Missoula and beer: a history

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When Missoula trademark attorney Bob Lukes revived the decades-dead Highlander beer brand in May 2008, he advertised a simple request in the community: He wanted stories. Lukes had already seen plenty of memorabilia from the old Missoula Brewing Company's standard brew - bottles, cans, boxes, signs, old tap handles, etc. - but the self-proclaimed beer history buff lacked the backroom anecdotes that made Highlander Missoula's go-to brew for more than half a century.

> I moved up here in '85, and I was just loving the place and the history of the place and wanting to learn more [Lukes says]. I started seeing this Highlander stuff. You go out to Fuddruckers (a hamburger franchise) and in one corner of it they've got this big collection of cans, or you're in the Missoula Club (a small local restaurant chain) and they've got that neon sign and painting … It just kind of got my fancy.

So shortly after Highlander's return at the 2008 Garden City BrewFest, Lukes hosted a small bash at Sean Kelly's, an Irish pub in the north-east of the city, with an open invite to any former Missoula Brewing Co employee. And the reverie didn't stop there. Lukes fielded stories for the next year, by letter and by email, from folks across the country. Some shared childhood memories of local businesses running contests on the radio, each offering the winner a Highlander sixer. Others recalled their teenage years working at the brewery, unloading 100-pound sacks of barley from railcars and washing glass bottles that were recycled five, six, even seven times a day.

Lillis Waylett, now of Decatur, Texas, responded to Lukes' plea with page upon page of backroom brewery history. He remembered seasoned workers packing lunches of pretzels, cheese, chips or smoked whitefish, 'anything to go along with a quart or two of beer.' Employees even had their own large pails, which they filled several times a day at a tapped keg of Highlander. Bill Steinbrenner, whose grandfather co-founded Missoula Brewing Co. after the repeal of prohibition, says beer was essentially 'part of their wages.'

The overwhelming response from a thirsty and grateful public convinced Lukes he'd done the right thing bringing Highlander back to the taps. But

Missoula's history of beer goes well beyond that signature blend of hops and barley. Montana has been a vital thread in the fabric of the nation's beer industry since the late 1800s. The emergence of craft breweries and the ever-increasing popularity of taprooms has only strengthened our devotion to that heritage or, rather, to that smooth, heady liquid so favored by local residents.

Missoula, Montana, in the western United States, in the early 1870s contained a population of just over 100, hardly enough to fill a downtown bar on a Friday night these days. Half of the existing 66 buildings had been constructed after 1869. The Northern Pacific Railroad and subsequent building boom was still a decade off, making the Garden City every bit a frontier town.

Yet commercial brewing started as early as 1874 under George Gerber, and as the town grew, the demand for beer skyrocketed. The University of Montana opened in 1893, ushering in additional drinkers, and by 1900 Missoula's population numbered more than 4,000. That's about the time barflies got an official name to go with Gerber's beer: Garden City Brewery. Like all rural communities of the day, Missoula relied on local producers for its goods and beer was no exception. More than 30 breweries statewide started up in growing communities like Philipsburg and Anaconda during the latter half of the 19th century. Bars in Missoula sold bottles delivered fresh from Garden City, and the Highlander brand officially hit the market in 1910, enjoying a decade-long reign before the US Congress passed the Volstead Act in 1919.

Prohibition spelled the end for Montana's early hey-day of beer. Garden City Brewery held on for several years, producing soda and near-beer. But just days after President Franklin Roosevelt's repeal of Prohibition in 1933, Highlander brewing operations kicked back into gear under the newly re-founded and renamed Missoula Brewing Company. The beer was once again a hit, generating fierce loyalty among drinkers across western Montana and catching the attention of West Coast beer mogul Emil Sick. Sick, the son of brewing pioneer Fritz Sick, inherited family interest in the highly successful and multinational Rainier Brewing Company shortly after the repeal of Prohibition. He spent much of the late '30s and early '40s expanding his beer portfolio, acquiring both the Missoula Brewing Co. and the Great Falls Breweries - producers of the popular Great Falls Select - in 1944. Highlander remained under the umbrella of Sick's Rainier empire for nearly 20 years.

Bill Steinbrenner never concerned himself much with the broader business interests at the Missoula Brewing Co. His grandfather, William Steinbrenner, had helped bring the Highlander name back to Missoula in 1933. But Bill Steinbrenner stuck to the brewery floor, working summers on the bottle line like so many other local teenagers. It was just another

job opportunity, he says, like timber industry or mine work - except it had certain perks.

