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Got Moxie? This town does.

Jim Baumer, Special to the Sun Journal

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Why Moxie? Why Lisbon Falls? And why Japan? The sweet oddities behind a town that fell for a 'distinctively different' drink.

When it comes to Moxie and Lisbon, I thought I had it figured out. I'm a native of the town, have served on several Moxie Festival committees and have written two books about the distinctly different soft drink. But uncovering the history of Moxie and its connection to Lisbon isn't linear.

Every time I think I know Moxie, something new pops up — or an old myth or story about the drink circulates back around.

But perhaps that's appropriate for a drink with a history filled with seeming contradictions.

For instance: Moxie was created by a guy in Massachusetts who was born in Union, Maine. In other words, no apparent connection to the area of Lisbon we all call Lisbon Falls.

For instance 2: Most people would tell you Moxie's distinctive flavor tends to . . . uh . . . let's say, help them avoid overconsuming the substance. In other words, why is this stuff still around?

Then there's the matter of Moxie being owned, ultimately, by a Japanese beer maker. Say what?

And yet, up to 50,000 people are again expected to fill the small town's streets over three days starting this coming Friday to celebrate the soft drink with what they say is the longest parade in the state, as well as a host of events, tastings, yard sales, a car rally, food, a variety of races, music and more.

To get to the bottom of all this, let's start with what we know about Moxie in 2014:

Moxie was invented by Augustin Thompson in 1884 and patented the next year. The original drink was called Moxie Nerve Food, was promoted as producing health and vigor, and was the result of Thompson wanting to make a cure-all that did not contain harmful ingredients like cocaine and alcohol. Thompson was born in Union, Maine (not Lisbon), and the drink was invented in Lowell, Mass. (not the basement of Frank Anicetti's Kennebec Fruit Company store in Lisbon Falls).

Fans of Moxie — even those with enough knowledge of the iconic New England soft drink to be dangerous — know that Maine's official soft drink (named in 2005) at some point became connected with Anicetti and his Lisbon Falls store. And from there, the festival blossomed. But even that story is shrouded in myth and contains numerous apocryphal elements.

I interviewed Sue Conroy back when she was still running the Moxie Festival in 2008. Sadly, Sue, who was one of the most influential people in the history of the festival, died less than two weeks ago. But her explanation of how a soft drink with a bitter taste became the star attraction each July in this little Maine town may be the best one.

Conroy gave credit to two Franks: Frank Potter and Frank Anicetti.

Potter was the author of "The Moxie Mystique" in 1981 and other books that introduced Moxie's magic to a new group of fans, while reinforcing the feelings of those already hooked on the drink and its ties to a previous time.

Anicetti, who was a longtime Moxie aficionado, was the one who invited

Potter to Kennebec Fruit Company in Lisbon Falls in 1982 for what turned out to be a surprisingly well-attended book signing.

The combination was a success, with Potter returning for more appearances and the event morphing into the current festival thanks to Anicetti, support of the local Chamber of Commerce and the tireless efforts of many people.

Today, Kennebec Fruit Company doesn't have fruit, but it does have Moxie. In fact, since that first official festival in 1984, Anicetti's store on the corner of Main Street and Route 196 has become for many people the "epicenter of the Moxie universe." Locals still know it as Kennebec's, but we're OK with its duality as the Moxie store too.

The orange unifier

While that explains the Lisbon connection with Moxie, what can you say about the taste?

The answer lies in part with the original ingredients of the soft drink. According to drinkmoxie.com, the colorful and informative Moxie website, the company made the fantastic claim early in its history that the basic secret ingredient of the beverage — now known to be the bitter gentian root — was discovered by inventor Thompson's former comrade, the fictional Lt. Moxie, while traveling in the wilds of South America.

Perhaps a surprise to some, but Moxie was outselling Coca-Cola in its heyday of the 1920s. Then the Depression took a toll on its popularity. An effort was made in the 1940s to sweeten the taste, meeting with "disastrous results," according to the Moxie archives.

So the flavor remains. But townspeople say it is not the drink's unique taste, or its bright orange logo, or its nostalgic advertising and appeal to yesteryear, or its storied fictional origins, or the drink's name becoming a part of our lexicon that explain completely why Moxie inspired the town's popular festival.

Turns out, Moxie is — at least in Lisbon — a unifier.

Mark Stevens is Lisbon's recreation director. Like me, he grew up in town. Stevens is the founder of the Moxie 5K Road Race and is one of the organizers behind the Moxie Car Show. He's also one of my favorite locals who I've remained in touch with from back in the day.

"I think the festival is less about Moxie, the drink, and more about something Lisbon latched on to in order to have a celebration," said Stevens. "Moxie's exploded, I think, because Lisbon needed something to celebrate after Frontier Days ended." (Frontier Days was Moxie's predecessor.)

Gina Mason, a Lisbon native and former Lisbon town councilor, is among the legion of festival volunteers and is serving as the Moxie Parade chairwoman for the fourth year in a row. "Moxie is a time when many people come back home to visit the place where they grew up and to show their children where their roots are."

And then there are the many people who are not native to Lisbon, but who swell the town from just under 10,000 to close to five times that over the entire weekend to also celebrate Moxie and the town's festival.

"There were people in town like Frank (Anicetti) who turned the original town festival in July toward Moxie. But now, I think people come to Lisbon to join in and celebrate with us," said Stevens.

He added, "I also think Moxie is an attitude, more than anything."

The mystique

It is believed that sometime during the first decade of the 1900s, the soft drink's name entered the nation's vocabulary as a synonym for vim, energy, stamina and spunk.

It's the kind of word you can apply to the many people involved with the festival — for full disclosure, my sister heads up the festival's recipe contest judging — as well as to Justin Conroy.

No relation to Sue Conroy, Justin is general manager for the Moxie Beverage

Company, which is owned by Coca-Cola of Northern New England, whose parent company is Kirin, a Japanese multi-national corporation best known for its beer. More about that in a minute.

Conroy has the savvy and branding sense necessary to carry Moxie from its storied past into a promising new future. He's helped transition Moxie to the 21st-century world of the Internet and social media.

Conroy is especially busy this time of year, out promoting Moxie all across New England. Along with his marketing team, he has worked to increase awareness about the unique New England product. As part of that effort, Moxie is entering its second year partnering with WEEI/NESN and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute during their annual Jimmy Fund Radio-Telethon in August.

But Conroy will surely be in Lisbon on parade day Saturday, as he always is. I asked him about Moxie and why Lisbon has become so prominent in the drink's most recent history.

"I am not sure that it is the celebration of the brand that draws the crowd," Conroy responded in an email. "To me, it seems like it is more about the community taking ownership for something unique and purely Maine."

As to that final question of why a Japanese conglomerate would want to own a small New England company that makes a soft drink with a flavor we fans like to call "distinctly different"?

Not being a corporate insider, I can't be certain. But as sure as thousands of people will turn out in a few days to celebrate Moxie, Lisbon and "something unique and purely Maine," I'd say the Japanese — just like the rest of us — have been caught by the Moxie mystique.

Jim Baumer is a freelance writer, the author of two books about Moxie (as well as two other books) and a Moxie drinker. He grew up in Lisbon Falls.