

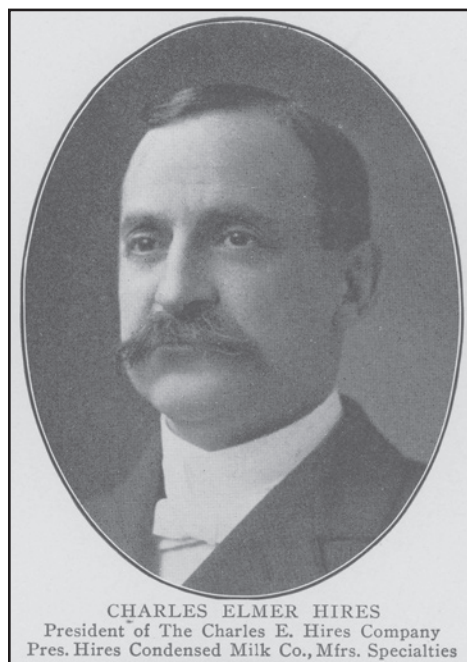
The Hires Root Beer Family Story and its Connections to Tredyffrin & Easttown Townships

Jeff Groff

Root beer evokes so many memories for people. For some it is a seat in a soda fountain after school having a big mug or glass. For others a root beer float on a hot day. And many people recall efforts to make and bottle their own root beer, sometimes ending alarmingly in exploding bottles. It is very much a part of American life and it began in Philadelphia in the 1870s with Charles E. Hires. Trained as a pharmacist, Hires would develop a soft drink inspired by a variety of home brewed herbal teas and beverages, and with a great skill for promotion and advertising make it known around the world. Perhaps less well known is that his entrepreneurial interests went beyond root beer and included cough remedies, other soft drinks, condensed milk, and bottled water. The story of Charles Hires and his family is integrally linked with Tredyffrin and Easttown Townships. It exemplifies the growth of Philadelphia business after the Civil War and through the first half of the twentieth century, and the resulting development of the Main Line. It is also a personal story shaped by memory, family recollections, and Hires souvenirs, as Charles Hires was my great-grandfather.

Root beer

Charles Elmer Hires (1851-1937) was born in Roadstown, New Jersey to a farming family, but decided to pursue a very different career and train as a pharmacist. (fig. 2) At an early age he demonstrated



[FIG. 2] Charles Elmer Hires, *King's Philadelphia and Notable Philadelphians*, 1902

his business savvy and ambition and in 1869 opened a drug store in Philadelphia.¹ An 1872 advertisement for his 602 Spruce Street

location highlights products including pure drugs, chemicals and spices, patent medicines, perfumes, cosmetics, even paper, envelopes and postage stamps.² A fortunate discovery came with a nearby lot excavation containing a large pocket of fuller's earth. In a time before dry cleaning for clothes and spot removing solvents, this dense clay offered some cleaning potential. When applied to cloth (especially wool or flannel) it drew out grease or oily stains.³ He sold it as Hires Refined Potters Clay or Special Cleaner, often wholesaling it to other druggists including Smith, Kline & Co.. This venture provided the seed money for his next business effort.

In 1875 Hires married Clara Kate Smith (1852-1910) a member of an old Germantown Quaker family. (fig. 3) And this brings me to the root beer creation myth. I am not sure how much is accurate, but my great-grandfather repeated it and perhaps embellished it. While on vacation on a New Jersey farm (or perhaps their honeymoon?), he and his wife were served a cool beverage brewed like a tea. He was so taken by it that he learned its



[FIG. 1] Trade card, Hires Rootbeer, 1895, author's collection

ingredients and decided to create his own formula. Key ingredients were sassafras, wintergreen, juniper berries, hops, and vanilla.⁴ He may originally have planned to call it root tea but he was persuaded that most consumers would not be drawn to something identified as an herb tea. The story is that as a believer in temperance he called it root beer hoping that miners, laborers and other workers would drink this instead of regular beer. Soft beers and “small beers” low in alcohol content had been around for some time, but there was no question that based on the marketing it was intended to be a temperance drink.

With clever promotion, his extract, sold both to consumers and to druggists for soda fountains, quickly took off. At that time soda fountains were still the place for much social interaction, so they were a natural market. His big breakthrough came at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 attended by millions. A bit of the showman, he set up a booth and gave out free samples of the drink and then sold packages of dry extract.⁵ Popularity of the beverage blossomed in the following years and by 1880 a liquid extract would be available that made five gallons of the beverage. (fig. 4) Soon directions in languages from French to Hebrew would become part of targeted sales. Smartly, he also patented a special bottle stopper and capping machine.



