued employee and bottle-line foreman.

Testament is hand-scrawled in the very book with Lazenby's secret formula. In case of his death, he inscribed to company treasurer W. H. McCullough, he wanted assurance "that Ellis Booker be retained" and that his pay be increased "whenever the business warrants it." Booker was one of a handful of people with access to the formula.

But this was more than a working arrangement. It was a family relationship -- a heartfelt sharing amid mutual risk.

The Lazenbys treated Booker and his 12 children like kin. Rhoda Lazenby, the first lady of the company, once responded to the death of a Booker infant by preparing and clothing the body for burial.

That's where Arhoda Hutchinson got her name, after the wife of her dad's boss.

Hutchinson's memories are painted by "glorious Christmas mornings" at the Lazenby home where she and her siblings were showered with gifts.

She remembers as a child traipsing all over the plant that now is a museum. She would bring her father lunch. They'd share it on the loading dock.

She remembers the hot water that arose from the well after which Lazenby named his Artesian Bottling Co. Later, the well was plugged and filled with bottle discards. It has been unearthed for display inside the museum.

Yes, most of the memories are sweet. Most.

Even one of the bitter memories serves as a point of celebration.

One time as the Depression strained the nation, a contingent of Klansmen paid a visit to the plant. With Booker standing nearby, they said that if Lazenby knew what was good for him, he'd fire his foreman.

"You know that's a white man's job," they said.

Lazenby didn't blink and didn't back down.

"Don't go anywhere, Ellis," he said.

Sometimes, Jim Crow intimidation went beyond words. Indeed, ultimately it took some of the Booker family away from Waco.

When Arhoda was in her teens, an incident not only left her with grisly images to last a lifetime, it also caused two of her brothers to flee.

One of their buddies had been held -- falsely, it turned out -- on an assault on a white girl in Cameron Park. A mob snatched him from law enforcement and lynched him in the square, then burned his body and dragged it around from the bumper of a vehicle.

She remembers the horror of seeing the battered, charred body pulled in front of the Booker home on North 6th, the driver stopping for effect.

Two of her brothers, Claude and Hal, close friends of the lynching victim, decided Waco wasn't safe. They left for Detroit where they remained.

Fortunately, Hutchinson stayed in Waco, married and had a son.

She got a degree and taught -- first in segregated schools in Bosqueville and Downsville, then in Rosenthal and Robinson -- a career of 40 years.

"I'm blessed," she said last week as family members gathered at the museum for a dual family reunion and 90th birthday celebration for her. She's the last of Ellis Booker's heirs.

She's also now part of the history on display at the museum -- her recollections on videotape in a second-floor room with a display about her father, who worked 53 years for the company.

The museum's theme is that the story of a soft drink in many ways is the story of a nation and a community. You could also say the same thing about Lazenby's secret recipe, in many ways uniquely American.

You take a host of ingredients -- symbolized here by a white entrepreneur and a black laborer -- and have a formula that gives these ingredients a chance to complement each other in a world of difference. The result is something that, as nations go, is distinctively different, and has withstood many tests, including that of time.