

Maxwell House, Good to Its Last Drop

By Olivia Johnson

New York City has the Statue of Liberty, Chicago has Cloud Gate, aka “The Bean,” and St. Louis has the Gateway Arch. Houstonians have Maxwell House. In case you have never noticed this classic Houston landmark, it is visible from most any freeway, downtown building, and the Medical Center. Generation “Z” is only vaguely familiar with Maxwell House, but ask any parent or grandparent and they will describe it the same way: “The coffee house with the giant neon cup.” For many commuters on Houston highways, Maxwell House serves as a marker for trips across town. Located in Second Ward and adjacent to downtown destinations such as the BBVA Compass Stadium and Minute Maid Park, the Maxwell House plant reminds residents traveling into town via Highway 59, I-45, or I-10 East, that they are home.

Maxwell House coffee is not native to Houston, however. The recipe originated with Joel O. Cheek, a traveling salesman for a grocery firm. Born in 1852 in Burkesville, Kentucky, Cheek’s initial knowledge of coffee was minimal. He befriended Roger Smith, a British coffee broker who could tell the origins of the coffee just by smelling the green, unroasted beans. Like Smith, Cheek shared a passion for coffee and developed

a roast for the best coffee in the South. Upon perfecting the recipe, they offered Maxwell House Hotel twenty pounds of the premium roast to sample and serve in its restaurant. Established in 1859 by former Civil War colonel John Overton Jr. in Nashville, Tennessee, Maxwell House Hotel was one of the city’s most popular lodging facilities. Its guests included presidents, senators, mayors, businessmen, and famous entertainers. The hotel’s restaurant agreed to offer Cheek’s recipe exclusively to its guests, resulting in an overwhelming response as the guests began asking how they could take the sweet aroma home with them.

Cheek joined John W. Neal, a lawyer in a grocery firm, and started a distributing company called the Cheek-Neal Coffee Company, which later became Maxwell House Coffee Company. The new name gained consumer interest but none like the storied endorsement from President Theodore



Joel Cheek devised the recipe for the special blend of Maxwell House Coffee.

Photo courtesy of Mondelez International.

Roosevelt. According to company lore, while visiting Andrew Jackson's home, the Hermitage, Roosevelt exclaimed the coffee was "Good to the last drop!" With that, Cheek knew the company had the potential to become one of the largest names in the coffee industry, one of the most profitable industries in the country and global economy. He moved operations to the first location in Jacksonville, Florida. The factory employed skilled and unskilled workers, with women occupying various administrative positions and serving as taste-testers. The second plant was in Houston, Texas, followed by



Hoboken, New Jersey, and San Leandro, California.

The company became a national success when Postum (later General Foods, and now Kraft Foods) purchased the company from Cheek-Neal in 1928 for more than \$40 million dollars. Cousins and investors in Maxwell House, Leslie and Mabel Cheek used profits from the sale to build Cheekwood on one

hundred acres of wooded land in Nashville.¹ The Neals, however, chose to remain in Houston. J. Robert Neal, the son of Maxwell House co-founder John W. Neal, purchased land on Lazy Lane near the River Oaks Country Club and commissioned one of the city's costliest home-building projects during the Great Depression.

The initial four Maxwell House plants shared one main characteristic: location. Each plant stood near bodies of water that served as major ports. Houston possessed the largest port with its connection to the Gulf

of Mexico by the Houston Ship Channel. This accessibility made exporting and importing coffee that much cheaper; plus the company utilized the railway system that connected the port to the rest of the country. The Port of Houston became a major selling point for General Foods's Maxwell House division as Houston became one of the nation's largest trading cities.

Originally located at 2017 Preston Avenue, after thirty years of operation, Maxwell House moved to 3900 Harrisburg in 1946 under General Foods. Harrisburg Boulevard, an extension of Texas Avenue, stretches through the East End, Second Ward, and Greater Eastwood neighborhoods. These neighborhoods were a part of Harris, Texas, a town considered "out of town" from Houston.

