Pepsi in His Blood

The Norman Gillette Sr. Story

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INTRODUCTION

It's certainly unusual to link a man's character with a road sign. But the flashing neon sign on the Cass Street Bridge between La Crosse, Wisconsin, and La Crescent, Minnesota, says a great deal about Norman Gillette, Sr.

Positioned there since 1956, that sign was the first flashing neon sign in Western Wisconsin and possibly the state of Wisconsin outside of Milwaukee. This first is very much in keeping with how Gillette has run his businesses over his lifetime. Gillette, who had seen such a sign on Times Square on a business trip to New York, had to have one just like it for Pepsi. He turned to a former Pepsi employee, Charlie Collins, who had started Collins Sign Company of La Crosse. Collins,
recognizing his former employer's need, agreed to take on the challenge. The sign he created has now stood for four decades to greet travelers between La Crosse and La Crescent.

As long as there is a road between these cities, the flashing P - E - P - S - I letters will greet drivers. In the time it takes to cross that bridge, a traveler sees the cycle not once but twice, enough to firmly implant the Pepsi image.

Of course, not every traveler was enamored with the sign. Back when Ralph LaPoint worked for Coca-Cola in La Crosse, he remembers taking detours around the bridge whenever Coca-Cola staff from regional or national offices came to La Crosse. Even if it meant driving miles out of the way from the Holiday Inn on Pettibone Island to get to Coke offices in La Crosse, they would do it.

"I would bet you to this day they never see that sign. That is how infuriating that sign has been," said LaPoint, who was hired away from Coca-Cola by Gillette to be office manager for Pepsi. "You just couldn't ignore it."

Long before Coca-Cola deemed it necessary to put up a sign or two in La Crosse, Gillette realized image is where the soft drink or any other business is at. His message, besides drinking Pepsi, is simply this: be bigger and better than your competition.

But then, Gillette is a classic entrepreneur. That sign, just as his business has always been, is an extension of the man himself. Rather than the bean counter's determination that detailed reports about cost effectiveness and return on investment must be made before every business move, Norman Gillette operates his business by gut, by instinct, by savvy. And, he's done it with great success.

"An entrepreneur has the drive to put himself into the business and keep putting money back into the business without wondering if he will get a return back this year, the next year or the year after that," said Ralph LaPoint, who serves as chief executive officer for Gillette's company, now known as The Gillette Group. "An entrepreneur like
Norm Gillette does it by instinct. The company is an extension of himself."

The closest we come today to the kind of business spirit that resulted in Pepsi far outselling its competition in this region may be found in the computer software industry, although LaPoint said it will take time to know if these companies will fare as well. "You can't just call yourself an entrepreneur. You have to be one. You have to be willing to risk your neck."

Gillette has always recognized an opportunity and taken advantage of it. In addition to the Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company of La Crosse, the Gillette Group now includes Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company of Rochester, Minnesota, Pepsi of Mankato, Inc., and a warehouse operation in Decorah, Iowa.

The company no longer bottles Pepsi. Instead it serves as a wholesaler for Pepsi products and 7-Up and Dr Pepper in southeastern Minnesota. Its market is now 1.2 million people in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa, which the company supplies through 10 major brands and numerous smaller ones.

The willingness to put himself into every business move, to take his chances with success and failure, and to be able to deal creatively with challenges is what has made for an exciting business life for Norman Gillette, Sr.
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Frank and Mary Esse Gillette, parents of Norman L. Gillette, Sr.

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First business lessons

Roughly 13 years after North Carolina pharmacist Caleb Bradham began experimenting with soft drink concoctions, Norman Gillette was born on January 8, 1906, in Genoa, Wisconsin, a Mississippi River town about 30 miles south of La Crosse.

More than 30 years before he discovered there was gold in Pepsi, Gillette's life centered around another liquid, the waters and backwaters of the Mississippi River. Genoa, Wisconsin, with a population today and then of about 250, was very much a Mississippi River town, with most of its activities revolving around the river.

Genoa is just a few miles north of the site of the Battle of Bad Axe, where followers of the Sauk leader, Black Hawk, were massacred by U.S. soldiers while trying to flee across the Mississippi River into Iowa.
in 1832. The first known settler of Genoa was David Hastings, who built a house in 1853 in what is now known as Genoa. That same year, Guiseppe “Joseph” Monti, a Swiss-Italian from northern Illinois, chose the Genoa site as a new settlement for a group of Italians and Swiss who had been living near Galena, Illinois. With most of the residents of the community coming from Italy, they changed the original name of the town from Bad Axe to Genoa in honor of the home city of Christopher Columbus.

The early Italian influences were very much a part of Gillette’s childhood in Genoa and certainly his diet. His family was not Italian but enjoyed a good Italian sausage along with their neighbors. The Gillette family to this day still enjoys Risotto, an Italian rice dish made with chicken broth, onions and aged cheddar cheese. The children of Norman Gillette always celebrated birthdays with chicken and Risotto and even today if there is any hope for “Grandpa’s Italian sausage,” the family is in ecstacy.

Seven children were born to Mary Esse Latimer and Frank Gillette: Blaine (born 1904, died 1988); Norman (born 1906); Elma Waters (born 1908, died 1996); Cyrus (born in 1909, died in 1994); Lyle (born 1913, died 1983); Wanda Grimsrud (born in 1914); and Don (born 1916).
Norman Gillette attended this public school in Genoa through the eighth grade, the last year public education was offered in the town.

While Norman Gillette was growing up, Genoa had three streets — Main, Walnut and Pine — all running parallel to the river. The four-bedroom family home on Main Street is still there. It was in the unheated, upstairs bedroom where four of the boys fought for covers on cold winter nights in the double bed they shared. More often than not, by morning they had kicked through the covers. The girls had it easier, each had her own bedroom.

The children all attended the one-room school in Genoa, which had one teacher for all eight grades. Sometime after Norm Gillette finished eighth grade, the family moved to Viroqua.

The dog that the family had when Gillette was growing up was an unexpected source of business philosophy for him. Toodles, a bulldog, was so full of fleas, Gillette was convinced the only reason the dog lived to a ripe old age was because of the exercise he got scratching away all day.
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From the dog’s experience, Gillette extrapolated to the philosophy that problems in business are like fleas. “The fleas of life keep you interested and your mind in everything,” Norm frequently said. “If you didn’t have any problems, you’d have to make them up.”

Well into his 10th decade of life, Norm still is going to the office looking for fleas to scratch. “He loves to go to the office and solve problems,” said his son, Norm Junior (called Junior by the family). “Father said nobody should ever retire. He worked seven days a week.
No matter where he was, he was always talking business. Even when he was fishing, his mind was always working and he was thinking about business."

In fact, Norm's own father-in-law, Louis Martin, used to tell him to slow down and not work so much. That message came from a workaholic, himself.

During his childhood, Norm's grandparents, the Latimers, ran Genoa's general store, which faced the river. Gillette's father, Frank Gillette, made the bulk of his living on the Mississippi, which he called a "gold mine" for anyone who understood how to make the most of the bountiful carp, buffalo and sheephead fish that could be captured in large seine nets.

Blaine (left) and young Norm. Circa 1907.
The December fish haul was quite profitable, but potentially dangerous.

So successful was he as a commercial fisherman that Frank Gillette used to brag that while farmers had to work year round planting crops, feeding animals and performing a multitude of other chores, he could practically get a year's worth of income from a day harvesting fish.

Rather than trying to sell the carp as they caught it, Frank Gillette, a man who stood 6 foot 7 inches, held the fish alive in a pond about two acres in size. Then he and his sons sold their fish at the seasons of the year when prices were highest.

"We'd go down sometimes and catch $10,000 or $15,000 worth of fish at one time," Norman Gillette recalled.

Frank Gillette added to his holding pens the catches of other fisherman who hadn't figured out that the best markets were in New York or Chicago just before the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashona in the fall and Hanukkah in December.

"In the summer time, you'd catch these carp and they weren't worth much in the market." Gillette said. Other fishermen would be pleased to sell their catch for 2 or 3 cents a pound, not realizing Gillette could turn it over at 10 to 12 cents a pound in the right market.
Their fish hauls of 25,000 to 100,000 pounds would be shipped east in tank cars, leaving at 4 p.m. one day and arriving alive in New York City about 10 p.m. the next day. Norman Gillette once had to travel with the fish to New York when he was about 18 years old. On this occasion, he had to collect the cash in person — making sure the buyers did not change the price on him.

Epstein's Fish Market of La Crosse, Jewish owned and operated, was a customer of the Gillettes at times, although mainly a competitor. And, local members of the small Jewish community in La Crosse came to Frank Gillette to buy carp.

One woman enjoyed a good-natured battle of wits with Frank for years. She would try to distract Gillette by encouraging him to throw another fish on the scales at the same time she put a finger under the scale so it would not weigh as much. Meanwhile, Gillette would push down on the scale so it would weigh more.
Looking thrilled to be photographed, the Gillettes are, from left: Norm, Elma, Cyrus and Blaine. Photo is from about 1914.

Donald Vinger, husband of Norm’s daughter, Norma, heard that story and many others from Norm’s brothers, Cyrus and Blaine, who spent hours each morning in Vinger’s office at Pepsi Cola. They described that woman and Frank Gillette as having “a love-hate relationship,” said Vinger, who was credit manager at Pepsi for many years.

Norm’s involvement with commercial fishing came early in his life because he attended school only through the eighth grade, a common practice then, especially since there was no high school nearby. Later on, he attended the La Crosse Business College, taking courses in bookkeeping and business law. He also was a self-learner, particularly if it had anything to do with business.

Gillette’s earliest job outside the family was on a “mini-gang” for the U.S. government. Already as tall as he is now at 6 foot 4, he worked in 1920 for what were then top wages — 30 cents an hour. The crew went into the back waters of the Mississippi gathering minnows, fish that
had spawned there and become trapped in receding waters after spring flooding.

"We'd go back about a half mile and pull these ponds for the minnows, bass, sunfish, everything," he said. The minnows were put into tubs and shipped to lakes in northern Wisconsin and northern Minnesota to increase sport fishing opportunities there.

As he grew older, Gillette and his brothers discovered another market. They caught fish on Wednesdays and sold it to Catholics on Fridays whose church then prohibited them from eating meat on that day of the week. The 15 cents a pound was "just spending money," Gillette said, which they used for movies set up on the streets of Genoa for viewing under the stars.

Much of the fishing was around Gillette Island, which the local people pronounced "Jill-it." The family kept a fish shanty on the island, which had a U-shaped bay. The men of the family spent summers removing stumps and snags so the 100-foot nets would not get caught. Fish trapped by the nets in the fish haul would be moved to a pond where they would be kept until the price went up.
"They cleared stumps by hand. It was not easy work," Norman Junior said.

The government took over the Gillette fish pond in the 1930s, using it to reproduce fish that could be transferred elsewhere. The love of fishing remained with the Gillettes, however. Norman Junior can remember the time he was boating on the La Croix River with his father near Stillwater, Minnesota, in 1956. His father had him pull up beside a commercial fishing boat, which he boarded and then proceeded to show the fishermen how to make the most of their 500-foot seine lines.

"We stunk pretty bad for the rest of the day," Junior said.

But neither man cared. They loved commercial fishing then and now. Junior had learned the trade from his Uncle Cyrus, who used to assign him the task of setting 1,600 hooks on a set line, or box line.

The Gillettes would soak barley and oats in water and dump them into the bay to feed the carp that were there. This practice, called
"chumming," attracted additional fish which would smell the food and swim upstream. They also fed the fish they held in the ponds so they would be bigger when they went to market.

In the early part of the 20th Century commercial fishing on the Mississippi was a dangerous industry, as Norman Gillette was reminded during a December fish haul in the 1920s. They had chopped a hole about 10 to 12 feet across in the ice. It needed to be large enough to slip the net underneath the ice so it could be stretched across the haul and up through another hole. The idea was to use the nets to block the frightened fish from going back into the main channel of the river so they could be captured and put into the live tanks for shipment out East.

“We probably had 50,000 pounds of fish that day. My father had a crew of six or seven working for us,” Gillette recalled. “The fish were there and we were making plans to get them out of there and my father walked by me, putting equipment away.”

Frank Gillette, “a very nervous guy,” never wanted anything out of place, including an 8-foot long board he saw lying across the pond. When he went to pick it up, however, he apparently stepped into a hole in the ice and went under. The board flew out of his hands, hit him in the head and pushed him down under the ice.

“I didn’t see it happen. I heard a noise, but I was busy with the fish,” Gillette recalled. “I looked around and didn’t see where my dad was at. I don’t know what made me think of it, but I went over and looked at that board. I lifted up that board and there he was. The board had come down on top of him, covering the hole.”

Frank Gillette was pulled out of the 10 to 12 feet of icy water, gasping for air and beet red on a day with an air temperature of 10 below zero. “A couple of minutes and he would have been gone,” Gillette said.

Frank was hustled to warm up in front of a fire in an ice shanty. Workers helped him out of his wet clothes and into dry ones and wrapped him in blankets. Characteristically, he didn’t go to a doctor.
Men just didn’t do that in those days. Thankfully, his only residual effect was a numbness in his hands.

