

Contested Memories: G. Heileman Brewery, Working-Class Leisure, and the Origins of Oktoberfest in La Crosse

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ABSTRACT

Contested Memories: G. Heileman Brewery, Working Class Leisure, and the Origins of Oktoberfest in La Crosse investigates the origins of Oktoberfest in La Crosse as a working-class leisure festival that G. Heileman Brewery management created for its employees. It analyzes the involvement of the La Crosse Chamber of Commerce, and how the Chamber and the Brewery combined a working-class leisure festival with a commercialized tourist event to showcase local businesses and products at a national level. This paper also investigates how the festival affected employee unity, solidarity, and class-consciousness. I conducted oral history interviews with past G. Heileman Brewery shop employees to determine how they utilized the festival as a leisure opportunity, as well as their feelings, impressions, and memories of Oktoberfest and the Brewery during this time. Interviews reveal that brewery workers came to regard Oktoberfest primarily as a family celebration, contributing little to worker unity, solidarity, or consciousness. Their experiences, memories, and interpretations paint a complex and intriguing picture of the La Crosse Oktoberfest and its origins.

INTRODUCTION

G. Heileman Brewery envisioned Oktoberfest as a working-class employee festival in 1960, holding the first Oktoberfest the following year in alliance with the La Crosse Chamber of Commerce. It quickly became a community ritual reflecting elements of brewery employee demographics and culture, including German cultural heritage, revelry, masculinity, and working class camaraderie. Oktoberfest quickly gained acceptance in La Crosse and it changed the individual identities and histories of both G. Heileman Brewery and the City of La Crosse. The Oktoberfest in La Crosse is one of the oldest currently running Oktoberfests in America, and spanning ten continuous days, it is also one of the longest in duration.ⁱ

Oktoberfest emerged as a community leisure opportunity at a time when the city of La Crosse encountered a turbulent labor atmosphere, a damaged economy, and a negative labor image for its employees. Through the festival, the City was able to attempt to counteract these economic adversities and develop unity and pride among the community. Oktoberfest also presented La Crosse an opportunity to reaffirm social identity and values.

While the Brewery had intended Oktoberfest as a worker release valve, employees chose to spend their leisure time in unanticipated elements of the festival. Interviews reveal that brewery workers came to regard Oktoberfest primarily as a family celebration, contributing little worker unity, solidarity, or consciousness. Oktoberfest mirrored much of the daily life at the Brewery, and it offered similar practices and activities held on leisure time in a leisure atmosphere.

Leisure and how people choose to spend their leisure time was paramount to the origins of Oktoberfest and to this study. Leisure is typically seen in contrast to work and is defined as a period reserved for play. The activity chosen for leisure or play is less important in defining leisure than just having the choice of what to do with that time. Leisure is bound closely with moral, ethical, and social ideologies, and when analyzed historically, it can enlighten the broader spheres of social, economic, and political movements and experiences.ⁱⁱ

METHODS

For my sources, I utilized the methodologies of oral history and archival research. I conducted eight oral history interviews with past G. Heileman Brewery floor workers that were employed during, or near the time of the invention of Oktoberfest in 1960 and 1961. I found diverse interviewees with a wide range of experiences, and spoke with laborers who worked in the bottlehouse, warehouse, brewhouse, and cellars. I employed oral history for

this project because it is effective in giving a voice to those groups who normally do not get their histories recorded or their stories told. My archival research consisted of analyzing a broad range of primary and secondary sources in archives in both La Crosse and Madison.

RESULTS

The idea for Oktoberfest in La Crosse originated in 1960 at G. Heileman Brewery as a private festival for its employees. Oktoberfest was a consummate festival for the Brewery to introduce. Oktoberfest has been an abiding tradition in Munich, Germany since 1803, and in 1960, German heritage comprised the largest ethnic group at Heileman Brewery. Oktoberfest fit the Brewery's largest ethnic heritage, and the timing for the festival was perfect. Early October marked the end of the brewing season, and it was the time when the Brewery dismissed all extraneous temporary summer help. If a temporary worker was employed after October 1st, they became entitled to full time pay and benefits, therefore, the Brewery extricated as much of the temporary staff as current production permitted, knowing that they would be able to operate minimally during the winter.

