

# The Color of Cola

By WARREN GOLDSTEIN

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History-making heroism, Stephanie Capparell means to demonstrate in this admiring account of the Pepsi-Cola Company's pioneering — but largely unsung — “special-markets sales staff,” ought not to be measured solely by the fame it attracts. She's right. Inconceivable without the giants of the ballpark and the ring, demonstrations and courtrooms, the movement for African-American civil rights depended even more on the mostly unknowable actions of millions, black and white, who created new ways of thinking and working and acting within and across racial lines.

“The Real Pepsi Challenge” begins with a creative, dynamic white New York businessman, a politically connected, progressive Republican turnaround specialist named Walter S. Mack Jr., who took over Pepsi in 1938. Mack, in his own words “an unrepentant capitalist and a liberal” who enjoyed playing, as Capparell puts it, “scrappy David to the Goliath that was Coca-Cola” (Pepsi's 1939 sales were under \$5 million, compared with Coca-Cola's \$128 million), decided to strengthen Pepsi's hold on the “Negro market.” Pepsi's 12-ounce bottle, twice the size of a Coke, sold for the same nickel, which made it more popular among poorer people; according to Capparell, Pepsi had “survived the Depression by appealing to Negro consumers.”

Mack more or less invented the business internship in 1940, with a nationwide essay contest for college graduates. Two of the 13 winners were black; they traveled through 21 states and “thousands of miles by car, train and bus, selling Pepsi” and, by implication, Pepsi's commitment to African-Americans. World War II interrupted the program, though not Walter Mack's racial activism: Pepsi opened three integrated military canteens that served 29 million servicemen during and after the war, while “the government's canteens — like the Army itself — were segregated.”

Capparell deftly portrays the optimism of the immediate postwar years, especially regarding what she calls the “dizzying number of firsts for African-Americans” — in business, education, politics, entertainment and, of course, baseball — in the banner year of 1947. That year Mack hired the 33-year-old Edward F. Boyd, a National Urban League staff member

working on housing issues, with a promise that Boyd could hire a dozen African-American salesmen. A slump in the soft-drink market kept Boyd to just four hires at first; his staff grew to eight in 1950, and finally reached 12 a year later. The book mostly recounts the story of Boyd's special-markets team — the employees' backgrounds, how they sold the cola, the coverage they received in the black press — and Pepsi's shifting fortunes in an often volatile market.



The “real Pepsi challenge” of the title lay in the efforts of Pepsi's black salesmen in the 1940s and '50s to establish both the importance and profitability of the “Negro market” and the reliability and competence of the men who could sell to it. These men faced the gritty, humiliating realities of Jim Crow as they traveled through the South hustling their cola at black churches, social clubs, schools and athletic events. Some of the first African-Americans working in national corporations — who didn't carry a broom, that is — they became role models and minor celebrities.

With Mack's backing, Boyd ran remarkable advertising campaigns in 1948, 1949 and 1951 in the black press. Called “Leaders in Their Fields,” the ads

featured profiles of African-American professionals like the diplomat Ralph Bunche, the composer Walter Franklin Anderson, the journalist P. Bernard Young Jr. and the hat designer Mildred Blount. Capparell shows how the series, copies of which black schools and universities requested as educational materials, simultaneously pumped significant income into black publications, showcased black business and professional success, and helped cement black loyalty to Pepsi.

Without calling explicit attention to the alliance among black leaders, the black media and black businesses — an alliance that sprang into action when the president of the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Company toasted Georgia's segregationist governor in 1950, and helped inspire a Pepsi-supported boycott of Coke — Capparell establishes the importance of their mutual support in the overall struggle against racial discrimination. Just as black sportswriters played a key role as advocates for baseball's integration, the black press, by promoting black consumers and businesses, served to strengthen itself and increase collective black political power. In 1951, Coke placed its first ads in black papers.

Capparell, an editor at The Wall Street Journal and a co-author of "Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons From the Great Antarctic Explorer," interviewed six surviving members of the team. Through them she opens a window onto the frequently impressive, culturally conservative (and therefore often deprecated), "striving" lives of the respectable black middle class in the years before integration — men and women without whom the achievements of the civil rights years would have been impossible.

Take the story of the team member Jean Emmons: from DuSable High School on the South Side of Chicago to a steel mill in Gary, Ind.; from a junior college to an M.B.A. at the University of Chicago in 1948. Emmons received no serious business interviews until Pepsi hired him. He later earned a doctorate in education and retired in 1981 after six years as superintendent of public schools in Trenton, N.J.

More journalism than history, more inspiration than analysis, "The Real Pepsi Challenge" nevertheless deepens our appreciation not, as the author would have it, for the platitude "that diversity is good for business and that business should be good for diversity," but for the persistence and courage of those willing to break barriers and risk the consequences.

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