

Rediscovering Milwaukee's historic breweries

Part I: Milwaukee's downtown breweries

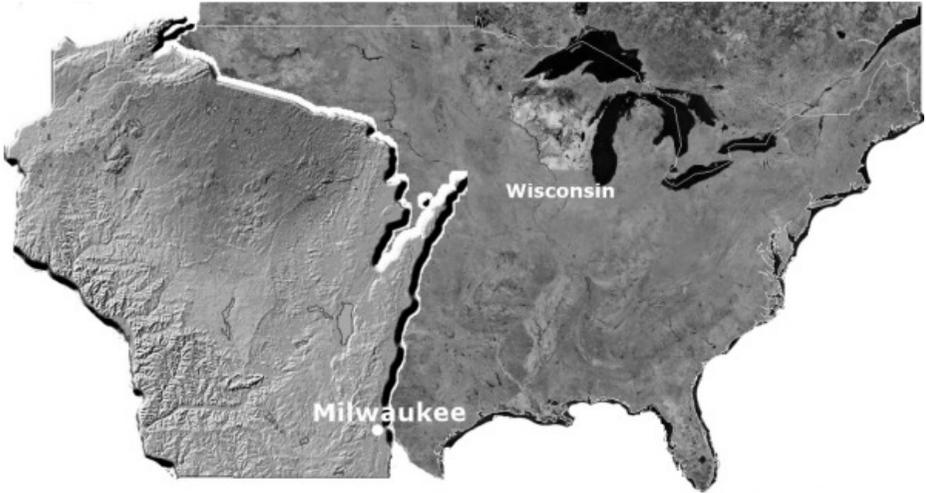
Kevin M Cullen

When you mention Milwaukee, one association in particular comes to mind, beer. This is because Milwaukee, Wisconsin once boasted the largest production of beer than any other city in America and indeed the world. As an agricultural and industrial hub on Lake Michigan for more than a century and a half with a thirsty population of ethnically proud beer lovers, Milwaukee was well poised to conquer the American brewing industry. What many people do not know however, is that this city has seen more than 100 brewing companies come and go over the past 170 years and unfortunately the original breweries as well.

Therefore, as part of the Distant Mirror Archaeology Program at Discovery World (a science and technology museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin) I am attempting to rediscover this brewing legacy through urban archaeological expeditions. My forays into Milwaukee's brewing heritage began as an outgrowth from an ongoing brewing seminar I teach called 'Ale through the Ages: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Brewing'. As one can imagine, these programs have proven to be a popular way for an enthusiastic and proud community of beer aficionados to

congregate in solidarity as we investigate ancient and traditional alcoholic beverages around the world. Hence, it was a logical and easy leap to get this eager public on board to rediscover their own city's brewing legacy.

Therefore, the first of what will be four 'Legacies of Milwaukee Brewing' tours took place on 17 April 2010. It was decided given the breadth and scope of this city's brewing heritage, that we would focus our first tour on the historic and contemporary breweries of downtown Milwaukee. With Calvin at the helm of a full motor coach bus, Leonard Jurgensen as the Milwaukee brewery historian and I as the archaeological tour guide, we made our way to one of Milwaukee's first brewery sites at the end of Clybourn Street (formerly Huron Street) and Lincoln Memorial Drive (formerly the Lake Michigan shoreline) at 10am. Known as the Milwaukee Brewery and later the Lake Brewery, it was started by three Welshmen, Richard G Owens, William Pawlett and John Davis in 1841; although most sources erroneously attribute it as starting in 1840. The brewery first began brewing ales, porters and whisky in a five barrel wooden box lined with copper. By



Figures 1. Location map showing the position of Wisconsin and Milwaukee.

1845, Owens bought out his partners and renamed the brewery, the Lake Brewery, though it was often referred to as the Owens Brewery. By 1864 the business was sold to MW Powell & Co of Chicago where they continued brewing until 1880. By 1881 the brewery was demolished for an expanding railroad yard. Presently the site consists of the Milwaukee County Transit bus garage with a rooftop garden. It was on this rooftop garden with a commanding view of Lake Michigan where we sampled a special brew I made in commemoration of the occasion called 'Old World Welsh Ale'. This all-grain strong ale with hints of smoked barley is in the style of a Scotch Ale meets a British Bitter, a fitting beverage to toast to Milwaukee's pioneer brewers.