Oktoberfest also mirrored the culture present at the Brewery during this time. The brewery culture of the 1950s and 1960s and the traditional German Oktoberfest possessed many of the same social elements present in the saloons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The growing prosperity of the working-class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries increased public consumption in the saloons that offered their patrons recreational diversions from their daily life. In Roy Rosenzweig's *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*, he observed that the saloons of this period facilitated masculinity and camaraderie, and they acted as a social, political, and economic communications center to a nearly all-male patronage.ⁱⁱⁱ

An alternative or oppositional culture to the dominant, mainstream culture developed around this drink centered atmosphere, termed saloon culture. Frequenting saloons as a recreational activity conflicted with dominant culture because many believe it was unproductive and destructive, that it contributed to delinquency and disorderliness in society, and because it segregated leisure by gender in an increasingly family oriented leisure society.^{iv} The largest difference between the saloon culture and the brewery culture was the time on which they developed. Saloon culture developed on leisure time and brewery culture developed on work time. Despite this significant variance, the two cultures were markedly similar in form and substance.

While the culture at G. Heileman Brewery centered on work, not drinking, brewery employees were allowed to drink on the job, and many of the same elements of the saloon culture developed at the Brewery. Beer was readily available throughout the Brewery and Section 13 of the Local Union 81 bylaws protected this privilege, noting, until changes in the early 1980s, that the "employer shall make all efforts to chill the beer."^v As Bill Bantle, a G. Heileman employee from 1948 to 1976 simply put it, "If you wanted a beer, you drank a beer."^{vi}

Workers developed rituals, habits, and particularities based around drinking at the Brewery.^{vii} Drinking was a notable part of their daily work and it seeped into all areas of the job. Ronald Kendhammer, an employee of 35 years remembered one particular rite at the Brewery:

"I remember one of the old boys down there that has since passed away now, old Romey Stahl. He worked in the filter room there and I remember he'd open that door up, we'd be sitting out there taking our break, he'd open the door from the filter room and, "Hey boys, heavy on the line." Heavy was Export. Export was a heavy beer. But he'd holler, "Heavy on the line." They were running the finished product over to the government cellar, and they'd be running Export over. We'd head on into the cellars there, into the filter room with our glass and there was a little pigtail there that would cut the pressure down. You'd stick that baby in there, it'd hit the side of your glass, let it swirl around like a white tornado in there. Fill your glass up with Export right off the line. I tell you it was excellent. That's before it was pasteurized. That's as good as it gets. That's gorgeous. When old Romey hollered, "Heavy on the line," why, you didn't miss out. Off to the filter room with your glass. Get yourself a big glass of Export. Good stuff."^{viii}

As in the saloons, drinking at the Brewery was something that nearly all could share and it created a common bond; it was something that helped knit everyone together. Kendhammer remarked that, "It was quite a camaraderie down there, more than a lot of place you work. As you might image, what's better than drinking buddies? We worked together, we drank together, and a lot of times we'd go out on the town after work. It was quite a lifestyle."^{ix} John Sagen, who worked at G. Heileman Brewery for 37 years, confirmed the close knit atmosphere and stated that, "People knew each other. Everybody seemed to know each other's business. It was pretty strong camaraderie. We used to do a lot of things together with guys from the shop. It was a close knit group."^x

So like the early U.S. saloons and the traditional German Oktoberfest, G. Heileman Brewery and the drinking at the Brewery facilitated masculinity, solidarity and camaraderie, and the Brewery itself acted as a communications

and gossip hub. Through the 1950s and 1960s, G. Heileman Brewery had an all-male shop crew, which created an overwhelming milieu of masculinity like the early saloons. These men discussed nearly everything; conversations, rumors and gossip spread throughout the Brewery rapidly. Sagen commented that, "The grapevine down there was unbelievable,"^{xi} and Kendhammer said, "Rumors would just fly through the door. Somebody come in with a rumor and within 15 minutes everybody in the brewery knew about it. No other place, I don't think, had a rumor mill like we had. It was pretty awesome that way."^{xii} Oktoberfest in La Crosse, mirrored after the largest beer festival in the world, precisely fit the culture at the Brewery in 1960, as well as the brewing calendar and also the brewery ethnicity in La Crosse.

