James Stanhope Meek, the progenitor of the Meek family in Fort Smith and the great-grandfather of this writer, was born in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, on June 13, 1837, one of the sons of Rev. William Spraggins and Nancy Cole Meek. The family left Tuscaloosa County, Alabama and moved to Union County, Arkansas, sometime around October 1845, settling in the Three Creeks area, where they established significant farming operations.

On December 24, 1857, James Stanhope married Miss Mary Jane Moore, a daughter of another Three Creeks family. This marriage produced three sons: William S., John A., and my grandfather James Wise (J.W.) Meek, born on August 2, 1861, which was after his father had enrolled in the Confederate Army.

James Stanhope enrolled in the 3rd Arkansas Infantry Regiment, which was raised at Three Creeks, on June 19, 1861, and served under Captain James W. Reedy. Several brothers, cousins and brothers-in-law also served in this regiment, and several Meek relatives were casualties of the war. (They'll Do To Tie To, a book by Capt. Calvin L. Collier, is a very good account of the service of the 3rd Arkansas Regiment.)

James Stanhope's name appears on the Muster-in Roll of Captain Reedy's Company of Arkansas Infantry, dated July 5, 1861 at Lynchburg, Virginia, on which he was listed as a 24-year old First Sergeant.
He received a 43-day furlough on Feb. 1, 1863, and traveled home to his wife and three young sons. Little did he know that this would be the last time that he would see his wife and his oldest son, William Spraggins Meek.

On Aug. 10, 1864, Lt. Meek wrote in a letter to Gen. S. Cooper, AIG Richmond, Va.:

“Sir,

In consequence of a bad calamity which has recently befallen my family which demands my attention at least occasionally and there being three (3) Commissioned Officers in my Company two (2) of which are present for duty, and only Sixteen (16) men present for duty, I therefore tender my resignation to take effect immediately, with the privilege of joining another command nearer my home.

Very Respy Your Obt Servt
J.S. Meek
2 Lieut Co. G. 3d Ark”

(The bad calamity to which he referred was the death of his wife Mary Jane on July 8, 1864, the death of his son William S., on July 13, 1864 and the death of his wife’s grandmother, Lydia Tubb Moore on July 9, 1864, in Three Creeks, Arkansas. They were victims of “the fever” that spread over the Three Creeks community, killing many people.)

The lieutenant’s resignation was disapproved by the Confederate secretary of war on Aug. 25, 1864. I have often wondered why he didn’t tell the general what the “bad calamity” was. One can only imagine the grief and heartache he must have felt over the death of his wife and son, and the worry he had for the two surviving motherless sons at home.

James Stanhope Meek was on a “List of casualties in 3rd Arkansas Regiment — May 6, 1864” from the Wilderness battle near Charles City Road, Virginia, where he was severely wounded in the face. He also appears on a Register of Medical Director’s Office, Richmond, Virginia under the heading of “Officers recommended for leaves of absence,” as injured on May 6, 1864 in the right side of face and neck and granted 30-day furlough.

On Jan. 11, 1865, he again tendered his resignation, but it is not included in copies of Lt. Meek’s service records that were secured from the Arkansas History Commission.

After the Civil War, he moved to Louisiana and stayed a relatively short time there. He married Heather Taylor O’Hara about 1865. She died on June 13, 1873, in Homer, Louisiana. From this marriage, four children were born, Robert Stanhope Meek, who was born in Ruston, Lincoln Parish, Louisiana, on July 4, 1868, and three daughters, Fannie, Pansy, and Delia James.

Sometime before 1880, James Stanhope had moved to Cleburne, Texas. It is probably there that he met and married his third wife, Mrs. Pattie Leigh Bledsoe, a widow with three children. From this marriage came three more children: Susan A., Julian, and Gresham King Meek.

Once again James Stanhope Meek moved his family – this time to Fort Smith. James W. was 18 and Robert was about 12 years old. The family is listed in the 1880 federal census of Fort Smith, along with four other Meek children and the three Bledsoe children. Patti Leigh Bledsoe Meek died in 1928 at the age of 83 years. Gresham K. Meek served as manager of the Fort Smith plant and was named to the Board of Directors in December 1922, serving until his resignation in December of 1928.

