



HICKSATOMIC, The maps and company

by **Walt Wimer** (RMCA #7)

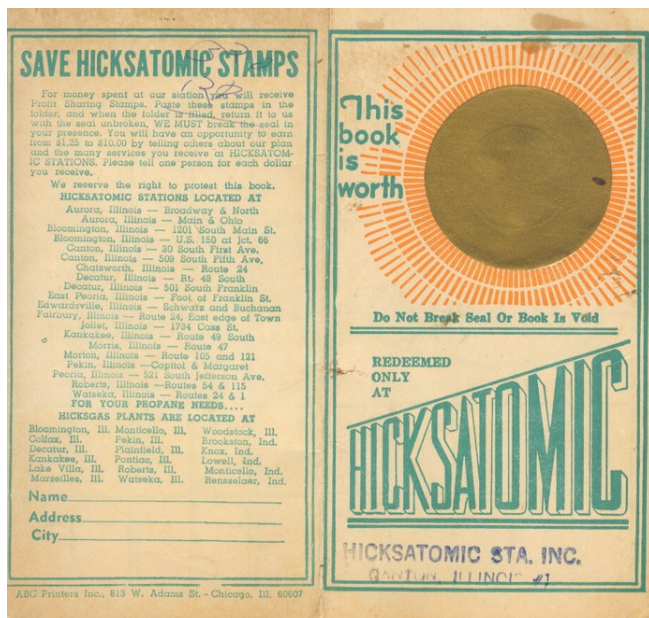
In 1931, C. W. Hicks of Roberts, Illinois founded the Hicks Oil Company, which would later market HICKSATOMIC gasoline at service stations in northern and central Illinois. Founded with just that single service station in Roberts, which was Texaco branded at the time, Hicks Oil would become one of the leading private brand independent “discount” gasoline chains in a very competitive state. The 1950s through the mid-1970s were the “Glory Days” of the independent private brand marketers. Many of them, like Hicks, were founded in the 1930s and even a few, such as Spur Distributing, could trace their roots back to the late 1920s. But two things happened in the marketplace that today few of these companies and brands still exist. The biggest blow to this type of operation was the so-called “Energy Crisis” of the 1970s. A “private brand” company is one that has no manufacturing. Thus, in the gasoline business, a Private Brander bought his gasoline from various refiners, including some of the largest major oil companies. During the 1970s shortages, often Private Branders were unable to get product and if they could, it was at a higher price than they could sell it for at retail. The other problem was the C-store growth that forced out most conventional full service gas stations and the independent “gas only” stations.



Hicks Oil grew from that single station in Roberts at the junction of U. S. 54 and Illinois route 115 in the middle of farmland, to 17 stations by 1941. Roberts had a population of around 500 and many of the company’s early stations were in such towns in rural Illinois. Over half of those sites were no longer around by the 1950s, probably having failed to survive the war years, or maybe switching to other brands if they were not company owned. However, seven of the pre-war sites were still pumping Hicks products in the early 1950s including those at Roberts, Chatsworth, East Peoria, Fairbury, Morton, Pekin and Watseka. It was some time after the war that the company elected to rebrand their stations to “HICKSTOMIC”. This was a time in our country’s history that the “Atomic” name was used in many marketing ventures as meaning a product with “power.” It is with the HICKSATOMIC name that the company is most remembered by gas & oil collectors.

C. W. Hicks was quite a businessman. He had a lot more going for him than just a chain of discount gasoline stations. He had his hand in several car dealerships, a large farm of some 460 acres with grain and dairy products, a grain elevator, a couple of restaurants at his gas stations and most important, a successful propane gas service that served eastern Illinois and western Indiana, which he started in 1940. By the mid-60s that business had grown to 34 plants and in the long run, outlasted his gas station operation. The Hicks family also owns a lubrication business headquartered in Du Quoin, Illinois and the Hicks name continues to be very well known in central and northern Illinois.

As for gas stations, the Hicks and Hicksatomic stations were mostly in Illinois. There was a station in Burlington, Wisconsin back in the early 1940s, but it was gone from the chain a decade later. In the late 1960s they operated sites at Rensselaer and North Judson, Indiana. But otherwise their stations were all in Illinois. In the beginning most of the stations were in small rural towns, but as time went on the company expanded to larger population areas such as Aurora, Bloomington, Decatur and Peoria. In the 1950s they even had a couple of sites in the Chicago area including one on busy Archer Avenue and a station in Skokie. It is interesting to note that the small town marketing strategy used by the Hicks Company is pretty much followed by the very successful Casey's General Store chain out of Iowa today. In the mid-70s the gas station chain began to wind down some and the company began to put more emphasis on their HICKS GAS propane operation. After around three decades, the Hicksatomic name was played down, and the big oval signs replaced with smaller ones that just read "Hicks Gas for Less". Some of the last stations were sold off to Trimble Oil Co., a Standard/Amoco distributor and rebranded to the major brand. The last remaining gasoline station was in Bloomington. It was closed in the late 1990s, but the site remained with the propane business.