The second stop on this downtown Milwaukee brewing heritage tour brought us to the Milwaukee Grain Exchange building on Michigan St. designed by the esteemed architect Edward Townsend Mix in 1879. For more than 50 years preceding WWII, this building with its ornately decorated Victorian interior was where the global price of wheat was established inside an octagonal trading pit. This trading pit set the precedence for other trading pits throughout North America. Today, the restored opulent three-story trading room is a testament to Milwaukee's industrial and agricultural wealth during this period and how the brewing industry as a result benefited from this global commodity exchange.

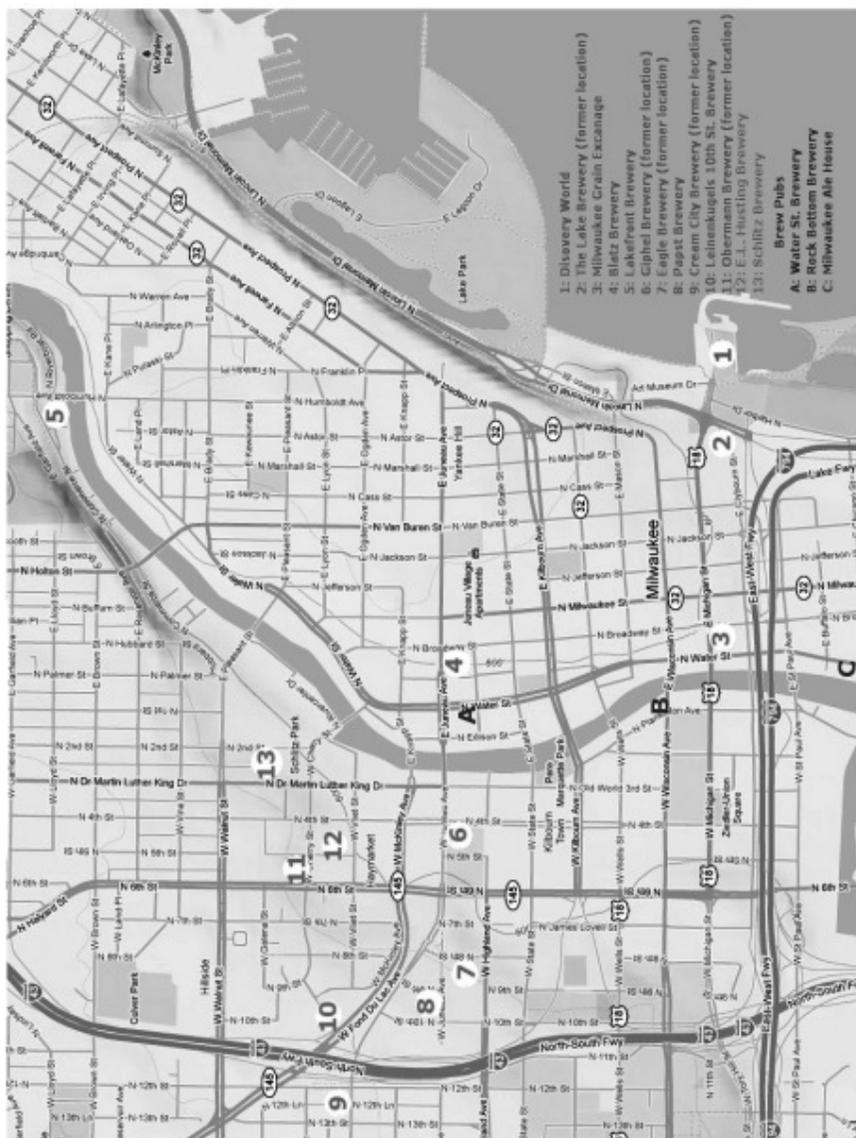


Figure 2. Location map showing the positions of Milwaukee's downtown breweries.

