

# Hank Speaks... So Listen

by Hank Bienert

Folks like to talk about the Good Old days ESPECIALLY IN A TOWN LIKE NEW ORLEANS WHERE NOSTALGIA IS A MAJOR INDUSTRY. Those of us who lived, studied, worked, got around in bus or car, and socialized in that sweaty, unending 8 months stretch know it wasn't so "good".

This older article from BYO magazine reminds us of what the REAL beer scene was like courtesy of The Retrospectoscope - Not Really the Good Old Days.

Dear Mr. Wizard,

I know American beers are lighter today than before Prohibition, but are there records of the recipes used before all these changes? I look at labels on some of the bottles in my collection and see that some breweries claim to be more than 100 years old. I just wonder how much better the beer might have been, say when Pabst was first started in 1844.

Reader

Beer history is usually a subject I avoid, because my view of beer history is not in line with the mainstream, romanticized views of brewing in the old days. But this is one of those questions that really is hard not to respond to, so here it goes.

For starters, Prohibition caused tremendous financial hardship for the domestic beer industry, but Prohibition didn't force brewers to brew light beers. There are many pre-Prohibition recipes floating about, and the differences between beer recipes of that era and beer recipes today are really not that great. American brewers of European descent were using starch adjuncts such as rice and maize (corn) decades before Prohibition.

These adjuncts, among other things, lighten beer color and flavor. Bear in mind that maize is native to the Americas. Even though Columbus introduced maize to Europe, it was principally grown in southern Europe, which is wine, not beer, country.

The other great American adjunct, rice, grows very well in wet, tropical climates such as the American south and monsoon Asia, where about 90 percent of the world's rice crop is grown. Needless to say, brewers from Germany and England didn't have much experience with rice before coming to the New World.

Brewers, a tremendously resourceful group, have used all sorts of starch sources over the several thousand years of beer brewing. The notion that rice and corn additives somehow make beers less beer-like has always puzzled me. After all, the loosest definition of beer is any alcoholic beverage whose carbohydrate is derived from cereal grains (as opposed to wine, whose carbohydrate comes from fruit sugars). In any case American brewers began using adjuncts long before Prohibition. Historically, World War I and World War II had a tremendous effect on brewing around the world. Most nations at war instituted ration programs intended to protect the supply of all resources needed for waging war and maintaining public health. Food is pretty darn essential for human life, and anything relating to food became part of rationing around the world. Although barley isn't a common food source for humans, it is a major livestock feed source. Barley for beef or barley for beer? In times of war barley for beef was more important.

Lawmakers in England used this logic during World War I to justify increases in the duty on wort gravity, limit the hours of operation of taverns, and limit the volume of beer that could be brewed. One consequence of the tax on wort gravity was a decline in the original gravity of English ales. Some American breweries even used potatoes in place of maize and rice during World War II. Another key event during World War II was a large swing in the beer-drinking demographic. Young men were drafted

for the war, and many young women were recruited for building the American war machine and worked in factories. Women, who tended to prefer lighter beers, soon became a very large part of the American beer-drinking market. Many beer historians tie the lightening of American beer flavor, particularly hopping rates, to this great change in beer drinking.

After the war ended the American palate was drastically changed. The bland trend was not reserved for beer alone. American food in general was bland, perhaps because Americans were accustomed to bland foods during war-time rationing. Today, flavorful coffee, tea, cheese, bread, meats, specialty vegetables, beer, wine, and ethnic cuisines of all sorts give the American consumer tremendous variety.

Are American beers bland? Most microbrew drinkers would say yes. Ninety percent of domestic beer sales fall into the bland category, and Bud drinkers like their Bud.

Was Pabst bland in 1844? No one alive today can comment on its flavor, but most American lagers of that period did contain adjuncts and probably had less character than their European counterparts. How much better were the beers back then than they are today? Read on!

In 1844 commercial refrigeration did not exist, pure yeast culturing had not been developed, the most basic understanding of beer spoilage by bacteria had not even been conceived, the word biochemistry did not exist, and there was absolutely no concept of how yeast biochemistry influenced beer flavor. In short, brewing science had not been born.

In 1844 beer was fermented in wood or concrete fermenters left exposed to the atmosphere. These fermenters were very difficult to clean, and bacteria were certainly full-time residents in breweries of the period. Without an understanding of microbiology, ease of cleaning didn't matter because the brewers did not even know the true objective of cleaning.

In 1844 beer was packaged in wood casks and exposed to air during serving. Oxidation and the proliferation of aerobic bacteria that turn alcohol to vinegar must have been commonplace.

In 1844 breweries used tools that would be classified today as crude. Life in the brewery was hard.

In 1844 the beer consumer could not imagine what he did not have, and the beer industry did very well. Breweries that consistently made highly ranked beer stood out from the crowd, but all breweries of that period certainly had their difficulties. Modern brewers and beer drinkers need not look to the past with rose-colored glasses but instead should be in awe of the advances made over the past 150 years by the brewing industry.

Brewers were among the most inquisitive and open-minded thinkers of the 19th century in the fields of chemistry, biology, and food-processing technology. Enzymes were identified and defined by brewing scientists; Louis Pasteur revolutionized the world with his *Etudes sur le Vin* and his *Etudes sur la Biere* in the mid-19th century (these studies later gave rise to milk pasteurization); Emil Christian Hansen developed pure culture techniques for yeast in the late 1800s; and S.P.L. Sørensen, a colleague of Hansen at the Carlsberg Laboratories in Copenhagen, suggested the pH scale in 1909. All of these achievements were applied to different industries and spawned new ideas in the field of science.

Today, brewing benefits from advances in raw-material quality, advances in the understanding of brewing science, and advances in brewing technology.

Almost every homebrewer today understands that beer is damaged by oxidation. This most basic kernel of knowledge was not known by the commercial brewing industry at the turn of the century. Today, oxygen pick-up is minimized by design in the brewhouse, in the design of beer transfer systems, filters, and packaging lines.

I am very happy to be a beer drinker in The Good Present Days!

(. . . and if you are too, buy me a beer at the next CCH meeting. HANK )