MAPS

The first Hicks Oil maps date to the late 1930s. The oldest issue we know of is from 1939, although maps might have been issued before that date. Those early Hicks maps were from the Mid-West Map Co., just before H. M. Gousha bought that company. The 1941 issue has a state map showing the Mid-West name, but a half-page United States map with the Gousha name. When compared to most maps from small independent companies, these early versions of Hicks maps are outstanding. The maps are tri-fold, with one of the three covers showing a full-length photo of a Hicks Oil tank truck of late '30s vintage. Inside the 1941 issue there is a full quarter page photo of Hicks Café on U.S.

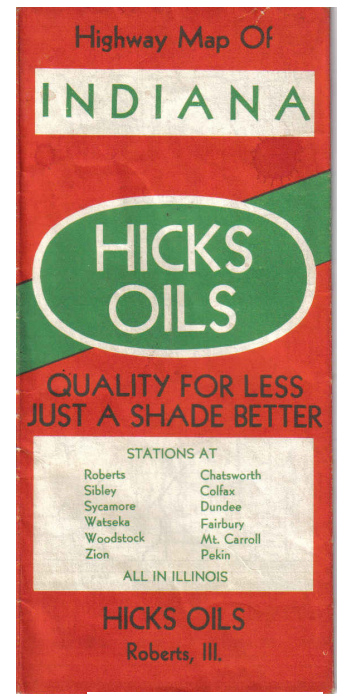
Route 24 at Watseka, Illinois, which was located adjacent to one of their early stations. Another major difference between the 1939 and 1941 issues is the station location list on the front cover. The 1939 issue lists stations in only 12 towns. By 1941, the list has grown to 17 and while the 1939 map listed only the towns, the 1941 map shows highway locations such as Illinois 48 & 115 in Roberts and U.S. 24 in Watseka (Illinois 48 was later changed to U.S. 54).

As most every collector knows, oil company road maps slowed to just a trickle during the war years, with just a couple of major oil companies issuing maps during the 1943-44 period. Things picked back up by 1945-46. However, in working on this article for *The Legend* I have been unable to come up with any later 1940s maps from Hicks, even with contacting several club members who have extensive collections. It is quite possible that the company did not issue maps again until the early 1950s. Also, there is one other possibility. One club

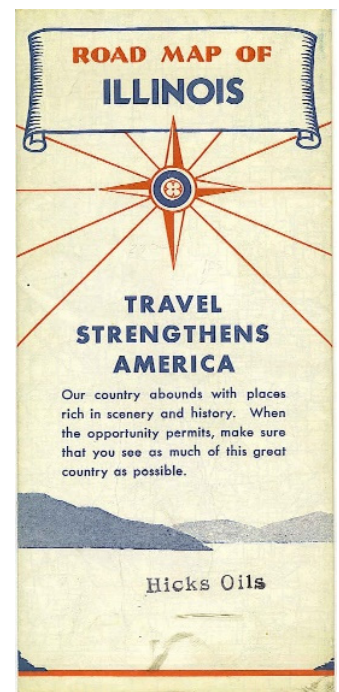


1941 front cover and side panel

member has a Rand McNally generic map dated 1941 that shows only a “Hicks Oils” rubber stamp at the bottom. This is the same Rand McNally “generic”, or “stock” design that was used for the first Hicksatomic” map in the early ‘50s. That design is the one I call the “compass” design, with a four point compass star at the top and a very undetailed lake with mountains scene at the bottom. On these maps Rand McNally would place the company’s logo or advertising in the blank area between compass and lake area and also in plain white boxes on the back & inside panels of the tri-fold maps. It could be that the only Hicks maps of the later half of the 1940s were like this 1941 issue. I would estimate that over the years more than 75% of the small independent oil companies used such “generic” cover maps from Rand McNally or Gousha. Hicks Oil used at least four different such covers from the 1940s into the ‘70s.



1939 front cover



1941 generic cover

Hicks Oil began using the Hicksatomic brand name in the 1940s after the war, but it is rather hard to pin down an exact date. The first years of Hicksatomic maps featured a green oval logo with red lettering. To the best I can determine, that logo did not actually appear on station signage. The oldest map of this design I have been able to come up with is 1952, although it could have been issued earlier. On the back cover of the tri-fold map is a station location list, which was common to all Hicks and Hicksatomic maps. Of note is that the listing on the 1952 map fell to 10 from the 17 of the 1941 map. It could have been that some of the smaller stations did not make it through the war years, or that they were dealer stations rather than company owned. And operated, which were not listed on the maps after the war.



