



Photos by CAROLINA RENFRO

How dry it is in Sebewaing since the brewery closed

You can still get a cold beer at the Old Heidelberg, but it won't be Golden Pheasant or Sport or Club, and all things considered, it won't go down as smoothly

by **CHRISTOPHER STODDARD**
and **LAWRENCE J. LOBERT**

The old three-story, red-brick building faces East Main Street as one enters the small town of Sebewaing in Michigan's Thumb. It is a spring morning, and tufts of weeds and grass sprout around a rusting trash can. Odd pieces of discarded pipe are strewn along the gravel at the building's base.

Between rows of windows, some shattered, a sign stretches the length of the building, pro-

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claiming in white lettering that it is the home of the Sebewaing Brewing Co. Below the sign, a 14-foot pheasant is painted on aging brick. Its wings are outspread, caught motionless, as it rises in flight.

The building is a small footnote in history, a crumbling monument to the enterprising dream of a young German immigrant named E.O. Braendle. He built it in 1880, and over the years it grew to be the pride of this little town surrounded by fields of sugar beets.

It is a survivor, having long outlived its builder. It endured a substantial fire at the turn of the century. During Prohibition, its basement was used as a storehouse for skins and furs, while upstairs a brisk business was maintained selling liquid malt to those willing to brew their own.

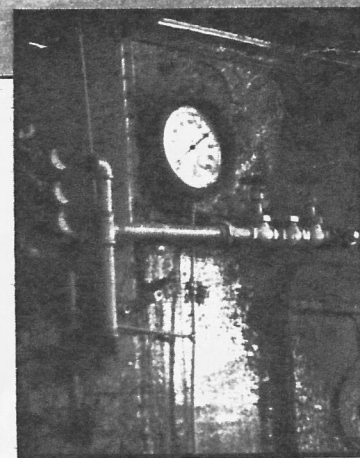
At the brewery's peak in the early 1950s,

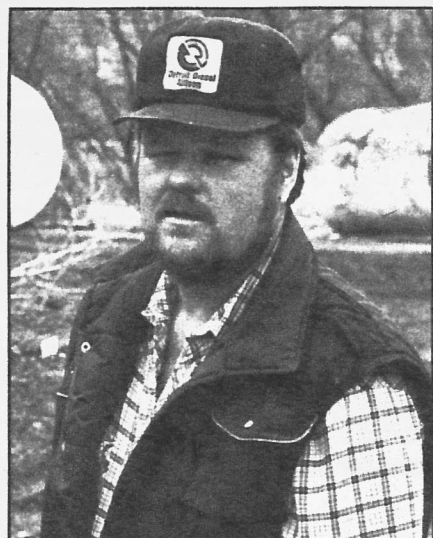
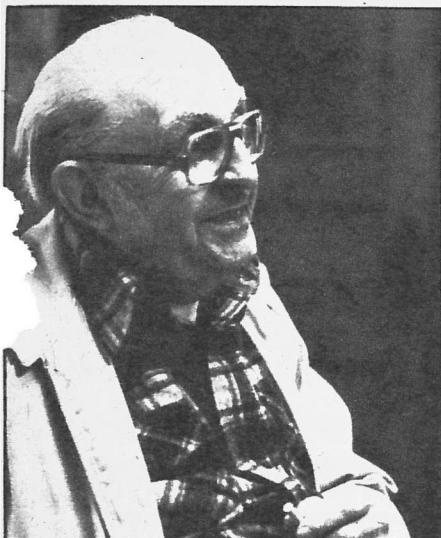
about 50,000 barrels a year left its loading dock, and annual sales topped the million-dollar mark. Such brands as Sebewaing, Golden Pheasant, Sport and Club were common throughout Michigan.

The brewery closed abruptly in early 1965, then reopened after a few months. It struggled along for another year, but the die was cast. A bankruptcy sale gutted the old building, but another 15 silent and empty years would pass before its future would be decided.

