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Rhinelanders Revisited: Tapping into Wisconsin's brewing culture

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River News Features Reporter

Long before Wisconsin was dubbed "America's Dairyland," it was colloquially known as the Beer State. But to what do we owe this niche cultural identity?

Actually, several factors precipitated our state's famed brewing culture. Not only did breweries provide stable, year-round employment, they also capitalized on the region's available resources and infrastructure. But, if you'll recall, these brewers weren't the first to do so.

Of course, the logging industry took advantage of the abundant lumber resources, but that wood was also used to make beer barrels. So too, the paper mill dam was originally built to facilitate log drives in the old days, but the dam also created Boom Lake, where ice was harvested during the wintertime to stock iceboxes made at the Rhinelander Refrigeration Co.

But harvesting that ice also served another purpose - naturally, to keep beer cold.

However, the rich history of Wisconsin breweries actually starts a bit further from home.

In the mid-1800s, waves of German immigrants settled in the greater Milwaukee area and beyond, bringing with them their brewing knowledge and thirst for German lagers. Due to poor water quality in Germany at the time, beer was safer to drink than water, and because German monasteries commonly produced beer for mass consumption, drinking it was culturally sanctioned and thus it became a staple in German culture.

When immigrants arrived in the U.S., their demand for German-style beers provided a reliable customer base, and, coupled with the natural resources in the area, Wisconsin was primed to become the next giant in the brewing industry.

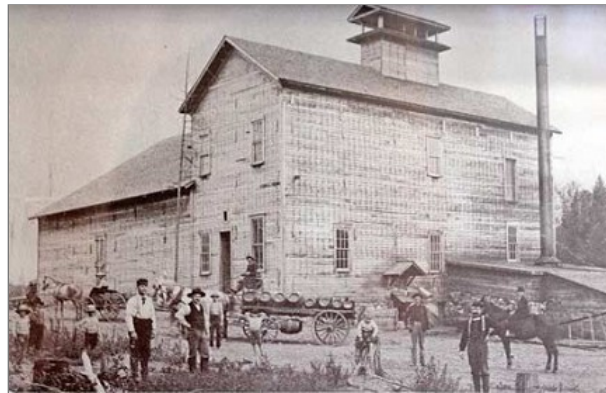
By 1860, over 200 breweries operated in Wisconsin, more than 40 in Milwaukee alone. That brewing culture was quickly embraced by rural communities across the state, including an infant Rhinelander.

In 1890, the Rhinelander Brewing Co. was founded by Otto Hilgermann and Henry Danner. It was located on Ocala Street next to the Pelican River (where the eye clinic is located today).

Operations at the brewery officially began in 1893, producing 30,000 barrels annually at the start. The brewery burned down in 1897, but was subsequently rebuilt soon thereafter.

Although a main player in the company, Hilgermann wasn't intimately involved in management, opting instead to expend his energies investing in real estate downtown, as Rhinelander Historical Society President Bill Vancos noted. For that reason, today one can still see the Hilgermann name engraved on the facade of the former Hext Theatre (which was an Opera House during Hilgermann's time).

The brewery saw great success in those early years, but as the temperance movement branched out of New England and inched westward, the industry soon met its demise.



This photo of the original Rhinelander Brewing Co. building is on display at the current headquarters of the Rhinelander Brewery Co. in downtown Rhinelander. Rhinelander Brewery Co. was founded in 1890 by Otto Hilgermann and Henry Danner. It was located on Ocala Street on the Pelican River, where the Eye Clinic of Wisconsin sits today. Photo by Stephanie Kuski/River News.

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Much to the distaste of the disgruntled German-Americans, Prohibition became the law of the land in 1920. The sale of alcohol was illegal for the next 13 years. Hilgermann sold the company, and all Rhinelander Brewing Co. equipment and remaining supplies were packed up and shipped south of the border.

Although the sale of alcohol was illegal, Rhinelander didn't stay dry. In those days, it was commonplace for locals to distill homemade moonshine by the Hat Rapids dam. My grandpa, Denis Laddusire, remembers seeing abandoned stills in the woods used for the home brew when he was a youngster.

"It was running rampant," Laddusire recalled. "It was really common back in the day... My dad got caught working there along with a number of other people, because that's the only job that was available after the Depression."

White Lightning was the name of a common home brew, he said, a 180-proof homemade moonshine "that would take the paint right off a battleship."