James Stanhope Meek came from a family of doctors, ministers, farmers and businessmen. His grandfather John Alexander Meek was a minister, medical doctor, and a land owner. His father, William Spraggins Meek, also was a minister and farmer. Both of these men were very prominent and instrumental in establishing Baptist work in south Arkansas and north Louisiana.
John Alexander Meek was one of the founders of the First Baptist Church in El Dorado, Arkansas, and his portrait is currently displayed in the foyer of that church. A few years later, Rev. William Spraggins Meek became the pastor of that same church.

James Stanhope Meek and his heirs chose the life of businessmen and most of them have been or are still active in the Baptist church. The 1890 City Directory of Fort Smith lists him as the proprietor of Meek's Cotton Yard.

James Stanhope Meek died Dec. 12, 1896, at the age of 59 years, and is buried in Oak Cemetery, Fort Smith. His official death certificate lists Sulphur Springs, Arkansas, as the place of death; however, Sulphur Springs was then an unincorporated community located south of Dodson Avenue and east of Fort Towson Avenue that later became part of Fort Smith.

J.W and Robert S. Meek: Half-Brothers
Fort Smith Coca-Cola Bottling Founders

James Wise Meek
James Wise (J. W.) Meek was born August 2, 1861, in Arizona, Louisiana. His mother was Mary Jane Moore, the first wife of James Stanhope Meek. She died July 8, 1864 at the age of 25 years, being one of several Meeks who died during an epidemic that swept through Union County, Arkansas.

J. W. Meek came to Fort Smith with his father's family from Cleburne, Texas when he was 18 [which would be about 1879]. He worked in the grocery store of Paul Delorvin on Towson Avenue and later on Garrison Avenue until he purchased the store. A short time later, his brother, Robert Stanhope (Robert S.) Meek, became his partner and the brothers started a wholesale and jobbing candy company at Sixth and A streets about 1892, later starting the manufacture of candy. (The J. W. & Rob't. Meek Candy Company was dissolved and ceased operation in 1927.)

On Dec. 10, 1890, J. W. was married to Miss Gertrude Brown of Fort Smith, the daughter of a well-known contractor and builder. She died in January 1901, at the age of 35 years. James Dabbs Meek (Jim D.) was their only child.

J. W. was a member of the First Baptist Church of Fort Smith and was a member of the board of deacons for more than forty years. He was also active in the Elks Club for many years.

Robert Stanhope Meek, Sr.
Robert Stanhope Meek was born July 4, 1868, in Ruston, Louisiana. His mother was the second wife of James Stanhope Meek, Heather Taylor O'Hara, who died June 13, 1873, at the early age of 23 years, following the birth of their fourth child, Della James Meek. (Della James Meek married Patrick Andrew Carr, who is honored as a Fort Smith police officer killed in the line of duty. Andy Carr was a subject of the Oak Cemetery's "Tales of the Crypt" in 2004.)

Robert S. Meek married Louise Allen Milton and they had three children: Preston Allen Meek, Robert S. Meek, Jr. and Anne Louise Meek. He died Oct. 18, 1949, at age 81 years, and, along with most other close Meek relatives, is buried in Oak Cemetery in Fort Smith.
Meek Generations in Business

1. James Stanhope Meek b. 1837 d. 1896
   1. m. Mary Jane Moore (1857) d. 1864
      2. William S., d. 1864
      2. John A.,
   2. James Wise (J.W.) Meek b. 1861
      (grandfather of writer)
      m. Gertrude Brown 1890; d. 1901
      3. James Dabbs Meek (Jim D.) b. 1892 d. 1975
         4. Roger S. Meek (retired)
         5. Roger S. Meek, Jr.
         4. Carolyn Meek Nelson (author)
   3. J.W. (far left) and Robert S. Meek
      (center, in doorway) with workers,
      presumed to be standing at the
      confectioners building shown above
      at South 2nd St and Rogers Ave.

