

Field Guide to Coronado History: Water Magician

By Bruce Linder

ICE CREAM SODA!
THE BEST AT
THOMPSON'S!
We use Only Coronado Waukesha Water.
CORNER OF FIFTH AND D STREETS.

Advertisement for Coronado Waukesha Water available at Thompson's Drug Store, Fifth and D Streets, San Diego. San Diego Union July 26, 1890

In December 1888, the Coronado Beach Company made a flashy and exciting announcement that a confirmed water supply had been discovered for the newly opened Hotel del Coronado and the resort community of Coronado. However, this wasn't just ANY water, but "pure, wholesome water" with "medicinal properties" from "a series of living springs."

A trusted water supply had been a paramount concern for the new master-planned Coronado resort from its first days. Nonetheless, the first attempt to find water on the Island through drilling by the Coronado Water Company (a venture owned by Elisha Babcock and

Hampton Story) had struck out.

With no water to be found nearby, Babcock turned to John Gruendike (another Coronado Beach Company investor and owner of the San Diego Water Company) to connect a pipe under the bay to Old Town to tap San Diego River water. Soon, a second line ran up the Strand from Coronado Heights and the Otay River Valley.

Shortly after the Hotel Del opened in early 1888, San Diego became caught in a nationwide recession. For Babcock, this timing could not have been worse. Hotel revenue slumped, as did Coronado lot sales — crucial in paying off the hotel's construction.

Babcock, at his visionary best, saw this sudden business challenge for what it was — a crisis that threatened the entire future of the Coronado resort.

In times of peril, businesses always seem to turn to marketing. Babcock's cure, in modern parlance, was to polish and enhance the Coronado Beach Company brand.

His first idea aimed at the rather plain water being piped to Coronado from Otay wells. Nearly everyone in America knew of the esteemed mineral spring water of Waukesha, Wisconsin. Waukesha had long energetically promoted the medicinal value of its natural springs for economic gain and thousands of well-to-do Americans had flocked to the small town's hotels and resorts.

The potential parallels between Waukesha and Coronado caught Babcock's attention. Could he create a Waukesha aura around the Coronado resort?

Dramatic ads swiftly appeared in local newspapers, all signed very officially by "E. S. Babcock, Jr., President Coronado Beach Company". The ads gushed with superlatives: "A very valuable and important discovery ... water of which has similar medicinal properties to that of the celebrated Waukesha Springs ... clear, bright, agreeable to the eye and refreshing to the taste ... water has been piped to Coronado Heights and Coronado Beach and used with the utmost satisfaction and most favorable results."

Wow!

Next arrived “official” scientific testing. In a second wave of ads, Babcock listed chemical test results of mineral content comparisons between Waukesha water and Coronado water to the third decimal point. He concluded grandly that both waters held the same “virtue” with “medicinal properties identical,” while Coronado water contained “but one half the [bad] organic matter found in Waukesha.”

Who knew what this actually meant, but the hook was set and the public, thoroughly trusting in science, began to request glasses of that tantalizing new Coronado water.

More often than not, people instinctively linked the word “Coronado” with the word “Waukesha” (as in “Coronado Waukesha Water”) lifting Coronado’s reputation and polishing its link with quality, health, and affluence.

The positive bounce was titillating, well received, and instantly a part of everyone’s conversation. As word spread, Babcock began selling bottles of Coronado Waukesha branded water for added profit. Babcock built a Waukesha Water bottling plant at Coronado Heights where, it was said, pure spring water bubbled out into a large vat for public viewing.

Babcock continued to expand his Coronado Waukesha Water enterprise. A newspaper article (not an advertisement) reported: “Today the Coronado Beach Company will start the sale and delivery in San Diego of their water, taken from the Otoy wells, which equals, if not excels, the famous Waukesha water.”

Railcars full of the stuff soon were heading northward for Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Certainly with a big smile on his face, Babcock also began to produce large quantities of frozen Coronado Waukesha ice. This wonder ice came from a new Ice House built on the Hotel Del grounds next to the

hotel's engine room and was intended exclusively for hotel guests.

Alas, Coronado Waukesha Water advertising began to peter out in early 1890 and the last mention of the magical elixir was in July of that year. John D. Spreckels had bought out Hampton Story in the Coronado Beach Company in July 1889 and the Spreckels brothers quickly gained controlling interest in the company.

With strategic interests far broader than Babcock, the Spreckels brothers instinctively viewed Coronado Waukesha Water as a mere splurge. They killed it.

Elisha Babcock had conjured up a dream, a romantic repast ... but also a wonderfully conceived advertising tour de force. He accomplished that most elusive of advertising feats: creating "value" in the public's eyes for the most ordinary of products.

As romantic and positive as this episode in Coronado history was, it was also very much akin to traveling roadshows with showmen pitching astounding cure-alls — a pure, sparkling, 100% Coronado scam.