

HEILEMAN'S HISTORY



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Old Style! Special Export! Blatz! These are all beers that are brewed at G. Heileman Brewing Company in La Crosse. The Heileman Brewing Company is quite different today than when it started in 1858. The Brewery and its employees have undergone many changes over the years.

Included in these changes is the transition from a partnership to a single ownership, along with changes in the Heileman ^{the house?} residence. Prohibition brought forth further changes in the brewery. There were various changes involving the employees, the working conditions and the machinery.

George Riese and Al Brietzke, former Brewmasters, provided information on the changes that they experienced as employees at Heileman's. They both said that the first beer brewed at Heilman's was Old Style, which was brewed at midnight on April 7th, 1934. This was the day that Prohibition was repealed which was an exciting day for the G. Heileman Brewing Company and its employees. The brewing started at midnight and the trucks were loaded and ready to go by 7:00 a.m. the next morning.

In addition, there were various changes in the beer output and in the plant itself. For example, in 1948, the Heileman Brewing Co. began a five year expansion and modernizing program. Heileman's continues to expand today.

The story of the House of Heileman begins in 1858 when Gottlieb Heileman became the partner of John Gund, who had founded the "City Brewery" in 1853 in Prairie La Crosse - later to be renamed La Crosse.¹ Mr. Gund built a small brewery on Front and Division streets in 1854. He operated this brewery until 1858 when he and Mr. Heileman moved the old "City Brewery" from Front and Division Street to its present location of South 3rd Street. This formed the partnership of Gund and

Heileman, which continued until 1872 when Mr. Heileman became sole proprietor.² Mr. Gund left the partnership in 1872 and started the Gund Brewery, near what is now Luthern Hospital, which brewed "peerless" beer.³

Gottlieb Heileman was born in Wurtemberg Germany and he left for the United States in 1852 when he was 28 years old.⁴ After Gund and Heileman dissolved their partnership in 1872, Mr. Heileman continued to work alone until his death in 1878.⁵ His wife, Johanna, then took over as head of the La Crosse brewery and ran it until her death in 1917.⁶ Their family home was on the same premises as the brewery plant on South Third Street. According to Walter Baltz, the general credit manager of G. Heileman Brewing Co., the custom in those days was for the brewery owner to live near his brewery.⁷ This was done so that a better working relationship could be developed between the workers and the owner and also if an emergency arose in the plant the owner was right there to handle it.

Brewing in the 18th and 19th centuries was quite different than it is today. The workmen usually had their sleeping quarters in the brewery and worked from 12 to 18 hours a day. All of the work was done by hand. In the late 1800's brewing beer reached its high point - Pasteur in Paris and Hansen in Copenhagen invented a way to avoid bacteria growth through the application of wort coolings and fermentation. Wort is the resulting concoction after the first stage of the brewing process has been completed. This process which is mashing consists of converting starches in the grains into soluble, fermentable sugars - maltose and dextrins. This is done by adding heated water to the ground grains which produces the resulting concoction. After this process was perfected, beer was no longer considered perishable.⁸

During these days breweries were only open during the winter months due to lack of refrigeration. Beer was stored in kegs in caves along Mormon Coulee Road. The beer was brought to the brewery in kegs on large bobsleds which were dangerous and frequently overturned. Therefore, the breweries in La Crosse began to use river ice for refrigeration, and storage houses were built by all the active breweries in the city where the beer was stored year round.⁹

At the time of the Civil War there were four breweries in La Crosse - Michel's, Defengabers, Nicolais and Heileman's. Total production of the city did not exceed 20,000 to 25,000 barrels a year. The Civil War period saw little progress, but during Reconstruction the businesses began to boom. In 1884, Heileman's put out 400 - 500 barrels a year, but just before Prohibition this number ^{was} increased to 200,000 barrels per year.¹⁰

The brewing industry reached a peak in 1914, the year World War I broke out. From the spring of 1919 to 1933 Prohibition greatly reduced the company's sales.¹¹ Although Prohibition forced many breweries to discontinue operations, the G. Heileman Brewing Company adapted to the times by concentrating its efforts on the production of "Near Beers" (non-alcoholic beverages) as well as malt extract and soda pop.¹²

Al Brietzke and George Reise, former employees of Heileman Brewing Co. who both worked their way up to becoming Brewmasters, provided further information about Prohibition. Al Brietzke worked off and on from 1934 to 1981 and he is now 66 years old. Brietzke has also worked at three other breweries - one in Kentucky, one in Panama, and one in Winona. George Reise is presently 71 years old and he was employed at Heileman's for 40 years from 1934-1974.¹³

