

Coke is it after all

No other brand name is as well-known
John McKay
The Canadian Press

It's the real thing.

The Cola Conquest, an epic warts-and-all TV documentary which airs in three parts on CBC Monday through Wednesday, is a hard-nosed look at the world's most famous soft drink and most recognized brand name.

Produced by Montreal-based DLI Productions, the film quickly and courageously disposes of the myth that Coca-Cola is just soda pop, maintaining that it is nothing less than the commercial embodiment of American manifest destiny.

From its humble origins as a post-Civil War brain tonic developed by an Atlanta druggist (and yes, it used to contain cocaine up until 1903), Coca-Cola rose to become a multinational colossus with, as the documentary says, an "unquenchable thirst" for world domination of the beverage market.

"We didn't set out to do a Roger-and-Me type of attack on the corporation," says director Irene Angelico.

"I wanted to take a fair look at them. It's not a journalistic film."

Angelico says in places where Coke (and rivals like Pepsi-Cola) did behave irresponsibly, they do not shy from discussing it. She says in all fairness the company often tried to do the right thing for the bottom line but that as consumers and citizens we all have a responsibility to keep our corporations honest.

The documentary covers historical events such as Coke's support for Dwight Eisenhower's run for the American presidency and Martin Luther King's call for a Coca-Cola boycott during the civil-rights '60s. (The film says for years the company was stuck in an old southern mentality with an all-white board and sales staff.) It also talks about how Coke was right there with free samples to make its mark in Vietnam and when the Berlin Wall came down.

Some unsettling events are related, too, including the assassination of local bottling-plant union organizers in Guatemala. And how, through "predatory capitalism," American colas went to war with the likes of the wine culture in France and the tea culture in China.

The Cola Conquest, then, is a look at 20th-century American political history through the practice of blitzkrieg capitalism.

"They for a long time took a position that we're only selling a soft drink, we don't have any political influence, we don't get involved politically." And of course that's total bullshit," observes Angelico.

"They have an enormous influence wherever they go."

The filmmaker says Coke and Pepsi are neither Republican nor Democrat, that instead they go where the power is, whether it's Richard Nixon or Jimmy Carter or some friendly Third World dictator.

Corporations this big tend to be litigious (those who have attempted exposes on the likes of Disney or McDonald's can testify) and Angelico concedes they did have some worries. She says Coke officials refused to cooperate with them, but have been watching the situation very carefully.

She says they did manage to say everything they wanted to in the film but not before repeated checks and double-checks.

"We have a team of lawyers. Luckily one's a friend, otherwise we'd be bankrupt by now. It's easier to make a film or program about the government than it is about these corporations. Their power is unchecked."

One of the victims of the power of the cola giants was Canadian businessman Dave Nichols, who left Loblaw to help promote house-brand soft drinks made by Cott Corp. With RC Cola, Angelico says Nichols gave them a run for their money for awhile. But eventually Coke and Pepsi used their marketing heft, simply cut prices and drove him out of the race.

"He was on the map for awhile and he pissed them off in a big way. The CEO of Coca-Cola called him a parasite at one of the beverage conferences."

Angelico says even Coca-Cola sometimes doesn't realize it is selling image, not taste. After all, colas are 98 per cent sugar and water. But she adds that it would sure be interesting to try that original 19th-century recipe with its cocaine, caffeine and sugar.

"No wonder people thought it was a miracle tonic. That first hour after a drink of Coke must have been really productive!"