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How the Temperance Movement Almost Killed Root Beer

by [Ethan Trex](#) - August 10, 2010 - 9:38 AM



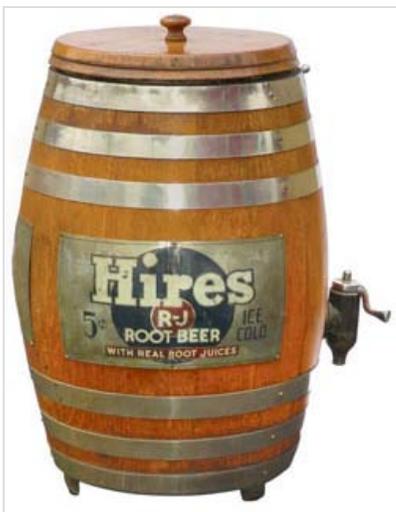
Most people just relax on their honeymoons. Not Philadelphia pharmacist Charles Elmer Hires, though. Instead of lounging on the beach, he hit on a million-dollar idea. In 1875, Hires and his new bride went on a honeymoon to a New Jersey inn, and the newlywed became chummy with the innkeeper and his wife. The innkeeper's wife served the Hires a root tea from an old family recipe, and they both loved it.

Well, they loved most everything about it. The drink was delicious, but it was also a potent laxative, a small but important detail that

probably limited its commercial appeal. When the couple got home, Charles Hires set about trying to recreate the flavor of the root drink without the laxative effects. Hires eventually came up with a dry mixture of roots and herbs that he could blend into a pretty tasty concoction.

Hires decided to market his beverage mix under the name "root tea." He made this decision in part because he wasn't a drinker himself and didn't want for potential customers to think his soft drink had booze in it. One of his mentors disagreed, though. Russell Conwell, a Baptist minister and the first president of Temple University, told Hires that he'd never make any [money](#) with something called "root tea." The blue collar miners in the area wouldn't be caught dead drinking a little tea. Now, root beer...there was a rough-and-tumble name that would catch on.

The Baptist preacher's advice to the teetotaling Quaker turned out to be sound. Hires gave away free mugs of root beer at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philly, and he was on his way to becoming America's first soft drink millionaire.



Then, something funny happened. The "root beer" name Conwell had suggested came back to bite Hires. In 1895, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement turned its sights on Hires, partially because of the word "beer" in the name. Even though Hires himself didn't drink, the WCTU theorized that since his root beer was a sweet fermented beverage it must have some booze in it. (Chemistry apparently wasn't the WCTU's [strong](#) suit.) Thus, having a frosty root beer was no better than pounding back a godforsaken actual beer.

Instead of testing to see if there was actually any alcohol in Hires' root beer, the WCTU simply called for a nationwide ban on his product, which had become wildly popular in drugstores around the country.

Amazingly, the WCTU's vicious crusade against a non-alcoholic beverage sold by a teetotaler lasted for three years. Despite its tendency to base its policies on junk science, the WCTU was a pretty [powerful](#) national force at the time, and Hires' sales went into the tank. Eventually he got an independent lab to test his root beer's alcohol content, and the results arrived in 1898. Hold on to your hats, folks: the root beer was not

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the booze-rich syrup of Satan. In fact, the lab found that a bottle of Hires' root beer contained roughly the same amount of alcohol as half a loaf of bread.

The WCTU no doubt considered using this analysis as an excuse to begin a national boycott of bread, but in the end, the union decided to ease up on Hires. The soft drink magnate ran ads touting his root beer as an alcohol-free, temperance-friendly tippie, and sales soon soared well beyond their pre-boycott level. The next time you enjoy a root beer, remember Hires and the brave scientists who refused to cave to the temperance movement.

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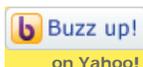
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Comments (36)

During Prohibition, Henry Weinhard's brewery made Root Beer. They still make it today. However, my favorite root beer is IBC. It's very sassafrilla-like. I can't drink it anymore because I'm diabetic. What's your favorite root beer and why?

posted by [Tim S.](#) on [8-10-2010 at 3:23 am](#)

The best root beers come from breweries. My personal favorite is 1919 Root Beer, brewed in New Ulm MN by Cold Spring Brewing. You can only find it on draft in the upper Midwest as it is only sold in aluminum kegs, just like 'real' beer.