[FIG. 3] Clara Kate Smith Hires, c. 1895, photograph by Gutekunst, Philadelphia, author's collection



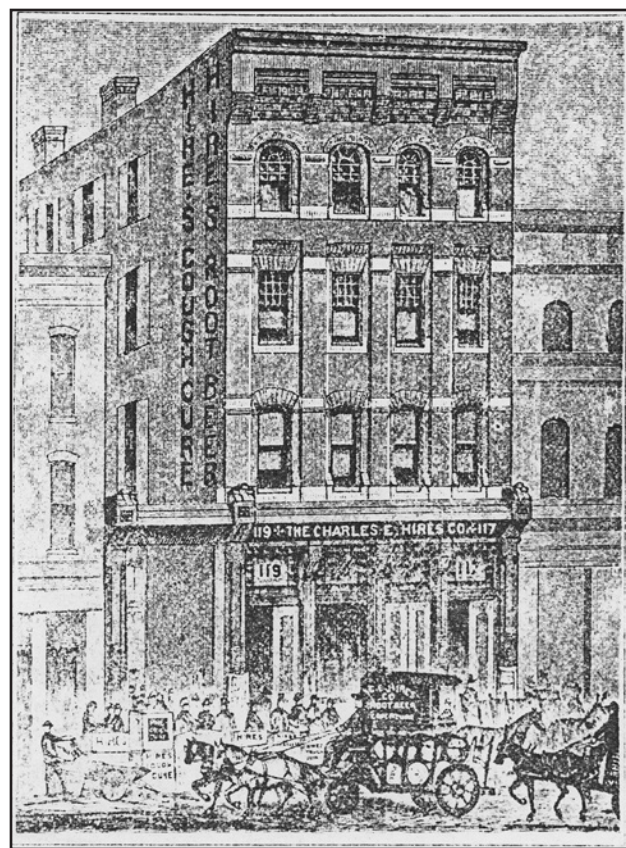
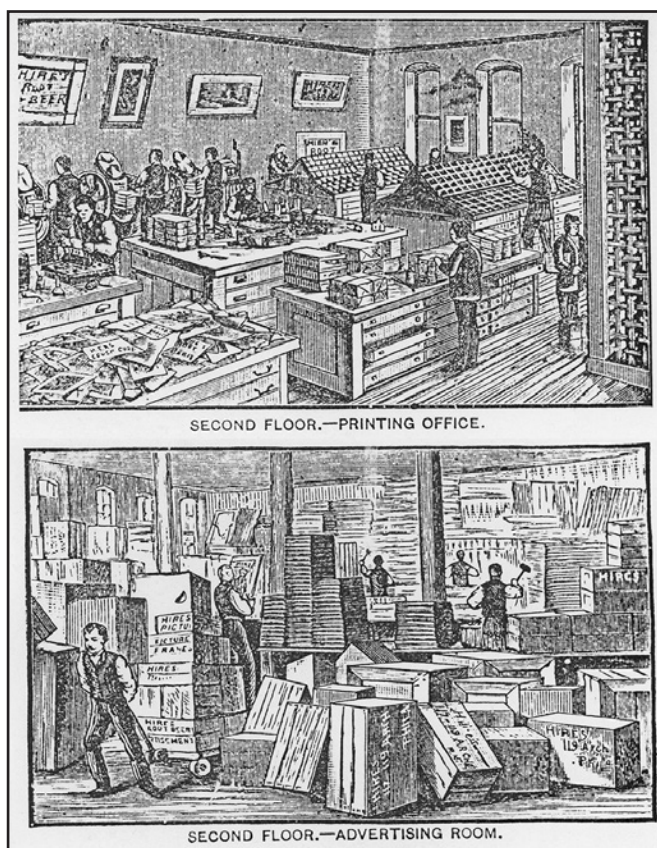
[FIG. 4] Extract package label, Hires Root Beer, author's collection



[FIG. 11] Joke booklet, Hires Rootbeer, 1901, author's collection



[FIG. 9] Trade card, 1883, advertising the 25-cent package of “Hires Improved Root Beer” concentrate that “Makes 5 Gallons of a Delicious, Sparkling and Wholesome Temperance Drink,” author's collection



[FIG. 5-6] Copies of woodcut engravings of the Charles E. Hires Co. at 117-119 Arch Street, Philadelphia, c.1890s