I. Married Heather Taylor O’Hara (1865) d. 1873
   2. Fannie, Pansy and Della James

2. Robert Stanhope Meek, Sr. b. 1868 d. 1949
   1. m. Louise Allen Milton 1903
      3. Preston Allen Meek d. 1962
      3. Robert S. Meek, Jr. d. 1977
         4. Robert S. Meek, III
      3. Anne Louise Meek

I. Married Pattie Leigh Bledsoe (died in 1928)
   2. Susan A.
   2. Julian

2. Gresham King Meek
   (Manager and Board Member, resigned 1928)

The building above is the location of
"J.W. and Robt. Meek, Confectioners."
"1899" is date on the sign at top. The
Meek Candy Company ceased
operation in 1927.

J.W. (far left) and Robert S. Meek
(center, in doorway) with workers,
presumed to be standing at the
confectioners building shown above
at South 2nd St and Rogers Ave.

All photos, courtesy of the Meek Family
In 1895, the brothers expanded their business with the purchase of the D. J. Young Bottling Co. from J. D. Elliott. This business also included the Fort Smith Bottling and Candy Company as Mr. Elliott had previously acquired The Fort Smith Steam Bottling Works from D. J. Young.

A three-story building was constructed in 1899 at South Second Street and Rogers Avenue to be the home of J.W. and Robt. Meek Manufacturing Confectioners and the Fort Smith Steam Bottling Works from D. J. Young.

In 1903, J. W. and Robert Meek acquired the right to bottle Coca-Cola as a sub-bottler from M. W. Fleming of Little Rock. Records from the Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta show that a total of 190 gallons of Coca-Cola syrup was shipped to Fort Smith in 1903. The territory was described as a radius of fifty miles from Fort Smith.

In 1907, they purchased the exclusive right to bottle Coca-Cola from Mr. M. W. Fleming for $1,500. The territory included all of western Arkansas from Scott County to the Missouri border and to Boone County on the east. It also included Sequoyah, LeFlore, parts of Adair, Cherokee, Haskell and other counties in Oklahoma.

In 1911, sub-bottler contracts were made with J. L. Ramsey, Paris, Ark.; Rogers Bottling Works, Rogers, Ark.; and Poteau Bottling Works, Poteau, Okla.. These contracts gave sub-bottling rights to those contractors in their respective towns. Harrison Bottling Works, Harrison, Ark., was later granted a sub-bottler contract.

In 1913, four solicitors were placed in the field. Their purpose was to take orders for the products and look after empties (bottles and cases) and to advertise.

It is interesting to note that in 1915, Mr. James C. Wing, Inspector, The Coca-Cola Company, noted that the Fort Smith Steam Bottling Works had the following equipment:

1. Junior soda automatic filler manufactured by Crown Cork and Seal Co.
2. Foot power machine
3. 20th Century Simplex Soaker (bottle washer) developed and sold by Geo. J. Meyer
4. Universal rinser

He also noted that the plant had four traveling salesmen and that advertising should be placed by salesmen to obtain best results.

The first trucks were purchased about 1915. Before that time, all Fort Smith deliveries were by horsedrawn vehicles, with deliveries to towns outside Fort Smith being made by rail. Rail shipments were made in barrels of 18-dozen bottles and cases of three- and six-dozen bottles.

Mr. Fletcher Bell, the father of former Van Buren mayor Gene Bell, was at one time a truck driver for Coca-Cola. He recalled that when his truck was to go up a fairly steep hill, he had to go in reverse gear because the truck did not have a fuel pump and gasoline would not flow to the engine if the truck was inclined going forward.
The Real Thing:

Early steam bottling works of the Fort Smith Coca-Cola company (opposite page and left), undated.

J.W. Meek at his desk (lower left.)

A candy and cola truck with a Coca-Cola umbrella (below), is undated, but the wooden wheels indicate the pre-World War I era.

