

Sebewaing Brewing Co.

Which brands of beer did the early hotels and saloons serve? From where did they get their beer?

The answer comes in one word: LOCAL!

Several of those pioneers who came into the Sebewaing area and opened saloons are known to have made their own beer. That's understandable as beer is probably the oldest-known alcoholic drink, and the techniques and ingredients have been utilized for centuries.

Historians know that beer was made in Egypt and Babylon more than 6,000 years ago. There it was manufactured from malted barley, and they soon discovered that other cereal grains also provided a worthy base for fermentation.

At various times there were three, then five, six — and possibly more — establishments that served beer in early Sebewaing. By 1880 E.O. Braendle decided there was enough need for all these consumers to have a larger source of brew, so he opened the Braendle Brewery in a wood structure on "the highest" area of land near Sebewaing's business section. As all Sebewaing residents, past and present, know there is no "hill" anywhere in the community. The "high" part on East Main Street became the site, and re-



The Braendle Brewery, which burned down about 1893, was roughly located on the site of the Sebewaing Brewing Company's later building

mained such for the larger brick structure that was erected after the Braendle Brewery burned to the ground early on a Monday morning in 1893, scant hours before the week's brewing was to begin.

"Substantial" is a good word to describe that larger brick building — with a deep basement and sub-basement encased in three-foot thick walls and a structure held up with steel girders, located on the south bank of Sebewaing River.

For more than four decades Sebewaing Brewing Company manufactured and delivered a tasty, robust, satisfying beer, a genuinely "good" product that gave quick recognition to that small town, Sebewaing.

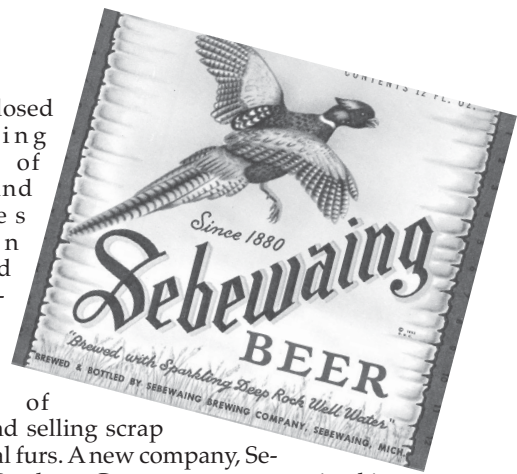
Alas, it was not to remain that way.

In 1920 came the 18th Amendment and the feared — and hated — word "Prohibition." For many years there had been growing opposition to alcoholic drinking, and there were groups, leagues and associations that worked for "dry" causes. During World War I with its food-control laws, the manufacture of distilled liquor, beer and wine was prohibited. In 1917 Congress provided an amendment that would put an entire country under "prohibition." On January 16, 1920, the 18th Amendment went into effect, and the United States were officially "dry."

That closed Sebewaing Brewery, of course, and Charles Beckman purchased the property and carried on the business of buying and selling scrap

and animal furs. A new company, Sebewaing Products Company, was organized in 1927 and purchased the building again, making and selling malt extract, which was legal and was used as the basis of home-made beer. That popular product was sold widely, in round, 5-gallon metal containers, some of which are still preserved by a few Sebewaing residents.

Reams and books have been written on the lawbreaking, crime and dissatisfaction that followed the arrival of Prohibition. In 1932 both political parties proposed to put repeal to a vote of the people through the 21st Amendment. By December, 1933, the required 36 states had ratified the Amendment, and America had turned again. Alcoholic drinks were legal again.



PROHIBITION ENDS! BEER IS BACK

On May 12, 1933, the Sebewaing Blade reported that six applications for beer permits had been filed with Clerk C.L. Manske. Making applications were A & P Store, John Eisengruber restaurant, Liken & Gregory (for the new Heidelberg Inn), Alfred F. Liken, plus grocers John C. Liken & Co. and John Rummel & Co.

In Sebewaing, that meant the brewery was reorganized by a Detroit, William B. Wreford. A local veterinarian and auto dealer, Dr. J.E. Wurm became president of the company in 1938, and continued until his death in 1945. Otto Thede was named manager, until Arthur E. Mast was made president and general manager February 1, 1948. Mr. Thede became secretary-treasurer and Millard Ringle was vice-president and brewmaster.

In 1981 Sebewaing Rotary Club published a booklet on the Sebewaing Brewing Company history. Here are excerpts of what followed:

"The company ran successfully with sales reaching more than \$1 million in several years. Profits were never huge, by today's corporate standards, but Sebewaing Brewing Company was a dependable employer of about 30 men, a valued customer of the town, and best-known identification for Sebewaing throughout Michigan.

"Sebewaing Beer was acclaimed across the state as a good, low-priced beer, and thousands of cases were trucked to stores and taverns every week. For years A&P Stores were a leading outlet for Sebewaing Beer. The names of "Sebewaing" and "Beer" and "Pheasant," the company's trademark, were symbols to thousands of Michigan beer drinkers.