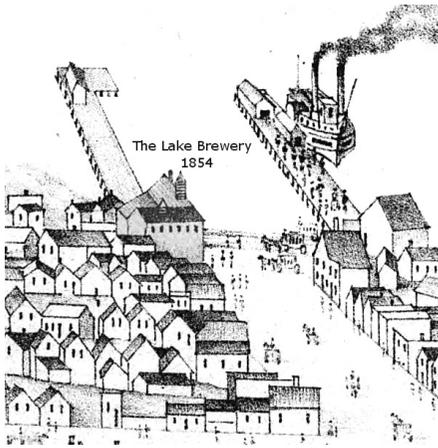


Figure 3. The Lake Brewery (shaded) as pictured in the mid 19th century.

Moving along Broadway Street, we paid a visit to the Blatz Brewery complex, which has since been converted into condominiums. We disembarked from the bus and walked the perimeter of the complex to get a sense of the exterior features of the former brewery. While the original brew house is now gone, we stood on the spot of where the massive kettles once stood and marvelled at the immense size of this former brewery. The origins of the Blatz brewery can be traced to 1846 when Johann Braun opened the City Brewery on Main and Division Streets (N Broadway and E Juneau Avenue). After Braun died his former Bavarian braumeister, Valentin Blatz - who had by then established his own brewery on Market Street in 1850 - married his late boss' widow and merged the two businesses in 1851. In 1875 he contracted to have part

of the brewery's output bottled, and soon 2,000 bottles a day were being distributed. In fact, Blatz was the first brewery to establish, own and operate their own bottling department in the city. The Blatz brewing interests were incorporated in 1889 as the Val Blatz Brewing Company with a capitalization of \$2,000,000. The next year (1890) Blatz took the top award at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Blatz historically celebrated beers included: 'Tivoli,' 'Wiener,' 'Pilsner,' 'Lager' and 'Muenchener. In 1891, Valentin Blatz sold his interests to a group of London financiers known in brewing circles as 'the English Syndicate.' Three years later Valentin Blatz died and was buried in one of North America's largest above ground mausoleums in the Forrest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee. The end of the Blatz Brewing legacy came in 1959 when the brewery was bought by the Pabst Brewing Co Today however, the Blatz beer label is still being produced by the Miller Brewing Co in Milwaukee, WI.

Our next stop was at the contemporary Lakefront Brewery located on Commerce Street where Jim Klisch (former owner and co-founder of Lakefront Brewery) welcomed us in while Russ Klisch (president and co-founder of the brewery) poured each participant a fine micro-brewed beer of their choice. After a brief history of the brewery, Jim led the group on one of Milwaukee's highest rated brewery tours, ripe with colourful commentary on the brewing process and insights into their 'Frankenstein' brewing equipment.



Figure 4. A 19th advertisement for Blatz's brewery.

By this time it was getting on towards 11:45am and we had lunch to get to at the Best Place in the historic Pabst Brewery. This was not before we had a chance to see the remnants of the old beer rail line outside Lakefront Brewery. This wooden rail trestle is all that remains of the original 'beer line', which between the 1870s and 1960s was considered one of the busiest railroad spurs in the world, carrying thousands of wooden 'reefer' railcars filled with lager beer from the

Blatz, Pabst and Schlitz breweries downtown. Most of the original rail corridor has since been converted for pedestrian use.

As the motor coach rolled west along Juneau Ave. we passed the site of the former Gipfel Brewery on the SW corner of 4th Street and Juneau Avenue (formerly Chestnut Street). In 1843 David Gipfel purchased the lot and likely began brewing on this site by 1844. By 1849, David died and was considered the



Figure 5. The old Gipfel Brewery.