Yes, the Gillettes often hauled upwards of $15,000 in fish in a single day, but it was not easy work. And, as they were reminded that day, the river had hidden dangers.

Youthful enterprises

Life in Genoa or in any American community during World War I put pressures on German immigrants — friends and neighbors who suddenly were suspected as being enemies of the United States. A family living next door to the Gillettes came under suspicion merely because they were eating white bread when the patriotic thing to do then was to eat dark bread, saving the bleached white flour for the men at war.

When someone spray painted “Down with Kaiser Bill” on the German family’s fence, that family falsely accused their neighbors, the Gillettes, and held that grudge for a decade. They only apologized in 1926, just before Norman Gillette’s mother died at age 44. She was a lovely, caring woman who was sorely missed by her children and husband. In fact, Norman Gillette said his father grieved for his wife the rest of his own life and was never quite the same after her death.

Frank Gillette enjoyed drinking as much as any man did in those days. He’d walk into his home very straight and tall because he carried a bottle under his top hat. His wife, Mary, did not approve of drinking. There would be hell to pay if he were caught with that bottle.

After her death, Frank Gillette took to drinking even more heavily. He had a temper when drunk and was said to have broken a chandelier in one fit of anger.

Norman Gillette felt a strong sense of responsibility to his siblings after his mother died. He was 20 years old and, with Blaine already out
of the house, he was the one the others turned to for advice. That legacy continues even today. His siblings talk to him before making major decisions.

If there is any characteristic of Norman Gillette as he grew up it was that he was enterprising. From the youngest age, there was an intensity about him, particularly when it came to earning money. Norman Senior proudly remembered the baby pig he bought for a buck and brought to market for $50 despite a desire by his parents to butcher it to feed the family. Instead of dinner, he pocketed a $49 profit. Then there were the tickets for the Chautauquas — traveling lectures that
his father organized. Norman Gillette traveled around the area selling tickets for the tent shows.

Norman and the boys would shoot frogs to sell them for frog legs. They'd also go out duck hunting and, with no limit on how many they could shoot at a time, would return home with dozens for sisters Elma and Wanda to pluck in the basement. A gravy made from ducks still is a family favorite. Norman Gillette had domestic ventures going as well, including organizing the family on a summer night to make ice cream or Italian sausage.

In the 1920s, he set traps for muskrats, whose fur was then quite valuable. Trapping was a dangerous business, particularly for those who dared steal from another trapper. "People would kill you if you stole from their traps. The 1920s were a time when muskrat coats were very popular," said Norman Junior.

Blaine was enterprising in his own way. As first born, he claimed Frank Gillette's Model T Ford as his own, hiding the keys from his brothers. Blaine had a fit when Norm found the keys at one point and

Norm with the family car, used to take Frank Gillette on insurance sales trips to La Crosse. The first Gillette car, a Model T, was the second in Genoa.
drove around Genoa. Being at the wheel of a car then, even more than now, was pure joy for a young man, particularly when there were so few.

“At that time, there were only two cars in Genoa. Somebody bought one ahead of us,” Norman Gillette recalled.

The car could speed to La Crosse at a breath-taking 15 to 20 miles an hour, making the journey in two hours — but only in the fall. In spring and summer, the dirt roads were under water; in winter, snow covered them, particularly in the area around the Genoa cemetery.

“You’d get stuck, see. So we would have to have a team of horses from a farmer pull you out. It was like quick sand. A guy around Hex Point, a farmer, lived close by. He would charge us $2 or $3 or $4 to pull us out.”

The enterprising farmer “had a racquet going until they caught him. In the day, he’d pull out cars and at night he’d haul in water and make the road muddy again.”

The Genoa “Black Sox”

Baseball was growing in popularity in rural America in the early part of the century with intense rivalries among the towns of western Wisconsin. Frank Gillette did not play, but absolutely loved the game and was eager to have the team he favored come out on top. So much so, he took advantage of some talent that came on the market from an unexpected source.

Frank would send his son, Blaine, in the Model T to fetch some players for the team he supported. Players known as “Lefty” Sullivan, a pitcher, and Pendergast, a third baseman, were said to be from the Chicago “Black Sox,” who were banned for life from playing professional baseball for allegedly fixing the 1919 World Series. Despite the charges, no players were convicted of throwing the series to Cincinnati, which was the underdog in the series with the Chicago White Sox.
It is common knowledge in the Gillette family that the “farm boys” Frank Gillette brought in to play were Black Sox, who continued to play under pseudonyms because they were banned from playing the game they loved and that was their livelihood. Sullivan may not have been an actual Black Sox, although he did play for the White Sox. Apparently his career in the majors was limited by a major flaw in this game. Yes, he could hurl a ball. But as soon as a player bunted, he was in trouble. He just couldn’t field a bunt, according to the stories told by Blaine and Cy.

Sullivan, who reportedly was paid $300 to pitch one game, was an excellent ringer until the opposing team figured out his weakness. He also knew other players he could bring in for Frank Gillette’s team. These players all wore worn-out uniforms to look the part of farm boys. “Where’d you get those players,” the opponents would ask. “They’re just some farm boys off the ridge,” Gillette would answer.

Once the farm boys began playing, the opponents became suspicious.

“That guy was a spit ball pitcher,” Gillette recalled about Sullivan. “He’d take the ball and scratch a little bit to one side. On the other side, he had wax in his hand. He put wax on the ball and threw curves.”

Frank Gillette was known to bet on a game or two, but “only when he knew he would win.” On one occasion, Frank evidently wagered $3,000 — the value of his home — on a game against a Caledonia, Minnesota, team.

It was a close game, with the team Gillette favored winning in the end. Gillette had already collected the winnings when a man in the stands recognized one of the Black Sox players as a ringer. The Gillette family took off, with each person taking a different route. In those days, fugitives could escape just by crossing the state line. “Once they crossed the river, they couldn’t touch you,” Blaine and Cy told Vinger.
Enjoying the outdoors

Gillette Island was more than a place for commercial fishing, it was flush with ducks. Frank Gillette, who like his sons loved hunting almost as much as fishing, somehow convinced the Fish and Wildlife Service to build an artesian well on the island in the middle of the river. Truthfully, there was no good reason for the well from a government point of view, but for some reason it was built at government expense. That well did lead to a career in conservation for Blaine, including management of a fish hatchery in Genoa.

Blaine, incidentally, ran the hatchery so frugally that he had to be threatened by the government to spend money or he would get less the next budget year. “He gave new meaning to frugality,” Donald Vinger said. “He didn’t have the first dollar he earned. He used that dollar to buy a wallet to hold all the other dollars he earned.”

Hunting and other outdoor activities always have been important to all the Gillettes. The story is told of the men hunting pheasant in South Dakota in the 1940s. To say they stretched the limits on how many birds they could shoot would be an understatement. A warden caught them because there were so many birds in the trunk of the blue Buick convertible (owned by Gillette’s wife, Jean) that it was riding very low.

The game warden ordered them to open the trunk and then arrested them, taking them into town. For the warden, it was a big catch of the day and probably his career. He displayed their dozens and dozens of birds on the courthouse lawn.

The Gillettes, meanwhile, had to wire back home for money to pay their fine. They were lucky they didn’t lose the car, itself, because it carried so much contraband.

One time in Arkansas, where Norman went duck hunting with other Pepsi bottlers, he suddenly found himself unable to get the trunk of his car open. Inside was all of his hunting gear, including guns and shells. Someone in the group suggested he use a torch to open the trunk.
Norman Gillette rejected that idea, realizing it could cause the shells to explode. His own inventive solution was to drive the car back and forth at top speed over a rough field. Just as he figured it would, the trunk popped open.

The Gillettes were not above doing tricks on those with whom they hunted. They had a hunting shack on Gillette Island that was so infested with snakes and other critters that they would pound on the door and walls to scare them off before entering. At least one hunting companion eyes widened when he saw the many black snakes crawling out of the shanty. The friend's fear was not lost on the Gillettes. Later that night, following that reaction, the brothers waited until their companion was asleep. Then they ran a rope under their guest's blanket. The friend jerked awake, thinking a snake was slithering over him. "There's a snake on me!" he'd scream. The Gillettes just laughed.

Norman Gillette used to say his goal was to have a boat at every landing between La Crosse and Genoa. If he had a sense the fish were biting, he wanted to be able to get at them instantly. While he never quite made his goal of a boat at all those landings, he came close.

Sadly, although appropriately, Blaine died on a pontoon boat in 1988. He and his brothers, Norman and Cy, were out on a Mississippi River slough behind the Holiday Inn on a warm March morning looking for fishing spots for later in the season. One of his brothers asked Blaine a question, but he did not respond. At first they thought he was sleeping, but he had just quietly died. What better way for a Gillette brother to go than on the river with his family?

A change in business

Black Sox pitcher Lefty Sullivan shared more than baseball with Frank Gillette. He introduced Frank to the insurance business, a much needed change of careers because the fishing industry was declining
due to the government changing the course of the river. Gillette Island and the ponds the family used to hold fish were no longer on the main channel, ending the ease with which the family collected and held their catch. Also affecting the commercial fishing industry were growing government regulations. Frank Gillette, president of a three-state association of commercial fisherman, tried unsuccessfully to fight those rules in Madison.

Frank already was a good salesman, having first made his mark selling radios around Genoa. One key to his success was that Frank had already warmed his way into the local priest’s heart.

Commercial fishing was done with nets with holes large enough to keep them from catching sport fish like walleye. When that kind of fish was caught, they were supposed to throw them back in the river. The Gillettes would “accidentally” toss walleye caught in the net on the shore and smuggle than to the priest who would be thrilled by the quality of the “carp” given him. He, in turn, would tell his parishioners what fine people the Gillettes were even if they weren’t Catholic.

Having the priest's blessing made it easy to sell radios or anything else. “On a good night,” he would tell his Catholic radio customers, “you can hear Rome and the Pope.” Of course, the nights were never that good.

Already having proved himself as a salesperson, it was easy for Frank to move into insurance once Sullivan introduced him to it. Sullivan personally called on customers with him until he got the hang of the business himself. Again, the local priest recommended the Gillette insurance services to his parishioners.

Insurance was not an industry that initially interested farmers, who told Gillette they didn’t want to buy insurance because “you had to die to win.”

“My father would say, ‘If you have to die anyway, why not win?’” Norman Gillette recalled.

With that argument, Frank Gillette more times than not made the
sale. Norman Gillette drove his father on most of those calls because Frank never learned to drive. Sometimes Norman helped to explain the policies to prospective customers, kept the books and did the calculations on premium costs.

Among Gillette's customers were members of the Gundersen medical family. Frank took them hunting and fishing on Gillette Island and in South Dakota. The time spent with them was an excellent investment. The doctors bought big policies for those days — $25,000 or $50,000. But because even they did not always have ready cash for the premiums at times, particularly during the Depression, Frank sometimes made those payments for them, taking notes in exchange. "Money was scarce then," Norm recalled.

One of the reasons Frank Gillette was such a fine salesman to the Gundersens and others was, in addition to being an imposing size, he had the gift of words. He could sell anything to anyone.

"Dad made quite a name for himself," Norman recalled. "He beat the hell out of La Crosse."

Frank Gillette had no desire to move to La Crosse despite his successes in the city. The way he explained it to his son, he was a big fish in a small town because he was not from La Crosse. Recognizing image was everything — something he passed on to his son — Frank realized he could more easily keep up the appearance of success if they did not see him living among them.

While certainly more a common man than an aristocrat, Frank Gillette's success in La Crosse was based in part on his not socializing with the "common man" but with the lawyers and doctors. In one picture that hung in the Bodega Lunch Club in downtown La Crosse for many years, Frank Gillette could be seen with other well-known business people in La Crosse, lawyers and doctors. He stood out in the picture, not only because he was a head taller than most men of the time (the average height then was 5 foot 8), but because he looked so distinguished in his fine suit and top hat. He certainly was "bigger and
better” than his associates.

Still, Frank Gillette was not without his faults, including his love of drink. The trick for Norman Gillette in driving his father to La Crosse on business was to get his father into town before he stopped at one of the many Italian taverns on the southern edge. Norman would try to distract his father as they reached the La Crosse area. Once his father said, “Let’s stop in here and see who’s around,” Norman knew the day would be lost.

The contacts the Gillettes made in the insurance business, like any other, have a way of leading to other opportunities. The Gillettes were in downtown La Crosse one day when Frank suggested they call on Louis Martin, whom he knew from New Albin, Iowa.

Martin was the owner of Martin Brothers Clothing Company, a manufacturer of clothing that traced its origin to the dry goods and clothing business begun by Mons Anderson in La Crosse in 1852. After Anderson retired in 1903, Martin took it over and soon began
 manufacturing clothing in
the building Anderson built
in 1870 at 2nd and Main
Streets.

"The new building in those
pioneering years in
La Crosse's history was
considered one of the leading
business structures in this
section of the northwest, and
even today in La Crosse it
represents one of the city's
finest buildings," wrote the
La Crosse Tribune and
Leader Press in an article on
July 31, 1927, commemorat­
ing the 75th anniversary of
the business (dating back to
when it was started by Mons
Anderson).