A close second is Milwaukee's Sprecher Draft Root Beer, also sold in kegs. Do not think that the Sprecher Root Beer Soda, available in bottles is the same — it isn't.

-**"BB"**-

posted by [Bicycle Bill](#) on [8-10-2010 at 3:45 am](#)

Root beer isn't so big here in NZ, but in the same vein – non alcoholic ciders and ginger beers are best made by the breweries.

posted by [Bakedpotatoes](#) on [8-10-2010 at 5:44 am](#)

WCTU => CSPI. We've seen these tactics before!

In the brewery vein of the other comments, I'll recommend Abita root beer. It's nearly perfect.

posted by [Dave](#) on [8-10-2010 at 6:17 am](#)

No need to let a little thing like science get in the way of a good crusade! They should have called it "sassafras soda" from the beginning.

posted by [Miss Cellania](#) on [8-10-2010 at 6:49 am](#)

"the WCTU theorized that since his root beer was a sweet fermented beverage it must have some booze in it. (Chemistry apparently wasn't the WCTU's strong suit.)"

Root Beer made at the time did have alcohol in it. The carbonation was a result of the yeast/fermentation process. It is a small amount, but it is alcohol.

People who make home-brewed Root Beer today still end up with a very mildly alcoholic mix (unless they happen to off-gas it and then recarbonate it, which probably no one does).

posted by TBone on [8-10-2010 at 8:33 am](#)

I always thought it was odd to call it root "beer". However, I can see the problem now. Yea "root tea" sure doesn't sound right, and I can't imagine "root soda" would be much more appealing. So, it does seem that calling it "root beer" is the best idea.

posted by Morris on [8-10-2010 at 10:07 am](#)

I grew up in South Florida. And there were hamburger joints there that served a "birch beer" which was absolutely delicious. Can't remember the name of the hamburger joints..Royal Castle?? maybe??

posted by MRMAC on [8-10-2010 at 10:19 am](#)

If you have not tried brewing your own soda. Try it! You can make it for around a dollar a gallon and takes no special equipment other than some clean 2 liter bottles. Ingredients are extract, sugar, water, and yeast. Also wine is pretty easy to. I just finished a batch of rhubarb wine.

posted by Steve on [8-10-2010 at 10:36 am](#)

Online research says yep, Royal Castle. Didn't they sell Orange Julius' when they came out too? Ours was in Boynton Beach

posted by [Val Redfearn](#) on [8-10-2010 at 10:48 am](#)

Henry Weinhard's is my fav! It's got a vanilla/honey quality that I really enjoy.

posted by Nikki on [8-10-2010 at 10:58 am](#)

@Tim-

IBC does make a [diet](#) root beer that is pretty decent.

posted by Karthik on [8-10-2010 at 11:08 am](#)

Root beer is one of those anomalies in soda. I've rarely had a truly awful root beer, even the generic store brands are at least drinkable.

On the other hand, there are some truly heinous off-brand colas being made.

My personal experience, of course.

posted by TheLoneIguana on [8-10-2010 at 11:29 am](#)

IBC & Stewarts are both great, but for the "big 3", I like Barq's best.

posted by Wayne on [8-10-2010 at 11:30 am](#)

My favorite root beer is Dog 'N Suds root beer. It used to be a nationwide drive-in chain. There are still a handful of locations around the Midwest. We're lucky enough to have 2 here in Michigan.

posted by [Andrew](#) on [8-10-2010 at 11:39 am](#)

There is a small brewery in Marquette Michigan that makes some excellent brews—my favorite being the blueberry beer. But when it comes to non-alcoholic brews, their rootbeer is the best I've ever had! Yay for the Vierling!

posted by Ophelia on [8-10-2010 at 12:16 pm](#)

Virgil's root beer is the best I've had from a store.

posted by Admiral Byrd on [8-10-2010 at 12:32 pm](#)

Sprecher brewery in Milwaukee is another small brewer that makes excellent beer and superb root beer. The brewery now also bottles other sodas including orange and cream soda that really have the flavor I remember growing up in the late 50s and early 60s.

posted by Pat on [8-10-2010 at 12:39 pm](#)