1952 front cover and side panel

In 1953 Rand McNally changed their maps from the tri-fold design to what has become known in the hobby as the accordion style. Now there were only front and back covers for oil companies to place their advertising. At the time Rand McNally dumped the “compass” design and several other stock designs they had used through the 1940s and early 1950s. Hicks, like all the other small companies, made a change in their map cover design that year. Hicks chose a map cover with a Far Western mountain bluff and peak with a lake in the foreground. The only wording on the covers of the 1952 maps was “The Symbol of Value” located below the oval logo. But in 1953 they added quite a bit of wording that would stay constant through their maps of the 1970s. “The Symbol of Value” was moved above the logo and below it “Gasoline plus Silver Premium Motor Oils”. Then below the mountain scene it reads “Will Give You the Utmost in Motoring Economy “Quality For Less””.



1953 front cover



1954 front cover

The cover for the 1953 issue appears to have been only used for that one year, as the 1954 issue is completely different. For reasons unknown, Hicks went to a different Rand McNally generic cover that year. This one is another Rand McNally design that saw considerable use in the '50s and '60s. It shows a country road through rolling hills with a 1950s car along with a church and couple of houses in the background. This cover was printed in a number of different colors, but for the Hicksatomic maps it was in green and red, the company's long time colors.

The 1954 design was again short lived, as the company made another change in 1955. This time a change that would remain through their remaining map history in the early '70s. This design has a wide color band in the bottom third of the map containing six cartoon outdoor recreation figures. Included are such enjoyments as golfing, hunting, skiing, archery and a lady in a bathing suit with a beach ball. The bar across the bottom, and a narrower one at the top are in dark green. This is also the first map that shows the famed Hicksatomic sunburst logo that is well known by gasoline and oil collectors of all types. This cover was in use from 1955 until the early '60s when a somewhat minor change was made. This cover also marks the first Hicksatomic map in my collection, a 1958 issue that I got at the Hicksatomic station on U.S. 24 in July of that year while driving across the state late at night. Fifty years later I still have it in "mint" condition. By 1958 there were 20 Hicksatomic stations listed on their maps. However, their map lists never did include dealer locations that handled the brand, except maybe early on. According to Shawn Coady of the company, their station count peaked in the mid-40s to the early 1970s before the energy crisis caused a downturn. The early '60s change I mentioned was the change from the dark green of the '50s to a much lighter, brighter green that would be used into the early 1970s. The latest issue I can find when checking with other collectors is 1972. That sounds about right. A good number of the major oil companies discontinued their map programs in the 1975-77 era. But the small independents had been hit hard by the so called "energy crisis" and likely gave up handing out free maps to customers a few years before that.



1955 - early '60s cover



early '60s - 1972 cover

Like the maps from all but the largest of the independent “Private Branders”, maps from Hicks Oil are fairly scarce. The light green cover of the ‘60s, which was used some 10-12 years, is probably the most common. But even those don’t show up at swap meets, antique shops or eBay all that often!! The 1953 & 1954 designs were only used for one year each and by a chain that had under 20 company stations at that point. So they are quite scarce, as are the old pre-war issues prior to the Hicksatomic brand name. From what I learned in contact with other RMCA members, few gasoline map collections include more than 2-3 Hicks/Hicksatomic maps!! Hicksatomic maps were issued for at least nine states even though the company was more or less a single state marketer. Those known include Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri and Kentucky/Tennessee. There are also a Central States issue plus maps of Chicago and I would also suspect maps may have been issued for Ohio and other states. Also known is a SIGMA map issued in 1967 with “Hicksatomic Stations, Inc., Fairbury, IL” stamped at the bottom. Other SIGMA issues are likely. Along these lines the company also sold atlases at their stations from at least 1962 through 1980. These were in conjunction with Quaker State or just standard Rand McNally covers, both with “Hicksatomic Stations Inc.” overprint at the bottom. For those into other gas/oil items, at least four different pump globes are known, none of them really common. Oil cans and signs are really scarce!! There are also a few paper items of the brand including matchcovers, stamp books and I have a full color post card of Canton, Illinois station #2 which was rebuilt in 1965 as the first Hicksatomic station to feature a canopy.



Post card showing Station #2, Canton, Illinois c.1970

In closing I would like to thank Shawn Coady, grandson of C. W. Hicks and one of the current owners of the company for all of the time and information he gave me. Also fellow RMCA members Gary Spade, Jim Wakefield, Judy Aulik, Richard Horwitz, Norm Fenske, Steve Sizemore, John McClure, Ian Byrne, Jim Heckenbaugh and Tom Sveum for filling me in on what Hicksatomic maps they have in their collections.