From 1913 to 1942, the building, which later became home to Maxwell House, housed the Ford Motor Company's assembly plant for Model T cars. Built in the summer of 1913 by an unknown architect, the factory was classified as "early twentieth century industrial."² The original structure stood four stories tall with two- to three-story additions on the eastern wing. Built from reinforced concrete, lined with brick and terra cotta trim, the building cost Ford an estimated \$200,000. For a short while, the Ford Company produced parts for vehicles during World War I out of this factory. At Ford's peak, it employed over 1,300 Houstonians and produced about 350 cars per day. The plant itself sat on a high traffic street, railroad tracks to the west of the north-facing factory, and the Houston Belt & Terminal Rail Yard caddy-corner, hosting Southern Pacific and the Galveston, Houston and Henderson Railway Company.

When Maxwell House took over the location, the proximity of this plant to Houston proper proved beneficial as the city expanded its highway system, beginning with the nearby Gulf Freeway. This expansion brought



The Ford Motor Company was the original inhabitant of the building at 3900 Harrisburg, which became Maxwell House.

Photo courtesy of Ford Truck enthusiasts.

more cars and families into Houston, which helped fuel the industrial boom in Houston post-World War II.

While Maxwell House expanded in the post-war period, steady competition remained in Houston coffee manufacturing. Competitors included Duncan's Admiration Coffee, International Coffee Company, and Magnolia Coffee Company located near Buffalo Bayou. These companies utilized their central location to move their products via water, truck, and rail.³

Maxwell House needed a place where it could market its brand and ship mass quantities effectively, and the Harrisburg location proved advantageous due to its proximity to the railway system. At that time, most products moved to and from the plant by boxcar, even during the Ford days. According to the 1925 Sanborn Insurance Maps, a small track of railroad ventured into the plant where boxcars could load and unload. Maxwell House sent its product from the Houston Belt and Terminal Rail Yard, located on McKinney Street in Harris to Houston proper.

Railway companies, such as Houston, Texas Central and Southern Pacific, were the backbone of the industrial period in Houston, assisting with the \$300 million

expansion. From 1940 to 1947, the tons of freight received and forwarded climbed from 6,416,432 to 15,391,171. Solidifying the role of railroads, the Houston Ship Channel facilitated the shipping process and served as home to the warehouses, wharves, and grain elevators required for moving large shipments.⁴

The neighborhood around the original Maxwell House flourished as the company grew. Austin High School opened in 1937 followed by Ripley House community center in 1940. The additions to the new Maxwell House plant called for more workers on hand for machinery maintenance, a larger janitorial staff, addition of administrative positions, and factory workers to operate and monitor machines. The Second Ward population at the time, a mix of Hispanics and whites, took advantage of this opportunity and generations of families, including former Ford employees, stayed in the Second Ward. Many families in the area can name at least one family member who worked at Maxwell House from a single summer to twenty years or more. For over fifty years, Maxwell House provided the community with much more than just coffee; it fostered relationships with neighbors.



Young girls work on the coffee bean mural conceived and executed by Port Arthur artist Genie Rester in 1957. The mural, approximately 9'x14' in size, is composed of 250,000 beans personally roasted in one-pound batches by Maxwell House employee Jesse Green to create the exact colors ranging from pale green to rich, dark brown.

Photo courtesy of Eastwood Civic Association.

In 1988, the addition of the sixteen-story tower put Maxwell House on the map. Workers brought the tower in piece by piece on the railroad and assembled it using a crane that had enough power to lift the space shuttle. Mounting the sign with a large neon cup, which became a city landmark, marked the beginning of the biggest investment for Maxwell House.