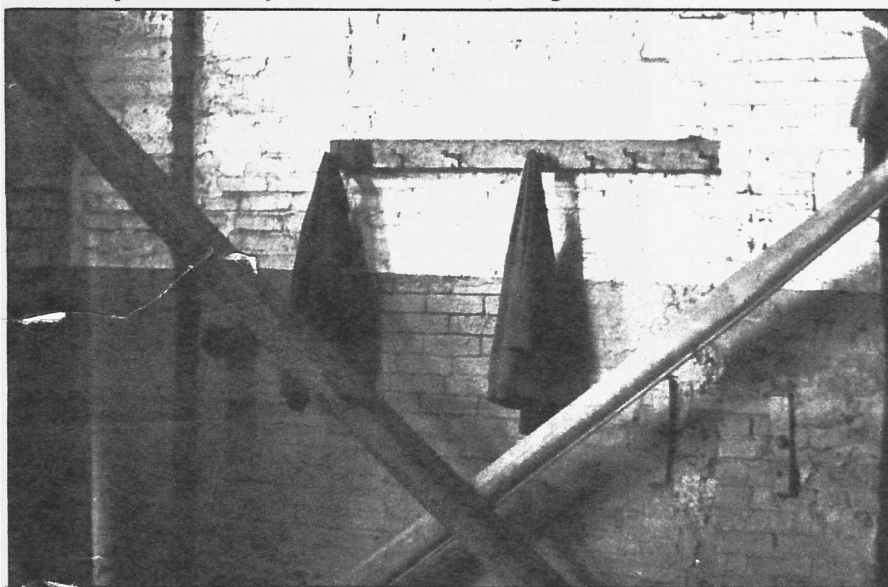
Then last year, in the spring of its 101st year, Fred Leskowich and his brother Randy worked methodically tearing down the brewery, loading the rubble into the open hopper of a semitrailer. They did it with no great joy. It was a job.

"My father used to come down here to buy beer," Fred Leskowich said. "The brewery gave





Sebewaing found a lot to be proud of in the brewery's pheasant symbol. Old-timers like Erwin Maetschke, left, remember the glory days. Fred Leskowich, right, helped tear down the building, still littered with rusty bottle caps and musty labels. Coats still hung in the boiler room.



him a discount on the bottles with the labels a little askew."

He paused in the bottling room of the brewery. The floor was a sea of rusting caps and yellowing labels. He knelt to sift through the debris.

"Guess these are sort of collector's items these days. I heard people were taking these old labels and glueing them on empty bottles. They go for a couple dollars apiece at collectors shows."

He shook his head and pitched a handful of labels onto the floor, where they scattered and disappeared in the multitudes. Like the building itself, Sebewaing has changed little over the last century. A sizable number of its 2,050 residents still farm, and sugar beets still are the money crop.

Sebewaing was founded by German immigrants, and some of that influence remains, along with a good deal of small-town pride. It may be the pride more than anything that contributes to an unwillingness to say much about the last days of the brewery, when hard lines were drawn between the locals and the out-towners.

"If you want my opinion," said Fred Leskowich, "I think it was done in by those city folks."

Otto Thede started with the brewery in 1933 and, during the next 33 years, ran its bot-

tling house, acted as brewmaster and became the company's last president.

One finds him in an old warehouse, once owned by the brewery, that he uses as a workshop. He wears overalls with an open jacket and a fishing hat set low on his brow. He is in his mid-70s, an active man with a passion for hunting and fishing.

"It's all over now," he says. "The brewery's been closed for years. Every time somebody writes something about it, we get folks coming up here, breaking the windows in the place, and rummaging about. It's all foolishness, because there's nothing left there now. I never go around the place anymore."

Thede was responsible for the pheasant depicted on the brewery's bottles and advertisements, and he personally painted the 14-foot version on the building. "I came up with the pheasant because Michigan's always had a lot of hunters. I figured if we could just sell every hunter a case of beer a year, well, I figured we'd do OK."

Thede gets off his stool in the cluttered warehouse and rummages through the shelves, returning with an old label of Sebewaing Sport.

"I got a lot of compliments on this one. You see, I incorporated the pheasant along with a duck and goose in flight. It went over real well. It was a real sportsman's label."

Thede is a proud man, the son of German immigrants and a man who has spent half his

life brewing, bottling and selling beer. It is a subject he knows well, but it brings painful memories.

"I figure I lost about \$100,000 on that brewery, and now all that's left are some old labels," he says.

Sebewaing Brewing Co. was among a stubborn but now almost extinct species of Michigan breweries. Detroit alone had 23 at the turn of the century. By the end of World War II, there were 63 in the state. Only a handful remained by the time the Sebewaing brewery closed.