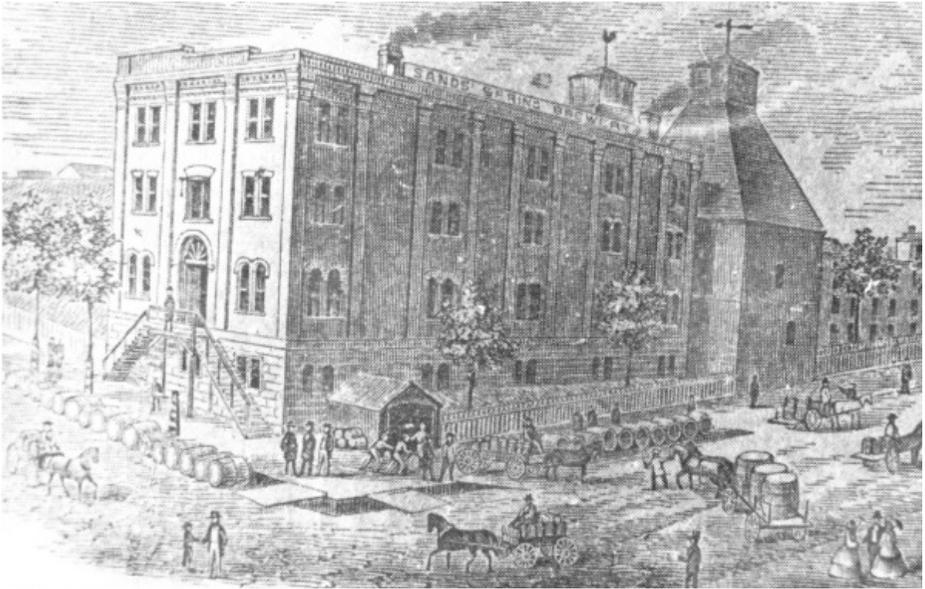


Figure 6. The Sand's Spring brewery from an illustration dated 1863.

wealthiest German brewer in Milwaukee at the time. Two years later in 1851, David's eldest son Charles assumed ownership of the family business and renamed it the Gipfel Union Brewery, where he brewed primarily weiss beer. In 1853 he built a three story 'cream city brick' saloon and boarding house fronting Juneau Avenue, behind which stood the original wood-framed brew house. Between the 1860s and 1880s the brewery was producing between 40 and 100 barrels of 'white beer' (weiss bier) annually. Yet, by 1894 the brewery permanently shut down due to increased competition. Since then, the building was home to a variety of businesses, including

soap-making, harness manufacture, leather goods and restaurant supplies. In 2007 the federal-style structure representing Milwaukee's oldest surviving brewery at the time was relocated one block to the east where it sat undeveloped before it was demolished on account of lack of funding in late 2009. This benign neglect of the Gipfel structure is a true shame and one that all parties involved should be taken to task over.

Four blocks west of the Gipfel Union Brewery site on the NW corner of 8th Street and Highland Boulevard is the location of the former Eagle Brewery. Construction began in 1842 by Robert

Baker, who soon transferred the property to William Miller that same year due to health reasons. In 1843 William Miller along with business partner William Pawlett (formerly with the Milwaukee Brewery), took this new brewery into production. In 1845 Levi Blossom, a banker and land speculator bought out the debt-burdened brewery and appointed his brother Alonzo to the brewing operation, where he brewed exclusively ales, in particular Scotch Ale and their well known 'Blossom's Badger Ale.' On 9 November 1853 the brewery burned down with arson as a suspected cause. A year later, the brewery was rebuilt and operated under new ownership by Matthew Middelwood, Pearson Gibson and TT Lunn. By 1859 the brewery was renamed the Sands Spring Brewery after it was sold to Chicago brewer John Sands. The brewery went into new ownership by Franz Falk, Frederick Goes and William Gerlach in 1862 and by 1866 the brewery was converted into an exclusively malting operation. The former brewery continued as a malt house until 1906 when the building was demolished and later sold to the expanding Pabst Brewing Company, where they eventually built a distribution warehouse on the site in 1977.

