



A local soft-drink legacy (l-r): Larry Shanker, Randy Shanker and Jack Shanker

# Quenching Lansing's Thirst Since 1933

by Ann Kammerer. Photo by Terri Shaver.

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Seventy years ago, an entrepreneur found something worth bottling.

Armed with a recipe, recent immigrant Louis Shanker began brewing an orange soda that's now part of Lansing folklore, and launched a business that's evolved into one of the last independent beverage distributors in the state.

"Most people who are over 35 and from Lansing remember Hi-Klas," said Randy Shanker, owner of the Canada Dry Bottling Company, of the phonetically named soda pop in a glass bottle. "It was a good product that was ahead of its time."

Shanker would know. As the fourth generation to step into the family business, Shanker understands the fickle nature of a world thirsty for good taste.

"Beverages are a lot like fashion," Shanker said. "They change. We've found our niches in following trends and jumping in to be the beverage distributor where you could always find the latest, greatest and hottest products."

## All in the family

Canada Dry Bottling Company of Lansing wasn't always on the western fringe of the city. Founded in 1933, the company sunk early roots on South Cedar Street, brewing and bottling Hi-Klas.

"My friends always wanted to go with me to see it," said Shanker of his coming-of-age years spent at the plant, where he soaked in the sights, sounds and smells of a unique business in the 1970s.

Shanker described how his great-grandfather Louis had come from Eastern Europe to run the business in the early years with the help of Jack Shanker—his son and Randy's grandfather. Because Louis couldn't speak much English, Jack handled most business matters until he was called to serve during World War II. For most of the war, he entrusted the business to the capable hands of his wife, Ida.

"She did great, and I think they're doing a terrific job today," said the 87-year-old Jack of the business he handed down to his son, Larry, in the 1980s, and now to Randy. "There aren't too many family-owned businesses that have lasted as long as ours."

The Shankers changed direction shortly after Michigan passed legislation mandating returnable bottles for soft drinks in the late 1970s. Costs, space and customer concerns pushed Canada Dry of Lansing to sell off the bottling plant, move operations to its warehouse, and focus on distributing product only. The beginning of consolidation in the industry also squeezed family-owned independents.

Fortunately for the Shankers, the strength of a well-known and beloved Michigan product carried their business, and allowed them to build a framework that continues today.

"Faygo is by far our strongest product," said Randy Shanker. "People love Redpop and Rock & Rye and all the cool flavors and variety. But we couldn't survive either if we didn't have our whole portfolio."

Today, Canada Dry Bottling rolls 15 million bottles or cans of Faygo and Canada Dry, premium sodas, waters, juices, kids' drinks, mixers and energy drinks out the door each year, amounting to about \$7 million in sales. With 25 brands and 350 individual items, the company serves 750 active customers in nine mid-Michigan counties. Because of that success, the company built a new distribution and office facility down the street from the old, and moved all operations in 2001.

"We've got a great place and a great base of customers," said Shanker, adding that the new facility allows them to adopt more products and gain efficiencies in distribution. "We've also got a great group of about 35 people who take a lot of pride in working for us. It's not easy going out there being the little guy, but our employees have

really helped us become a supplier our customers need and want to do business with."

### Modern times

Shanker said Canada Dry Bottling is known for providing value and premium products. While renowned for doing business the old-fashioned way through one-on-one calls or visits, the Lansing distributor also has a modern edge.

"We're constantly adding new products," said Shanker. "That keeps us in business, and keeps our customers excited about what we're going to walk in the door with next."

Premium and enhanced waters like Crystal Geysler and Glaceau Vitamin Water, and energy drinks like Monster, Pimp Juice, Stinger, Whoop Ass and Bawls Guarana are among the newer, evolving staple products for the former bottler turned distributor. New Age drinks, teas and coffees with monikers like Fuze, Tradewinds, Kahula Cappucino and Arizona are equally popular items, with low-carb, sugar-free healthy products on the horizon.

"We're also the number one state in the country for Jones Soda," boasted Shanker, talking about how the chair-

man of the innovative soda company visits twice a year, just to talk shop. Last year, the visit involved a 40-minute conversation with his grandfather, comparing formulas of the Jones line with Shanker's Hi-Klas.

"It was an interesting dynamic," said Shanker. "Here we are, 50 years apart from Jones, and look at the similar product we had way back when."

Shanker hinted that Canada Dry may reintroduce Lansing's own Hi-Klas as a special promotion for a limited time given current market trends. For now, the company will focus on helping grocers, large retailers, neighborhood party stores and restaurants quench the thirst of both brand-loyal and adventurous customers.

As for a fifth generation of Shankers taking on the family business?

"Maybe the next generation will come in," grinned Shanker, "but I want my son to be President of the United States, although he's only 2." ■

### Canada Dry Bottling Company of Lansing

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