The Millcreek Soda War

It’s around 8:30 a.m. when today’s battle begins. The first cars pull up to their prospective soda shops. The long winding row of white vans forms a line of battle, protecting each soda store’s future through their repeated business. By the time the shops open their drive-through windows there are eight cars waiting for Swig, six for Thirst, and The Park and Sodalicious are tied with two cars each. While these shops are known for having a history of intense competition, they have decided to approach this war in an unprecedented way. Instead of the long and arduous process of filing lawsuits, these soda stores have decided to take a more direct approach, by setting up shop all within a one-mile radius.

Utah—a state known for its red rocks, ski slopes, and its saturation of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Of the many peculiarities this state boasts, there is nothing so complexing and intriguing as Utahans’ love of soda. Members of the church do not participate in drinking alcohol or caffeine, so sugar has become members’ vice. Here, the idea of neighborhood bars has been replaced by corner soda-pop shops. It’s a place where the [plastic surgery](https://www.uvureview.com/front-page/recent/featured/news/researchers-say-utah-is-no-2-in-cosmetic-surgery/) is all the rage and the soda wars run rampant.

The Millcreek soda war unofficially began June 17, 2020, but the competition commenced many months prior. It all started in when Swig decided to open up shop on the Corner of 3300 south in Millcreek, Utah. At the time locals were surprised. The Holliday-Millcreek area already had a soda shop, located six blocks south, across the street from Olympus high school. People started to speculate about what would happen. Swig, an eminent soda chain with 22 locations, 19 of which are situated in the state of Utah, seemed a daunting opponent to a small locally owned establishment. Would Swig gobble up The Park’s customers and leave the small shop closing its doors?

When the neighborhood rumor mill discovered Sodalicious was joining the competition, opening a store only a three-minute drive away, the rumors started flying. But the war didn’t begin until Thirst stepped in. They opened their doors on the 17th of June, ushering in the present sugar-filled conflict. Also located on 3300 South, customers have the luxury of watching a rival location, all while staying in the comfort of their air-conditioned car, with a coke or some other sugary drink in hand.

In no other state would a business model based on sugary drinks being “spiked” with flavor be so prosperous. Utah exhibits a great irony. The state prohibits alcohol consumption and in turn Utahan’s vice are “dirty sodas”—soft drinks that are mixed with fruit purees, cream, and flavored syrups instead of liquor. These “dirty sodas” epitomize Utah’s uncommon relationship with alcohol, it’s unique nightlife, and its resident’s unhealthy love affair with soda.

**A history that primed the sweet tooth**

Utah’s history with The Church and alcohol prohibition uniquely primes its citizens to enjoy sugar. Most states first attempt at limiting alcohol consumption commenced in the 1920’s but Utah has been trying to restrict alcohol consumption since the early 1900s. By 1911 the Utah State Legislature adopted a law that allowed rural areas to pass ordinances that would restrict the buying and manufacturing of alcoholic beverages. In 1919 Utah ratified the 18th Amendment to the U.S. constitution outlawing liquor. But in 1933 the legislature ratified the 21st Amendment. As they were the 36th state, they set the deciding vote to repeal Prohibition.

Many states have distanced themselves from what [*The Atlantic*](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/prohibition-was-failed-experiment-moral-governance/604972/) has called, “a failed experiment in moral governance,” letting the alcohol flow freely—so long as you have your ID, and the money to pay. Utah, however, continues to lean back on the wink-and-nod days of prohibition. This is reflected in some of the state’s atypical and often confusing laws. Take, for example, the ‘Zion Curtain’ which only fell in late 2017. The law prevented customers from seeing alcoholic drinks be mixed or poured. Another tight liquor law in Utah forbids customers from getting drinks unless they have also purchased food. Despite being updated yearly, the [state’s liquor laws](https://utah.com/state-liquor-laws) and its tacit rules are confusing. Clearly, Utah has had a long and complicated relationship with booze.