At this stage on the tour we had reached the sprawling redevelopment of the Pabst Brewery complex, in time for our lunch at Best Place. We were greeted by Jim Haertel, owner and developer of this original castle-like gift shop and former office of Captain Frederick Pabst. While inside the beautifully fresco-laden

rathskeller, we ate a German-themed catered lunch while washing it down with, what else, but Pabst Blue Ribbon. From here we were led out into the brewery grounds by Michael Murvis and Dan McCarthy who represent Towne Investments that are overseeing the redevelopment of the brewery complex. Mike and Dan were very kind to show us through a handful of buildings on the property, including the vacant bottling plant, the abandoned Methodist church and brew house with the upper works of the six massive copper kettles still intact. We were told they hope the brew house will be incorporated into the lobby of a grand hotel some day.

The origins of the Pabst Brewing Company can be traced to 1844 when the Best family of Jacob Sr, Jacob Jr, Charles, Phillip and Lorenz Best built their small brewery on a hill overlooking the Milwaukee River. Here they made rye whisky, bourbon, porter, ales and lagers. Charles and Lorenz would eventually leave the family brewery and open the Plank Road Brewery, which would later become the Miller Brewery. In 1858, Phillip Best took over the brewery on 11th and Chestnut Street (Juneau Avenue) and by 1863 he renamed it the Empire Brewery. A year later Phillip hired Emil Schandain and Captain Frederick Pabst, both of whom would eventually marry Phillip's daughters and take the helm of the Phillip Best Brewing Company. In 1866, Phillip Best retired from the business and transfers the primary responsibilities to Frederick Pabst, who by 1873