Since industrialization, many companies have offered leisure opportunities for their employees outside of work hours. Historian E.P. Thompson observed that with industrialization, the working class faced newly imposed constraints to their leisure time.^{xiii} Employers forced the new hourly wage earners to completely separate leisure from work time and they began to be subjected to government and employer interference in their leisure outside of the workplace. Workers' leisure time was a function of the prevailing economic and political system and it acted as a form of socialization for the working class in society, a way of handing down social norms and mores.^{xiv}

Companies believed that constructive leisure and sport activities held numerous benefits for employees, and in turn, benefits for the company. It produced a healthier and happier workforce that were more loyal and productive, and it was viewed as a way to combat worker militancy, insure peace in the workplace, and produce a less tense worker-management relationship. According to Robert Wheeler in *Organized Sport and Organized Labour: The Worker's Sports Movement* it was also effective in "socializing workers into pliant upholders of the status quo."^{xv} Government and company sponsored leisure was also effective in developing a sense of personal, company, community, city, or state pride. G. Heileman Brewery realized the importance and benefits of providing leisure activities for its employees and sponsored a myriad of employee sports teams and also organized annual company picnics and Christmas parties.

The official La Crosse Oktoberfest website states that the idea for Oktoberfest was accepted because in October the leaves were changing color and La Crosse is beautiful at that time of the year, and because it marked the end of the harvest season and the preparation for winter and a festival at this time would serve to be an ideal "release valve."^{xvi} The traditional release of tension through a recurring leisure activity is primarily expected to enhance socialization and integration amongst the participating groups.^{xvii}

Credit for the original idea of Oktoberfest in La Crosse is obscured and shrouded in myth. The La Crosse Oktoberfest website states that in 1960, G. Heileman Brewing Company was searching for a unifying event for its employees, and that two employees of German origin who worked in the malt house brought up the idea of staging an Oktoberfest to management. The idea developed and matured from there.^{xviii} None of the eight shop employees with whom I spoke had heard of this creation story or remembered these two men. Whether this creation story is fact or fiction is impertinent. The official way in which the organizations choose to remember the origins of Oktoberfest reflects something about the festival, the Brewery, and the City of La Crosse: their values, what they want it to be, and how they want to be viewed and remembered. The creation story of the two German brewery workers possibly reinforces the festival as a "workers festival" and strengthens ownership of Oktoberfest to Heileman Brewery. The fact that they were of German origin perhaps further validates the German festival being held in La Crosse.

Also during this time the City of La Crosse was searching for a community unifying festival. The idea for Oktoberfest reached the Chamber of Commerce, who quickly became involved and adopted the idea of Oktoberfest as a citywide festival. Oktoberfest emerged at a very turbulent and uncertain time for the economy and labor in La Crosse. Labor unions in La Crosse were vocal and well organized, resulting in numerous strikes and a tense relationship between workers and management. La Crosse workers received a "bad labor image" around the state, and large employers began to close in La Crosse around the 1960s.^{xix} Electric Auto-Lite closed in 1959 after two extensive strikes in the 50s, in 1961 Northern Engraving and Manufacturing closed, and Allis-Chalmers endured extensive strikes in 1955, 1959, 1962, and 1964, only later to close in 1969.

CONCLUSIONS

In 1961, the La Crosse Chamber of Commerce and G. Heileman Brewery worked in conjunction to launch the first Oktoberfest in La Crosse. Oktoberfest was successful for both the Brewery and the City. The City was able to create solidarity and unity among the community at large. In *The Re-establishment of Community: The Emerging Festival System of the American Midwest*, Sheldon Smith similarly discerned that the community festivals in the Midwest were initially created to aid lackluster city economies, but became institutions that bolstered community unity.^{xx} Oktoberfest also showcased local businesses while allowing workers and management to participate in the

festival on the same level, easing working tensions. The festival increased tourism, which secured more money into a lackluster economy. The City was also able to reaffirm social identity and values by stressing and focusing on particular advantageous attributes and traits in the festival and parade to try to oppose this bad labor image of the area.

