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LEST WE NEED ANOTHER REASON TO KNOW THAT JULY FOURTH AND OUR UNIQUE SYSTEM WAS SUCH A WONDERFUL EXPERIMENT.

The Beer That Made America

From the days of the Pilgrims, beer has played a crucial role throughout U.S. history

By Dane Huckelbridge

“Beer,” Benjamin Franklin is said to have quipped, “is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” Today, beer is also the carbonated motor in a quarter-trillion-dollar American industry, second only to water and soft drinks in popularity. But it isn’t just another beverage: Beer has played a crucial role throughout U.S. history, tracing the country’s evolution along the way.

In New England, the dark English ales brought over by the Puritans helped to put the colony on the map—quite literally. In September 1620, the Mayflower set sail, with just over 100 passengers and a hold laden with small beer—the low-alcohol brew preferred by Englishmen. Given the preservative properties of the hops, beer on voyages was far superior to water, which, if it wasn’t polluted to begin with, often turned brackish.

When the Mayflower at last made it into Plymouth Harbor, the passengers and crew were desperate for food and beer. This proved to be the deciding factor in the decision to drop anchor in New England rather than to push farther south. As William Bradford, who would become governor of Plymouth Colony, recounted, “we could not now take much time for further search or consideration, our victuals being much spent, especially our beer.” When the Pilgrims and the crew became ill, the captain shared the last of his private beer rations, giving the group strength to persevere.

In the Dutch colony of New Netherland, beer production helped to establish the cosmopolitan and commerce-driven attitudes of its most prosperous cities—New York and Philadelphia chief among them. Prominent families like the Rutgers, the Vassars and the Lispenards all had fortunes built on commercial brewing.

The brewing industry in New York and Pennsylvania helped to supply the nation with fresh beer in the wake of the American Revolution, when imported goods suddenly became scarce. George Washington himself relied on rich Philly porter to fill in the gaps left by Madeira wines and English ales, and he remarked that the brews of that city were of “exceptional quality.”

The plantation economy and warmer climate of the South didn’t lend themselves to brewing with barley on a commercial scale, but local beers did exist, with molasses serving as a common substitute. Thomas Jefferson spent much of his retirement at Monticello experimenting with home-brew recipes in his attempts at making a viable Southern beer.

Though his concoctions never did take off, the native corn-based beer favored by the Scots-Irish and African-American segments of Southern society did. On the South’s mountainous frontier, this corn beer was eventually distilled into whiskey, paving the way for the American bourbon industry and Western expansion alike.

American beer truly came into its own in the Midwest, spurred on by the new yeasts and techniques of German immigrants. In cities like St. Louis and Milwaukee, a novel style of American pale lager emerged in the 19th century; its popularity quickly eclipsed that of traditional American ale and whiskey.

During the Civil War, the taxes garnered from beer production gave a tremendous boost to the federal government and helped to secure its place as America's beverage of choice for the next half-century—until the onset of Prohibition overturned the country's brewing infrastructure. When the Volstead Act was finally repealed in 1933, only a handful of large industrialized breweries remained, ushering in the hegemony of the American macro-brew. This hegemony would go more or less unchallenged until the later decades of the 20th century, when a new style and philosophy of brewing arose on the coastal fringes of the American West. In the 1970s and '80s, in cities such as San Francisco, Portland, Ore., and Seattle—capitals of a nascent gastronomic movement—home-brewers began tinkering with older styles of American beer, incorporating more flavorful ale yeasts, more complex malts and zestier local hops.

These early efforts at creating carefully crafted, traditional beers kicked off a craft beer revolution that is still in full swing across the country. The number of American breweries has climbed from just a few dozen in the early 1980s to more than 4,000 today, with a collective repertoire that spans almost every imaginable style and flavor of beer. Like so much else in the U.S. today, an astonishing diversity prevails in the provision of this most American of beverages.

—A review hacked by Hank (I have other notes from the Clinton illegal server) and adapted from Mr. Huckelbridge's new book, "The United States of Beer," to be published by William Morrow on June 14.