Martin Brothers' catalog in
1927 listed its products as
men's and boy's cloth
overcoats, leather coats for
men, women and children,
mackinaws, stag shirts,
blazers, duck coats, hunting
coats, sheep skin coats,

A Martin Brothers advertisement for
one of its coats.
pants, overalls, coveralls, jackets, work shirts and flannel shirts. Skins used in manufacturing came from as far away as South America and Australia.

A Martin Brothers advertisement for one of its coats described it this way:

"They fit the fat
"They fit the lean
"They fit all sizes in between.
"No other garments will give as much comfort, satisfaction and service as the Lion Brand Sheep Skin Lined Clothing.
"The Garment with a reputation."

The decision to call on Louis Martin proved to be providential. His son, Louie Jr., became a life-long close friend with whom he went hunting and fishing; and later Louie Jr.'s sister, Jean, became Norman Sr.'s wife in 1935.

Jean Martin had returned to La Crosse from Smith College after her mother died. Norman didn't have much of an explanation about why she decided not to return to college except that she reportedly described Smith as "too snooty" for her. That comment was ironical considering Norm encouraged his daughter, Norma, to go to Smith and his son to Harvard. Neither did. Instead, they attended University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, then known as La Crosse State College.
It was Louie Jr. who may have helped encourage the romance between his friend and his sister.

"Louie brought her to Viroqua. We used to chase around together. She was like Louie, a lot of fun. We went to night clubs, Walt's (restaurant in La Crosse) years ago. We'd dance at the Avalon and at private clubs," Norman Senior said.

"Chasing around" included bootleg liquor during Prohibition. While he would not say even 60 years later who supplied the booze, Norm said Louie Jr. had a bootlegger friend who kept him amply supplied.

"This town was famous for getting liquor. Bootleggers stored it here," Junior said. "Stills were everywhere. This town existed on stills, but nobody will admit it."

"When I take our aunts to Genoa, they can point out where the dance hall was and where booze was made in stills. They just knew where to go to get it," said Norma Vinger.

Louis Martin not only became Norman Gillette's father in law, he was also a shrewd business adviser. Martin Brothers, located
kitty-corner from where Powell Place on Main is today, was a bit of a misnomer as it really was not run by the brothers but by Louis alone. The brothers started out together, but soon found they could not get along well enough to work together. So, Louis Martin established brothers Charlie and Ed in a South Dakota clothing business. Instead of the Lion brand overalls made in La Crosse, they made Buffalo brand overalls. When they did not do well, they moved to Minneapolis, where they made a line of baby's clothing, even winning a patent for the drop seat in baby clothing.

During one of the Gillettes' days selling insurance in La Crosse, they stopped at the Bodega Lunch Club, a common meeting place in downtown La Crosse business people that was a fixture well into the 1980s. Probably more deals were struck over coffee at the Bodega than any other place in La Crosse at the time.

Norman Gillette struck up a conversation with Henry Robinson, president of the Pure Oil Company, a wholesaler of gasoline to service stations that primarily served farmers and road contractors. It didn't take long for Robinson to size up Gillette's business abilities.

Robinson invited him to join the oil business, which involved the bulk plant in Viroqua and later 35 or so other stations that operated under the name Purol and sometimes Capitol Oil.

The Gillettes talked about it for a while and then agreed to take it. No salary was involved; it was strictly commission. The Gillettes quickly realized they had to do something to increase sales. They decided to, in effect, take on Standard Oil by encouraging stations carrying that oil company giant's products to convert to Pure Oil.

"Why would a fellow want to change? He's been with Standard Oil for a number of years and he's going to change over to Pure Oil?" Gillette said. The Gillettes came up with a deal that was too good to pass up. Instead of renting the stations from Standard Oil, which left them at the mercy of the company, Gillette and Robinson came up with a plan to allow Pure Oil station operators to own their own franchises.
The Norman Gillette Sr. Story

Pure Oil offered a 10-year, uncancelable lease which allowed operators to buy their stations. “I would tell them the reason you are doing a lot of business is not because of Standard Oil, but you. You have all this business here and are paying rent. Why the hell don’t you own your own business? You could be your own boss.”

The loans went through the First National Bank (now Norwest Bank) in La Crosse, which loved the “paper” because it was guaranteed by Pure Oil. “It was really good paper. They owned a lot of oil wells in Texas,” Gillette said.

Louis Martin, Sr., also loved the loans. “He begged me to get him some of that paper for him for investment,” Gillette said. The loans were especially good during the Great Depression because they were guaranteed at a good rate of interest — 4 or 5 percent. “He just loved it. If payments didn’t come in, he would just go to the Pure Oil Company,” Gillette recalled. All together, Gillette arranged something like $700,000 to $800,000 worth of $5,000 to $6,000 loans for Pure Oil stations.
Louis Martin understood money and especially how to keep it. To say that this bespectacled man was tight with a dollar is an understatement. “Old Man Martin,” as he was affectionately called by Gillette — but never to his face — would break the glass in a burned-out light bulb to reclaim the copper filament.

“Money was money then,” Gillette recalled. “He just didn’t throw away anything. He was really conservative. There was nothing wrong with that. Copper was scarce so he would sell it and make money.”

Old Man Martin didn’t want any of his workers “stealing time” from him in the bathroom. To prevent that, he had a 10-watt light bulb installed in the rest room so no one would camp out in the bathroom with a newspaper. And, when you visited in Old Man Martin’s home, you learned to turn off the light when he left a room. “We’re not working for the Northern States Power Company,” Martin would tell him if he was foolish enough to leave on a light.

The Martin home at 1004 Cass Street had been the home of F.A. Copeland, who was mayor of La Crosse from 1891-1893. Copeland was president of the La Crosse Lumber Company and Edison Light and Power Company in La Crosse.

Later, the house, which was built about 1885, would be the home of Norman and Jean Gillette, who spent their first years of marriage in Viroqua. The Martin property was part of one of La Crosse’s earliest additions, Clinton and Rublee’s Addition, which was first recorded in 1854.

Gillette recalled travels with Martin to Chicago, where he learned tricks of the business trade. They stayed at the Blackstone Hotel, a well-known business hotel in Chicago.

Jean Gillette hung out the wash in this photo from the era before clothes dryers.
Before they would settle on a price for a room, Old Man Martin would send Gillette up to the counter for the price on a lower floor. Once he had that information, they’d use it to get a room on the more expensive upper floor for the lower price.

“He said, you find out the price once and then you tell them you don’t want to stay there. You want a room on the 10th floor, but you want the same price,” Gillette recalled.

With windows open, traffic was much louder, and therefore it was much harder to sleep on a lower floor. Hotels normally charged a premium for upper floors in the era before air conditioning.

On that same trip, Martin sent Gillette to hail a cab. He did so, but Martin wouldn’t take it because the cabby was going in the wrong direction. “He said ‘you go across the street and get one going the other way. He can take you 10 blocks before you get back to the other place.’ They worked on mileage and right away they can tell when you talk that you are a dummy, a green horn from a little town,” Gillette said.

Martin just didn’t trust anyone, Gillette recalled, except for a janitor at the plant named John. Each spring, he brought his trusted employee, John, into his home to do the spring cleaning chores — washing walls and carpeting filled with soot from coal burning furnaces and dirt that blew in open windows.

Sadly, trusting John turned out to be a mistake. Two detectives on foot patrol during the noon hour discovered a man in the alley behind Martin Brothers Clothing loading his car with overalls from the plant. The detectives observed this practice for several weeks during the noon hour and then spoke to a very angry Old Man Martin. The detectives staked out the alley once again to catch the culprit in the act. It didn’t take long.

“Here comes this guy, John. When he had his car about half way full of stuff, they popped out of the door. They were hiding there. They stuck a gun in his ribs and he filled his pants,” Gillette recalled. Detectives went to John’s home and found a room full of overalls. “It’s a
true story. He was the one guy Old Man Martin trusted."

Martin was not a man to be pushed around. In fact, when the 200 to 300 workers at his plant tried to start a union, he simply closed the factory. He didn't need that business if the workers were going to try to tell him what to do.

Martin also was a partner in the La Crosse Drug Company, a wholesaler of pharmaceuticals at Second and Main where Powell Place is now located. His partnership included La Crosse industrialist Philo M. Gelatt (the father of Charles Gelatt, chairman of the board of Northern Engraving Corporation) and about eight others. Martin held the company together for many years when his partners put him in charge of the financially-struggling La Crosse Drug. All he had to do was walk across the street to sign checks and keep an eye on the business.

Louis Martin Jr. inherited his father's portion of the pharmaceutical business upon his death in 1939. But young man Martin, who had spent some years in a tuberculosis sanitarium in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, preferred partying over business. With some Martin money in the Pepsi franchise, Louie, Jr., did carry the ceremonial title of president of the Pepsi operations in La Crosse for a time, but he was not a hard worker.

Old Man Martin wanted Gillette to take care of his son and teach him about business, but "but the kid didn't want to do much. He was a rich man's kid who didn't want to work. He wanted to play," said Gillette's son, Norman Junior.

Martin, a millionaire in the 20s and 30s, had interests in many other business ventures as well, including the La Crosse Rubber Mills (now La Crosse Footwear). Gillette can remember accompanying his father in law to meetings at the Rubber Mills. "I was always there. He wanted me to go along. I don't know why. I didn't have anything to offer, but he wanted me to know what's going on."

Norman Junior understood why his father was expected to be there. "Sit there and listen," he said. "Learn. Keep your mouth shut."
Of course, there were some of Martin’s business ventures that did not turn to gold (or oil). Norman Senior was sent as Martin’s representative to sites in Illinois, where Martin was drilling for oil on about 3,000 acres of leased land.

“They got down about 800 foot and they got some saturation of oil. It’s not like drilling for water. You have an auger that goes down. It goes down and you see some water and can smell some oil,” Gillette recalled.

A core of sand and soil was tested on the land by a geologist hired by Martin. The geologist’s report was not positive. He told them there was not enough pressure in the soil to allow the oil to come out fast enough to be profitable. Gillette and Louis Martin Jr. went back and reported the findings to Old Man Martin. While Gillette thought they should go deeper, the decision, based on the advice of the geologist, was to stop because it would not be cost effective.

“We had to. He was the expert. This fellow advised them not to take the land and not to go any deeper. That scared them off and, in a year or two, they dropped their leases,” Gillette recalled.

It was a major mistake. Shell Oil Company moved into the very same land — with the very same geologist — where it had one of its richest finds ever.

“It was a frame-up. There’s no question in my mind about it,” Gillette recalled. “The geologist was working for Shell Oil Company at the same time he was working for us. I didn’t have any proof, but he advised us not to go down any further and he told them to go down and they found one of the biggest pools in the state of Illinois.”

Old Man Martin, a man so nervous that he scratched his hands until they bled, accused the geologist of “being crooked,” but it was no use. They had no recourse. For Shell Oil, the Illinois discovery was a tremendously profitable extension of its thousands of oil wells in the neighboring state of Indiana.

Unfortunately, this was not the only time that Old Man Martin was
taken by a geologist. He also had land that looked to have gold in Canada. Gillette was supposed to traveled for Martin to evaluate the land’s potential for gold. To reach the land, he would have to cross a lake and tramp back into the woods.

“Old Man Martin was bound and determined that he wanted to send me up there on that deal. I was all set to go and I’m not sure what happened. I guess they determined that the amount of gold they would get was not worth it because of how far they would have to ship it,” Gillette recalled. “But that geologist was crooked. He said they would have to cross the lake and everything and that it wasn’t worth it. Years later, we found out it was developed and there was a lot of gold there. And the geologist had discouraged it.”

Old Man Martin was “always gambling” in one venture or another, Gillette added.
Louis Martin, Jr., (right) stands by a crate of Oranj Gold to be delivered by Thore Skolos. Oranj Gold was a great product — except it easily spoiled because preservatives were then banned in Wisconsin.

The Pepsi plant in Viroqua, Wisconsin, and the first delivery truck. Operations quickly were moved to La Crosse to meet the demand for Pepsi.
CHAPTER II
SEARCHING FOR THE RIGHT DRINK

Oranj Gold

Norman Gillette was constantly looking for gold and thought he found it in a bottled orange juice product, Log Mill Orange, that was being sold in gasoline stations in the early 1930s. Gillette discovered it in Bulk Oil stations, which he visited on his rounds to observe their operations. Gillette, who was looking for a business for his brother-in-law, thought it might just be the product for the family to manufacture. Gillette, who was then living in Viroqua, located a man in La Crosse who sold franchises for Log Mill Orange in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. The man was more than happy to sell Gillette a franchise for the Viroqua area for $50,000, a very sizable sum of money.

"It was very impressive. I thought this is a good thing. If he had said $1,000 for the franchise, I knew it would be no good. But $50,000 — that sounded very valuable," Gillette recalled.

Being the businessman he is, Gillette decided to do some field research. Before buying in, he asked for the locations of other franchise holders and went on a road tour to speak with them in Minnesota and Illinois.

All were cordial, but secretive about the process. "They were doing well with it. It looked really good. But nobody would show us a thing or tell us anything about the formula," he said.

