

Faygo book shares social history of Detroit-based company

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Whenever someone new comes to Detroit, there are a couple things they need to do.

But the first suggestion should always be food: a coney dog, with a side of Better Made potato chips, washed down with Faygo's Redpop.

American Coney Island opened in 1917, Better Made came around in 1930, but Faygo has been with the city the longest of the three: since 1907.



Faygo orange pop on the line with the 100 year seal on the label in 2007. HUGH GRANNUM, Detroit Free Press

Faygo is a soft drink company born in Detroit by Russian-immigrant brothers Ben and Perry Feigenson. The first three pop flavors included grape, fruit punch and strawberry, which would later be renamed as Redpop and become a staple for the city's residents. The flavors were based on the Feigenson brothers' cake frosting recipes.

Through decades, the company grew, introduced dozens of new flavors, like Rock n Rye, another Detroit favorite, as well as a diet pop. With growth came fame and ventures into television and animation. And despite wartime politics, the rise and fall of Detroit's population and recession, Faygo stuck with the city.

Author and former Free Press editor Joe Grimm's new book, "The Faygo Book," explores not only the timeline of the influential company, but the social history that has bonded it to the city of Detroit.

The book features an inside look into Faygo's founders, who pledged to keep the company in Detroit, despite the tricky economic times the city has seen through the last century.

Faygo was even the last pop bottler on "Pop Alley" — where in 1935 some of Faygo's neighbors on Gratiot Avenue on the east side of Detroit included plants and bottlers from Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola, and 40 others, who eventually left the neighborhood. Faygo eventually absorbed the two cola companies buildings and connected them to make a 400,000-square-foot complex, where the headquarters still stands.

Faygo sold to National Beverage in 1987, but still is produced in Detroit.



In August 2007, Quality Control Intern Amy Myers of LaSalle, works the line at Faygo in Detroit. 2007 was Faygo's 100th year anniversary. *HUGH GRANNUM, Detroit Free Press*

And since the company is defined by its presence in Detroit, many infamous Detroiters have had run-ins with Faygo. In the book, Grimm notes that while Henry Ford called the drink, sold outside his factory around the turn of the century, "belly wash," hip-hop group Insane Clown Posse adores the soft drink so much that "Faygo showers" are an integral part of its live performances.

But let's get one thing straight: it's pop ... not soda. But Faygo didn't coin the term. It dates to 1868, and bottlers in Michigan were already calling themselves "pop companies" — after the sound the bottle made when opened. But the term "pop" holds steady here in Michigan, as other companies and states have adopted "soda."

According to popvsoda.com, Michigan stands behind pop more than any other state.

"The Faygo Book" is filled with sweet nuggets of facts and quirks, as well as several "Pop" quizzes throughout the book about the business, its advertisements and, more importantly, its dozens of flavors.

Here are a few takeaways:



Cousins Morton Feigenson and Phillip Feigenson head up the Faygo Beverage Company in 1967 *Tony Spina/Detroit Free Press*

Tons of archival photos

Thanks to the Feigenson family and Detroit historical archives, many unseen photos of Faygo in its early days are found in this book.

For example, before the Feigenson Brothers bought their first GMC truck in 1912, the duo dispensed their bubbly pop from horse and carriage. One photo from 1907 shows a two-horse carriage with a Bottling Works carriage in tow on a brick-paved road. Boxes of pop are piled high in the back. After the brothers opened a new bottling plant on Beaubien Street and Erskine, a black-and-white photo from 1920 shows seven men at work, barrels of pop are scattered about and an assembly line cuts down the middle of the factory. Twenty years later, the company had nearly 100 employees.



Ad filmed in Mexico

Faygo had to fight for attention in a decade that was inundated with soda pop. Phillip Feigenson's daughter, Susie, remembers moving Faygo to the middle shelves in the grocery store "where you can catch that eye."

The choice to get into commercials was an obvious one. In the 1970s, Faygo's advertising budget was \$1 million, adjusted for inflation that equates to roughly \$7 million today.

Faygo came out with a commercial that was one of the biggest hit jingles in Detroit advertising history: "Remember When You Were a Kid."

The song was meant to embody childhood innocence and memories attached to the brand, featuring [Harold Peary](#), a comedian who appeared on radio and film.

However, the boat commercial was not filmed on a Detroit River boat as some may think, but on a boat named *Fiesta* in Acapulco, Mexico. The company wanted the commercial ready for summer 1973, so the choice to head south was merely a weather-related call.



Faygo, the Detroit soda pop maker and bottler in October 8, 2002. *Susan Tusa, Detroit Free Press*

Faygo hired local

In 1967, the company declared to the historically black newspaper, the Michigan Chronicle, that its production workers were 70-percent African-American.

When the company moved to its Gratiot headquarters, it moved its workers with them: transforming a historically German and Italian neighborhood to nearly one-third black.

And those employees stayed. Take, for example, Harvey Lipsky, known as the company's unofficial historian and chemist, who had been with Faygo for more than 50 years, longer than its owners, finally retiring at 76.