

History of the Schmidt Museum of Coca-Cola® Memorabilia

It began as a small seed of an idea, a way to fill a few empty bookshelves. But Bill and Jan Schmidt's passion for Coca-Cola memorabilia would grow to fill a museum.

The Schmidt's quest for Coca-Cola advertising art began in the 1970s when the couple, then bottlers of Coca-Cola, attended an antique art auction. They were hooked.

Fast forward 40 years, and the family owns the largest and most comprehensive collection of Coca-Cola advertising art in the world: 80,000 items, enough to fill the 32,000-sq.-ft. Schmidt Museum of Coca-Cola Memorabilia in Elizabethtown, Ky., 50 miles south of Louisville.

The Schmidt family's Coca-Cola bottling business spanned four generations. It began in 1901, when Frederick Schmidt opened a plant in Louisville at the corner of 9th and Main streets, becoming only the fifth Coca-Cola bottler in the country. Later, he divided the Louisville franchise territory among his three sons. The Elizabethtown territory went to middle son Luke Schmidt. Upon his death in 1941, Luke's wife, Irene, managed the operation. Their son, Bill, returned to Elizabethtown to take over the family business in 1955 after completing college and serving as a pilot in the United States Air Force. Bill and his wife Jan represented the third generation of Coca-Cola bottlers. In the 1970s, Bill and Jan's sons, Luke and Larry, began working at the bottling plant. While Luke eventually pursued other interests, Larry stayed active in managing the business and took over as president in the mid-1990s. Larry remained in the position through the sale of the Coca-Cola franchise in 1999 and the subsequent sale of the bottling and canning facility in 2004.

The passion for Coca-Cola memorabilia began in 1972 when Bill and Jan Schmidt began to search for a few Coca-Cola antiques to decorate office spaces. By 1976, their passion for collecting Coca-Cola memorabilia filled warehouses. In 1976, dedicated space was created in the Elizabethtown bottling plant for the Schmidt Museum Collection of Coca-Cola Memorabilia, which opened to the public in March of 1977. In November 1999 – after 25 years and almost a million visitors from around the world – the museum closed for about a year due to changes in state regulations. The museum reopened for several years at the Elizabethtown Tourism and Convention Center. Then, in the fall of 2005, the Schmidt Museum of Coca-Cola Memorabilia moved to a new 32,000-sq.-ft. museum/warehouse facility located on Buffalo Creek Drive just off I-65 in Elizabethtown.

The nostalgic collection spans the past 114 years, reflecting the country's culture through the years. The 80,000 items include many rare pieces, such as the only complete collection of classic Coca-Cola serving trays known to exist, antique Coca-Cola delivery vehicles, turn-of-the-century bottling works, vending machines, toys, bottle displays, signs and a Santa exhibit.