Then they stopped at the home of a Rockford, Illinois, woman who was so enthusiastic about the product, she was willing to tell them everything. Over donuts and coffee, she babbled about their being business partners.
Gillette was non-committal, however. “I said, I had to wait and see and that I had to go back and talk to this fellow,” Gillette recalled. 

“Oh,” she said, “Haven’t you seen it?”

When Gillette said he had never seen the production, she took him to her basement, showed him the equipment and the formula. He was astounded at how easily the product seemed to be made.

“We came back to La Crosse and said to ourselves, the hell with this guy. We aren’t paying him any $50,000 for orange juice,” Gillette recalled. “We found out where that machine came from. All that damn thing was was a sausage grinder.”

Oranges were delivered at 2 a.m. each night by the Bern Fruit Company of La Crosse. Family members began squeezing the oranges at 4 a.m. for Oranj Gold (they had to spell orange differently for trade mark purposes). It was a family operation from the beginning. Gillette’s father and his sisters, Elma Waters and Wanda Grimsrud, helped squeeze quarters of oranges by pushing them through the grinder. Oranges went in the top of the motorized machine; juice came out the end where the finished sausage normally came out. The orange peel came out another hole.

Because of Old Man Martin’s connections with La Crosse Drug Company, they knew the ingredients the holder of the franchise was buying through the company for Log Mill Orange. “We found out some things, how he was buying citric acid to add flavor. We started buying our own oranges and we knew how much citric acid to put in. The oranges were not enough themselves. Citric acid gave it a stronger orange flavor.”

Oranj Gold had to have about 10 to 15 percent orange juice and the rest was water, sugar, and citric acid. The Gillettes put it into an 8 ounce bottle with cardboard tops, much like milk bottle tops. They then went into cases, which were stenciled with the Oranj Gold name by Norm’s youngest brother, Don.

Louie Jr. occasionally livened up the morning sessions by putting a
tennis ball in the paper that oranges then came wrapped individually. He slipped it into the case and waited. It was a moment of diversion in a dreary, hot, early morning activity when Frank Gillette would discover the tennis ball.

Each morning, the family pushed filled 24-bottle cases of Oranj Gold up to street level through a coal shoot. It was then loaded on a truck and taken to stores for sale. "We had a ball. We didn't know where we were going or how we would get there, but we would sell a case of 24 for about 60 or 80 cents," Gillette recalled.

Was it profitable? "We didn't retire from that business, I'll tell you that," he said.

Instead, the product retired from them. The one piece of information that Gillette failed to uncover from his research was the product would ferment after a couple days. Customers were not too happy about it.

Neighborhood kids became their quality control. If a hot, thirsty kid took a sip of a bottle and turned up his nose, it was time to retire the case. Spoilage was a problem only in Wisconsin which, unlike Minnesota or Iowa, did not allow use of the preservative benzoate of soda. "We didn't know that. We got into a lot of trouble," Gillette recalled.

The Oranj Gold business was over in one brief summer. There was a lasting effect, however. "I don't like orange juice to this day," Wanda Grimsrud said.

The experience did spark an interest in Gillette in soft drinks, however. "I had this brain storm of putting out soft drinks under the name of Gillette Flavors," he said.

He bought the equipment of the La Crosse Bottling Works, which then bottled the fruit flavors that were the rage in soft drinks — orange, grape, strawberry, and so on. Unfortunately, after making up many labels with that name, the Gillette razor company took issue with it and cried trademark infringement. After lawyers became involved in this "lousy, cut throat business," Gillette discovered that it
would have been legal to use the name Gillette Flavors since it was his own name. Still, he already was moving on to greener sodas, if not pastures.

Gaining the Pepsi Franchise

In the late 19th Century, soda pops were just being developed, usually by druggists. In Atlanta, in 1886, pharmacist John S. Pemberton mixed dried leaves from the South American coca shrub (which also gives the world cocaine), extract from koa nuts from Africa and fruit syrup. The result was what he advertised as "esteemed Brain tonic and intellectual Beverage." A fountain man at Jacob's Pharmacy, where Pemberton worked, added carbonation. By the end of the year, it didn't look like the product would be successful. Pemberton had sold 25 gallons of syrup for $1, but had spent $73.96 in advertising.

In 1891, pharmacist Asa G. Chandler bought Coca-Cola for $2,300. He had more success with the product when he stopped using such claims as "Wonderful Nerve and Brain Tonic and Remarkable Therapeutic Agent" and "It's beneficial effects upon diseases of the vocal cords are wonderful." By 1896, Coca-Cola was sold in every state in the country but it was not until 1899 that it was first bottled. Most sales still were from soda jerks who mixed syrup with carbonated water.

In was in 1898 that North Carolina druggist Caleb Bradham developed Brad's drink, as a combination of carbonated water, sugar, vanilla, rare oils and cola nuts. Renamed Pepsi-Cola, Bradham began devoting all his energy to Pepsi in 1902.

By 1903, Coca-Cola had made its place, selling 881,423 gallons of syrup, compared with 7,968 for Pepsi. By 1929, Coca-Cola, now advertised as "The Pause that Refreshes," had sales of $39 million. But Pepsi was growing in sales. Bradham moved the bottling of Pepsi to a
warehouse in 1903 and sold 7,968 gallons of syrup in that first year of operation, using the theme, "Delicious, Invigorating, Aids Digestion."

There were 15 U.S. Pepsi Bottling plants in 1906; and syrup sales rose to 38,605 gallons. The product now was sold under a modified script logo with the slogan, "The Original Pure Food Drink." The first franchises were sold in 1907 and in 1908 Pepsi-Cola became one of the first companies in the country to modernize delivery by using motor vehicles instead of horse-drawn carts. By that year, Pepsi had 250 bottlers in 24 states.

Price controls held the price of sugar to 5-1/2 cents a pound during World War I, but once the war ended, sugar escalated dramatically, rising to 26 cents a pound. Bradham, expecting sugar prices to continue to rise, bought large stocks of sugar. But by the end of 1920, it dropped to 2 cents a pound, creating enormous financial losses for the Pepsi-Cola Company. By the end of 1921, only two plants remained open. An attempt to re-organize failed in 1922 and the company was bankrupt in 1923. The company's trademark and business were sold in 1923. Unfortunately, the new owners had tough times as well, going bankrupt in 1931. A new Pepsi-Cola Company became bankrupt again in 1933, reborn with the personal ownership by Pepsi President Charles G. Guth who held 91 percent of the stock.

In the heart of the Great Depression, the still struggling Pepsi-Cola made a daring move. As an experiment, it started selling a 12-ounce
drink in Baltimore for 5 cents — the same price as 6 ounces of Coca-Cola and other competitors. Pepsi quickly became the hottest soft drink in America — a bargain much in demand during the tough Depression years.

Coca-Cola was vulnerable at this point — its sales had dropped in 1933 to 20 million gallons of syrup from a high in 1933 of 27.7 million gallons, a victim, in part, of the tight times of the Depression.

Doubling the product while maintaining the 5 cent price was a bold move for Pepsi, but a successful one. The theory was that yes, bottlers would make less on each bottle sold, but they would sell many more bottles in the process. It worked. In 1936 Pepsi granted 94 new U.S. franchises and reported year-end profits of $2,100,000.

Gillette’s first clues about Pepsi-Cola’s potential came from La Crosse Drug Company sources. Old Man Martin had been contacted in the mid 1930s about handling Pepsi syrup by George and V.O. Robertson, brothers who then were responsible for selling franchises for about half the country. With his interest piqued, Gillette contacted Pepsi franchise offices in Chicago. The Robertsons called on Gillette and agreed to sell him the franchise for Vernon, Crawford and Richland counties in Western Wisconsin.

This 1936 cardboard stand-up states that Pepsi-Cola is the “Biggest Value in Town.” The large five in the background supporting the new 12 oz. bottle was the beginning of the “12 full ounces for a nickel” advertising campaign.
Gillette remembers the first time he tasted Pepsi. "It was terrific," he said. "Just a little sweeter taste than Coca-Cola."

The big break for Gillette came in 1937 when a wholesale grocery business in Winona, Minnesota, decided there was no future for them in the Pepsi-Cola franchise, particularly since they didn't have the time or equipment to sell the product in La Crosse. They decided to bail out. The business owners contacted Gillette and offered to give the franchise to him if he would buy their bottles and wooden shells for $1 each. For the Winona grocers, getting out seemed like a great move because the La Crosse operation was then little more than a paper route.

Norm gained a franchise that very quickly would be worth multiple millions of dollars. "They gave up La Crosse and sold it to me for $1,200 for shells and cases," he said.

"It was another gold mine, but this one worked," Junior said.

One of the reasons they gave up La Crosse was, as grocery wholesalers, they had no time for the additional franchise business. Traveling from Winona to La Crosse, was difficult because of the poor road conditions of the times. "In La Crosse County, the wholesalers had only sold a case here or there," Gillette said.

Junior remembers the road to Winona as being difficult to travel when he was young. "It was a crooked road to Winona. I drove it for years. It was the world's worst road. It took hours to get there."

Running the business originally out of Viroqua, Norm commissioned construction of a truck to deliver Pepsi. It was a beautiful truck with only one problem ... it was too large to get out of the warehouse door. The door had to be widened to allow it to get out and on its routes.

Meanwhile, Pepsi was about to take off with a new president, Walter S. Mack, Jr., who had divided the country into territories, including giving the middle section to the Robertsons.

Mack, Pepsi-Cola said in its History Milestones, considered advertising the keystone of the soft drink business. The cartoon
characters Pepsi & Pete were introduced in 1939 to further emphasize the *Twice as Much for a Nickel* campaign. Pepsi & Pete appeared in 205 Sunday newspapers.

In 1940, the company spread the word about this bargain with the world's first radio jingle sung to the tune of the old English hunting song, "D'ye Ken John Peel:"

\begin{verbatim}
Pepsi-Cola hits the spot.
Twelve full ounces.
That's a lot.
Twice as much for a nickel, too.
Pepsi-Cola is the drink for you.
\end{verbatim}

The advertising jingle, "Nickel, Nickel," became a mainstream hit record and was translated into 55 languages. By the end of 1940, it had played 300,000 times on 500 stations. After fifteen hundred copies were made for juke boxes and Americans forked over nickels to hear it played even more times, a total of 100,000 copies were made for juke box use.

Even though other cola companies later jumped on the 12-ounce bandwagon, no one had the success that Pepsi did with the larger bottle. The slogan was successful, Norman Jr. said, because it was the Depression. "There were not a lot of nickels around then."

The need for marketing fit in with Norman Gillette's personality. As he put it, Coca-Cola "had the jump on us. They had all the accounts. We'd go in and tell people in taverns and so on that Pepsi and Coke taste the same and they would taste it and sample it. There was really no difference. But there was a small difference with Pepsi a little sweeter."

Coca-Cola, then well established in Western Wisconsin and dominant throughout the country, had no idea what kind of competitor they would have in Norman Gillette.
"The theory behind the Coca-Cola people was they had been out so long. No matter where they were, nobody could touch them," Norman Jr. said. "They sat back and laughed at us."

Norman Sr. made two moves — saturation advertising and sampling. He put Pepsi signs everywhere and bought advertising time on local radio stations at 25 cents a spot. One commercial ran every 10 minutes around the clock for about four or five days when he began getting calls from people who begged him to "'Take that damn thing off the radio.' I played it anyway."

He took a different approach in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, when a distributor named Tim Anderson told Gillette there were not enough sales for him to make the 50-mile trip each way from La Crosse. "He sold 25 cases a trip. It was a long run, all day and he didn't make any money," Gillette recalled.
Rather than giving up valuable territory and potential business, Gillette's answer was to go down to Prairie du Chien and fix the problem personally. He arrived one summer day with a fleet of Pepsi trucks. Immediately, he hired 15 to 20 kids to give away one bottle of Pepsi to every home in the city. By late afternoon, the bottles were being returned to the stores — after all, they had 2-cent deposits. But customers also demanded more Pepsi from harried shopkeepers who had none to sell. The very stores that had refused to open accounts with Pepsi before the sampling now wanted to sell it. That day. Right away.

Store owners begged for 10 or more cases, but Gillette, ever the sly businessman, would allow them to have no more than two or five cases. "If they got two or five cases and sold out, they'd think we better load up." If they got 10 cases, they'd overstock and they'd think they better stop selling it because it doesn't sell."

Prairie du Chien quickly moved from a city that sold 25 cases a week to one that sold 150 cases a week. Soon after that, the much happier distributor was thrilled to make the trip to Prairie du Chien two and three times a week.

Gillette used that same successful approach in other cities. He also used a New York newspaper story about Pepsi outselling Coke in New York by a 2 to 1 margin as an example of his product's potential. Of course, Long Island had been the home of Pepsi since 1935. A newspaper story in Atlanta, Georgia, the home
of Coca-Cola, would have told a much different story about the intensifying cola war.

When Gillette went into the Pepsi business, his sisters, who had worked with him on Oranj Gold, were doubtful about whether it would be successful. Wanda Grimsrud said she used to laugh about Pepsi in the beginning. “That big bottle? I’d check with the drivers and they’d have sold only 30 cases that day. The people say the bottles were too big and the labels came off in the cooler. I thought this would never go. Coke was so strong,” she said. “But he had perseverance. He just kept at it. He did a lot of advertising. He entertained people and talked about Pepsi everywhere he went every day.”