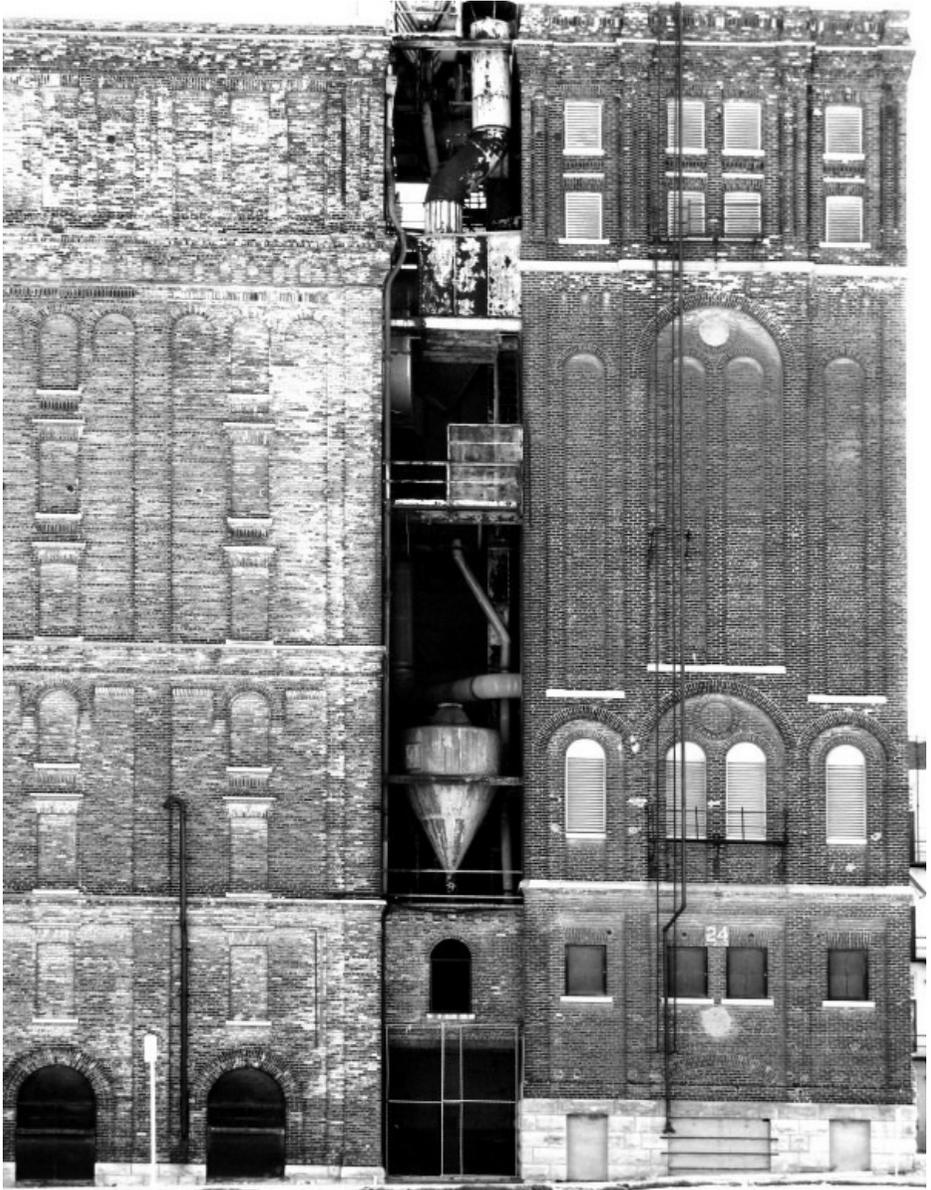


Figure 7. Exterior of the Pabst brewery.



Figure 8. Interior of the Pabst brewery.

became president of the brewery. During this time, the Empire brewery was brewing more than 100,000 barrels per year, more than any other brewery in North America. In 1889, a year after Emil Schandain died; Pabst renamed the business to the Pabst Brewing Company, while maintaining the letter B in the logo in honour of the Best name. By the 1890s the brewery covered almost 10 acres, with a capacity of 1,500,000 barrels per year making it the largest beer producer on the planet. Over the decades the brewing company would continue to lead North America in beer production until 1996 when the brewery shut down and

the corporate headquarters moved to Texas. Today the Pabst Blue Ribbon label is still being brewed by Miller Brewing Company, however the former Empire brewery is undergoing a major revitalization for mixed business use.

After the bus pulled out of the Pabst Brewery complex, we were off to visit the site of the former Cream City Brewery located nearby on the NE corner of 13th and Cherry Street. This brewing company began in 1853 when George and Conrad Wehr built their brewery at the same location. After several ownership changes, it became the John Beck West Hill Brewery



Figure 9. Cream City Brewing Co, lithograph. ©Milwaukee Public Library.

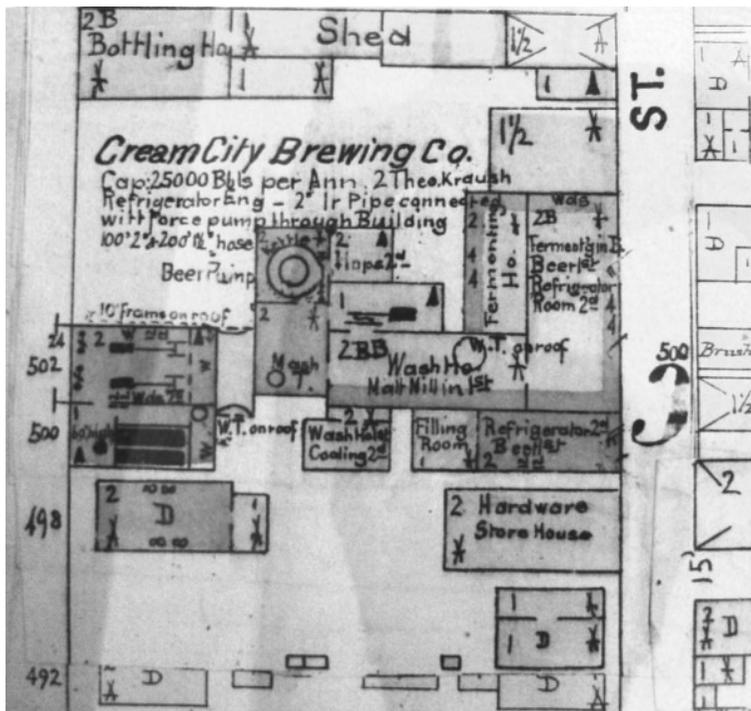


Figure 10. 1876 Rascher fire insurance map of Cream City Brewing Co.
©Milwaukee Public Library