Each city with Maxwell House plants adopted the company as its own. No city demonstrated this feeling more than Jacksonville, Florida. When Kraft Foods threatened to close one of its two East Coast plants, either Jacksonville or Hoboken, the Florida community was in an uproar. The city created and supported a campaign called “Keep Max in Jax” that included workers, families, and even city officials. JaxPort, Jacksonville Port Authority, supported the campaign by providing money that the city lent the plant based on a taxing zone, since the beans had \$7 million in revenue associated with the trading commodity. Numerous monetary efforts, the creation of a bridge to help expand the plant, as well as union concessions and new contracts eventually ended the competition. Max stayed in Jax and in 1990 shut down the Hoboken plant.⁵

In December 2006, speculation about the sale of Maxwell House ran rampant in Houston newspapers,



A taste-tester samples varieties of the brew for quality assurance.
Photo courtesy of Florida Memory.

fearing a demise similar to Hoboken's. Kraft, having gone through a recent name change itself, gave no reason for the profitable company's sale, though rumors swirled about the company lobbying to buy Cadbury, a British confectionary company. Nevertheless, Maxwell House, the plant not the product, was purchased by Carlos de Aldecoa Bueno, president of Maximus Coffee Group and Cadeco Industries. Cadeco's partnership helped Maximus's newly acquired Houston location become the company's third and largest home, following Spain and Mexico; and it placed the Port of Houston in competition with the Port of South Louisiana, the nation's leader in total tons. Because the state ad valorem tax has been eliminated in 2003, Cadeco was able to store beans it sold

to Kraft and other competitors tax-free. The ad valorem tax, placed on imported goods at the time of transaction and charged annually, was written into the state's constitution. It applied to warehouse inventories such as coffee beans kept for months and even years at a time, raising the cost of storing in mass quantities.⁶ A constitutional amendment exempted coffee and cocoa, thereby adding to the success of Maximus and de Aldecoa in Houston and solidifying its position as a key player in the coffee industry.

De Aldecoa purchased multiple warehouse spaces, one located on I-10 East by the Budweiser plant, and the Uncle Ben's plant, specifically to store coffee beans and sell them to other coffee producing companies. Cadeco “strives to be a leader in the raw coffee process,” which includes cleaning, sorting, blending, and bagging. Some co-manufacturing partners send their products to Cadeco for these services before sending them to Maximus for processing.⁷

In Houston, the potential closure forced many to take early retirement to avoid being laid off. However, de Aldecoa struck a deal for employees to collect their retirement from Kraft while maintaining their jobs and seniority under Maximus. Ruben Cerda, a quality lab specialist, has had a long relationship with Maxwell House, and now Maximus. Before joining the Kraft family in 1990, he worked as an exterminator at the facility on contract with Terminex. He was one of hundreds that continued to stay employed when Maximus took ownership. While he worked at Maxwell House, the company underwent two name changes but never ceased to be a key player in the coffee industry. Not only did they produce roast and ground coffee, but also now had the opportunity to process decaffeinated and instant coffees. Roast and ground coffees remain the most popular in the United States. Canada, Mexico, and countries in South America all partake in the instant coffee industry. Maximus makes a large part of its profit from selling instant coffee in bulk. Cerda thinks that Maximus will lean toward becoming an instant coffee producer as demand increases.⁸

Maximus is also an innovator in decaffeinated coffee production. In contrast to the conventional decaffeination process, which involves a carcinogen, methylene chloride, to assist with the extraction of caffeine, Maximus uses a process involving water, carbon dioxide, and nitrogen. This process is a USDA certified organic method of removing caffeine and avoids the metallic taste that methylene chloride leaves in the roast.⁹ Houston is the only facility in the nation that produces decaffeinated coffee with this process, making it a prime supplier to the Maxwell House facilities in Jacksonville and San Leandro, as well as other companies.

Maximus also attempts to lessen the plant's environmental impact. After the decaffeination process, the extracted caffeine is sold to pharmaceutical companies or other beverage companies, such as Coke or Pepsi. The water used still retains small traces of caffeine, so it is re-used at the plant, mainly for external cleaning. Remnants

of coffee beans are burned and used to power boilers instead of being sent to a landfill. Since the plant uses so much energy, Reliant Energy, which is located further down Harrisburg from the plant, requires Maximus to shut down if a power outage occurs. Once the affected area regains power, the plant can restart production.¹⁰ The addition of the decaf tower, or Amco as the workers call it, has a large impact on the amount of energy used, but reaps great benefits for the company.

