

Maynard Wood “Woody” Bates – innovative soft-drink marketer

Maynard “Woody” Bates, whose wide-ranging interests provided a platform for success in many fields, died Sunday, December 20. He was 93. The arc of his professional career took him from the smoky jazz clubs of war-time New York City to the executive suite of The Coca-Cola Company.

His early life was spent in the eastern Pennsylvania coal country. An only child, he was doted upon by his mother and learned an appreciation of the outdoors from his Grandfather, Ervin Bates, who made his living hunting ginseng and trapping. His father, Harold, found Depression Era employment with the Worthington Corporation and the family moved to Kearny, New Jersey, a stone’s throw from Manhattan.

During his teen-age years, Mr. Bates worked with an appliance store owner in Kearny to build a thriving business in phonograph record sales, eventually eclipsing the store’s primary merchandise. This was the first of many sales victories for the young man. He took up drumming, studying with journeyman Danny Alvin during one of his New York sojourns. He became a habitu  of clubs from Harlem to Greenwich Village. He sat-in regularly during after-hours jam sessions at “Nick’s” in Greenwich Village and Jimmy Ryan’s club on 52nd St., accompanying such notables as Billie Holiday and Count Basie. He formed a number of Dixieland groups during the 1940s. They sought-out and recorded with an up-and-coming producer, Rudy VanGelder, who was working out of his living room in Hackensack. VanGelder became one of the giants in mid-century jazz recording.

After earning a degree from Bucknell University in 1945, Mr. Bates began work with the Grand Union grocery chain where he quickly established a reputation for hard work and innovation. During this time he met and wedded Jean Lobdell Barrows. They settled in Stamford, Connecticut, where two sons were born: Geoffrey and Christopher. Mr. Bates was hired by Lever Brothers as a brand manager for Peptosent toothpaste. His suggestion to widen the mouth of the toothpaste tube, thus encouraging greater consumption, increased sales significantly for the brand. As an amateur photographer, he won First Prize in the Lever House photography contest of 1955.

Mr. Bates began his career with The Coca-Cola Company in 1957. He survived the 1958 “Saturday Night Massacre,” where a number of upper-echelon executives were fired summarily by then president of the company, Paul Austin. He rose rapidly through the ranks with ideas which expanded notions of marketing and bottler relations. As National Sales Manager from 1962-66, he created the now ubiquitous idea of printing messages underneath bottle caps. By implementing a nationwide contest in which consumers would collect bottle caps with imprints of individual letters in order to spell C-o-c-a-C-o-l-a, he drove a significant increase in bottled product. With only one first prize of \$10,000 (\$95,000 in 2016 dollars) the winner made headlines and brought further public notice to the company.

After the death of his wife in 1961, Mr. Bates married Mary Elizabeth “Sunnie” Stanley Jennings, a television news personality at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania’s KDKA. Ms. Jennings brought 2 children from her previous marriage, Jill and Jack.

Mr. Bates was moved to New York and the Coca-Cola Export Corporation in 1966 as part of Robert Woodruff’s drive to globalize the soft drink. His mission was to assist global grocery chains modernize their product marketing and thus improve Coca-Cola sales throughout the world. He retired in April of 1986 as Vice-President for Trade Relations at Coca-Cola USA.

Mr. Bates’s lifelong interest in the culture of East Asia, and particularly Japan, found flower during his retirement when he and his wife enjoyed Yo-Shin-So, the Atlanta home whose design was based upon elements of the Imperial palace in Kyoto. He began a used-book business and built a reputation as “The Dependable Bookman,” collecting and selling books primarily about East Asia. He served a term as President of the Antiquarian Booksellers of Georgia.

It was during retirement that he developed an interest in and became an internationally recognized expert on Lafcadio Hearn, 19th C. Greek-born immigrant and international writer of Japanese culture.

Mr. Bates’s wife Sunnie, died in 2009. He is survived by his sons, Geoffrey Barrows and Christopher Allen, his stepchildren Jill Jennings and Jack Bennett Jennings, nine grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. A memorial service will be held Sunday, June 12 at the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 1025 Mt. Vernon Highway, NW, Sandy Springs, Georgia. In lieu of flowers, donations in Woody Bates’s name will be accepted by the Northwest Unitarian

Universalist Congregation.