A recent [Business Insider article](https://www.businessinsider.com/prohibition-anniversary-bars-per-capita-state-map) commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Prohibition discovered that states with the highest number of bars per capita tended to be in the nethermost Great Plains and mountain states—all except Utah. Turns out the Beehive state is second only to Georgia in its lack of liquor establishments. According to an article written by the [Salt Lake Tribune](https://www.sltrib.com/news/2018/09/02/facts-about-bars-booze/) in 2018, the state only has a little over 350 bars, 192 of which reside in Salt Lake County.

Due to the lack of liquor establishments, the social scene of Utah is different from most states. Most places have a neighborhood bar, and while it may not be like an episode of “Cheers” with regulars sharing their life stories with each other, people can still find a place to knock back a cold one with friends. But in five Utah counties this isn’t even possible because Daggett, Piute, Rich, Wayne, and Morgan do not even have a bar. Unsurprisingly, these counties are not highly populated, and the demographic is primarily members of The Church. While these cities don’t sell liquor they readily sell sugar and artificially-sweetened beverages. Swig and Sodalicious have locations in these counties.

These stores are geared towards members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Sodalicious, one of the competitors, originates from Provo. Capitalizing on the lingo that is used around BYU’s campus, the store has a host of drinks that are centered around the church and it’s culture. Take the “Boy Scout” for example. This root beer toasted marshmallow concoction pays homage to The Church’s association with the Boy Scout Program. Other names include Blue Shirley Temple, Eternal Companion, 2nd base, and Ging and Juice.

These soda shops also stay open later than other restaurants. Most food joints close around nine. Many looking for a late-night activity around 10:00 p.m. may find only the hazy glow of the soda shop and bar signs beckoning to them. The raise of soda shops seems to have increased the divide in Salt Lake between members and non-church goers.

“It’s kind of difficult navigating the night-life in Utah. If you don’t want to drink soda, and aren’t interested in going to a bar then you are out of luck. I feel like members obviously aren’t going to bars, and non-members don’t understand or hold the same fascination with soda. In this way the neighborhoods become kind of divided,” said Megen Morgan, a Millcreek resident.

Many residents who are not affiliated with The Church are perplexed and shocked even, by the soda consumption. “I just don’t understand the soda love,” says Grace Bachicha, a Salt Lake City resident not affiliated with the church. “It seems that the church does not want people drinking coffee because of the caffeine, but some of my neighbors seem to have the same addiction to their diet coke as I do for my morning cappuccino,” she said.

Bachicha is right, at least from the looks of the Swig parking lot at 10:30 a.m.. Java Joes, a coffee shop that shares a parking lot with Swig only has three cars in the drive-through line while Swig has 12.

**A typical Day in Battle**

The Millcreek Soda War is fought primarily in its own parking lots, fueled by Utahan moms in their white vans, children biker gangs, and opposing high-school cheerleading fundraisers. A typical Wednesday around noon in the Thirst parking lot would look a lot like this: 12 to 15 cars form a long line that backs out onto the road and even obscures the entrance to the residential street nearby. Teenaged employees stand outside with iPads taking orders for a clientele that is primarily women ranging from their early twenties to late forties. According to employee Grace Valdez, most of their clients are repeat customers.

“We get the same people coming in Monday through Saturday, at around the same time for their diet coke. We have a loyalty program associated with customer’s numbers and people are frequently earning their free soda,” said Valdez hurriedly. She’s manning the iPad out front, nearly running from car to car taking orders.

To a person unacquainted with Utah and its soda fascination, Millcreek may not seem like an ideal location for a shop based on sugar-sweetened and artificially-sweetened beverages. According to the [International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity,](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5773139/) “People of lower socioeconomic status are at a higher risk of consuming poorer diets, with lower fruit and vegetable consumption and higher intake of unhealthy snacks, fast-food and sugar sweetened beverages.” It would stand to reason that a good location for a store that only sells soda and sugar cookies would be somewhere in a low SES-community.