The co-manufacturing abilities of the facility also gave the company an extra advantage. Ebro Foods, one of the largest rice traders and millers, packaged and processed its Minute Rice brand at Maxwell House. Upon the sale of the Harrisburg plant, Ebro made an agreement with de Aldecoa, stating that until they found a new manufacturer, Maximus would continue to process and package Ebro's product.¹¹

Maximus's takeover of Maxwell House from Kraft has proven to be a step in the right direction for the plant and its position in the global trading economy. In 2012, Maximus acquired membership in the British Retail Consortium (BRC), which focuses on standardizing "quality, safety, operational criteria and manufacturers' fulfillment of legal obligations" while "protecting the consumer."¹² This prestigious BRC membership is a direct result of outstanding products, safety procedures, and quality controls implemented since the ownership change. Additionally, it has allowed Maximus to place bids for coffee around the world.

The quality of ingredients serves as the primary selling point of Maximus. "We sell flavor, first and foremost," said Cerda. He is referring to the same quality beans de Aldecoa imports tax free and previously sold to Kraft. Several companies use these beans processed by Maximus including Nestle, Starbucks, Mother Parker, and Folgers. The best quality growing countries range from the Tropic of Cancer to the Tropic of Capricorn. Colombia produces the "A" bean, the most wine-like sour bean, Brazil the "J" bean, and Mexico the "C" bean.

When mixed, these beans produce an Arabica blend, the most common coffee blend. Jamaican and Vietnamese beans are the "M" beans, containing the most robust flavor for the strongest, most bitter coffees. Cerda, a certified taste tester, recalls tasting at least 120 sample blends in one day.¹³

Cerda is the quality lab technician and the only employee that is high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) certified in the entire plant. HPLC is a chromatographic technique that reveals traces of foreign substances in a coffee, much like detecting drugs in a blood sample. This method measures the levels of caffeine in a beverage and allows a technician to recognize when the level in decaf surpasses .3%, the point at which a body can and will have reactions to caffeine. The enforcement of a cautious .25% level protects customer safety. Also, the levels of CO² under extreme pressure are monitored constantly to keep the workers and neighborhood safe. A small explosion on the north facing tower in 1988 damaged a wall of the facility and shattered the windows of a bar only blocks away. Fortunately, no other incident of that magnitude has taken place.

Maximus employs about 200-300 workers, and most of them live east and south of Houston, giving the same homey feel to the company that existed during the Maxwell House days. Maxwell House remains a household name for many Houstonians and continues to keep its name under Kraft Foods ownership, producing the same recipe that Cheek and Smith created almost 100 years ago.

Maximus is on its way to achieving that level of notoriety in Houston. For those living in the Second Ward, now referred to as East Downtown or EaDo for short, Maximus is the first and last thing they see and smell leaving their home, work, or school. This coffee house resides on one of the newest METRORail lines and is getting its silent salute with the stop located at York named Coffee Plant/Second Ward, which is what many would inevitably call the station.¹⁴

Maxwell House—as some still call it—or Maximus is a neighborhood staple, which explains the baffled looked on citizens' faces when our very own neon cup—an iconic image on the side of the building—was gone in the blink of an eye. Vice president of Maximus, Leo Vasquez, says, "Kraft legal team thought it was a matter of trademark infringement... We tried to convince them to leave it. It was a Houston landmark."¹⁵ He understood what the cup meant to the neighborhood. Though the aroma still lingers, the cup saw its last days in the summer of 2007 when Kraft dismantled and hauled the neon away. For now, Maximus's bright lights and aroma will carry us through this new era for Maxwell House.

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The Maxwell House Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, was the first place to serve the special brew that came to bear its name.

Photo courtesy of Historic Nashville.