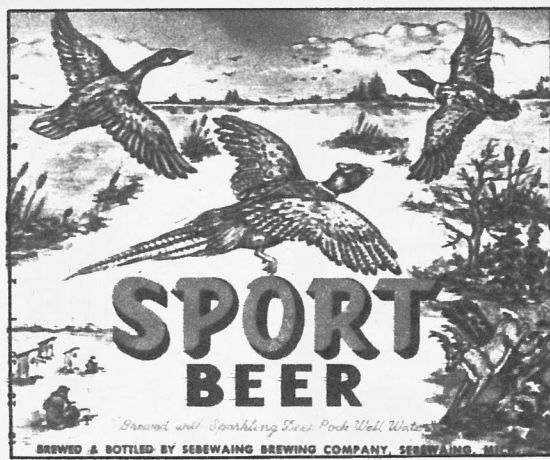
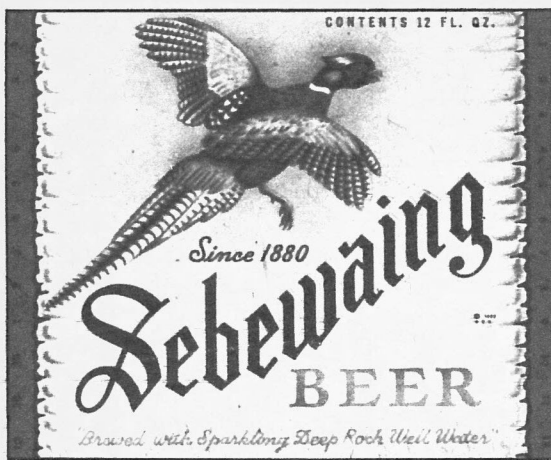
From its incorporation in 1933 until the early 1960s, the Sebewaing brewery showed modest but steady profits, selling a quality, low-priced beer. While other brands in the '60s sold at \$3.75 to \$4 a case, Sebewaing remained at \$2.75 to \$2.90.

"The brewery had always been part of Sebewaing," says Thede. "Even after it was incorporated, everybody in the company owned some stock, along with a good deal of folks in town."

Although it remained essentially a small business, employing at its height only 35 people, Sebewaing beer was found on the shelves of stores and taverns throughout the state.

"Our beer put Sebewaing on the map," says Thede. "A lot of folks never would have heard of this town if it weren't for the beer."

BREWERY ▶



BREWERY

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Thede believes the end of the brewery began in the early '60s, when company President R.W. Mast sold his controlling interest.

The new investors were Detroit area people led by attorney William E. Francis and Kenneth Chappell, who became the board chairman and president, respectively.

The company was renamed the Michigan Brewing Co., a change that didn't sit well with residents. New brands were introduced, and the brewery soon began making Pride of Michigan beer.

But the conflict went deeper than names and brands. There was a feeling among residents that their brewery had been taken from them, wrested away in a shuffling of papers.

Change had always before come slowly in Sebewaing, and pride in tradition had been sown into life like seeds at spring planting, over decades and generations.

To make matters worse, the brewery began losing money rapidly. As Thede puts it: "They were supposed to be hotshot business people, but they didn't know beans about brewing beer."

Other Sebewaing residents and former stockholders are equally direct in their assessments. Over beers at the Old Heidelberg tavern, there have been mumbled accusations about mismanagement and extravagant expense accounts.

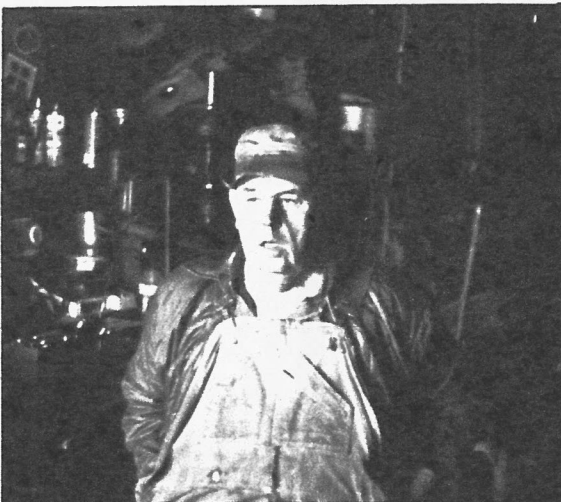
"They fleeced it," says Frank Taschner, a 30-year brewery employee.