Currently in line are four Honda Odyssey’s made 2017 or later and other various luxury cars. When the cars pull up to the drive-through window, manicured hands extend from the vehicle to grab their Styrofoam cups. It seems difficult to believe that this area would be a lower socioeconomic status. According to the 2010 census, Millcreek’s median household income was $66,572, and Holliday’s was $83,551, far greater than the United States’ median household income of $60,293.

Again, Utah is an enigma, and Utahan’s love affair with sugar is a poorly kept secret. Contrary to the findings of several research studies predicting the higher consumption of sugary beverages in low SES neighborhoods, Utah actually purchases candy at the highest rate in the nation, according to sales data from [The Hershey Co.](https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=2509299&itype=CMSID)

60.68% percent of Utah’s residents are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter- Day Saints. With members restricting their coffee, tea, and liquor intake, their allowed indulgence has become sugar. Church parties and Sunday school lessons are known for ubiquitous treats aimed to satiate every member’s sweet tooth. Soda has become a natural extension of Utahan’s love for sugar.

“People are always coming back for more. They can’t seem to get enough soda. We are busy from opening to close, and sometimes we have to work late because the line is so long when we are trying to shut down for the night,” Valdez says.

In the store three employees are rushing to fulfill orders. One is cutting citrus fruit to be squeezed into the sodas, while others are manning the soda fountain. Each is a mixologist, methodically combining purees and syrups to fulfill client’s orders. One is adding raspberry puree and coconut cream to Dr. Pepper in order to make what they call “Dr. McDreamy”. They seem to be having a good time, making jokes about the other soda shops, while diligently working to keep up with the ever-increasing amount of orders.

“I’d definitely say Thirst is the best. Not that I’m biased,” jokes Valdez. “But really, we offer the best selection in terms of sweets, and our drinks are tough to beat.”

**Unusual Battle Tactics**

In what *The New York Times* called “The Soda War of 2015", Swig sued Sodalicious for copying their trademarked idea of using the word “dirty” to describe their sodas. Sodalicious objected saying that the word has been a slang-term to describe martinis and other drinks for years. The legal battle became so large that it caught the attention of the nation. People even took to Twitter to express their loyalty and condemn their competitors.

Nicole Tanner, Swig’s owner, said in an interview with [*The Times,*](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/30/us/utah-soda-wars.html)“We started seeing some the knockoffs whatever you want to call them—’competitors’. We are just trying to protect our brand.”

The lawsuit resulted in Sodalicious relinquishing it’s use of the word “dirty” to describe their concoctions. Many stores now use the word “nasty” instead. After that lengthy debacle, which lasted into 2017, these soda shops have resorted to other means to try and sway people over to their soda shop.

Since that time, the propaganda for this rivalry has been dispersed mainly through social media. Mommy bloggers, Instagram influencers, and even High Fit instructors use their platforms to endorse the cause of their favorite soda shop.

Jamie Smith, a High Fit instructor, was one of the first people to declare her side in this sugary conflict. She created an event with Swig to honor her sister’s Susie’s birthday. All of her High Fit pupils would be invited to her 6:00 p.m. class in the park adjacent to the soda shop. After 60 minutes of cardio everyone could enjoy a free sugar cookie when they said, “High Fit Sisters!” while ordering. In exchange, Smith and her sister advertised the event through their personal and public fitness accounts.

I drove by that night, slowing the car and rolling down the windows to watch the peculiar scene. There were nearly 100 middle-age women shouting “whoop-whoop” as they executed jumping-jacks and squats with drill team level precision. The temperature outside, true to a typical Utah July night, was nearly 95 degrees. All this effort for a discounted “Dirty Diet Coke”.

“The event was a huge success,” said Smith. “We had way more people in attendance than we typically would on a Tuesday night. The idea of getting a Swig cookie really motivated people to attend.”

Two weeks after Susie’s birthday bash, Thirst hosted an event with High Fitness Brittney, another local High Fitness instructor in the area. The collaboration yielded nearly the same results—at least 50 women grooving to EDM music in the parking lot of the soda shop, all for a 20% discount on their favorite soda.

