"Admiration Coffee: The Bitter Taste of Southern Hospitality"

By Maria-Louise Cook

Situated in the midst of a carpet bag and a KKK hood in the Museum of Southern History, the Admiration Coffee Can at first glance seems to be no more than that: a can of coffee. Given a second look, however, the tin turns out to be a time capsule (in more than one way) into a sinister and uncomfortably present past. The simple tin markets itself using a past that a person of its time might have found comforting and charming, but which the modern world now sees and recoils. Through its label and marketing, the can bears a grim history; but once it bore something much darker: a Confederate flag.

With its royal blue wrapper and large, strategically mouth-watering, colored letters, the tin appeals to its viewer; it calls out "buy me," just like it was intended. But just what would one be buying? The can itself does not stop short at marketing its product—it sells a version and vision of the South's past that it knew its consumers wanted to preserve. The container itself says that it is "a Southern Institution," and three times, in light, friendly fonts, it proclaims that what is held within is "the cup of Southern Hospitality." To drink Admiration is to also drink Southern ideals.

And the can shows just what ideals it, as "a Southern Institution," upholds in a Norman Rockwell-esque scene painted in stark, bright colors. A smiling woman, who is clearly drawn to fit the "mammy" archetypes and "happy slave" narratives of the antebellum south (Pilgrim), cheerily serves from a sparkling, sterling-silver coffee set to a man, who looks eerily like Colonel Sanders, and his Southern Belle wife. The woman dons a dress one could imagine Scarlett O'Hara wearing, and her hair is curled in a few, tight ringlets that cascade down her neck—per the fashion of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The painting is dated; it evokes a particular era. It is clear from their clothing and coiffure that it is set around the time of the Civil

War—a strange fact, seeing as even Admiration's parent company, Duncan Coffee Company, was not founded until 1918. This is an image from the 20th century glorifying and romanticizing the 19th century South. It shows that Admiration is a Southern institution that upholds old Southern Institutions, such as, depending on how one interprets the painting, vague racism at best and slavery at worst. It harkens back to a past that it wants to preserve, but it ought not to have persevered past the war fought to quench its corrosive force. The scene depicted on the can is a pocket version of *Gone with the Wind*: a rosy image of a thorny past, the effects of which still prick the South today.

Moving from mere hints at socio-political concerns, Admiration plasters direct Southern-Democrat propaganda on the bottom of its coffee can. A blue eagle clutching lightning bolts in one claw and a gear in the other is engulfed in bold, red lettering that says, "NRA—WE DO OUR PART." It is not *that* NRA. It is the National Recovery Administration (Library of Congress). The stamp was Admiration signaling its allegiance to the National Industrial Recovery Act, a once popular limb of Roosevelt's New Deal that quickly fell from public grace and was deemed unconstitutional. The NIRA extended federal power in order to boost the economy during the Great Depression; however, the extension of federal powers was used to coerce businesses into compliance to the will of the federal government, lest they faced public lambastes and boycotts (cnx.org). The abuses of power caused by the NIRA meant that the act faced swift death at the hands of the Supreme Court because it "allowed unlimited power…sanctioned a 'completely centralized government'…[and] violated the principle of separation of power" (Bill of Rights Institute). The Admiration Coffee canister dated 1934—just a few months after the then-favored NIRA was signed into law—was using popular public politics as a marketing tool (LivingNewDeal). Part of the Southern ideal with which Admiration

was aligning itself was the ideal of Southern Democracy. The South was filled with “yellow dog Democrats”—meaning that Southerners would vote for a dog before they voted for a Republican—the party of Lincoln and Reconstruction. (Elving). The NRA being a facet of Roosevelt’s New Deal—and, therefore, a part of Democratic policy—meant that it was grafted onto the homogenous Southern Democrat identity. Much like the NRA, businesses shunned those which were uncooperative, and Southerners who did not favor the Democratic party were ousted. Therefore, inclusion of NRA propaganda on the canister is not unrelated to the marketing of Admiration as “a Southern Institution;” rather it was an extension of it.

The Admiration Coffee Can is not only a time capsule because its marketing gives a glimpse of the politics and ideals of the antebellum south, but also because of what it hid: a Confederate flag. To be specific, the can held the Battle Flag of the Army of Tennessee used by the 36th Alabama Infantry. This infantry had a particularly bloody past, having fought at the notorious battles of Chickamauga and Atlanta (“Thirty-Sixth”). After the Civil War, the flag was brought to Texas and hidden inside of the Admiration Coffee Can, which was then put on display.

Both the Admiration Coffee Can and Confederate Flag are symbols of the Mythology of the Lost Cause: a Southern rewriting of post-Civil War history to justify the devastation laid upon the South by the South through its secession and deadly ideals (“The Lost”). This mythology romanticizes the past while repainting the picture: slaves were happy, slave-owners were magnanimous, and Confederate soldiers were saints (Janney). This type of romanticization led to new narratives about the “old South,” like D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation,* which directly caused a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the early twentieth century (Elving). The Confederate flag became a symbol of Southern identity—even in the face of defeat. This flag—

which is rightly seen as a symbol of oppression by most Americans—persists in the South. Drive through the South and it will appear, not merely in history museums but, like a bitter aftertaste, it serves as a reminder of the perseverance of a dark and lingering past, which still causes trials a hundred and forty years after more than 600,000 human lives were lost to wash away its bitter taste from Southern history.

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