There were just tons of people in the state of Montana who had worked at the brewery for various summers between the '40s and 1960 or so [says Steinbrenner, now 73]. One reason people wanted to work at the brewery was you could drink all the beer you wanted, no problem - as long as you didn't get drunk on a union contract.

Steinbrenner remembers the typical first-day gig for prospective employees. High school or college kids would unload 100-pound sacks of barley from railcars, before moving on to work the heavier bottle-washing machinery. Steinbrenner says the former task weeded out about 20 percent of the applicants.

By Steinbrenner's account, beer had a drastically different presence in Missoula society during the 1940s and '50s. The high cost of transporting beer long distances meant the lion's share of draft beer in Missoula was Highlander. Occasionally Steinbrenner, who says he had his first sip of beer at age two, got a taste of something else from the region. But beer was unpasteurized then, giving it a short shelf life and necessitating daily deliveries of fresh bottles and kegs.

When I was a kid, the only beers were Highlander, Kessler out of Helena, Rocky Mountain out of Anaconda and maybe Butte Special [Steinbrenner says]. The beers were all very local. It was like the dairy business. You had your milk delivered to your door, and same with your beer.

Sick's purchase of the Missoula Brewing Co gradually changed the localized character of Highlander. Signs painted on buildings across the state proclaimed it 'Montana's Favorite.' The company altered its advertising strategy in the '50s, adopting the now-familiar tartan label. Montana had already established itself as a player in the country's beer industry with Leopold Schmidt, who created Centennial Brewing in Butte in 1879 before moving west to found the Olympia Brewing Company in Washington. The growing distribution of Highlander through the Rainier network made the brand a regional favorite and further solidified the state's role in US brewing history.

However, this second wind in Missoula brewing was also destined to end. Sick began shedding his beer assets in the early '60s, among them his entire Montana portfolio. Rainier's Seattle brewery continued producing Highlander for a short time, but the brand died completely in 1964, when Missoula Brewing Co. closed its facility at the base of Waterworks Hill to clear the way for Interstate 90. The costs of transporting beer through the Rocky Mountain West and competing with national conglomerates simply became too great. One by one, Montana's other breweries folded, with the last - Great Falls Breweries, then owned by Blitz-Weinhard - shutting down in 1968.

The disappearance of localized breweries across Montana resulted in a 20-year dry spell for the state, an era punctuated by what Worden's Market (a long-established grocery store in the north east) owner Tim France calls 'brand loyalty.' Large companies like Anheuser-Busch, Rainier and Olympia replaced hometown brews with mass-produced American pilsners. Community radio contests ceased, gimmicky local beer products became memorabilia. France says Montana drinkers chose a big-name beer and stuck to it. Rainier had its run, as did Lucky Lager, each generating a die-hard following that drank for the drink, not for the taste. 'Nobody talked about Oly or Rainier or anything,' France says. 'It was just a given.' When he first bought Worden's Market 30 years ago, France sold about 6,000 kegs annually. Whether it was fraternity rush parties or a night with the guys, 'beer was the social lubricant.' People just drank to drink, France says, end of story.

Rhinoceros bar owner Kevin Head first arrived in Missoula for college in 1977, in the days when Olympia and Rainier were more widely accepted with local crowds than the likes of Budweiser and Miller. Imports were a luxury back then, Head says, something strictly reserved for those rare moments when beer was more than just a social norm.

It used to be that if you went over to a friend's house and went into a refrigerator and they had a six-pack of Michelob, you would ask, 'Well, what's the occasion?' [Head says]. Same with a six-pack of Heineken or Beck's.

So when a seeming novelty began to emerge in the Missoula beer market in the late '80s, no one knew quite what to think. Bayern Brewing introduced the city to the unique flavor of craft beer in 1987, a bold move by German master-brewer Jürgen Knöller that both Head and France recognized as an opportunity to turn local drinking culture on its head.

What I saw a lot were people who were willing to drink up and enjoy something over a longer period of time, rather than just get a glow and drink as much as possible [Head says]. They were willing to buy up and drink less.

Worden's Market and the Rhino teamed with Bayern and the Iron Horse Brew Pub - the microbrewery's partner at the time - in 1993 to host the first BRIWFest in Caras Park (the first initial of the four businesses' names made up the acronym). The event featured some 20 breweries from throughout the region, Head says, and helped expand the community's awareness of fine craft beer. The foursome eventually handed the event off to the Missoula Downtown Association, creating the annual Garden City BrewFest.

It's been a very welcome change, and it's been a lot of fun [Head says]. There's a real experience in trying new things now, whereas before, you knew what you liked and that's what you went for.