On March 17, 1965, Francis and Chappell wrote to stockholders, admitting that "management does not feel it has a satisfactory solution as to how the brewery can be operated profitably."

They proposed that the brewery be closed and its assets and trademarks sold to the Buckeye Brewing Co. of Toledo, Ohio. Confident the deal would be accepted, and wielding 10,000 shares, they called a meeting March 20.

But the out-of-towners hadn't counted on residents and stockholders launching a "Save the Brewery" campaign and hiring Detroit attorney Alfred E. May.

At the crowded meeting, Chappell read the sale proposal and voted management's 10,000 shares in favor of it. Moments later, to cheers and shouts, May presented proxy cards for



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42,000 shares that residents had turned over to him. He offered those shares against the sale, and another 1,092 no votes were cast personally by stockholders.

May called for the resignation of Francis, Chappell and the board of directors. He was ruled out of order by Chappell, but it was clear that lines had been drawn in a proxy war.

Next morning, the 7 a.m. brewery whistle announcing the start of the first shift was silent. The board had voted to close the brewery indefinitely.

At the annual meeting in April, shareholders fighting to keep the brewery in Sebewaing — by then 53,819 votes strong — voted out the president and board. Otto Thede was elected president and general manager by a new board dominated by residents.

The brewery reopened in June, but its three-month shutdown had cost it dearly. Distribution had been at a standstill. Major outlets had turned to other sources, while over-aged beer sat in the storage tanks.

"Once a business is closed, it's tough to make a go of it again," says Thede. "We tried to keep the place going, but it was just too late."

In July 1966, the brewery — once again called the Sebewaing Brewing Co. — closed for the last time, having filed for bankruptcy in District Court in Detroit.

Long before the brewery's troubles began, in the days when Sebewaing's streets were paved with dirt, wooden kegs filled with brew would be rolled through the brewery's double doors onto horse-drawn wagons.

Deliveries were made to the town's six taverns, and then the wagons continued up East

Main to the railroad station, where the kegs were put on freight cars heavily laden with huge chunks of ice cut from the eastern shore of Saginaw Bay. Sebewaing's finest would soon be bound for Saginaw, Flint and Detroit.

German-born Erwin Maetschke was the brewery's chief engineer in the '30s and '40s. He is in his mid-70s today, but remembers well those years.

"We made a beautiful beer here in the beginning," he says, recalling the company's first brewmaster after Prohibition, Albert Holmer, whom he still refers to as the Old Man.

"He was a hard one to work for, but it was only because he cared so much. He came from the old school, and when he said the temperature in the brewing tank had to be 81 degrees, you could count on him crawling up there to check it. If he found it a degree off, we all had hell to pay. It had to be 81 degrees, no more and no less."

Maetschke thinks quality declined after Holmer left in the early '40s. "They wanted him to use cheaper hops and malt, but he wouldn't brew with anything but the best."

Even before the ownership battle, Maetschke says, little things had hurt the brewery. "We'd made some concessions in our quality to remain competitive. And our wells, they weren't as pure as they once had been."

Unable to save their brewery 15 years before, townspeople gathered last spring to salvage what pieces of it they could. Only a couple walls are standing today.

The Junior Chamber of Commerce has made plans to erect a monument in the village park. The memorial will be constructed with 3,000 bricks from the brewery, and Jan Wenzel, a local graphic artist, will repaint the pheasant as it appeared on the brewery building. To raise money for civic projects, the Rotary Club is selling a kit that contains a brick, a beer label and a history of the brewery.

Sebewaing survives, of course. The Old Heidelberg no longer has Golden Pheasant on tap, but it does a reasonably good business on Friday nights, when pickups fill the parking lot and farmers troop in from the fields.

Life goes on, a season at a time. There are good sugar beet crops and bad sugar beet crops. Just as there are good beers and bad beers, says Otto Thede.

"When you put your whole life into something, it's heartbreaking to see it die," he says. "But I'd rather have seen the place close down than have had to face the possibility of seeing Sebewaing Beer being made someplace down in Ohio."