Gillette did have his concerns initially. “I didn’t make any money. I was thinking about giving it up and staying with flavors. The company said you have to remember that this is based on volume and the most successful stores in the country are 5 and dime store like Kresge and Woolworth. They do the most business.” He stuck with it.

As Pepsi took off, there was tremendous need to expand production. It was a ticklish problem. As any business owner of a rapidly growing concern experiences, there is a shortage of capital to meet the challenges of day to day life. Yes, he was selling a lot of product, but he also had a lot of overhead expenses to meet. The first equipment Gillette bought for bottling cost him about $10,000 and seemed like a fortune. Later he sweated over a $35,000 purchase.

There would be plenty more to come for the plant in La Crosse and two others in the Gillette group in Mankato and Rochester. But nearly all was used equipment, shrewdly purchased when the G. Heileman
Brewing Company of La Crosse upgraded its own equipment. It was not until 1958 that Pepsi bought its first new equipment, a bottle washer.

Gillette Group CEO Ralph LaPoint said it was a tremendous challenge for bottlers across the country to swallow the added costs of doubling the product in the bottle without any added revenue. “All the Pepsi bottlers had to be entrepreneurs to accept that. Success was a long way down the road. They had double the ingredient costs without an impact on revenue. They had to invest in new bottles and the equipment was changing,” LaPoint said.

Although he was not with the company in those days, LaPoint said Gillette told him “he believed in it. Risk takes guts.”

Norman Sr. told him he was concerned about the campaign, but it also was “right up Norm’s alley. He is that kind of person. He gulped when they talked about doubling your costs without more revenue. It was a shady business then, damn risky. I would guess that anyone without courage left Pepsi.”

Adding to the difficulty was the fact that the soda pop business was seasonal — soda was drunk during the summer months in the 1930s and 1940s. “Back then in January and February, business would drop off almost to nothing,” Gillette said.

One of those who saw potential in the business was Old Man Martin, who urged Gillette to move his operations to La Crosse from Viroqua. He scouted the city for a building he thought would be appropriate for a bottling plant and found one on West Avenue and Travis Street, available for $25,000 because the owner was in bankruptcy.

The 40,000-square-foot building had at one time been the home of Samuel’s Refrigerator Company. During the Great Depression, after Samuel’s had stopped operating, the building was a delousing station used by the federal government to care for the hundreds of “passengers” who hopped off freight trains on the tracks behind the business. Two hundred to three hundred hobos would get off there,
knowing they could get a soup kitchen meal and a place to stay the night. Delousing was an added service, complements of the U.S. government.

The buildings behind the Pepsi-Bottling plant also were the site of a major fire in the city of La Crosse. Gillette had been home for lunch when he received a call that the warehouse of the Evans Cartage Company was ablaze, apparently from spontaneous combustion. No one knew what all had been stored inside. The building, which was separated by a road from Pepsi, burned completely but left Pepsi untouched.

Norman Jr. can remember playing in the footings and remnants of the walls of the Cartage Company building as a child in the 1940s. And, the delousing equipment still was there during those years.

He also remembered other fun activities as a child, including smashing the bottles that the corporate Pepsi office said no longer could be used. For years, the Pepsi syrup was filled to a line marked on the outside of the bottle. Then, a machine would shake the bottle to mix the carbonated water with syrup, a task originally done by hand.

When the industry standard said there could be no more bottles with paint on the outside, Gillette sent some sample bottles to La Crosse State University (now the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse) to see if anyone could figure out a way to remove the line economically. No one could, so he had no choice but to throw away an untold number.

But, because they didn’t want enterprising kids returning them for the 2 cent deposit, all had to be smashed. For a kid like Norm, Jr., the job was a dream. He joyfully practiced his driving skills by riding back and forth in a truck over the glass bottles at the landfill.

The Pepsi franchise in La Crosse remained a family business, involving many family members for years. Uncle Cy even had to live close to the facility because he had to go there all hours of the day and night to stoke the coal furnace so it would have enough heat for the washers in the 1950s.
The Norman Gillette Sr. Story

Pepsi-Cola went to war during World War II, changing the color of its bottle crowns to the more patriotic red, white and blue. In addition, Pepsi opened a canteen in Times Square, New York, which enabled more than a million families to record messages for armed services personnel overseas.

Meanwhile, World War II created problems for nearly every bottler of soft drinks. Rationing of steel meant old crowns had to be recycled. In La Crosse, Pepsi staff used acid to remove paint and clean the crowns. A machine reformed them and passed them on to a worker, who put in new cork.

The biggest problem, however, was sugar rationing. Sugar was one of the critical raw materials that was in short supply because it was used extensively in making of explosive materials. The U.S. Government imposed strict rationing on sugar and classified soft drinks as "non-essential" to the war effort.

Food processing companies had higher priority for sugar than soft drinks, which were not deemed essential to the war effort until J.B.
O'Hara, a major in the U.S. Army in World War I, suggested a liquid refreshment during scheduled breaks might help war production plant workers. He reasoned cutting off soda pop would lessen their productivity.

He went to a doctor to do a study to confirm his belief, which resulted in quotas but not elimination of sugar for soft drink manufacturers. For Pepsi, which had been so successful with its 12-ounce bottle, the problem was still acute. Twice as much product meant twice as much sugar was needed. The company tried to help by purchasing a sugar plantation in Cuba, which was highly profitable. Still, there was not enough sugar available to meet company needs, which in 1943 was advertising its product as “Bigger Drink, Better Taste.”

The sugar shortage resulted in Gillette acquiring the Pepsi franchise for eastern Minnesota from the Big 4 Bottling Company, which had plants in Austin and Rochester. Because of sugar shortages, they decided to emphasize their soft drink brands in smaller bottles, 7 Up and Dr Pepper. Pepsi Cola asked Gillette if he would take on that franchise, which he did. In exchange, he had to promise to build a plant in Austin some day in exchange for the additional territory, although he later decided that he could meet the need for Austin from Rochester, just 40 miles away.

He was given some additional sugar from Pepsi-Cola to cover that territory, but not enough. To meet the need for sugar, Gillette turned to corn syrup, which could replace about 80 percent of the cane sugar. The company shipped corn to North Dakota for processing. “We'd take corn to North Dakota and they'd give us a certain amount of sugar from corn syrup. We'd ship corn by the carloads.”

Gillette also had some “bootleg sugar,” or sugar that was “undeclared.” “I bought a bunch of corn syrup that was undeclared. All cash. I bought it in Minnesota. Somebody snuck in about 40,000 pounds. I paid off in cash.”
A cousin in Chicago in the candy business also was able to acquire corn syrup and resold it to Gillette at a profit. "Wherever you could get it, you got it," Norm Jr. said.

Still, Gillette had about half of what he needed. Costs were higher, and they couldn't raise prices on Pepsi for fear it would lose its reputation as a bargain or bottlers be considered war profiteers.

Coca-Cola bottlers were in a different position. Not only did they not need as much sugar to sell their 6-ounce bottles, the company acquired sugar and mixed it in with the concentrate before shipping it to its bottlers, whose plants were all company owned.

Coke also had an in with the federal government, according to Roger Enrico, president and CEO of Pepsi-Cola, who wrote a history of the company called, The Other Guy Blinked ... How Pepsi Won the Cola Wars.

"World War II changed everything. Robert Woodruff (president of Coca-Cola) promised to put a Coke in the hands of every American soldier," Enrico wrote.

"This inspired the government to exempt Coke — but, somehow not Pepsi — from sugar rationing. The government also built almost a hundred Coke bottling plants overseas, enabling Coke to supply American soldiers with 94 percent of the soft drinks they consumed during the war. And, when the war ended, Coke not only had millions of grateful servicemen, as consumers, it also had the makings of a worldwide bottling network, courtesy of Uncle Sam."

The end of the war should have been a moment of triumph and renewed business, but Gillette just remembers the sugar supply coming back slowly. "It didn't come back all that fast," he said. "It took a few months to get it growing again. But, after it was over, our business really started to grow."

CEO Enrico wrote of a new attitude about soft drinks in the post World War II boom economy in America. Not only did millions of soldiers come back Coke drinkers, the old slogan, "Twice as much for a
nickel, too," was not effective after the Depression was over.

"When the soldiers came home and the postwar boom began, no one wanted to be reminded of hard times. Pepsi was, people thought, a drink you had in the kitchen. If you were going to serve it in the living room, you poured it into a Coke bottle first," Enrico wrote. "Few did. Pepsi profits plunged from $6.3 million in 1946 to $2.1 million in 1949; the stock price during that period fell from $40 a share to $8."

Clearly, Pepsi had a battle on its hands to win back the hearts, minds, throats and stomachs of post-war America.

The Mankato, Minnesota, Pepsi plant was built in the early 1940s. The franchise fell into Gillette's hands in the early 1940s after the previous owners had financial and/or legal problems.
Adding to his territory

The Mankato, Minnesota, franchise also fell into Gillette’s hands in the early 1940s after the previous holders had financial and/or legal problems. The first franchise holder for Mankato, Minnesota, was a private label bottler who made fruit soft drinks. He lost the Pepsi franchise after he was jailed, most likely for bootlegging and violations of sugar rationing. The man lost a personal fortune worth millions.

Pepsi then gave the franchise to Fred Lutz, who already was bottling 7 Up. Before he and his son, Fred, Jr. and son-in-law, Jim Lloyd, could get Pepsi started, Gillette had the idea that he wanted that part of the state for himself.

“I was out in New York and I was in pretty good standing with the franchise department because I had made all those deals. I went after the guy who handled franchises and told him to get me that territory, but he said it was already taken,” Gillette recalled.

The man did bring Gillette home for dinner with his wife and family. Gillette doesn’t remember the details of the evening, but by the end of the night, the man agreed to get the franchise for Gillette. “What I told the Pepsi man was, ‘Remember, I have Pepsi in my blood and they have 7 Up in theirs’. All they think about is 7 Up.”

That statement is ironic considering Norman Sr. frequently warned his son about maintaining his objectivity. “In business you have to like your product, but not too much,” Junior said his father told him. “If you
like it too much, you can get blindsided. You need an outside view of it so you don't get hurt."

Norman Jr. said he has often discussed the Gillette takeover with the Lutz son and son-in-law, who ran the 7 Up and Dr Pepper franchise in Mankato for years. The Lutzes never quite forgave Norm Sr. for his business coup at their expense. "They're still mad about that today," Norman Jr. said of his father's take-over of the territory for Pepsi. "They showed me the original franchise for Pepsi. They still have it. 'We were canceled,' they told me. 'Dad was really mad, but he couldn't be mad at Norm for long. He was really mad at Pepsi, though.'"

While the sons would marvel at what Pepsi might have done for them, they admitted their father was "running 7 Up, 7 Up, 7 Up. That's the only thing he thought of all the time."

Norm Sr. called the 7 Up and Dr Pepper products "cats and dogs" because none had market domination. 7-Up had many additional products to go with its main lines because none had a major share of sales. Only through multiple brands could it get enough to fill a soda truck.

The Lutzes were excellent business people, however. "I never saw a marketing man like Fred Lutz," Norman Junior said. "He had a marginal product and 30 percent of the market in Mankato for years. 7 Up was probably more popular than Coke in many places before Pepsi came in. Fred was like a door-to-door salesman, but he was one of the sharpest people. I never saw anything like it."

Still, Norm Sr. referred to 7 Up as a drink for "sick people" and Dr Pepper as a drink that was only for people in the South. "Nobody drinks that cherry stuff up here," he used to say.

His attitude changed, however, when the Gillette Group bought out the Lutz family business, Northland Beverages, in 1992. Today, he's more than happy to sell Dr Pepper and 7 Up in Minnesota.

As Gillette's success grew, he became one of the leaders in the
Pepsi-Cola Bottlers Association. As a member of the Midwest Bottlers Association, he went to New York for meetings. He remembered one meeting for which then president Walter Mack called him to New York to be present when Pepsi handed out scholarships to prestigious colleges like Harvard and Yale.

At that luncheon, he was seated one person away from Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin Roosevelt. Across the table from him was Mayor Fiorello La Guardia of New York, whom Gillette described as a "hell of a talker." Fiorello was known as "the little flower" because of his first name and the courage and energy that he brought to municipal reforms.

A personal tragedy

While the rest of the nation was enjoying a post-war boom, the Gillette family was rocked by the discovery of ovarian cancer in Gillette's much loved wife, Jean Martin Gillette. Even today, ovarian cancer is not a very hopeful diagnosis; then there was little chance for her survival.

Norman Gillette responded like he did in business — by taking action. He flew in a surgeon from New York City to operate on her, a doctor who was a classmate of Dr. Joseph Egan, who then practiced at St. Francis Hospital in La Crosse. Later, Gillette took her to New York for radiation therapy at Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, the most well known cancer hospital in the country. Sloan Kettering's radiation therapy...
equipment was so large and powerful it filled a multi-story building.