Figure 1. Big Sky Brewing Company, Missoula, Montana.

Figure 2. The bottling line at Big Sky Brewing Company.

Figure 3. Kevn Keeter, Director of Procurement at Big Sky Brewing Company, heads up the ladder to inspect the brewing process.

That change came slow at first. When Neal Leathers, Bjorn Nabozney and Brad Robinson entered the local scene by founding Big Sky Brewing in 1995, Rainier still held the monopoly on local taps. Big Sky's debut brew, Whistling Pig Red Ale, appeared at a number of regional brewfests to mixed reviews. Leathers says the culture in the west at that time didn't instill much confidence in the chances of local craft beer making it big.

We came in in that deadzone when Highlander was gone[says Leathers, who moved to Missoula from Michigan in 1990]. When we came in here, because I was already a homebrewer and into craft beer, it was great just having Bayern Brewing. But I don't think aside from Bayern there was anything I associated with Missoula beside the keggers, and even that was before my time. That was sort of the beer-drinking culture-big parties.

Head at the Rhino had already given microbrews a shot when Bayern came on to the scene, increasing the number of available drafts at the bar from three to six to accommodate local tastes. But those at Big Sky were surprised how quickly Missoula's prevailing attitudes toward beer morphed, making way for what most devout brew-a-holics hail as Montana's microbrew renaissance. Bars that once had two draft beers now had four or five, and craft beers were even bumping domestics off the taps.

Rainier was still the hot number, and in Missoula alone that was, I think, the single largest impact we had on any beer [Nabozney says]. We took 65 Rainier handles within a couple weeks of starting the brewery. Talk about a strange switch, from Rainier to craft beer.

When Big Sky started brewing at its former Hickory Street location, there were fewer than 600 microbreweries established nationwide. But the early successes of Bayern and Big Sky gave the industry a strong foothold. Tim O'Leary founded the Kettlehouse Brewing Company as a brew-on-premise operation the same year Big Sky opened. For its first few years, Kettlehouse acted as a community homebrew location, where individuals could craft their own batches of beer.

O'Leary says he'd grown familiar with the model while living in Boulder, Colorado - already a hotbed for microbrewing by the early '90s. The idea worked, until the demand for craft beer by local bars and drinkers overwhelmed the number of homebrew enthusiasts taking advantage of the Kettlehouse facility. Greater business interests prevailed, and O'Leary began using the building on Myrtle Street to market a line of brews.

Kettlehouse was an instant hit with classic American styles like Eddy Out Pale Ale. But the brewery quickly established a reputation for being edgy and experimental, implementing new-to-Missoula ingredients like hemp in the brewing process. O'Leary says local business owners proved an invaluable asset to

early success at Kettlehouse, with bars like the Rhino eager to open taps to even the strangest beer. O'Leary even credits the Rhino for coming up with the name for his popular hemp porter, Olde Bongwater.

One obstacle still stood in the way of serious expansion, however: Microbreweries could produce beer, but they couldn't legally sell pints on-site. Most breweries allowed customers to fill growlers in the '90s, allowing the growing hoards of loyal drinkers to take their craft beer home. Still, O'Leary says selling beers straight from the taproom was a pivotal marketing tool to lobby for, and represents one of the greatest hurdles the local beer industry has faced in decades. In addition to helping business, the taproom acts as a 'Petri dish,' he says, or a place to test new brews before adding recipes to the regular line-up.

We had people that just wanted to come in and drink a beer [O'Leary says]. We'd say, 'Well, we can give you [space] and you can brew your own and when you bottle it you can sample your own bottle.' But people wanted brew pubs in this state, and when your customers are asking for something, if you're a smart business person you give it to them.

In 1999, O'Leary helped lead the fight to rewrite Montana's laws governing taprooms. The Kettlehouse's growth had been hindered by the state's limitations, and O'Leary believes the brewery would not have made it without the brand loyalty generated by on-premise sales. By January 2000, after a contentious battle in the Legislature, O'Leary says 'we were able to sell the first pint beer from a taproom in Montana.'

The ability for microbreweries that produced fewer than 10,000 barrels a year to sell customers 48 ounces of beer - or three pints - opened the industry floodgates. More than a dozen breweries cropped up over the subsequent decade, including taprooms in small towns like Stevensville, Lakeside and Wibaux. According to the Montana Brewers Association, founded in 1998, Montana's 25 micobreweries produce more than 70,000 barrels of beer a year, employ roughly 200 residents and distribute to 19 states.

