

# Ida Shanker A Hi-Klas Lady

By Kayla Habermehl

“We feel wonderful. The fourth generation has taken over.”

When adversity hits home, some people give up. Others show the world they will make a difference. Ida Shanker's world changed in 1942. Her husband had been drafted into the military, leaving her father-in-law to run the company by himself. He, in turn, wanted to sell the business because it was difficult to run without his son. Ida had other intentions.

“I said ‘please don't do that, I want to help. I want the business here when Jack gets back,’” Ida said. Her father-in-law agreed.

Granted, a lot has changed since then, the products, the location and even the name, changing from Hi-Klas to Canada Dry Bottling Company, but without Ida's help the Lansing icon may not exist today.

Ida's father-in-law, Louis Shanker, started the business in 1933 in the midst of the Great Depression. His cousin in Flint had put a deposit on a building with the intent of taking over a then defunct bottling company in Lansing. Then came the Bank Holiday, enacted by President Roosevelt, closing all the banks for four days. His cousin was unable to access the rest of his money to pay off the building.

“He [Louis' cousin] had to come up with the money and my dad had some available,” said Louis' son Jack, of the beginning of the partnership.

As to how they got their name? “Before it was called Hire-Klas Beverages but my dad just blocked out the -re and it became Hi-Klas,” said Jack.

And so a legacy was born. In the beginning, Hi-Klas bottled and distributed Hi-Klas soda in a variety of flavors.

Louis had emigrated to the U.S. from Poland and didn't have sufficient command of the language to run the office. Therefore, it was important to have help. When Louis considered selling the business, Ida convinced him to keep it and helped him run it.

“It wasn't easy. I had worked for my father for many years but it was a different business. My father-in-law was a wonderful man but he was nervous and upset about the boys in the service and I would have to go into the plant because he would get upset at the help. But help was hard to find,” she said, “I would ask them to forgive him because he was just so worried and upset.” She had to be sure that the help stayed because there weren't many men around at the time because of the war, Ida said.

“You needed able-bodied men ... you had to put up with people that you normally wouldn't hire,” Jack added.

Jumping into a new business was hard, but it wasn't the toughest thing that Ida had to deal with. Jack was at war.

“Those were some of the worst memories of all,” she said. “When Jack was in basic training, we met a couple. The wife came to live with me because Jack and I couldn't live together. After, when both of the men went overseas she called me and told me that her husband was killed in action. I didn't hear from Jack. But I finally heard from him and thank God he was okay. When they got there, her husband had gone one way and Jack had gone the other. They were in the infantry, it was very serious.”

Jack was gone from 1942 until 1945. Ida had no idea that he was returning until he walked in the door.

“It was a very horrible time for me because he was in danger and I worried that he wouldn't come back. I was so lucky when he walked in. I was on my way out of the office and he was coming in. I was so surprised to see him!” Ida said.

Later, Jack, wearing his military uniform, walked up the driveway anxious to get home. His son, Larry was outside playing and didn't even recognize his dad.

Ida left the company and returned to being a housewife. She and Jack already had one son, Larry, two more children followed.

Jack and Ida have been married for 68 years. They met at a youth club at the Temple in Lansing. Ida had ridden into Lansing from her home in Owosso with her brother and some other boys.

“When I saw Jack walking across the rec room, I said to one of the boys ‘I like the looks of that guy, would you go introduce yourself to him and then introduce him to me?’” Ida smiled.

As for her time at the company, Ida says it was most rewarding to know that the family kept the business because of her help. She is thankful for that and for its continued success through the years.

Louis passed the company on to Jack who in turn passed it on to their son, Larry. Now, Larry's son Randy is running the company. But Ida's involvement when the company needed it most kept it alive for the current generation.

“We feel wonderful. The fourth generation has taken over. Randy is doing a very good job and we've got a wonderful crew of men and women,” Ida said. “It wasn't easy but somehow we managed. I can't believe how big it is now.”