"She was pretty sick during the treatments," Gillette said. "We stayed at the Waldorf (Astoria Hotel). She couldn't eat. The Waldorf had a home kitchen. Whatever you want, you name it, you could get it." Unfortunately, as much as they tried to prepare the foods she enjoyed, she couldn't tolerate any of them. The radiation therapy was so powerful that it damaged her internal organs. "It was hard to tell years ago how much your system could stand," Gillette said. "They didn't have the experience with it and it varied with different people. But you had to take a chance."

Jean Martin Gillette died at age 36 in 1948, leaving behind Norma, then 9, and Norman Jr., then 6. During her weeks of treatment in New York, they were cared for by Aunt Elma and Uncle Dale, with the help of Katherine Dineen. Dressed in a starched, white uniform, she worked for the Gillette family until 1953 or 1954. It's unclear whether she actually was a nurse, although the children called her "Nursey."

During this period, the children also became close to their cousin Terry, son of Cy and Agnes. Terry Gillette went on to become a lawyer and later took over management of La Crosse Garment Company as Gillette Industries. The business later became known internationally for its production of Bill Blass down coats and down comforters under the name The Company Store.

It is difficult for Norma and Norm Jr. that their memories of their mother are so limited. Norm remembers her large vegetable garden at
their home at 1004 Cass Street. She never grew flowers — just vegetables for their table.

One memory that Norma has is of being taken to kindergarten by her mother. Feeling scared in this new place, little Norma walked out of the room and ran home moments after her mother left her. "I wanted to be with my mom. I wouldn't stay there," she said. "She took me over there and all of a sudden she was gone."

Norma Gillette Vinger also remembers playing in the snow with her mother. The 16 mm films that her father took also help her and her brother recall memories.

Jean Gillette was a small but strong person who was very down to earth, Wanda Grimsrud recalled. "She adored her family. She never went any place except out to eat as a family to Walt's Restaurant every Wednesday — maid’s night off."

Incidentally, the first thing Norman would do when he arrived at the restaurant with his young, squirming children was to get them something to keep them busy — crackers and, of course, a Pepsi.

**New leadership at Pepsi**

After the difficult years following World War II, Pepsi's fortunes began to change again when Alfred Steele was appointed president in 1949. Steele actually had a La Crosse connection, having spent a few years working for the Trane Company.

Instead of such marketing lines as, "Why take less when Pepsi's best," His advertising effort was designed to make drinking Pepsi an experience ... "Be sociable, have a Pepsi." Fashionable young adults who drank Pepsi were dubbed "the sociables." The marketing line, "The light refreshment," was geared toward an American society that was beginning to be weight conscious. It reflected a slight modification in the Pepsi formula to less sugar.
Steele, who introduced Pepsi's stylish swirl bottle in 1958, was particularly popular with bottlers who had struggled with the company, often losing their shirts during Pepsi's down turns. "The time has come for you to stop driving around in lousy Fords," he told a cheering crowd at one convention. "I'm going to put you in Cadillacs."

Norm Gillette wasn't impressed. "He would put himself in his own Cadillac. In 1957 he bought one," LaPoint said.

"He had to earn it first," Junior said.

Steele did convince the bottlers to make large capital investments in their bottling plants, a major feat considering just a short period before he became CEO the "franchises were so unprofitable they almost couldn't be given away." During the 1950s, net earnings did triple for Pepsi because of supermarket and overseas sales. Growth of Pepsi in the Gillette Group paralleled the national experience and, perhaps, bettered it.

After Steele became president in 1959, there were cocktail parties at the home of his wife, actress Joan Crawford, whom Gillette remembers as constantly puffing away on cigarettes and behaving outlandishly to get attention from men. Crawford's home, an exclusive address off 78th Street on Park Avenue West, frequently had other famous movie stars as well.

Sometimes accompanying him on these trips to New York was a neighbor, Marian Eberdt, a retired head of telephone operators for The
Norm Gillette, Sr., attends a cocktail party in New York with actress Joan Crawford in 1960.
Trane Company. They've maintained a special friendship over the years since Norman Junior and her son, George, became friends as children.

Gillette remembered lunch meetings of bottlers association directors at which Crawford was present as a figurehead board member. “I sat next to Crawford and lit cigarettes for her. She was a star, not knowledgeable about business. She was all show all the time. She never stopped.”

She also carried her own bottle of Smirnoff vodka, refusing to drink from the company's bottle. “And, she was drinking a lot,” Gillette recalled.

Crawford was spokesperson for the new “The Light Refreshment” campaign was designed to appeal to those who yearned for a high society lifestyle. In one commercial, butlers were poised to serve Pepsi from silver bowls. In another spot, Joan Crawford's daughters sat at a table with their poodles. A jazz band played music accompanying a female singer who sang:

"Be Social, look smart.
Keep up to date with Pepsi.
Drink light, refreshing Pepsi.
Stay young and fair and debonair,
Be Sociable, have a Pepsi."

The bottlers did not like the campaign, nor did the public. In fact, Enrico referred to it as a major miscalculation. After Steele's death in 1959, the Sociables campaign died, too.

While Gillette was somewhat caught up in the glamour of being with stars, he did recognize Joan Crawford for what she was and realized she was destroying the company. Her husband did what she told him and her advice did not fit the interests of those who actually drank Pepsi.
Incidentally, Joan Crawford was not an easy person with which to work on commercials. Neither was actor Don Johnson, who appeared in Pepsi commercials in 1985. He once asked Enrico if he was the most difficult with whom the company had ever dealt.

The Pepsi CEO described his response in his book: “Don, you never touched Joan Crawford in her prime: She required toasted French bread, slightly burned on top, in her motel room — not that she ever ate it. Also in her hotel room, she had to have seven packs of cigarettes, four closed and three opened. She required a licensed engineer on duty, and she had to know the number of steps from her room to the elevator.”

The Sociables died as a campaign after market research proved what the bottlers knew all along. A new advertising firm, BBDO, surveyed the public to get its impressions about the sociables and found most people were not impressed by socialites, which was aimed at 30 year olds. The campaign simply did not understand its market was young people.

Young people, BBDO found through research, wanted to be older, and old people wanted to be younger. The smart thing, they learned, was to think younger in their campaigns. The next president, Don Kendall, took Pepsi from what Enrico called a “mildly profitable but definitely second-string soft drink company and turned it into a company that ranked number 41 — Coca-cola was 44 — on the Fortune 500 list.”

Under his leadership, the Pepsi Generation was born. First came the market-driven advertising line, “Now It’s Pepsi for Those Who Think Young.” Later there would be “Come Alive — You’re in the Pepsi Generation.” He also merged with snack food company Frito-Lay to form PepsiCo, Inc.

Gillette was never one to rely on what the national company did to sell his product.

“He was not concerned with campaigns,” LaPoint said. “He was
concerned about what he could control, things he could make happen.”

Norm, Jr. agreed. “The stuff that came out of New York was so far removed from his own business.”

Beginning in October 1971, Pepsi enjoyed 72 straight months of market share growth. By 1974, the Pepsi-Cola brand pulled even with Coke in food stores. In 1977, it pulled ahead.

Pepsi continued to be innovative in its marketing in other ways, offering the first 16 ounce bottle in 1963. It wasn't quite like Twice as Much for a Nickel, but it did sell the product.

Then there were new brands, which Norman Gillette welcomed. Pepsi was the first national brand to introduce a diet cola, Diet Pepsi, in 1964. Diet Pepsi's campaign in 1966 focused on the cosmetic benefits of the low calorie drink with a “Girlwatchers” musical theme that became a top 40 hit.

Pepsi also acquired a regional brand in 1964, Mountain Dew from the Tip Corporation. Mountain Dew was a “hillbilly” drink before Pepsi acquired it and it remained so for a number of years with marketing lines that included “Yahoo Mountain Dew ... It'll tickle your inndards” and “Get that barefoot feelin’ Drinkin’ Mountain Dew.” Even in 1973 it was marketed with “Put a Little Yahoo in Your Life.”

For some reason, Mountain Dew’s potential did tickle Gillette’s inndards. “Norm was willing to invest money behind it. He saw the potential,” LaPoint said. “We hyped the brand as much if not more than anyone in the United States.”

In fact, the Gillette Group went about selling this hillbilly product to Northerners with tremendous creativity. With a target market of teen-agers, Junior can remember Mountain Dew Days at the Interstate Fair at West Salem sponsored with the support of WLCX, the radio station to which teen-agers then listened. They arranged for buses to bring young people to the fair in West Salem.

With a few beers for courage, Junior would attempt to ride a pig named Arnold that they painted in the Mountain Dew color of
aardvark green. "I rode the pig, but it threw me off. We could do anything we wanted. It was crazy stuff," he said. "In those days I would do anything."

Their work paid off. La Crosse, Wisconsin, had the highest sales of Mountain Dew per capita than any market other than North Carolina, where it was first produced.

LaPoint said a new product like Mountain Dew required bottlers to take risks once again, particularly in this part of the country. By 1979, Mountain Dew had a more homogenized theme: "Reach for the Sun, Reach for Mountain Dew" and in 1982, "Give me a Dew." Today, Mountain Dew is wildly successful with an adventuresome foursome who "Did it. Done it. Liked it. Loved it" and who urge everyone to "Do the Dew."

Pepsi I, the original Pepsi boat. (mid 50s)

Norman Gillette fishing. (early 1950s)
The Cold (drink) War in La Crosse

Back in La Crosse in the 1950s and 1960s, Gillette battled with Coca-Cola bottlers for premium shelf space in supermarkets, which had become big business year-round. “We’d take theirs out and put ours in,” he said.

Norman Jr. can remember his father driving by the old Coca-Cola bottling plant in La Crosse and cursing at it. “We’d go by there and you would cuss at it. I remember a lot of bad language,” he reminded his father dryly.

Gillette did more than cuss. He marketed. Added to his radio spots were billboards in strategic places where there was heavy traffic, such as the one so big and beautifully visible between La Crosse and
La Crescent. It took a while for Coca-Cola to respond in kind, but when it did it was warfare. Coca-Cola put a billboard in the heart of Pepsi Territory on West Avenue and Travis Street, right across from the front door of the Pepsi-Cola bottling in La Crosse. When Gillette could find no place in the immediate area for a Pepsi billboard, he responded by permanently stationing a Pepsi truck there with a big sign facing Pepsi and the Pepsi employees parking lot.

"We got mad that they came within a block of us," Junior said. "They had one across the street from us, too."

Advertising of this kind in the local community is left to the local franchise holders, who foot the expense without help from corporate PepsiCola. "We have more billboards in this town than others and the company doesn't give us a nickel in co-op advertising," Norman Jr. said.

Norman Senior was always a maverick when it came to advertising. He never cared much one way or another about how the company advertised the product. He was more concerned about what he could control.

"He has a competitive determination that comes with a singleness of purpose," LaPoint said. "you don't have to be more brilliant to be successful, just more determined."

Part of Gillette's determination was exhibited in a saturation of La Crosse by Pepsi signs in every restaurant, tavern, cafe, gas station and store where Pepsi products are sold. "You were dominant in this market because you were the only one ever seen out there in this town," Junior said.

Coca-Cola dominates other parts of the country because it is a fierce fighter, particularly on its home turf. The story is told of the time in Atlanta in the late 1970s when a Pepsi distributor had the nerve to put a vending machine in a gas station right there in Coke country. Coca-Cola responded quickly. It bought the station and ousted the Pepsi machine. "It was the cold war, so to speak," Norman Junior said.
Pepsi and Coke watched each other's prices very carefully. After one raised a price, the other followed the pathfinder. Raising prices was risky because there was a drop-off in sales for about three months, LaPoint said. But someone had to do it. More often than not it was Pepsi that led and others followed.

"Small bottlers — flavors — would not move until Coke or Pepsi did," Norman Senior said.

The raises were big for the times — a nickel on a case that sold for 80 cents. The big barrier was going over the magical 99-cent mark for a case of 24.

"What they were worried about was we used to sell for 80 cents a case. They were afraid to break that barrier, break that 80 cents price because the product would sell for more than a nickel a bottle," Gillette recalled.

By the 1950s, the king of soft drinks — Coca-Cola — had lost its throne, at least in La Crosse. "We owned the town," Norman Senior said.

What happened, his son explained, was that Coke didn't feel any need to market its product. "They were No. 1 and they just looked at you as just another flavor. They just sat back, even in Chicago, when we ran our product cheaper. They were just ignorant about it."

In other areas of the country, Coca-Cola still is ahead and remains the No. 1 soft drink manufacturer in the country. But not in La Crosse where Norman Gillette won the market with creative marketing and business in about the year 1960. In 1995, Pepsi had 60 percent of the La Crosse market and Coke 30 percent. Other soft drinks shared the remaining 10 percent. Nationally, coke has about 45 percent share, while Pepsi has 28 percent. It is the Midwest — the Pepsi Heartland — where Pepsi has its greatest success.

LaPoint can remember Gillette's willingness to do whatever it took to add distribution. "His philosophy was 'let's get the job done.' If it takes money to get the job done, than 'let's get it done.' He'd want
distributors and he'd want them now. You can't sell product if you can't get it in the hands of the consumer. To do that, you need distributors."

