

# A Fresh Look At Nebraska

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By LuAnn Schindler

As a child, backyard summertime picnics meant perfectly-seasoned hamburgers, corn on the cob slathered in peppery butter, bright-red tomato slices tinged with salt, juicy peaches, and a glass of icy, black cherry Kool-Aid.

We sat around the redwood picnic table and watched Dad handle grilling duties, and Mom, well, she depended on Kool-Aid like we depended on mom.

As a Hastings College student, I spent hours in Perkins Library, researching and reading. When I needed a break, or when the procrastination bug prevented me from focusing, I investigated the second floor exhibits. In a glass case, faded packages of Kool-Aid told the story of Edwin Perkins, the library's benefactor and the inventor of the soft drink mix.

Perkins was born in Iowa in 1889. Four years later, his family moved to Hendley, Nebraska, in Furnas County, where his father ran a general store. At age 11, Perkins worked in the family business and became interested in food manufacturing.

When a friend showed him a box of Jell-O, Perkins interest piqued, and he answered a magazine ad about manufacturing pre-packed foods. Using those recipes, Edwin tested medicines and flavorings in the family kitchen.

Eventually, Perkins started two businesses. From the back of the Hendley Post Office, he printed *The Hendley Delphic*, a weekly newspaper. He also established a mail-order business, selling perfume, bluing and several other products.

By 1921, Perkins married Kitty Shoemaker and the two moved to Hastings, where the couple started the Onor-Maid line, featuring 125 items, including lotion, medicines, soap, and flavorings. But the most popular item was "Fruit Smack," a concentrated drink mix available in six flavors. The glass bottles posed

shipping problems, so Perkins went to work developing a dry concentrate, similar to Jell-O.

During 1927, Perkins introduced six flavors of Kool-Aid: raspberry, cherry, grape, lemon, orange and root beer. Strawberry came about later.

In 1928, the product's name changed to Kool-Aid. The Adams County Historical Society reports various stories exist concerning the name switch. It's possible that government regulators forced the change since "ade" indicated a fruit juice product. Another story claims Perkins was threatened with a lawsuit if he used the original spelling.

Kool-Aid was trademarked in 1934 by Perkins Products.

Originally, a package cost a dime, but Perkins slashed the price to a nickel during the Great Depression. It was a gamble that made Kool-Aid a multi-million dollar business.

During this time, the demand for Kool-Aid rocketed. The family business, located along First Street in Hastings, needed more room. The company took a handful of employees to its new Chicago location, and in 1953, General Foods purchased the business. The Jell-O Kool-Aid connection was complete and has since continued to deliver more smiles per gallon.

The entrepreneurial genius of a small-town Nebraska boy poured into several charitable organizations in Hastings and Adams County. The community honors Perkins and Nebraska's official state soft drink during Kool-Aid days (this weekend), where you can get a glass of sweetness from the world's largest Kool-Aid Stand.

Oh yeah!

Kool-Aid's so hot, it's cool.

What's your favorite flavor? Let LuAnn know at <http://luannschindler.com> or on Facebook.