Despite its illegality, this home brewing culture continued virtually unchecked throughout the '20s. Northern Wisconsin was known as a thoroughfare for Al Capone's mafia to illicitly bootleg the home brew to cities down south, and for that, the surrounding area has become infamous for its colorful chapter in the local history of bootlegging.

But as soon as the paint dried on the ratification of the 21st Amendment, Otto's son George Hilgermann and business partner J.R. Caldwell swiftly reopened Rhinelander Brewing Co.'s doors in 1933.

Since all of their equipment had been sold and shipped off, the duo needed a financial backer for their initial investment. For this reason, Larry Henning provided the tanks, kettles and vats in return for stock in the company, thus giving Henning financial control of the brewery.

That move didn't bode well for Hilgermann or Caldwell, as Henning soon took over operations. He hired Otto Dietz, the longest-tenured brewmaster in Rhinelander's history, that same year.

In January of 1940, Rhinelander Brewing Co. released a 7-oz Shorty bottle, which soon brought the company tremendous success. But the 5% light lager wasn't the only craze - the teaser campaign prior to its release was one of the first virtual ad campaigns of its kind, and it certainly made waves.

"I've been infatuated with the Rhinelander Brewing Co. for many years," Vancos commented. "They had such unique advertising, and they were so innovative in their marketing, it was just so creative."

"There were a couple other places around the country that had 7-oz (bottles), but nobody in the Midwest," he continued. "So when they came out with it, they did a tickler campaign first. They started hinting that Shorty was going to be the first baby born in the year and stuff like that."

"There was a Milwaukee Journal artist who put out a whole bunch of these comic posters for the brewery at that time," Bill Brunell, whose personal collection of Rhinelander Brewing Co. memorabilia is on loan at the Taproom downtown and who grew up in the former Hilgermann residence across from the brewery, said of Milwaukee artist Ross Lewis.

"He made about a hundred different posters with cartoon figures for the Shorty," Brunell continued. "Some of them said, 'Where's Shorty?' or 'When's Shorty coming?'"

Other such ad campaigns boasted the success of the Shorty brand - they released salt and pepper shakers, napkins, penny postcards, billboards, posters and even two airplanes which featured the Shorty name. One of their most iconic products featured a wooden arrow through the bottle.

The Shorty brand put Rhinelander on the map.

At its peak, the company produced 40,000 barrels annually to keep up with demand, and even sponsored a women's softball team - the Shorties - who proudly boasted the name in ballgames across the Midwest.

But in 1958, Henning retired, and Dietz left the company in 1966 following disagreements with new management. During an era where big breweries were buying out small ones, and as the Rhinelander Brewing Co. began to encounter financial hardship, the company closed shop for the second time in 1967.

By the early '70s, the Joseph Huber Brewing Co. in Monroe purchased the rights to the Shorty name.

"They owned the name, but they did not own the recipe," Sara Martin, Taproom general manager at the Rhinelander Brewing Co., explained. "So they were slapping Rhinelander's name on some cheap beer and that's what they did for years - just riding on the coattails of Rhinelander's successful name."

That changed in 2009 when Rhinelander Brewing Co.'s current owner, Jyoti Auluck, bought the Rhinelander name and original recipe, opening the Taproom in April of 2018 with the vision of reviving nostalgic brands like the Shorty.

"The owner, when she brought the company back, tried to get the recipe as close to the original as she could," Martin said. "They did find the old recipe, but things like strains of hops and stuff like that changes over that many years. But they did try to get it as close as possible, and that's our flagship beer."

The original Shorty recipe is available in a redesigned bottle right in the heart of downtown Rhinelander, in addition to 30 different varieties of brew and an original line of hard sodas.

Today's Rhinelander Brewing Co. also features Shorty memorabilia on display at the Taproom, allowing locals like Brunell to proudly showcase the rich history of the company.

Brewing - and beer drinking - remains a palpable part of Wisconsin culture, although the industry has changed drastically from its community origins. Consolidation and commercialization has brought national, and even international, distribution to some state breweries such as Miller, while smaller, craft breweries have made a comeback in recent decades.

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Tapping into the proud history of Wisconsin's brewing culture in this way makes its present landscape that much more clear.

Stay tuned for the next installment in this series. Visit rivernews.com to read previous installments. To connect in candid conversation about the history of Rhinelander, contact Stephanie at stephanie@rivernews.com.

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