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Breweries in the Lake Superior Basin: An Essay

Russell M. Magnaghi

During the last two decades, micro-brewing has boomed throughout the United States and Canada and within the Lake Superior Basin as well, a story told recently in the *Lake Superior Journal* magazine. This thriving economic and social activity has grown rapidly and as a result we tend to forget about the breweries of the past that dotted the region and provided beer for the thousands who made the Lake Superior basin their new home.

French explorers, voyageurs, soldiers and missionaries introduced the first spruce beer to the region as early as the mid- to late seventeenth century. Unfortunately no records have been uncovered to record this early brewing history. The beer was made with new growth spruce tips, molasses or maple syrup, water, and yeast from natural sources. The French used it especially during the winter months when the lack of vegetables and fruits with vitamin C led to the terrible effects of scurvy, which could result in death. After 1760 and the end of the French and Indian War the British entered the region and continued the practice. The British army provided detailed instructions on making spruce beer to avoid scurvy. General brewing was never an important activity in the Great Lakes because the dominant fur trading libation for the French was brandy, and for the British, rum. Why carry heavy barrels of beer into the interior when high spirits were readily available? Brief mention is made in the latter part of the eighteenth century of spruce beer at Fort Mackinac. The North West Company probably either imported or made spruce beer and regular beer at or close to Fort William. An account of an Irish immigrant family living in the center of the Copper Country attests to making spruce beer in the 1850s. They had originally learned to make an excellent brew in Newfoundland. The unnamed brewster had quite a cottage industry going.

The modern era of brewing in the Lake Superior Basin began in June 1850 when three German immigrants—Nickolas Voelker (grandfather of the famous U.P. author), Joseph Clements, and Nickolas Ritz—opened a small brewery at Sault Ste. Marie. Although their operation at the Soo only lasted for a few years, the pattern of German immigrants making beer had begun. Voelker and Clements quickly moved west and opened breweries in Ontonagon and Eagle River where the copper mines flourished, employing numerous immigrant beer drinkers. This region would become the center of economic activity in the Lake Superior Basin. By 1860, of some 7,282 people in the region, 20 percent were German immigrants. By the late 1850s Frank Knivel, William Ault, William Holt, and Adam Haas were brewing, with malt imported from Detroit.

Saloons quickly developed as social centers for the laborers and miners, with beer readily available for the thirsty patrons. As a picture of the popularity of saloons in 1877, the small mining community of Rockland with a population of only 1,000 had a brewery, while Calumet, with 4,000 people, had twenty-four saloons—a saloon for every 167 people—and Lake Linden to the east with 600 people had a brewery and seven saloons. Although mine managers and religious leaders, especially Methodist ministers, tried to curb the spread of saloons and promote temperance, it was to no avail and prospective saloon keepers found ways around the obstacles before them.

Although there were many small and transient breweries in the Copper Country the growing industry was dominated by the A. Haas and Bosch Brewing Companies. Bavarian-born Adam Haas opened his brewery in Houghton in 1859 and by 1890 the brewery was producing larger and Bohemian beer and “XXX ales.” Beer in bottles was introduced in 1880. The flourishing brewery was forced to close in 1918 with the coming of state prohibition. The brewery reopened in the summer of 1933 with the end of Prohibition and stayed in business until 1954.

The other dominant brewery was Bosch Brewing Company, started by Joseph Bosch. Born in Baden, Germany, he opened his Torch Lake Brewery in Lake Linden in 1874. This brewery also flourished and sold beer by delivery wagon and shipped it in special railroad boxcars. The brewery closed during Prohibition and then re-opened in 1933 with a license from the state of Michigan. They produced an all-time high of 100,000 barrels annually between 1955 and 1961. However, as with the Haas Brewery, they could not compete with the large national breweries like Anheuser-Busch and Miller and closed in 1973, thus ending nearly a century of German-led brewing in the Upper Peninsula.

There were also a number of small breweries that developed and quickly passed from the scene in L’Anse.

The grand operation was the Upper Peninsula Brewery in Marquette, the dream of Charles Meeske and Reiner Hoch. Located to the west of downtown Marquette, it served not only Marquette but also the central Upper Peninsula. Meeske constructed a large fanciful castle-like brewery and naturally sold Castle Beer and continuously put money back into the brewery to maintain an efficient operation producing quality beer. When state prohibition came in 1918, Meeske refused to convert the brewery into a soft drink factory, as many brewers did, and closed the brewery forever. The structure remained an iconic ruin in Marquette until the 1970s when it was razed for a new bank building.