A little extra cash could be spread around to create the "proper incentive" for carrying Pepsi products, and LaPoint said he had discussions with Gillette about how much financial encouragement might be needed. LaPoint suggested on more than one occasion that they might get by with $75, while Gillette was willing to pay $100.

But Gillette would respond: "Ralph, you think you can get it done, but I know I can get it done with mine," LaPoint recalled. "End of conversation."

Gillette also has a mind that can analyze a business problem without the aid of pen and paper, let alone a calculator or computer. Others might need to call back with a proposal, his mind could calculate it on the spot, figuring out what was needed to make a profit.

Norman Gillette has the ability to "flip a switch" when dealing with a potential client, whom seconds earlier he may have been "cussing at," according to Donald Vinger. "That man walks in the room and he can charm them out of their eye teeth."
When sales people call on Norman Gillette, he is “so diplomatic that they walk out happy even though they didn’t make the sales,” Vinger said. “You just can’t teach that.”

That day in Dallas

It was a November day in 1963 and Norman Gillette was in Dallas, Texas, for a regular meeting of the National Pepsi Bottlers Association Board of Directors. Among those at the meeting was former Vice President Richard Nixon, who was emphasizing his law career after losing the presidential race in 1960 to John F. Kennedy and the California governor’s race in 1962.

There were many who thought Nixon was finished as a politician. But not Norman Gillette, who caught the vice president’s ear when he urged Nixon to run for president again. Nixon, who was at the meeting as the attorney representing the bottlers association, was thrilled to hear from a supporter.

“He came in shaking hands with everybody. When he got to me, he asked me where I was from. I said, ‘Wisconsin’ and I asked him why he wasn’t running for president again,” Gillette recalled. “Right away, he took hold of my hand and he wanted to know more about what I thought.”

Nixon continued to ask Gillette a number of questions about his chances in Wisconsin in 1964 should he decide to seek the Republication nomination. When the meeting broke for lunch, Gillette and Nixon walked together to a nearby restaurant where the group was going. As they walked in, the dramatic announcement was made that Kennedy had been shot in Dallas moments earlier.

“Nixon jumped to the speaker stand and announced that everyone should be quiet, that nobody should go out into the streets,” Gillette said. “I was about halfway out the door and they shoved me back in
because people were running in all directions trying to figure out who had pulled the job. I was with Nixon that day. I was there.”

Obviously, the bottlers’ association meeting was canceled as everyone was wrapped up in the turbulent emotions of the moment. It was not business as usual in the country, nor would it be for the next several days until long after the Kennedy funeral.

Gillette remembered policemen seemingly running in every direction on the streets; and squad cars speeding by with lights flashing and sirens wailing. Anyone who went outside was stopped and questioned, particularly if they walked too fast or ran. It was better for everyone just to stay inside the hotel and remain calm. People sat glued to televisions, watching endless reports with very little new information.

After an hour or two of staying indoors, Gillette, always the activist, decided he wanted to go down to the Texas Book Depository to see the scene himself where Kennedy had been shot as he drove through Dealey Plaza in a motorcade toward the Dallas World Trade Center. Gillette tried to get a taxi, but was told he couldn’t get within blocks of where the assassination had occurred.

When Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested 80 minutes after the shooting for killing patrolman J.D. Tippit and later was implicated in the assassination, there was relief and yet emotions ran high in Dallas. Because of a fear that someone would hurt Oswald, police and other government authorities decided to move Oswald from the City Jail to safer quarters in a state prison. It was common knowledge that he would be moved on Sunday morning, November 24, 1963, through the basement of the Dallas city jail.

Gillette can remember hearing that the transfer was going to be made and deciding he wanted to “see what that fellow looks like.” He and another man caught a cab to the government building. When police would not let them into the building’s basement, they sat and waited directly across the street from the building.
"The police didn’t want to let a lot of people go down there, but I could see people going down there," he recalled. "We sat there an hour or an hour and a half waiting for them to come out so we could get a look at him."

It was when six to eight armed soldiers marched by in formation that Gillette began having second thoughts. "They were afraid something might happen here," he said. "I began to get a little concerned."

Still, they waited. Then police told people waiting that Oswald was to go through a ramp so no one could see him. Gillette and his associate finally gave up their vigil and found a cab for the ride back to their hotel.

"We didn’t drive half a block when the radio said somebody had shot Oswald as he came out of the elevator and was walking toward an armored car. There were 30 or 40 people down there and Jack Ruby was one of those guys down there," Gillette said. "He was pretty well known around town."

After the shooting was announced, Gillette said he realized how foolish they had been. "We could have been in trouble there," he said. "People were so damned mad about this guy Oswald shooting the President. Oswald was shot right across from where we were at."

Gillette still shakes his head when he thinks about all the protection for Oswald and one man still was able to walk up with a gun and shoot him. "I said to myself later, what a damn fool I was sitting across from the ramp. Somebody could have started shooting at the car as he went by. People were really disturbed."

Meeting other celebrities

Because of his business connections, Gillette had the opportunity to meet with a number of celebrities. His books were audited a number of years by Maurice Stans, who was with the Chicago office of the public
accounting firm of Alexander Grant and Company. Stans, who had four business accounts in La Crosse, later went on to be the campaign finance chair of the Committee to Re-Elect the President in 1972. Stans, who was said to control “a secret fund,” was part of the Watergate scandal that eventually resulted in President Nixon’s resignation.

Stans advised Gillette to buy properties on West Avenue in La Crosse near Pepsi. “He could see the progress in our company and saw that the only thing that we had at that time was this one small building. Everything was growing here. We didn’t have any room for expansion. He said we better start buying.”

Over the years, Gillette has acquired practically all of the buildings along West Avenue between Green Bay and South Avenue, including the old Bump Pump Company, which made water pumps; Moen Photo and the Miller Broom Company, a highly successful broom maker until vacuums took over much of the cleaning duties in homes.

Among the other celebrities Gillette met was band leader Lawrence Welk, who came to La Crosse as part of a promotion for Miller Hi-Life, a product that Gillette distributed for a brief period until he realized beer and soft drinks really were not a good mix in business.

Gillette can remember Welk’s entire band and other friends coming on his boat. It was so filled, the boat sat deep in the water. “I was scared. We had the whole damn bunch and I didn’t have a big boat at the time. They just kept coming on and coming on. And I’ll never forget the liquor on the boat.”
Lawrence Welk's band played at the Avalon Ballroom on the North Side of La Crosse. They had been in Mankato, Minnesota, first, where they met brother Lyle Gillette, who managed the operation there.

He also had a brief — but indirect meeting — with actor John Travolta. Over the years, Gillette has owned a number of planes, which he uses for business and for the family. When his brother, Cyrus, had a heart attack, Gillette decided to fly him and his wife Agnes to Florida to recover over the winter. Gillette felt it was safer for his brother to fly than drive or take a bus.

But as they passed Macon, Georgia, in their flight to Florida, the window blew out of the plane at about 15,000 feet. With the sudden change in pressure, co-pilot Jim Bailey's head bumped against the window. Maps, sandwiches, and glasses were sucked out of the window.

"I was scared. It scared the hell out of me," Gillette said. "Wayne (Oliver, the pilot) was white as paper. It was a shock to everybody."
Right away the oxygen masks came down and he hollered ‘mayday!’ over the radio.”

The Gillette party returned to Macon, where the airport was alerted for an emergency landing. Airline flights were stopped and fire trucks and an ambulance waited on the runway for them. Luckily, no one other than co-pilot Jim Bailey was seriously injured. Even Cyrus, recovering from his heart attack, seemed to weather their terrifying flight.

Norman Gillette chartered another plane to fly his brother to Florida and then began looking for a replacement for his disabled plane. He also learned this was not the first plane of its type to lose its windows in mid air.

“That damn plane, I never wanted to see it again,” Gillette said. “I got it in my mind that I wanted to find the safest plane there was. The pilot said the safest one is a jet. There are fewer moving parts than with a gas propelled. I set my sights on a jet, which was pretty expensive.”

He went to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he had purchased planes before, and was told that a man there at that moment was interested in trading his plane in for a smaller one. Gillette looked him over. “I thought he was a bum or a grease monkey. He didn’t look like much,” Gillette said.

The grease monkey turned out to be actor John Travolta, who was trading his plane in for a less expensive model because he was going through a slow period in his career. The plane he traded in was large enough for people to sleep on; and Travolta frequently had flown a number of Hollywood stars on it.

“I still have Travolta’s plane,” Gillette said. “It was a $7 or 8 million plane and I bought it for far less.”
Pepsi first appeared in cans as early as 1948, but it was not a popular package until Pepsi produced 12-ounce cans for the military in 1963 that allowed the product to be transported throughout the world. The military cans were so successful that a full-scale canning of Pepsi began in 1965.

The problem for bottlers like Gillette was there were only two Midwest companies that made cans — a Pepsi-owned plant in
Minneapolis and an independent in Iowa. Knowing they controlled access to the increasingly-popular cans, these companies were not afraid to charge a premium.

"They were robbing us," Gillette said. "They were charging us a lot of money because there were not a lot of sources for cans. They were raising their prices and we had no choice but to pay."

Gillette and four other Pepsi bottlers decided to meet in Oshkosh to talk about what they could do to stop the great can robbery. They, and three other Pepsi bottlers, formed a cooperative company based in Watertown, Wisconsin, because of its proximity to Milwaukee and Oshkosh. They agreed they would produce the cans and sell them at cost to member franchises.

"One bottler spoke up and said, 'I suppose you'd like it to be in La Crosse,'" Gillette recalled. "I said that was not it at all. I had some question in my mind about where this plant should be."

Gillette had a vision that went beyond those original members, however. In his mind, the real savings were not just in eliminating the profit margin in can production, but in lowering production costs through economies of scale. "The eight founding members of Wis-Pak didn't have the purchasing power to really save money," he said.

But the other members of the cooperative were not ready to invite others in. Gillette kept arguing his point and finally the members agreed that they would accept others if they requested membership. "That's what I wanted them to say. I went to all my friends who were Pepsi-Cola bottlers and told them to write letters. My idea was to build up purchasing power. I went in the back door. But I knew we would have cheaper cans buying in quantity."

After 30 to 35 bottlers became members, Wis-Pak began accepting non-Pepsi clients but at a premium cost. Because they could not sell cans at different prices, they charged non-Pepsi companies "freight," a fee Pepsi members did not pay.

"Wis-Pak was a life-saver for all the bottlers around. Now there are
canning companies throughout the United States, but I think we are number 2," Gillette said.

It didn’t take long for Wis-Pak to outgrow its facilities in Watertown. The cooperative decided to build a second plant, and the bottlers battled over where the second facility should be located.

Gillette suggested, and the group agreed, to hire an engineer who would study freight cost related to production and shipping from a second plant. That engineer suggested building in Mankato, Minnesota, because it would save about $6 million a year in freight costs alone.

Wis-Pak has since built a plant in Norfolk, Nebraska, and in 1995, built a new plant in the La Crosse industrial park producing post-mix and pre-mix, rather than filling cans or bottles.

Ralph LaPoint, now chief executive officer for Gillette Group, which owns the Pepsi-Cola Companies of La Crosse, Rochester and Mankato, said Wis-Pak was the “biggest reason the business is independent today. To stay independent, you have to be able to control all of your major costs.”

He can remember the day Gillette decided to speak with the other bottlers about starting their own can operation. “He came in the office mad. He’d gotten another price increase. It was going to cost another 10 cents on a case. That was a lot of money then and it was the second increase in just a few months. He was just irate. He said, ‘You can’t operate a business if every time you open the mail, somebody else has a hand in your pocket.’”

Gillette recognized the can would grow as packaging when consumers realized its quality. Wis-Pak has grown from producing 1.8 million cases a year to 115 million. “Wis-Pak charges only what we need to operate the business efficiently and to keep some funds in capital reserve,” said LaPoint, who now has Gillette’s position on the Wis-Pak board of directors.

Pepsi was the first soft drink manufacturer in the country in 1970 to produce a two liter bottle and to make light weight, recyclable plastic
bottles. With the growing cost of aluminum, plastic bottles have grown in popularity. Wis-Pak anticipated and ventured into plastic bottle production in 1991 with the acquisition of a Sioux City, Iowa, plastics factory. It now produces 20 ounce, 1 liter, and 2 liter plastic bottles.

It does so for the same reasons Gillette was so interested in cans — to control costs. Whether the packaging is aluminum or plastic, the goal of the cooperative is to make sure the franchises' futures are in their own hands, rather than at the mercy of another company eager to profit from them.

Wis-Pak also developed the Klarbrunn line of carbonated water, which now is sold in about 20 states. LaPoint said the product was developed at the suggestion of the Gillette Group after it observed the growing consumer interest in waters. LaCroix Water, developed initially by the G. Heileman Brewing Company in La Crosse, was just one example of the waters becoming popular in the 1980s.

At one of the Wis-Pak meetings, LaPoint suggested producing their own bottled water since Pepsi didn't have a product available. They worked with a Milwaukee advertising agency, which came up with the Klarbrunn name.