The Coca-Cola sign painted on the Meek building, (bottom) was at the time the largest sign in Arkansas, according to the Meeks.
On March 4, 1916 "The Coca-Cola Bottling Company" was incorporated with Robert Meek as president, and J.W. Meek as vice-president. Additional expansion occurred on Jan. 22, 1917, when the Muskogee, Oklahoma Coca-Cola territory was purchased. The equipment inventory from that purchase included three foot-power crown machines, two horses, two 2-horse delivery wagons and one top buggy.

In April 1917 a Pure Food Show was held in Fort Smith and Coca-Cola constructed an exhibit booth. The booth consisted of walls constructed of stacks of Coca-Cola bottles, bedecked with streamers and banners advertising Coca-Cola. It was reported that more than five thousand people were served free Coca-Cola during their visit to the booth.

The First Cousins: Jim D. Meek, Preston A. Meek, and Robert S. Meek, Jr.
For many years, Jim D. Meek, son of J.W. Meek and Preston A. Meek, the son of Robert S. Meek, Sr., were the managing partners representing the families of the two founding brothers. Upon the death of Preston Meek in January, 1962, his brother, Robert Stanhope Meek, Jr., became a managing partner.

The Second Cousins: Roger S. and Robert S.
Upon the death of Jim D. Meek in 1975, his son, Roger S. Meek, became the managing partner representing the J.W. Meek family. Robert S. Meek, Jr. died in April 1977, and his son, Robert S. Meek, III then became a managing partner. Roger S. Meek retired in 1990, and his son Roger, became a managing partner.

The Fourth Generation of Meek bottlers
Today, Roger Meek Jr., a grandson of Jim D. Meek, and Robert Meek, III, a grandson of Robert S. Meek, Sr., are the managing partners, representing the fourth generation of Meek family ownership of the Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Fort Smith, and the company itself is one of approximately fifty privately-owned Coca-Cola bottlers still in existence. In 2003, the company issued a special bottle to commemorate its 100th anniversary as a Coca-Cola bottler.

Much of the early history of the Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Fort Smith has been carefully preserved by Fred Kirkpatrick, who has more than sixty years' service with the local company. Without his dedication and conservation efforts, much of the history would have been lost over time. He has supervised the establishment at the Fort Smith plant of an exceptionally extensive Coca-Cola museum that contains many significant and scarce items and memorabilia. This museum is proudly made available for public inspection in appreciation of the enviable position that Coca-Cola holds in the refreshment of Fort Smith and surrounding areas.

It is also appropriate to note that a special commemorative Coca-Cola bottle was produced in limited quantity to recognize Mr. Kirkpatrick's sixty years of service from 1938-1998. This item is being written some six years later, and although Mr. Kirkpatrick is officially retired and "keeps his own time," he is still active in preserving the history of the company and on certain days he can be contacted at the office he still maintains at the plant.

Carolyn Meek Nelson is the daughter of Jim D. Meek. She lives in Fort Smith.

Coca-Cola Trivia:
In 1886, the year Coca-Cola was created, its originator, John S. Pemberton, spent $46 for advertising and sold 25 gallons of syrup.

The Fort Smith plant also bottled Ward's Orange Crush in 1919; Green River carbonated drink in 1920; Delaware Punch in 1922; and Grape-Ola in 1928.

In 1936, the Fort Smith plant sold 1,922 6-bottle cartons of Coca-Cola.

Diet Coke distribution began in May 1983.

"New" Coke was first distributed in April, 1985, followed by Cherry Coke in July and Classic Coke in August.

Gold commemorative bottle presented to Preston A. Meek on the 50th anniversary of Fort Smith Coca-Cola Bottling Co., 1949.
A sales meeting Jan. 20, 1937, with sales quotas on the board. (McCann Photography)
Center: Preston Meek
Below: A Coca-Cola Christmas promotion offering free ornaments in Coke cartons.

Robert S. Meek Sr. in 1948 on his 80th birthday, with a Coca-Cola cake.

Coca-Cola truck and driver, 1952. "Ice Cold Coke – 5 cents."