The sudden spike in Montana microbreweries mirrors in a large way what's happening to beer culture across the country. Craft brewers nationwide sold over 9 million barrels of beer in 2009, and 1,595 microbreweries are now in operation - the most since before Prohibition, according to the national Brewers Association.

The newness of it all, it was like a little toy in Montana [Nabozney says of the growth statewide]. People thought the whole idea, the whole concept of craft beer was just pretty cool.

Head credits the rising popularity of craft beers in Missoula partly to the interest and ingenuity of local brewers. Mostly

Figure 4. Filling barrels in the basement of the north side Kettle House, Missoula, Montana.

Figure 5. Kettle House brewer, Colleen Bitter, checks the brew process at the north side.

Figure 6. Tommy Patches, brewer, pulls a sample from a vat of reduced gluten Seeley Axe White beer, south side Kettle House.

though, he says Missoula's tastes evolved. The average citizen is more worldly these days, and most college kids have grown up with one or two brew pubs in their hometowns. Like the Rainier years, there's a shifting loyalty. Only this time it's shifting back toward the local product.

As people have come to enjoy a good beer, they've come to demand more choice [Head says]. When [the Rhino] first started, most of the places had two, maybe three beers on tap. That was it. I think you'll find now, because of the micros, that most have five to 10 on tap. That specifically is because the people are demanding it. They'll go to the bars that have it. People's expectations have changed. Their palates have changed, and they want the better stuff.

At Worden's, France says many consumers have simply grown bored with domestics. But the danger of boredom also applies to the microbrews. Big Sky, Kettlehouse and Bayern all need to release seasonals and specials on a constant rotation to stay competitive and hold the attentions of consumers.

Any of the local breweries would be the first to admit a competitive edge to the local industry. But they're just as quick to point out how vital each is to the continued success of the others.

It's a very symbiotic relationship that all us breweries have with each other [Nabozney says]. We're dependent on each other ... Competition is good. It raises the bar. It raises the expectations of all the beer drinkers.

That competition continues to spur growth in Missoula. Kettlehouse gained so much popularity in the region that O'Leary opened a second brewery location on North First Street in spring 2008, largely to meet distribution demands.

Did I ever think it would go to this? No. I would have been happy to be 3,000 to 4,000 barrels keeping my buddies in canned beer for their ski trips [O'Leary says]. It's only icing on the cake that there's a demand for it in western Montana, and in the region. We can't send beer to Billings yet because we want to make sure we don't run Missoula out of beer if the beer switch really turns on.

Big Sky, already the largest producer of Montana beer, can't stop growing either. The brewery currently distributes across most of the western United States, from the coast all the way to Minnesota. In 2009, Big Sky produced 36,500 barrels of beer - an increase of about 10% from 2007. With local passion for craft brews as strong as it is, Leathers says he's even surprised Missoula hasn't given rise to a fourth brewery. [Since this interview was conducted, two western Montana breweries have opened branch locations in downtown Missoula. And a fourth Missoula-based microbrewery - Draught Works - intends to open in an old Westside warehouse by fall 2011.]

While the mass-produced domestics won't disappear anytime soon, the return to prominence of fresh, local brew makes Missoula's beer culture seem somewhat cyclical. Though the recipe may be different, and though the beer is now brewed in Whitefish at Great Northern Brewery, the triumphant return of the Highlander name goes a long way in proving the point.

Based on the community's initial strong reception to the new Highlander, he hosted a 100th anniversary, full-on Celtic bash for the brew in July 2010 in Caras Park. Lukes hosted the second annual Celtic Festival Missoula on 20 July 2011, shortly after announcing that Highlander would appear on store shelves in a special 22-ounce bottle in August. It's the first time Highlander has been available in a bottle since 1964.

One of the Missoula beer moments that really pops out for Lukes occurred downtown on a summer afternoon shortly after Highlander's return. Lukes was cruising in a vintage truck tagged with Highlander's tartan label and caught the eye of an elderly man who, upon seeing the familiar brand name, rushed home to retrieve an old Missoula Brewing Co box.

So many people here have a story about, 'I remember that's all my dad used to drink,' or stories about their grandfather [Lukes says]. People come up to me and say, 'We were remodeling our house last year and we opened up this wall and there were 30 cans of Highlander in there. The workers must have just put the cans in the wall.' I've heard that story about a dozen times.

Clearly the Missoula community never really let Highlander go. Or perhaps it's just that sudsy allure of beer, whatever the brand. France sums it up perfectly. ‘It's the culture, man,’ he says. ‘It's the history.’

Head prefers a conclusion that's a tad more grand, though in no way overstated for those with an unquenchable thirst: ‘Beer is universal.’

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