With rapid expansion his principal business location became 117-119 Arch Street. In 1896 he opened a plant on Delaware Avenue, one in Malvern in 1899, and in 1904 on N. Broad Street.⁶ Several woodcut engravings supposedly depict the Arch Street facilities. (figs. 5-6) Probably a lot is artistic license, but what is notable is how it depicts the business, especially the advertising room. The key to his success was advertising, and he is known as a very early pioneer in this field. He had been strongly encouraged by George Childs, the publisher of Philadelphia's largest newspaper, the *Public Ledger*, to build market through repeat advertising. He was nervous about it, but also a risk taker and plowed much of his profit back into advertising, \$200,000 in three months alone in 1893.⁷ Besides newspaper and magazine ads in publications like *Ladies Home Journal*, he made extensive use of trade cards, joke books, puzzle books, pen knives and small mirrors. (figs. 7-11) Trade cards on the reverse often pointed out health benefits, ingredients, and trumpeted the sales figures—3,134,947 bottles in 1894. Interestingly the terms “root beer” and “rootbeer” are used interchangeably in advertising.

In 1891 the Hires Boy was introduced in an attempt to create a distinctive brand. The advertising in general echoed the sentimentality of the period using cute children and wide-eyed dogs and cats. With growing success, Hires launched his next push at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago where he again gave out samples and sold extract. But that also was the year when he introduced Hires ready to drink and for sale in bottles, making it easily accessible to a much larger consumer audience.⁸



[FIG. 10] Trade card, author's collection



[FIG. 7-8] Trade cards: (Left) 1891 card featuring the “Hires Boy”; (Center & Right) Front and back sides of the “Uninvited Guest” trade card, with an earlier and happier “Hires Boy” card shown on the table next to the glass, author’s collection

In 1907 Hires contracted with Villeroy & Boch of Mettlach, Germany to produce distinctive ceramic mugs for soda fountains that echoed the barrel shape of a beer mug. Most featured the Hires boy holding an identical mug, frothy with a head from the soda. A tall, slightly flaring stein introduced about the same time was described as highly ornamental, dainty and refined. (figs. 12-13) These mugs were free to soda fountains, but tied to minimum orders of the extract. Villeroy & Boch also made large dispensers for on top of the counter that are highly prized by collectors today.⁹



[FIG. 12-13] Mug (above) & Stein (left), Hires Rootbeer, Villeroy & Boch, Mettlach, Germany, c. 1910, private collection

Much of Charles Hires’ success came from following the business model of vertical integration. As he sourced the various ingredients he needed for root beer he realized it was much better to control the supply. So he also became a wholesale dealer in vanilla beans (mainly from Mexico and Guatemala). In 1920 he purchased a very large sugar plantation and mill in Cuba named Dos Rosas near Cardenas on over 25,000 acres, with over ten miles of rail lines.¹⁰ And he acquired springs as a source of pure water. The high quality of the water and the ingredients were core values of his business.

With the growing popularity of a variety of soft drinks he added an extract for ginger ale (probably in the 1890s or early 1900s). (fig. 14) What would become the country’s most popular brand—Canada Dry—was introduced in 1907 and soon displaced any success Hires might have been having. So he decided to take his product upmarket in 1914 and call it Champanale. It used white Niagara grapes, ginger root, and grapefruit and was sold in bottles that looked very much like

[FIG. 16] Advertisement, Hires Ginger Ale, c. 1920, author's collection



[FIG. 17] Extract, Hires Ginger Beer, 1920s, author's collection



[FIG. 15] Glass, Hires Ginger Champagne, c. 1915-20, private collection



champagne bottles.¹¹ Flared champagne glasses marked Ginger Champagne were distributed to soda fountains and restaurants. (fig. 15) Advertisements seeking an upscale audience noted that it was served at leading hotels like the Waldorf Astoria, Ritz Carlton, and Bellevue Strafford. Keep in mind this is a time when the national temperance movement was really gaining momentum. Surviving bottles of extract for ginger beer and ginger ale from as late as the 1920s also indicate the company continued to sell those projects for some time. (figs. 16-17)



[FIG. 18] Hires Advertisement by artist Maxfield Parrish, *The American Magazine*, June 1921, author's collection



[FIG. 14] Bottle, Hires Ginger Ale, c. 1900-10, private collection

By the 1920s there were so many root beer makers that Hires needed to reestablish their prominence. The advertising shifted to emphasize the Hires brand and also Real Root Juices, rather than the term root beer. Changing style and the beginning of the Jazz Age also meant that the Hires boy was falling out of favor—too cute and children oriented. The old fashioned look did not appeal to a younger audience who were being drawn more to cola beverages. Hires drew on popular artists and commissioned Maxfield Parrish to create a number of illustrated advertisements. (fig. 18) Larger flared mugs from Villeroy & Boch simply marked with the Hires name replaced Hires boy mugs. (fig. 19) As the 1920s progressed the advertising became more modern. Flappers, young men who looked like they would be completely at home on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Princeton campus, and more glamorous models now lifted bottles or glasses in a wide variety of ads. (figs. 20-21) Prohibition broadened the market and root beer as a health drink took a decided backseat. In the 1930s–50s full page ads in the leading magazines featured attractive couples and families, appealing to a wide audience.