in 1861 after John Beck bought out his partner Stephen Weber. It operated as the John Beck West Hill Brewery until 1879 when it was sold to William Gerlach (Sands Spring Brewery maltster) who renamed it the Cream City Brewing Company. The brewery quickly expanded during the 1880s brewing over 25,000 barrels per annum. The brewing company survived prohibition (1920-1933) by operating as the Cream City Products Company. However, by 1937 the brewery was foreclosed by its creditors and the

buildings sat vacant until the late 1940s when it was demolished to make way for a department store parking lot. Today the sole remaining structure from this former brewery is the 25,000 square-foot horse stables built in 1910 that once housed more than 40 horses to pull the beer wagons.

Across Interstate 43 lay the tenth destination on this downtown brewing history tour, namely Leinenkugel's 10th Street Brewery which assumed brewing rites

there in 1995. Master brewer and facility manager Gregory Walter met us at the gate for a rare tour of his brewery. As the group were treated to a newly brewed yet-to-be released 'mystery beer' in the hospitality room, Greg gave an overview of Leinenkugel's history which began in 1867 in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. We were then guided into the brewery where we were allowed to see their state-of-the-art operation that is rarely viewed by the public, as well as being treated to samples of beer straight from the fermentation tanks.

Soon it was on to the oldest complete standing brewery structure in Milwaukee, the EL. Hustung Brewery, whose name is

still embossed along an upper cornice of the cream city brick building, which incidentally is now home to Great Lakes Archaeological Research Center, a former employer of mine. This brewery and soda factory was established by Eugene Louis Hustung in 1877 on the eastside of 5th Street between Cheery Street and Vliet Street. In 1884 EL Hustung was brewing weiss beer in an eight-barrel brew kettle and bottling in stoneware bottles. He continued to brew sodas and beer here until he died in 1916, after which sodas became the primary beverage of production during prohibition. Following Prohibition in 1933 the facility became a distribution plant for beer and liquor until it shut down in 1970.

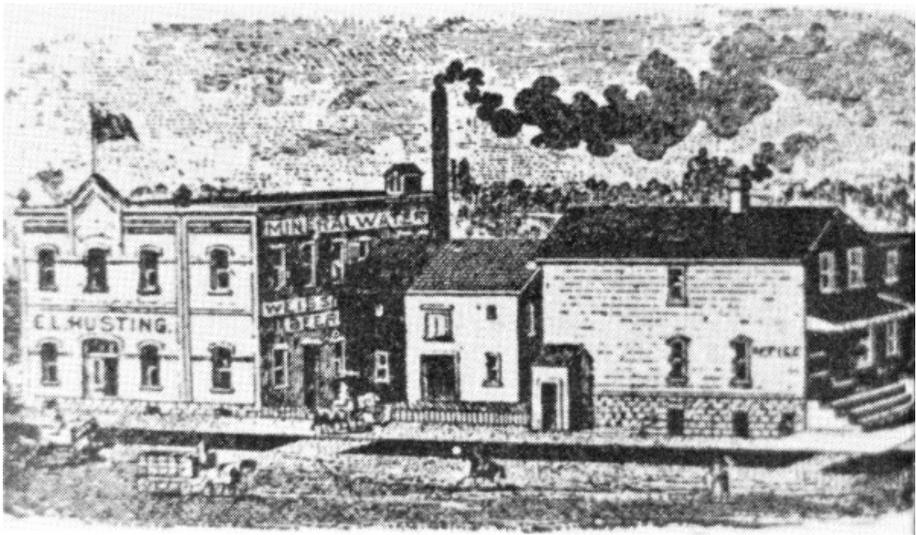


Figure 11. EL Hustung Brewery, 1893.