"While other beers were selling around \$3.75 to \$4 per case, Sebewaing Beer remained steady at \$2.75 and \$2.90. The Sebewaing "Pheasant" was a refreshment symbol across the state.



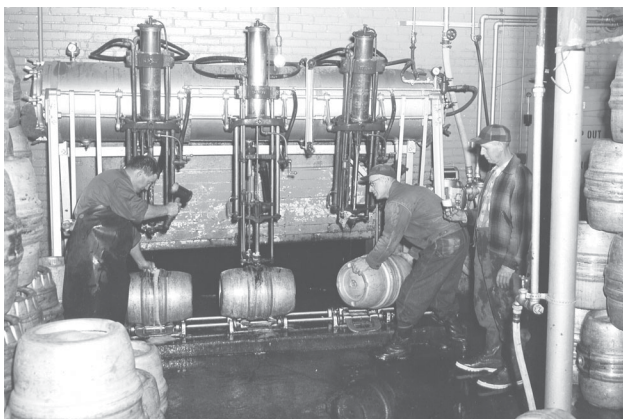
Sebewaing Brewery on the original site about 1940

"New and larger equipment was added regularly and the beer business in Sebewaing was a source of employment, civic pride and publicity. Taxes from state and national levels increased and cut deeply into the company's profits, as they did into earnings of all Michigan breweries."

At the time of World War II there were 62 breweries in Michigan, and by 1965 the number dwindled to 7 — 6 in the Lower Peninsula, one in the Upper." Today there are no traditional breweries in Michigan, although a growing number of small micro-breweries are in operation.

Without localites knowing, large blocks of stock were being bought by Detroiters, and in 1962 came the shattering news that Buckeye Beer of Ohio had purchased control and would close the brewery, but take the trademark for its own use. A stampede followed, as outraged Sebewaingites started a proxy battle, gathering votes and pledges and forcing another meeting. The good news was that enough shareholders attended to vote down the sale. The bad news was that, in anticipation of the sale, management had stopped brewing, laid off workers and began closing down. At the April meeting the Detroit board members were swept out of office and locals again took over.

On Monday, June 7, 1965, for the first time since March 2, the 7 a.m. brewery whistle notified the community that brewing was beginning again. Otto Thede, elected President by the locals, declared that two brews would be made daily, Mondays through Thursdays, producing more than one-thousand barrels weekly. Beer that had been in storage was being delivered across the state, and residents be-



Barreling Room in the 1950s with workers John Buehler, Mike Buehler and Gus Kausch

lieved all was well.

Then they discovered that court actions caused freezing of assets, markets were lost during the layoff, and precious shelf space once reserved for "Pheasant Beer" and been usurped by other brands.

The sad story is that the company never got going again. Government regulations and taxes, plus competition from other brands had taken markets.

In late 1965 the brewery closed its doors forever, after a wild plan to sell draught beer directly from vats to quaffers during the new Sebewaing Sugar Festival. Thousands of barrels of foamy brew were released from vats through floor drains into the adjoining Sebewaing River, yielding a deliciously-tangy fragrance.

To avoid trouble, the "runoffs" were usually released in the middle of night, and for weeks many a visitor or passerby, seeing the foamy mattress-thick lather on the river, wondered what could be happening.

The locals knew, of course.

Many of them, nursing heavy hearts, knew it was the end of an industry, of a village emblem and a label of achievement.

For years the massive building stood vacant, its ownership including the State of Michigan, the Village of Sebewaing, and several almost-owners. Soon after, it was razed with many a brick and handful of unused bottle labels, spanking new beer cases and advertising signs carried off by sad-eyed visitors who wanted something to remember the Birth, Growth, Decline and Death of a noble industry that won its place in the minds and progress of a historic village.

Today the riverside lot, fronting on East Main, is listed in township records as owned by Terry Sprowl of Frankenthum.

THAT FREE TAP AT THE BREWERY...

Until its last day of operation, Sebewaing Brewery had a "free" tap, open to all — natives, visitors, workers, anyone.

A kitchen-style sink had been installed outside the chill room, with two projecting pipes with faucets. From one faucet poured the delicious nut-brown Sebewaing beer, from the other a boiling hot, steaming jet of water to "sterilize" the waiting tray of shell glasses.

Guests learned in their first visit that they were to pick up a glass, "sterilize" it with a jet blast of steaming water, then draw their own draught of brew, which could be repeated. Then, finishing the drink, it was courteous to again "steam out" and "sterilize" the glass before returning it, upside down, to its tray.

For many visiting the brewery was a daily event, as vital as breakfast, lunch or a visit to the post office. Some stayed hours, some brought cheese or crackers for a visit of several hours, and one gentleman even brought a carload of out-of-town guests to help him celebrate a birthday.

Most patrons of the free tap were aware that they could buy "shorts," a case where labels on the bottles might have been omitted or applied crooked. "Shorts" cost \$1 for a case of 24. Those were the days before bottle deposits existed.

Alas, the free tap died the day the brewery closed.

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