Beverage Economy

EACH bottle of the delicious—healthful beverage you make from Hires Extract costs only about 1½¢—compare this with the 15¢ to 20¢ you would pay for ready bottled beverages.

Why pay the middleman's cost—pay for new bottles each time—pay freight on water you already have? One 30c bottle of Hires Extract makes 40 bottles of bracing, thirst-quenching and invigorating beverage—you would pay \$6.00 for a like quantity of ordinary bottled goods.


WARNING: When patronizing soda fountains remember there is no beverage which combines refreshment and health like Hires. Beware of weak imitations claiming to be "like Hires." Your protection is to insist on Hires by the name, refusing any imitation.

THE CHARLES E. HIRES CO.
206 South 24th St. Philadelphia, Pa.

Printed in U. S. A.—X27 R

Hires Rootbeer

*Appetizing
Invigorating
Nourishing*



**CLIP
and MAIL
ATTACHED
Free Offer Coupon**

ABOVE: [FIG. 20] Recipe booklet, Hires Rootbeer, c. 1920s. RIGHT: [FIG. 21] Hires Root Beer Advertisement, *Saturday Evening Post*, June 24, 1933, both author's collection

Drink

Hires

R-J

Root Beer

FOR THIRST AND CHEER

R-J

Your guarantee of Real Root Juices

Three ways to get Hires Root Beer

DELICIOUS • HEALTHFUL • ECONOMICAL

At Fountains

When you insist on Hires R-J Root Beer, you get real root juices, not just oil flavored imitations—you pay no more for the genuine.

In Bottles

Ready to drink. Get Hires R-J Root Beer wherever bottled beverages are sold, either by the bottle or by the case. Healthful, economical.

Make it at Home

For less than 1c. a glass, it is easy to make 40 pint bottles of Hires R-J Root Beer from one package of Hires Extract. A national favorite.



THE CHARLES E. HIRES COMPANY, PHILADELPHIA AND TORONTO

Other Companies

Condensed milk

At the same time Charles Hires expanded his soft drink business, he launched a variety of other ventures. Cough syrups and other remedies were tried but soon became a secondary offering. Much more successful was Hires Condensed Milk. (fig. 22) Condensed milk is normally sold sweetened and used especially in baking. Siting factories near to major areas of dairy farming proved most efficient and became the Hires model. Malvern, Pennsylvania was his first condensed milk plant opening in 1899, taking advantage of the nearby farms and the adjacent railroad tracks for shipping.¹² The success of this venture spurred employment in this area and rapid growth within the borough. At its height the factory condensed 20,000-40,000 quarts of raw milk a day in a building along King Street at Bridge Street, in its early years described as the largest enclosed building in Chester County. (fig. 23) Hires' ambitious expansion plans for condensed milk production meant at its height there were twenty-one plants in four states and Canada. Root beer was also bottled seasonally in Malvern from 1900 to about 1904, both as extract and as a ready to drink beverage.¹³ After several years of large demand supplying the Government during WWI, Hires Condensed Milk was sold to Nestles in 1918 for over a million dollars. Increasing regulations in the dairy industry possibly led to the sale, but it may have been a refocusing on core business.



ABOVE: [FIG. 23] Advertising safety pin holder, Hires Condensed Milk, c. 1899, author's collection

BELOW: [FIG. 19] Mug, Hires, Villeroy & Boch, Mettlach, Germany, c. 1920, author's collection
RIGHT: [FIG. 23] Postcard, Hires Milk Condensary, Malvern, author's collection.



Water

A growing need for high quality water in an era when pollution in rivers and streams was increasing created many challenges. Hires sought sources for natural spring water for his root beer. As a by-product, he began selling bottled water years before it became a large market in this country. Purock was the primary brand and mostly it was sold in a variety of sizes. (fig. 24) The line expanded to include distilled water needed for home and industrial uses. Water coolers were a natural sideline and many hallways in businesses or schools had five gallon glass bottles of Purock inverted in a dispenser base. In later years Hires branched out into electric water coolers.