Al Brietzke commented on the strict law enforcement during Pro-

hibition. Alcohol removed from near beer had to be rinsed down the sewer. The sewer had a pad lock on it and only government officials had keys to these pad locks.¹⁴ George Riese added that the kegs in the cellars where the beer is krausened were also kept locked. Krausening consists of a second fermentation of the once fermented beer and it is the most expensive way to brew beer.¹⁵ The entire process could be held up if the government officials were not there to open the kegs.¹⁶ However, one former employee, who asked not to be named, said old-timers told of workers sometimes taking beer home before alcohol was removed.¹⁷ Al Breitzke and George Reise did not mention anything to this effect during the interviews.¹⁸

After Prohibition ended, Heileman was ready to distribute regular beer and the demand was high.

"It was a madhouse - trucks, pickups coming from all over hell," recalls Solie. "I was in high school at the time."¹⁹

"It was crowded," said Riese. "The whistles were blowing. They started loading trucks a day after midnight. City trucks went out at 7 the next morning."²⁰

However, when Prohibition was repealed the company found itself in need of new capital after years of losses. Therefore, in April, stock was offered to the general public, and today stockholders from all 50 states hold shares in the brewery.²¹

Many alterations and improvements have been made at the brewery since 1934, although the processing of the beer has remained basically the same. Al Brietzke and George Riese both thought that, except for automation, beer was brewed, fermented, and aged in much the same way as it is now. Riese also said that after Prohibition, Heileman replaced its wood tanks with steel ones, having a glass lining or special coating, so the beer did not contact the metal and get an off taste.

Mr. Brietzke said that they made pickle barrels out of the old wood tanks and sold them to a pickle company. He also added that the tanks had to be cleaned by hand and now they are automatically cleaned with a pressure hose. Riese said that the tanks now drain in five minutes in comparison to the 1½ hours required in 1904 ~~until Prohibition~~.²²

When Riese was hired, Heileman old-timers told him about using rakes and shovels to turn malt in the mash bed. Later, an automatic mixing device and doors in the bottom of the barrels were added so that spent grain would fall out.²³

Before Prohibition, wooden kegs were preheated, coated with pitch, cooled and rinsed, and then soaked so that they would swell up and become leakproof. The kegs were rolled along the floor, picked up by hand and placed on horse-drawn wagons. Today, fork-lift trucks wielding pallettes have replaced the manual task and lightweight aluminum kegs are now used.²⁴

New machinery has greatly improved the bottling department. In the early 1900's, bottles were washed by hand- lead shot was placed in each and the bottle was shaken. Next, the bottles went into a filling machine and were placed in wooden cases. Today machines do the work, including the cleaning.²⁵ This is a great improvement because it saves time, cuts down on manpower and is more efficient.

Before Prohibition, beer was sold in clear, 16 or 20-ounce bottles, crated 36 to a case. The familiar 12-ounce bottles came in during Prohibition.²⁶

According to Brietzke, the beer was hopped much more and was made much stronger before the war than it is now. During World War II the hops, barley, and oats were given to the troops. Therefore, the breweries had less hops to use. Heileman's began making a much lighter beer with 1/3 less hops. The beer still had the same alcoholic content.

The brewery planned on switching back to the regular amount of hops after the war, but people preferred the taste of the weaker, less hopped beer.²⁷

There has also been a change in the number of employees over the years. Riese stated that there were 30-40 employees in the brewery (not including the bottling room) when he started and that this number increased to 80-100 employees when he retired. Al Brietzke said that the number of employees has increased dramatically. However, the amount of employees would have increased even more if it was not for the fact that automation itself has taken over many of the jobs.²⁸

The number of women employed at the brewery has also increased. Riese recalled one woman, Hilda Tanke, who was employed at the brewery when he started. She kept her union card and came back to the brewery for 2 years after Prohibition ended. Brietzke said there were no women employees when he started working. Today there are women in the lab and in the brewery. There is also one woman assistant Brewmaster working at Heileman's today. The Brewmaster is responsible for the production of the beer and the quality of the beer that is produced. The Brewmaster runs the plant as far as the operation of the brewery is concerned. Brietzke has also heard of a woman Brewmaster in Germany.²⁹