Gotta be A&W Root Beer! (A-Treat is a close second although their cream soda is the best)

posted by Nancy Pierpont on [8-10-2010 at 12:44 pm](#)

I kind of wish that the WCTU had succeeded. It would have made my life MUCH easier. Rootbeer is the only thing that I have a life threatening allergy to. I break out when it gets on my skin and my throat closes when I ingest it! My poor husband loves the stuff though. Every year during the MN State Fair he leaves me at home and camps out at the 1919 stand. I'm pretty sure that's the highlight of the year for him.

posted by Andrea on [8-10-2010 at 12:57 pm](#)

I'm old enough to have actually had Hyers. My grandma lived 2 doors from a gas station that may well have had the best pop machine of all time.

posted by TOM on [8-10-2010 at 1:17 pm](#)

@Andrew, I live in Michigan and have never heard of Dog's N Sud's. I'm gonna have to go next time on that side of the state, it sounds good!

posted by hockeyzombie on [8-10-2010 at 1:52 pm](#)

Polar also makes Birch beer. Delicious. Saranac also makes a great root beer, and a ginger beer.

posted by Sam on [8-10-2010 at 2:38 pm](#)

When I was a kid, there was an independent bottler in Catawissa, PA that made a fantastic birch beer! I can remember one fourth of July where they had set up a table with bottles of red, white and blue bottles of the stuff shaped like an [American](#) flag. Their root beer was good, too, but the birch beer was out of this world!

posted by Dave on [8-10-2010 at 2:48 pm](#)

I have to agree with Admiral Byrd, Virgil's is the best root beer I've had. Interestingly, I like that I can taste the wintergreen in it but I hate wintergreen-flavored candy with a fiery passion.

posted by vegebrarian on [8-10-2010 at 3:41 pm](#)

Birch beer is made with birch root, while root beer is made (originally) with sassailla root. I've seen "clear" birch beer, which is really strange.

posted by PartiallyDeflected on [8-10-2010 at 5:14 pm](#)

vegebrarian, I agree with you on the wintergreen exactly! I hate the flavor by itself, but as a component of root beer it's great. If you haven't tried Virgil's cola- it's only okay. They flavor it with citrus oils. Tastes too citrus-y in my opinion.

posted by Admiral Byrd on [8-10-2010 at 5:50 pm](#)

I bought an old fashioned root beer once (the kind that is actually fermented) and got carded, apparently it was store policy because the root beer contained .5% alcohol.

posted by Macho Business Donkey Wrestler on [8-10-2010 at 6:26 pm](#)

Admiral Byrd, thanks for the tip. I've been curious about their other flavors but have yet to deviate from the delicious root beer!

posted by vegebrarian on [8-10-2010 at 6:44 pm](#)

Barq's is by far the BEST in my opinion. I know it's not the fermented, hand-crafted stuff but it tastes good and it's not expensive.

posted by Greg on [8-10-2010 at 7:47 pm](#)

Root beer was killed anyway, by the Delany Clause. In the '70s, it was concluded that safrole, the principal flavoring ingredient of root beer, were carcinogenic.

What has since been on commercial offer is an ersatz root beer, though I understand that a few brave souls are still making true root beer at home.

posted by [Daniel](#) on [8-10-2010 at 7:52 pm](#)

Prohibition, the true cause of the Great Depression.

posted by Andy on [8-11-2010 at 9:54 am](#)

A&W Root Beer, but only if it's "draft" (as it were) in a frosty cold mug at one of their restaurants. I also have a fondness for the one made by the Waialua Soda Works out of Hawaii. But birch beer is my absolute fave, and Kutztown my current obsession.

In Temecula, California there's a store called the Old Town Root Beer Company...nice little place for exploring brands.

posted by VM on [8-11-2010 at 11:27 am](#)

Root beer is like wine for me. The variety! I like diet A+W best (blasphemy!) because it tastes weirdly like bubblegum.

posted by Nicole on [8-11-2010 at 1:22 pm](#)

Dog N Suds for me too! In fact, I'm going to have to hit it up for lunch since its just a few minutes down the road.

posted by Megan on [8-13-2010 at 11:29 am](#)

Thomas Kemper's Root Beer is really good, as is their Cream Soda. I prefer it over Weinhard's (which is my second favorite).

posted by =Dan on [8-16-2010 at 6:17 pm](#)

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