Developing strength nationally and internationally

Pepsi in the 1970s gained strength as a company through international sales. After reaching an agreement in 1972 with the Soviet Union, Pepsi opened its first plant there in 1974. So much did Pepsi dominate the Soviet Union soft drink market that when the Georgian republic finally had its first Coca-Cola plant in 1993, Georgia's President Eduard Shervardnadze had only one product to serve as the Gold standard of soft drinks. "It's just like Pepsi-Cola!" he said.
By 1985, Pepsi was in 148 countries with 600 different plants.

Pepsi also was helped during the 1980s by Michael Jackson, the most popular entertainer of the time, who starred in two television commercials in 1984 for the new campaign, “Pepsi. The choice of a New Generation.” Other entertainers joined the Pepsi Generation in 1985, including Lionel Richfiie, Gloria Estefan, Terri Garr, Billy Crystal and Tina Turner. Sports stars Joe Montana, Dan Marino and Dwight Gooden were part of it as was Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman nominated to be Vice President of the United States. In a particularly memorable commercial, television star Michael J. Fox climbed over the rooftop of his apartment building to get a Diet Pepsi.

Some of the hottest advertising of all came in 1990 when music legend Ray Charles sang, “You got the right one baby” about Diet Pepsi. Later it was modified to “You got the right one baby, un-huh!”

While Norman Senior always enjoyed his own brush was fame, he never was impressed by the celebrity ads. Those were just what was done in New York, not what was done in La Crosse, And, he had seen what celebrities could do to the company, such as Joan Crawford nearly ruining Pepsi with her ideas in the 1940s.

Coca-Cola’s disastrous move

With Pepsi having so much success in the early 1980s, Coca-Cola was in desperate straits. In 1984, with very little warning, the Coca-Cola Company suddenly changed its formula for Coke, calling it a “smoother, rounder, yet bolder” Coke. Pepsi-Cola called it a great opportunity to win over Coke drinkers. And it was.

After hearing the Coke announcement, a jubilant Enrico sent this message to its Pepsi Bottlers and Pepsi-Cola Company personnel:
"It gives me great pleasure to offer each of you my heartiest congratulations. After 87 years of going at it eyeball to eyeball, the other guy just blinked.

"Coca-Cola is withdrawing their product from the marketplace, and is reformulating brand Coke to be 'more like Pepsi.' Too bad Ripley's not around...he could have had a field day with this one.

"There is no question, the long-term market success of Pepsi has forced this move. Everyone knows when something is right it doesn't need changing. Maybe, they finally realized what most of us have known for years ... Pepsi tastes better than Coke."
Calling the victory sweet, Enrico even gave employees a paid day off. New Coke was a major blunder by Coke, one that the Gillettes saw as an attempt to "be just like Pepsi."

"It was great while it lasted," Norman Junior said, a reference to how badly New Coke did. "Coke was one of the few companies that could recover from that and it recovered well."

New Coke was a direct result of the Pepsi Challenge, an advertising campaign in which soda drinkers were blind folded and then asked to try both Coke and Pepsi. In those surveys, Pepsi was the winner.

"It got to the point where Coke had to make a radical action," LaPoint said.

The introduction of New Coke was a major mistake, almost laughable in the industry. One political cartoon purported to show the Coca-Cola board room. On the wall is a sign that says, "Tasting in Progress." An excited taster announces, "Eureka, gentlemen! We've got it. It tastes just like Pepsi!"

In another political cartoon, Coke spokesperson and comedian Bill Cosby is shown pouring Pepsi into a Coke can. The caption said: "New item: Coca-Cola announces, new formula, taste ...

When the first reaction to New Coke was negative, Coca-Cola tried to recover with a survey that claimed soda drinkers preferred New Coke over Pepsi. But Pepsi's own surveys showed only 18 percent of loyal Coke drinkers preferred the New Coke. Sixty-five percent of those who tried New Coke were "negative about the change" to a sweeter formula and 46 percent of the new Coke samplers said they would drink less Coke or switch to another brand and 75 percent of the switch drinkers said they would buy Pepsi.

Coke drinkers rebelled and within 90 days, Coke was back with the old formula as "Classic Coke." Journalists described new Coke as the "Edsel of the '80s." And, having two Cokes on the market meant they competed against themselves. A year later, new Coke was gone completely.
“If they keep doing things like this, we may not need a marketing department,” Enrico was quoted as saying in 1985.

Consolidation in the industry

The soft drink industry has seen tremendous consolidations in the last decade. The number of independently owned Pepsi franchises alone has dropped from 460 in 1967 when LaPoint joined the company to 118 today. Most of the original franchises were family owned; those that have survived have made the transition from entrepreneurial business to today’s world of professional management teams, LaPoint said.

“Most of those that have sold are a result of family members who can’t come to agreement on how to run the company,” he said.

When a family-owned business passes to a new generation, some families have no one who wants to run it, while others have competing family members who want to be in charge. Sometimes none are qualified.

“One obvious solution is to sell it. But anything that has to do with a family is emotional,” LaPoint said. “It can split up a family. It is easier to liquidate it.”

The day-to-day operations of the various Gillette franchises are managed now by LaPoint, although family members remain as advisors. Norman Jr. is president and Norma Vinger is vice president, roles they’ve held for years after growing up with Pepsi.

Junior, in addition to smashing outdated bottles, remembers the fun he
had when the company acquired its first fork lift. "We bought it from Camp McCoy (now Ft. McCoy). It was an 8,000 pounder," he said. "I'd drive it too fast and flipped it a couple times."

He also worked with the glue machine, which put glue on labels before they were affixed to bottles. "I'd have glue all over my hair and everywhere else."

Junior said the "back of the plant was my childhood. I had more fun back there. I couldn't care less what went on in father's office."

Norma Vinger had a much more sedate experience. She worked at Pepsi during the summers from eighth grade through college in the front office, counting the money that came in cash from vending machines and other sources. She also did drivers' reports, paid bills and payroll and sent statements.

Norman's grandchildren are not involved in the Pepsi business,
although each spent some time working with the company as high school and college students.

Donald and Norma Vinger's sons, Eric, born in 1964, and Christopher, born in 1967, worked for Pepsi in the summers while in high school and college. They are now in land development in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Norman Junior's children, Sarah O'Brien, born in 1967, worked at Disney World for a number of years after college, and now is back at school. Marie Thoe, born in 1968, lives in Rochester, Minnesota, with her two children, Matthew and Erika. She is furthering her education as is Richard, born in 1971, who also works in a construction business.

A continuing influence

Norman Gillette Sr.'s presence remains with the company even beyond the hours he still spends each morning at his office at Pepsi. "His presence is felt by what I've learned from him over the years," LaPoint said. "He helped mold my business philosophy. I can't overemphasize the influence he has had on me."

The philosophy includes forever emphasizing the Pepsi image and determination to be the best. "The philosophy is business is not just about money. As Norm always says, money is only how we keep score."

The Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company no longer bottles Pepsi, but is a wholesaler for the product. In earlier years, the Pepsi syrup and sugar were mixed in huge steel containers. A bottle then had 2 ounces of sugar/formula and 10 ounces of carbonated water. Large machines mixed the bottles. The Gillettes stopped filling the product in 1989.

By bottling or canning, the Pepsi workers stayed close to their product in sight and smell. Once Pepsi no longer was bottled there, the aroma of the syrup died away over a period of time, as did some of the joyous tradition.
"It was the hardest day I have ever had," LaPoint said. "Workers were crying, not all, but many of them were. It was a sad day."

While everyone in the Gillette family had input into the decision, LaPoint said "Ultimately, I made the decision. We probably bottled about a year longer than we should have as a pure business decision."

The company tried to lay off as few workers as possible, instead incorporating nearly all into other duties. It was difficult for some of the older workers because so many of the new jobs were more physically demanding. In the end, eight of the most recently hired workers were laid off.

The future for the Gillette Group, Inc., is strong, particularly with the addition of new products. The Gillette Group is the 11th largest independent franchise in the United States with $100 million in gross sales representing 12 million cases of products a year. Most impressive, it has made this remarkable success with the same basic territory today that it had in 1942. There are more people living in that territory — about one million today — but the thirst for soft
drinks has grown even more rapidly. While once a bottle of soda was a rare treat, for many people it is the drink of choice many times a day.

Pepsi has recognized growth in the variety of product was critical and constantly is developing new products. As Pepsi continues to expand, so will the Gillette Group, Inc. Already it has added Lipton Tea and Ocean Spray brands. Pepsi has a working relationship with Star Bucks Coffee Houses, making it a beverage company, not just a soft drinker manufacturer.

"Consumer tastes are changing. We need to change with them. Whatever the consumer's tastes in beverages, we intend to be there," LaPoint said.

**Saying thanks to the community**

One of the benefits of success is the opportunity to do something about community problems. In 1965, Norman Junior was stricken with a degenerative kidney disease called glomerulonephritis, which was a result of his having had Scarlet Fever in the fourth grade. He needed kidney dialysis, a lengthy procedure that involved 14-hour sessions to cleanse his blood of wastes multiple times a week.

At first, the Gillettes made the journey to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Then Norman Gillette Sr. decided if the traveling and long sessions were hard on his son, they certainly were hard on other patients. He volunteered to buy equipment that would set up the second dialysis unit in Wisconsin at Gundersen Clinic in La Crosse.

That unit has served hundreds and perhaps thousands of patients in the last 30 years. Norman Jr.'s problem ultimately was corrected by the donation of a kidney from his sister, Norma Vinger, in 1968.

Gillette went even further. So grateful for the care his son received, he has since donated more than $1 million to Gundersen Medical
Foundation to support kidney and other research.

In a 1979 interview at the time of one of his earliest gifts to the Foundation, Norman Senior said “They (Gundersen staff) gave a lot to us and I hope others will benefit from this gift. My hope is through research that kidney disease can be controlled and that better treatments can be developed.”

Norman Junior shared that view. “My hope is that they will find some cures and causes,” he said. “And that they improve on transplantation for the kidney, liver and pancreas.”

Norman Sr. Has provided support for the community in other ways as well. For many years in La Crosse, city leaders struggled with redevelopment of a downtown area, Harborview Plaza. Old waterfront buildings were torn down in the hopes of a shopping center being built there. When that plan failed a number of other projects were suggested, but the land remained vacant for more than a decade.

Finally, in the late 1970s, a plan for a civic center/auditorium and hotel were announced. Curt Carlson, head of Radisson Hotels, came to La Crosse to find local investors. He called on Norman Gillette, Sr., urging his support. It was not exactly a “cold call.” Carlson was married to one of the children of Old Man Martin’s brothers, Charlie Martin.

Gillette recognized how valuable this project would be to the continued financial strength of La Crosse and was interested in supporting it. But ever the businessman, he had one stipulation — that only Pepsi products be sold in the Radisson. To this day, the highly successful Radisson-La Crosse Hotel is the only one in the country selling Pepsi; the others sell Coca-Cola.

Gillette also was one of the first owners of the La Crosse Catbirds, a Continental basketball team that brought joy to many La Crosse residents during cold winter months for nearly a decade. The team even went on to two CBA championships before moving to Pittsburgh for financial reasons. The Pittsburgh Piranhas lasted only a year in that city.
Norm Gillette with friend, John Mooney (left). Norm Gillette was one of the original owners of the La Crosse Catbirds Continental Basketball Association team.

Center: Norm with CBA Championship trophy.

Bottom: Norman Gillette, Sr., and long-time friend, Marian Eberdt, enjoy a Catbird game.
The most significant community-wide gift occurred in late 1992, when Gillette decided to establish a $1 million fund with the La Crosse Community Foundation to support area charities. Funds from the Gillette Family Fund have been used for such projects as the St. Clare Health Mission, which provides health care services to people who are not eligible for government programs but who cannot afford health insurance. In addition, it has supported a League of Women Voters history of women in La Crosse County.

Because of his generosity in many ways to the community, Gillette was named the 1995 Philanthropist of the Year by the Upper Mississippi Valley Chapter of the National Society of Fund Raising Executives. Also in 1995, the La Crosse Boys and Girls Club honored Gillette by naming him to its Wall of Fame for his support for the club and other local organizations.

At the time of the gift to the Community Foundation, Gillette called the fund a way “to give back to the community.”

Norman Jr., agreed. “Money made in the company and developed by the company will be put back in the community where it came from. It’s recycling.”
The Gillette family, youngest to oldest, left to right: Don Gillette, Wanda Grimsrud, Lyle Gillette, Cy Gillette, Elma Waters, Norman Gillette, Blaine Gillette.

The great-grandchildren: Erika and Matthew, children of Norm Jr.'s daughter, Marie.

Relaxing on the Mississippi, 1994 style.
Norma's wedding August 4, 1962. From left are Norman, Sr., Norma, her husband, Donald Vinger; and Donald's parents, Norma and Harold Vinger.

Norman Jr.'s wedding, May 1, 1965. From right are Norman, Jr., his wife, Sue, Norman, Sr., Elma and sister, Norma Vinger, who was a bridesmaid.
Fishing on the Pepsi boat were from right, Lyle, Norm, Ortis Price, Cy Gillette and an unnamed guest.

Fishing in Naples, Florida, in the early 1970s were from left, Don, Norman, Sr., and Ralph LaPoint.