The methods used by Brewmasters have also changed over the years. For example, during the 16th and 17th centuries, in England, the Brewmasters used to pour out their brew on a wooden bench. Next, they sat on the beer and if their pants stuck to the bench, the beer was considered to be good. Today beer tasting is done twice a day at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. First, the beer is smelled for the aroma and then a little bit is swallowed. A little bit of beer is swallowed

again, savoring the brew this time. Each beer is rated according to flavor during this time,³⁰

George Riese and Al Brietzke, former Brewmasters, commented on their preparation for becoming Brewmasters. George Riese said he served an apprenticeship through all of the departments. He also attended Brewer's School at the Seibo Institute of Brewing Technology in Chicago after the war. Brietzke went to college for two years to study the basic science classes. Then he went to Brewmaster's School for a six month course which applied the sciences to brewing.³¹

However, neither of these men started out at the top. Riese recalled starting out washing kegs and ending up as a Brewmaster and Plant Supervisor. Brietzke remembered starting out as an apprentice, getting paid by the hour, and eventually becoming a Brewmaster for 25-30 years. Eighteen of those years were at Heileman's.³²

The former Brewmasters also commented on the amount of hours they worked per week and on the first beer brewed at Heileman's. Riese worked between 45 and 75 hours per week and was on call at all times when he was a Brewmaster. Brietzke said he worked 7 days a week when it was busy, and 6½ days a week during the summer. He was also on call at all times in case anything went wrong. They both said the first beer brewed at Heilman's was Old Style, which was brewed at midnight on April 7th, 1934. George Riese made the first Special Export brew in 1936. He also added that Blatz was a Milwaukee beer bought out from Pabst Brewery in 1969.³³

Although the location of the Heileman Brewing Co. has been the same since 1853, when it first opened, a lot of growth and expansion has taken place over the years. For instance, the corporate headquarters was built in 1870 and it was first used as the house of the Brewmaster and his family. It was then used for the corporate head-

quarters and it is now located across from the Mississippi River.³⁴

There were many other additions. For example, in 1880, the bottling department was added to the Heileman Brewery.³⁵ In 1938, the hospitality room and its adjoining room (mariner's return room) were built. This used to be the Brewmaster's office.³⁶

In 1939, Heileman purchased Gambrinus for \$100.00 from a closing brewery; its original cost was \$3,000.00. Gambrinus is the statue in front of the brewery; he is the patron saint of the old Teutonic Brew Industry. The statue stands 15 feet in height and weighs 2,000 pounds. The figure is a rare one with only one other like it in New Orleans. Gambrinus was enthroned in Holland and Belgium as patron saint of the brewers as early as the late 13th century.³⁷

In 1948, the Heileman Brewing Co. began a five year expansion and modernizing program. In 1950, one of the most modern storage cellars in the world was completed. These cellars permitted the process of "krausening."³⁸ In 1960, Heileman purchased the home for its officers after a fire destroyed its previous office building. The old office building was located where the Giant Six Pack is presently situated.³⁹ The World's Largest Six Pack was built in 1970 and it actually holds beer,⁴⁰

Improvements are also noted in Heileman's beer output and in their rank in the nation. Since 1960, Heileman has moved from 31st to the fourth position among major U.S. brewers in beer sales in 20 years. Heileman made the top 10 in 1973 and the top five in 1981. The following chart illustrates this progress:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Barrelage per year</u>	<u>Rank in Nation</u>
1934 (April 1st)	150,000 (450 a day)	--
1958	370,820	37
1968	1,726,000	18

<u>Year</u>	<u>Barrelage per year</u>	<u>Rank in Nation</u>
1969	2,298,000	16
1970	3,000,000	15
1971	2,820,000	15
1972	3,645,000	11
1973	4,420,000	9
1974	4,300,000	9
1975	4,535,000	10
1976	5,210,000	9
1977	6,245,000	7
1978	7,000,000	6
1980	--	6
1981	--	4

For the year 1981, the Company ranked as the 4th largest brewer in the nation based on published trade reports.⁴¹

Expansion continued in 1981. A new government cellar with 10 unit tanks was built, along with a new brew house. The house was built on the intersection of Second, Third, Jackson and Mississippi streets.⁴²

Expansion of the Heileman Brewing Company is even going on right now. Just this year, 1982, Heileman bought out Walt's restaurant. They plan on using it as a new hospitality room and a restaurant. It is also rumored that the brewery will discontinue giving tours in the future. Apparently, films will be shown in the new building illustrating the brewing process. In addition, when Walt's is completed, the Brewmaster's office will move back to the place where the hospitality room and its adjoining room are presently located.⁴³

As mentioned above, the plant itself has undergone a great

deal of growth and expansion. In addition, the G. Heileman Brewing Company has experienced changes in ownership, employees, working conditions, machinery and beer. These changes have provided a better working environment and a better quality beer throughout the years.