Brewing returned to Sault Ste. Marie in 1882 when a series of small breweries developed. In 1902 the Arnold Brewing Company was incorporated and soon a monumental structure rose along the St. Mary’s River. Five years later the name was changed to the Soo Brewing Company. The brewery flourished under the wise leadership of German-born brewmaster John Leonhard Stroebel. Its product was served on local dining cars of the Soo Line, on lake steamers, and to the garrison at Fort Brady. During Prohibition the Soo company survived by getting into the soft drink business and then re-opened to continue brewing until 1948.

Elsewhere along the western shore of Lake Superior other breweries developed at Superior, Wisconsin; Duluth, Minnesota; and Thunder Bay, Ontario (formerly Fort William and Port Arthur). All of these cities developed in the late nineteenth century as commercial, manufacturing, and transportation centers. Ships and railroads took iron ore, grain, and wood products from the area. As a result they developed growing populations, especially of immigrants—Ukrainians, Finns, Italians, Slovaks, Germans, and many more. In central Minnesota west of Duluth a large population focused on mining on the various iron ranges. Brewers found that the conditions were favorable for their trade. The working population wanted their product and the rail lines could take their brew to those markets.

In 1890 two experienced German brewers, Louis Rueping and John A. Klinkert, set up a brewery in West Superior, Wisconsin, called Klinkert Brewing Company. When Klinkert left the partnership in 1898, the brewery was renamed Louis Rueping Company and then Northern Brewing Company. It developed to become one of the most prosperous industries in Superior and sold its product not only in Superior but in the neighboring resort communities of Spooner and Rice Lake, among others. Later they were able to regularly ship two semi-truck loads of beer to Milwaukee. Despite being a popular brew they ran into a

bad batch of beer that gave them a bad reputation.

By 1967 all regional breweries were on the decline. The Northern Brewing Company closed in 1967 and the label was sold to Cold Spring Brewing Company in Minnesota. Again due to declining sales this brand was also discontinued, in 1995.

Across the bay from Superior, Duluth brewing also became a big industry. In 1857 a group of entrepreneurs, H.S. Burke, Gilbert Falconer, Harry Fargo, and J. Gottlieb, were unemployed in Duluth Township. Gottlieb, a German immigrant who had brewing experience, joined forces with his partners and opened the first brewery in the Zenith City, called the Luce/Busch Brewery. Over the years the following breweries and associated industries came and went: Klein & Kiichli (1859-1981), Gustave Kiene (1869-1876), Kreimer Brothers (1871-1872), Camahl & Busse (1874-1875), Benjamin Decker Brewery (1882-1884), W. Franke & Co. (1884-1885), C.J. Johnson /Scandia Bottling (1901-1906), West End Malt Ale Co. (1910-19145), and E.F. Burg (1907).

The Luce/Busch Brewery struggled through the difficult economy of the 1860s but survived. In 1865 Luce sold the brewery to Nicholas Decker who died a decade later and the brewery was leased to Michael Fink. Fink hired August Fitger in 1882 to run the brewery and within six months Fitger and his partner Percy Anneke bought the brewery from Fink and changed the name from the Decker Brewery Company to A. Fitger & Company Lake Superior Brewery. The new enterprise prospered and grew with the addition of new buildings, equipment (early ice machine was added in 1890) and employees at 600 East Superior Street.

All went well until the arrival of Prohibition in 1920, which shut down the manufacture and sale of beer. Fitger and Anneke turned to legal endeavors such as making Pickwick and other non-alcoholic beverages, candy and distributing cigars. Silver Spray was their most popular brand and they turned part of the brewery into the Silver Spray Boxing Gym. The bartender, Joseph Wisocki, bought their Brewery Saloon and renamed the establishment The Pickwick after Fitger's non-alcoholic drink, which mixed well with illegal alcohol, brought in by patrons.

After Prohibition ended in 1933, Fitger's reopened and continued to prosper. However as with most regional breweries, they could not compete with the big breweries like Anheuser-Busch and Miller and closed on September 19, 1972. Today the large former brewery is home to a hotel, restaurant, shops and a microbrewery.