“I wasn’t necessarily bugged that they did an event with Thirst. I just don’t think it was very creative. Thirst also can’t accommodate for a large number of people in their parking lot, so I think Swig is a better choice, overall,” said Smith.

But it’s more than just the High Fit instructors that have taken sides, influencers have as well. Various Instagram influencers will post about different shops new flavors, and offering giveaways. Utah Grubs, a well-known foodie account with over 63 thousand followers recently did an Instagram giveaway for a free year of Thirst Drinks. The post got over three thousand likes.

Annie Barns a frequent Thirst Customer said, “I really wanted to win that giveaway. I go there every day and it would have been nice to save that money.”

**Not so sweet stories**

Barns is a mother of three living in the Salt Lake Area. She typically gets up around 7 a.m. and exercises for an hour. After the kids wake up they begin their morning ritual of sorts. They pack into her white 2018 Land Rover Discovery and go for a drive. They zoom past neighborhoods, winding past the elementary school her oldest son attended before the new coronavirus turned their lives upside down. Eventually their car makes its way to 3300 South, into the parking lot of Thirst. The soda shop runs a promotion where every Monday is “Mommy Monday”. Busy mothers can get a free 16 oz soda for their child when they order their 32 oz fix.

“My love of soda has become a problem that is out of my control,” said Barns.

Barns grew up near a McDonalds and remembers her mother’s daily drive to get a diet coke. A member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Barns abstains from alcohol and tea. As a personal choice, she often limits her red meat intake, and exercises six days a week. But she admits to having a diet soda addiction.

“I crave diet soda. The locations of these soda shops are so convenient, and I find myself pulling up to the drive through after running errands with screaming kids,” confesses Barns.

Her kids who have inherited her honey-blonde hair, have also inherited her sweet tooth. Each of them is used to the sight of their mother with a 32 oz Styrofoam cup, and they routinely drink soda themselves. Her oldest son, for example, will only drink Sprite. Despite trying multiple methods to get him to drop the habit, he has to have Sprite at every meal, and rarely drinks water.

“I have been taking him with me to get my Diet Coke ever since he was three. I am sure it was around that time that he become obsessed with soda. He won’t drink anything else. I feel bad, but we have tried everything and he won’t give it up. I guess he just takes after me,” said Barns.

Barns is not alone in her soda dilemma. Kelly Henriod, a friend of Barns, confronted her own sugary crisis. Henriod made a habbit early in her teaching career of picking up a 32 oz Coke on her way to work.

“When I got pregnant I tried to quiet cold-turkey. The headaches that resulted were like nothing I had ever experienced before. It was like someone squeezing me on both sides of my head,” said Henriod.

Her experience is not unusual for someone having a caffeine withdrawal. According to [Healthline](https://www.healthline.com/health/headache/caffeine-withdrawal-headache#why-headaches-happen) caffeine constricts the blood vessels in the brain. Without the stimulant the blood vessels widen allowing for more blood flow, which triggers headaches and other withdrawal symptoms.

Henriod ultimately reached out to her doctor. He told her to incrementally lower her intake to lessen the effects of the withdrawal, and protect the fetus who could have formed a caffeine addiction.

“Living in Seattle with the soda-tax and all really helped me to cut back. Moving back to Utah it’s hard not to fall into the same habbit. The stores are so convenient and my friends enjoy picking up sodas and socially-distant chatting from our cars,” said Henriod.

Henriod admits to having around one can of soda a day, but she rarely lets her kids have any. “I’ve realized how my consumption has a profound impact on my health, and that of my children. I don’t want my kids to be dependent on any substance. It’s better to teach them to enjoy things in moderation,” she said.

I check up on the locations before close. At 10:00 p.m. Thirst has 10 cars in line. Swig has 8. Sodalicious comes in third with four cars, and The Park has three. The new coronavirus has forced people to put things into perspective. Parents and children stay at home to protect themselves and others from getting sick. People are encouraged to venture out only for things that are ‘really important’. Watching cars pull up to Swig’s window it becomes clear that Utahans’ love of soda isn’t a fleeting fling, it’s a full-blown love affair.