

BOOK REVIEW

The Drink That Made Wisconsin Famous: Beer and Brewing in the Badger State

Hoverson, D.

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In 1994, Randy and Ann Lee founded the first micro-brewery in northwest Wisconsin, opening Viking Brewing Co. in a former Ford dealership in the town of Dallas. In 2010, they sold their U.S. trademark on the Viking name to an Icelandic brewery that planned to ship its Viking beer to America. Now the Lees call their business Valkyrie Brewing Co.

Their Oktoberfest celebration has been popular for many years, Doug Hoverson writes in *The Drink That Made Wisconsin Famous*, particularly when they cooked a bratwurst that was about 150 feet long. There is little epic about Valkyrie, which produces less than 200 barrels of beer per year, nor is the history ancient. However, it is details like these that make Hoverson's book an encyclopedia as well as a coffee table book.

The book itself is physically imposing, with 752 pages and weighing more than six pounds. It is generously illustrated and printed on heavy stock, thus the weight. (Jill Lepore's *These Truths* is more than 900 pages, but half the weight.) It is the long awaited companion to *Land of Amber Waters*, Hoverson's 352-page history of the breweries of Minnesota, his home state. It embraces the same format, with the state's overarching history in front, followed by details similar to those about Valkyrie.

The Drink That Made Wisconsin Famous would be a substantial coffee table book were it to end on page 353,

before 323 more pages listing almost 800 Wisconsin breweries and brewpubs, past and present. Scrolling through the book feels like visiting a museum where the items on display are described in detail.

Hoverson chooses to tell the story by eras which may overlap, so a chapter about the emergence of brewing as an industry in Wisconsin between 1860 and 1920 is followed with one about 'Milwaukee-Queen of Lager' between 1865 and 1915. It makes it easy for a casual reader, somebody who would pick up a coffee table book, to start just about anywhere. *The Drink That Made Wisconsin Famous* is not so much a history book that needs to be read from start to finish as a book full of carefully vetted history.

That includes a certain amount of myth busting. He writes, 'Much of the history of the founding of Milwaukee and its brewing industry has blended with legend, and with each repetition of the legend, the his-



torical record becomes harder to disentangle.’ He points out that in 1895, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Milwaukee’s charter the city held an industrial exposition. It included what was purported to be a reconstruction of the first brewery in the city.

The model was not the Owens brewery [which he already established as the first], however; in fact it was not even the first German brewery, [he writes]. It was the original Phillip Best brewery that had grown into the Pabst Brewing Company - the sponsor of the exhibit.

In 1981, four of the five largest brewing companies in the United States were located in Wisconsin. The state had only four other breweries, but they were four of but 19 in the whole country that produced fewer than 300,000 barrels of beer a year. Hoverson points out at the outset that there was always

much more to Wisconsin beer than just Milwaukee and La Crosse giants. Milwaukee beer became famous through consistent quality and relentless promotion, but the smaller brewers of the Badger State built their reputations by jealousy defending their local markets and building a sense of place for their products.

Not every town had a brewery, but many did. The 800 commercial breweries that operated since 1835 were located in almost 300 different cities. This book is about them as much as it is about giants, or former giants, such as Pabst Brewing, Schlitz Brewing and Miller Brewing.

There is more detail about some than others. For instance, it seems that the man who operated the first brewery to open in the township of British Hollow was not well liked. Hoverson writes,

Research by local historian John Dutcher has identified a brewery extant in 1840 mentioned in passing by an 1844 account as that of Thomas C. Jones. Jones was apparently not popular in the area and was involved in several lawsuits during his few years in British Hollow. Very little is known about Jones’ brewing, but it is known that he moved west after a divorce and a flurry of lawsuits in 1850. The brewery

may have stayed in operation after Jones departed, since descendants of the other British Hollow brewers remember older relatives pointing to the former Jones property and being told “that’s where the competition was” - a state which was only possible if brewing continued after 1850. It may have continued as an informal farm brewery, since it appears in no other official records.

It is easy to imagine driving along the backroads of Wisconsin with this book in hand, checking the history of breweries in Cecil (population 570), Hillsboro (pop. 1,417), Washburn (pop. 2,117) or in dozens of other towns and villages.

Hoverson, associate editor of *American Breweriana Journal*, began the research for *The Drink That Made Wisconsin Famous* about a year after Amber Waters was published in 2007. Eleven years later he had written a half million words. In seven pages of acknowledgments and elsewhere he describes conducting research, finding and verifying sources and other details of interest to those interested in uncovering beer history.

The footnotes for the first half of the book occupy 27 pages. In order to keep the book what he describes as a manageable length, footnotes are not included in print with the breweries in the second half. Readers interested in sources may refer to a fully annotated online version of the individual histories available at <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-drink-that-made-wisconsin-famous>.

In 2009, when Hoverson was just beginning research, a radio host asked him why a Minnesotan should be writing a book about Wisconsin beer. In the introduction he suggests there were several reasons.

But sometimes it takes an outsider to appreciate the uniqueness of a culture and to explain to others what is self-evident to someone immersed in that way of life. And beer is not just another product or source of employment in Wisconsin: it’s a way of life.

STAN HIERONYMUS