In 1895 Reiner Hoch, a German brewer, established the Duluth Brewing & Malting Company and was later joined by his business partner Charles Meeske. Both men had gotten their initial start in Marquette, Michigan. Their brewery was one of the few breweries in the nation with its own malting plant, which served many other breweries. The plant survived Prohibition by changing its name to The Sobriety Company and making soft drinks. As with many breweries, the two products interacted despite the legalities. In the 1920s Fitger's bought the Lovit soft drink brand and the rights to Duluth Brewery's beer labels and produced Moose and Rex brands, the latter becoming Fitger's most popular beer.

The end of World War II saw the brewery develop and expand; its market covered the Midwest and north to Alaska. In 1951 they revived their Royal brand with a beer of 5.7 percent alcohol and the result was the Royal 57 label. The new beer became known as "the ketchup beer" because of the connection with the Heinz 57 brand. The name was quickly changed to Royal 58, advertised with the clever slogan "Make a date with 58." The brewery ceased operation in 1966 following the national pattern for regional breweries.

The third and smallest Duluth brewery has a unique history based on socialist ideas brought by

European immigrants. Three West Duluth tavern owners, Martin Smith, F.G. Sandstedt, and Michael J. Gleeson, joined forces in 1907 and opened the People's Brewery. They wanted to "resist the evils of capitalism" by not having to purchase beer from Fitger's or the large national breweries. Prohibition closed the plant in 1920 after which they produced soft drinks. Carl O. Hanson reorganized the brewery after 1933 and again it flourished. They promoted their fine quality beer with the slogan made with "Crystal Clear—Chemically Pure Lake Superior Water." Their better-known brands – Stag and Olde English 600 – found markets in the Pacific Northwest and Puerto Rico. By the early 1950s, Duluth was the only Minnesota city with three breweries, but this ended with the closure of People's in 1956. Commercial brewing returned to Duluth in 1994 with the opening of the Lake Superior Brewery. A year later Fitger's Brewhouse opened as Duluth's first brewpub and is now the highest-producing brewpub in Minnesota.

Thunder Bay, Ontario, about 133 miles northeast of Duluth, was another early center of brewing in the Lake Superior basin. By 1900 Thunder Bay, which consisted of two separate communities –Fort William and Port Arthur –, had become a rail hub for Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railways, a port for the export of wood products and grain from the Canadian wests, and a manufacturing center for paper. Its population grew and a large immigrant community composed chiefly of Finns, Ukrainians, Italians, Slovaks, and others developed. The first brewery serving the region was the Kakabeka Falls Brewing Company, which opened in 1906 in Fort William. It was created by six local businessmen— Thomas P. Kelly (wine merchant), William C. Lillie (real estate agent), and James P. Doyle, Emil A.D. MacKenzie, John Meagher, and Edwin Smith (all hotel keepers). At the other end of the big lake, in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, the Soo Falls Brewing Company, Ltd. built its facility in 1900. The story of these two breweries is tied into Doran's Northern Ontario Breweries, which was founded in 1907 by J.J. Doran and co-founders J.J. Mackey and Richard A. Fee. These three men were from northern Ontario and had great faith in the development of the region. In 1907 they constructed and opened the Sudbury Brewing and Malting Company at Sudbury, Ontario and then expanded their operation. In 1911 they purchased the Soo Falls Brewing Company, Ltd. in Sault Ste. Marie and followed two years later with the purchase of the Kakabeka Falls Brewing Company. In 1919 the company established the Doran's brewing division at Timmons and in 1948 their final acquisition was the Port Arthur Beverage Company in Port Arthur— the oldest plant in the organization, dating back to 1876.

All of the individual breweries operated under their original names until 1960 when all of the operations were consolidated under one management known as Doran's Northern Breweries. Changes took place soon after. Given the fact that the two plants in Fort William and Port Arthur had identical marketing areas and were only a few miles apart, in 1961 the former Kakabeka Brewing Company closed and the Port Arthur plant took over all production. Then in 1971 the company was purchased by the Canadian Breweries, Ltd. But the company continued to operate under the original name. In July 1977 the company was purchased back from Canadian Breweries by its employees, the first such acquisition in North America. It was renamed Northern Breweries, Ltd. and in 1979 expanded its market into southern Ontario. In 2004 its was purchased by an investment group led by Leo Schotte and major changes were introduced. Two years later the company was in a downward spiral and by December 2006 it ceased to exist. A number of its properties have been reused or destroyed by fire. Microbreweries have filled the gap left by the demise of this former beer empire in northern Ontario that lasted over a century.

A new book written by the author of this article, *Upper Peninsula Beer: A History of Brewing Above the Bridge*, will be published by The History Press, April 2015.