An important purchase by Hires, the Colonial Springs in Valley Forge was acquired from the Fisher family in 1915. (fig. 25) There is speculation whether root beer was bottled there, but more likely it was just a water source. (See Mike Bertram's article "The Bottling Plant at Colonial Springs" in the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3, p. 84, October 2010). In the 1930s the springs were sold to Valley Forge State Park. The Hires Company also owned over 70 acres next to Pine Iron Co. and backing up to Robert Liggett's Echo Valley Farms, now perhaps better known as Stirling's Quarters.

The Family

Charles E. and Clara Kate Hires

In 1894 Hires purchased a large Gothic style stone villa set on twenty-one acres in Merion called Rose Hill. (fig. 26) It sat at the southeast corner of N. Highland Avenue at Old Lancaster Road and had been built for Lincoln Godfrey the President of the Eddystone Print Works (textiles). Designed by Theophilus P. Chandler, the noted architect who did many Main Line houses, it is clear evidence of Hires' financial success. He renamed it Melrose.¹⁴

How Charles and Kate Hires decided on this purchase and the details of the transaction are a bit cloudy. And this is where some land in Devon comes into play. They purchased several lots in Devon in 1892 on that Highland Ave. bordering the railroad tracks and near the Devon station.¹⁵ It appears they planned to build a very large, half-timbered house, probably on the crest of the land. It would have had views over to the Devon Inn on one side and towards Valley Forge on the other. The architect was to be William Price who was noted for his large houses, often in a Tudor mode with arts & crafts style interiors. An oil painting Price made of the proposed house shows a beautiful rendered building, yet it was never constructed. Drawings for it were published in 1894.¹⁶ (fig. 27). So I am left to wonder what happened. Had rapid expansion of the Hires Company in 1893 and a national financial panic that year left him reluctant to build? Was it too grand for their Quaker sensibilities? Was there a falling out with the architect? Or was Devon too far from his factories in the city? In 1894 they sold those Devon lots to Lincoln Godfrey, the same year they bought Godfrey's Merion house. Godfrey meanwhile built a very large



[FIG. 24] Purock Water Bottles. www.treasurenet.com



[FIG. 25] Colonial Springs ruin, Valley Forge National Historical Park, April 2016. Photo © John O. Senior



[FIG. 26] Rose Hill (aka Melrose), Charles E. Hires residence, N. Highland Ave. and Old Lancaster Rd., Merion, PA, *King's Philadelphia and Notable Philadelphians*, 1902



mansion in Villanova, now the home of the Academy of Notre Dame. Godfrey later resold the Devon lots, but in 1908 still retained ownership of one.

By 1908 the Hires lived on Buck Lane in Haverford in a large house with 14 rooms and 4 baths, a sizable garden and a conservatory (fig. 28)—not as grand as Merion, but by then their children were older and their living needs had changed. It was described as Jacobean and Old English, but really is completely Colonial Revival. Interiors were modest in design and furnishings appropriate to their fairly low key lives. (fig. 30) Three live-in servants proved sufficient to manage the household.¹⁷



[FIG. 28] Charles E. Hires residence, Buck Lane, Haverford, Pennsylvania, *Country Homes*, January, 1920, author's collection



[FIG. 30] ABOVE: Buck Lane residence, interior views, *Country Homes*, January, 1920. Author's collection
BELOW: [FIG. 31] Emma Waln Hires at Buck Lane, c. 1930s. [FIG. 32] Charles E. Hires, c. 1930. Author's collection



OPPOSITE LEFT: [FIG. 27] Proposed residence for Charles E. Hires, Devon, PA, Oil painting on board, William L. Price, 1894. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, by the gift of G. Holmes Perkins

In 1910 Clara Kate died. Besides her husband she was survived by her three sons and two daughters. The next year Charles Hires married Emma Waln, a school teacher who was a member of a very prominent Philadelphia Quaker family, related to the Morris and Wisters.¹⁸ She brought to the marriage social prestige; he brought a large fortune. It is likely they often attended Haverford Meeting conveniently across from their house, but Charles Hires remained very involved and interested in Merion Meeting, one of the oldest in the area, and he helped preserve it, and in 1917 wrote a brief history.¹⁹ In 1918 the Buck Lane house was remodeled by the architect Edmund Gilchrist, no doubt giving Miss E., as she was known in the family, a change to make it more to her own taste. (figs. 31-32)