George Riese and Al Brietzke provided information on the changes that they experienced as Brewmasters employed at G. Heileman Brewery. The fact that these men were interviewed in person established dependable and reliable sources of information.

Obviously, the G. Heileman Brewing Company and its employees have experienced many changes since 1858. These changes have definitely improved the brewery itself and the work done by the employees. Even today the G. Heileman Brewing Company continues to grow and to expand.

Endnotes

- 1 Welcome to the House of Heileman, Pamphlet which was obtained from the G. Heileman Brewing Company.
- 2 Will and Sonja Anderson, One Hundred Years of Brewing, p. 339.
- 3 Gayda Hallnagel, "Heileman Plans 2 Million." LaCrosse Tribune, December 30, 1977, p.1.
- 4 Welcome to the House of Heileman, Pamphlet which was obtained from the G. Heileman Brewing Company.
- 5 Chris Nudd, "LaCrosse Scenes," File on the brewery located in the University of Wisconsin LaCrosse Resource Center.
- 6 Welcome to the House of Heileman, Pamphlet which was obtained from the G. Heileman Brewing Company.
- 7 Gayda Hallnagel, "Heileman Plans 2 Million." LaCrosse Tribune, December 30, 1977, p.1.
- 8 Chris Nudd, "LaCrosse Scenes," File on the brewery located in the University of Wisconsin LaCrosse Resource Center.
- 9 Idib.
- 10 Idib.
- 11 Chris Nudd, "Heileman's Keeps Growing," LaCrosse Tribune, March 16, 1969, p.4.
- 12 Welcome to the House of Heileman, Pamphlet which was obtained from the G. Heileman Brewing Company.
- 13 Al Brietzke and George Reise, From interviews which were administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.
- 14 Idib, Al Brietzke.
- 15 What is Krausening?, Pamphlet which was obtained from the G. Heileman Brewing Company.
- 16 George Reise, From the interview which was administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.
- 17 Donald W. Affolter, "Thirsty population provided beer market." LaCrosse Tribune, July 19, 1979, p. A10.
- 18 Al Brietzke and George Reise, From interviews which were administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.
- 19 Donald W. Affolter, "Thirsty population provided beer market." LaCrosse Tribune, July 19, 1979, p.A10.

- 20 Idib.
- 21 Chris Nudd, "Heileman Keeps Growing." LaCrosse Tribune, March 16, 1969, p.4.
- 22 Al Brietzke and George Reise, From interviews administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.
- 23 Donald W. Affolter, "Thristy population provided beer market." LaCrosse Tribune, July 19, 1979, p.A10.
- 24 Idib.
- 25 Idib.
- 26 Idib.
- 27 Al Brietzke, From interview which was administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.
- 28 Idib., Al Brietzke and George Reise.
- 29 Idib.
- 30 Mary Ellen Hughes, "Beer Tasters Hop to it." LaCrosse Tribune, February 1, 1976, p.5.
- 31 Al Brietzke and George Reise, From interviews which were administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.
- 32 Idib.
- 33 Idib.
- 34 Idib., George Reise.
- 35 Gayda Hallnagel, "Heileman Plans 2 Million." LaCrosse Tribune, December 30, 1977, p.1.
- 36 Al Brietzke, From interview which was administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.
- 37 Chris Nudd, "Heileman's Keeps Growing." LaCrosse Tribune, March 16, 1969, p.4.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Marybeth Clark, "Heileman Home to Become Museum." Coulee Gazette, March 29, 1978, p.3.
- 40 Al Breitzke and George Reise, From interview which was administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.

- 41 "Heileman Records Steady Growth." LaCrosse Tribune, December 17, 1978, p.4.
- 42 Jerome E. Rosse, "Heileman Begins New Expansion." LaCrosse Tribune, June 10, 1979, p.1.
- 43 Al Brietzke, From interview which was administered by Tracy Meisner and Terri Waldron.