A block away on the NW corner of 5th Street and Cherry Street is the site of the J Obermann Brewery. Established as the Germania Brewery in 1854 by Jacob Obermann, they brewed 'Standard', 'Weiner' and 'Extra Brew' styles of beer. By 1880 Jacob Obermann and his sons were brewing 30,000 barrels of beer per year, making it one of the largest beer producers in Milwaukee until Jacob died in 1887. In 1895 after being unable to recover from debt, the J Obermann Brewing Company was sold to Phillip Jung. Three years later, the Jung Brewing Company built a bottling plant across from the brewery (which still stands today) and he remained in business until 1920 when prohibition struck. Up until 2008, the original brew house was still standing, however after years of neglect it was demolished and is currently a vacant lot. Prior to the tour, I used ground penetrating radar around the perimeter of the brew house to determine if the sub-cellars were still detectable; as it turned out they are, some four meters below street level.

Finally, our last stop on this inaugural Legacies of Milwaukee Brewing Tour would be the Schlitz Brewery complex. As we pulled along side the former brewery stables, it is still possible to see the horse head carvings and stable sign embossed on the exterior façade. We disembarked beside the former wash house and made our way into the old Brown Bottle bar, which is now home to an Italian restaurant, where everyone was treated to a bottle of Schlitz each.

Taking these out into the courtyard we were able view into the brew house windows. Unfortunately we were denied access to the 1890 brew house because of the dangerous condition of the interior, which is in serious disrepair. If this structure is not stabilized soon, I fear it too will succumb to the sad fate of so many other Milwaukee breweries.

The history of the Schlitz Brewing Company began in 1849 when August Krug opened his eponymously named small brewery and saloon on 4th Street and Chestnut Street (Juneau Avenue today) across from the Gipfel Union Brewery where he brewed about 500 barrels a year. Two years after August Krug died in 1856, his bookkeeper Joseph Schlitz married the widow Anna Marie Krug and built a new brewery at its current location on 3rd Street under his name in 1871. In the same year, following the Great Chicago Fire, the Schlitz Brewery sent shiploads of beer to Chicago, which helped to galvanize Schlitz as 'The Beer that made Milwaukee Famous.' On 7 May 1875 Joseph Schlitz died on the steamship *Schiller*, off the southern coast of England (Lands End, Cornwall) at which point management of the brewery was taken over by August Krug's nephews, the four Uihlein brothers: August, Alfred, Henry and Edward. The name of Uihlein figured prominently in the evolution of the Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company, which was organized with a capitalization of \$200,000 in 1874. After Schlitz's death, Henry Uihlein became president, Alfred, the brew master, and



Figure 12. The Schlitz Brewery.

August owning the majority of the stock, ruled by common consent under the unassuming title of 'Secretary and Treasurer'. By 1890 output was nearly half a million barrels. In 1902 the output of the Schlitz Brewing Company surpassed that of Pabst, a supremacy it maintained until the Prohibition era. The company was capitalized at \$12,000,000 in 1903. In 1948, Schlitz brewed an estimated 4,000,000 barrels, more than any other brewery in the world at that time. The company flourished through the 1970s, being ranked as the number two brewery in America as late as 1976. However, attempts to cut costs in the brewing process by using a high-temperature fermentation led to inferior tasting beer. In 1982 the Joseph Schlitz Brewing Co was acquired by Stroth Brewery Co of Detroit MI. In 2008 Schlitz began brewing its original 1960s recipe to popular appeal.

Alas, as the sun lowered in the early April sky, we boarded the bus one last time bound for the Discovery World museum, after visiting eleven brewery sites throughout the day. While many of the original breweries that once dominated downtown Milwaukee's skyline have since disappeared, it is hoped that these tours begin to put these sites back on the map, while creating accurate chronologies for generations to come. In fact, this initial Legacies of Milwaukee Brewing tour acted as the perfect catalyst for additional soirees into this city's historic brewing tradition on the south, west and north sides of Milwaukee. The details from those urban expeditions will be forthcoming. Until then, a toast to Milwaukee's brewing heritage and the lasting legacy it continues to have in a city of proud beer lovers.

The author would like to thank Leonard Jurgensen for providing the historical information for this article.