The Brewery remained highly involved in Oktoberfest, which they originally had designed to be a release valve for its employees. Oktoberfest mirrored their daily work culture and drinking practices, it matched the ethnicity and gender at the brewery, and it did not interfere with the brewing calendar. Yet, oral history interviews yielded interesting conclusions into how brewery workers actually participated in Oktoberfest.

Although other groups from the community participated in the traditionally "destructive" form of leisure, including revelry and alcohol consumption, most of the brewery workers utilized this leisure festival to get away from this atmosphere and to spend time with family and friends from out of town. Bill Bantle thought that Oktoberfest was "no big deal," but he and his wife used to take the kids down to watch the parade every year.^{xxi} Ronald Kendhammer stated that the brewery employees, "never really got together as a group, we didn't go down there that way. It was always pretty much for your friends from out of town."^{xxii}

Most brewery employees did not go to Oktoberfest with others from the Brewery, so in this respect, Oktoberfest was neither a unifying factor at the Brewery, nor did it create an overall employee identity or class-consciousness. Ronald Buschman, who started at the G. Heileman Brewery when he was 18 years old, further confirmed this and stated that "Everybody went, but I think most of it was an individual family affair than it was a get together bond."^{xxiii} This is partly due to age differences, different lifestyle choices and personal feelings toward drinking in general, but the lack of unity and solidarity regarding brewery employees at Oktoberfest is primarily due to differing ideas on how to spend their leisure time.

The majority of Heileman employees used Oktoberfest as a leisure activity to depart from their daily environment, co-workers, and routines. Oktoberfest was held on leisure time in a leisure atmosphere, and it offered them a different time and place to celebrate their working lifestyle, but the brewery workers did not need nor want a leisure activity that mirrored their daily atmosphere. G. Heileman employees chose to use this leisure time and space for something different.

It was also interesting to note that none of the men interviewed for this project feared losing their job or the Brewery closing during this turbulent labor atmosphere in the city, as well as a difficult time for smaller breweries across the country. G. Heileman Brewery remained a bastion of confidence, pride, and job satisfaction. Interviewees recalled fond memories of camaraderie, fair treatment, pride in what they were doing, and respect for management. It was remembered as good pay, easy work, and a fun work atmosphere. Donald Wateski who worked in the bottlehouse recounted that, "It was about the best you could get in town. Good wages and vacations. It wasn't monotonous like a lot of jobs are. We always had some goofy thing going on."^{xxiv} Ronald Bushman who started at the brewery in 1960 stated that, "The Brewery has been very, very good to my family, and in most cases all the families that worked there. The Brewery was a good place to work, good wages, good benefits. When I took the job I figured the job would be for a lifetime. I've been proud I've worked at the brewery."^{xxv} Andy Schwaegerl who started at the brewery in the 1930s thought that, "It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I enjoyed it. It was interesting."^{xxvi} The job satisfaction, security, and fond memories were in part due to the prevalent and successful leisure pursuits enacted by G. Heileman Brewery for its employees, of which Oktoberfest was the pinnacle.

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- ⁱⁱ Max Kaplan, *Leisure in America: A Social Inquiry* (New York and London: John Wiley and Sons, 1960), 24.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 46-47.
- ^{iv} Rosenzweig, 62.
- ^v Local Union no. 81 and the International Union of United Brewery, Flour, Cereal, Soft Drink and Distillery Workers of America, the CIO, and then after 1955 the AFL-CIO.
- ^{vi} Bill Bantle, interviewed by author, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 13 July 2004.
- ^{vii} Not all of the employees drank at the brewery. Interviewees gave me estimates as high as 90% and as low as 50%. For my project, two out of the eight interviewed did not drink fairly regularly at the brewery, so this study's results would put it towards the higher end estimate
- ^{viii} Ronald Kendhammer, interviewed by author, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 28 July 2004.
- ^{ix} Kendhammer, 28 July 2004.
- ^x John Sagen, interviewed by author, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 4 August 2004.
- ^{xi} Sagen, 4 Aug. 2004.
- ^{xii} Kendhammer, 28 July 2004.
- ^{xiii} E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (Dec. 1967): 73.
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