

What's in a label?

Colorful labels attract consumers, while older labels delight collectors and evoke feelings of nostalgia. This Sebewaing beer label, in the collection of the Archives of Michigan, provides one example. Sebewaing once was brewed in a Huron County town of the same name. In the mid-1920s, the Sebewaing Products Company (housed in a building that once served as a brewery) began producing malt extract—a baking product often used in the production of homemade beer.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, company ownership changed and the Sebewaing Brewing Company was born. Since the Sebewaing area was popular with hunters, the company adopted the pheasant as a corporate symbol. Sebewaing beer hit its commercial peak in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1960 the company changed its name to the Michigan Brewing Company, a decision not well received by some local consumers. In 1965, Buckeye Brewing of Toledo, Ohio, purchased the business; they soon discontinued Sebewaing beer.

Why does the Archives of Michigan house a beer label collection? It is part of official state records—specifically those of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission. After Prohibition's repeal, the State of Michigan established this commission to regulate alcohol sales. The Michigan Liquor Control Commission acts as sole wholesaler for all distilled spirits. (Beer and wine are exempted from this process and sold through the private sector.) The commission also oversees licensing for alcohol sellers, manufacturers and distributors in Michigan. The labels now found in the Archives of Michigan (holdings range from 1934 to 1960) were originally submitted to the commission as part of a licensing requirement. Today, these labels provide a fascinating walk through the history of Michigan brewing.

—Robert Garrett (Archives of Michigan)

