

Local Breweries, a presentation for the Old House Society's Annual Meeting
Hike Haven, Forest Park, Feb 23, 2023.
Presenter, Rochelle Gridley.

This building is Hike Haven, a day camp conceived of by local Girl Scout leaders and built with the volunteer labor of local union men in 1947. It was dedicated during Girl Scout Week in Nov. 1948 when 700 troops of Girl Scouts were coming to Bloomington for an entire week to celebrate the birthdate of Juliette Lowe. In Bloomington Normal alone there were 1001 girls scouts in 69 troops. Imagine the 1000s of girl scouts, leaders and parents filling the hotels and restaurants of downtown Bloomington. The building was sold to the city in 2010 and became part of the park district. However, today I will not be talking about the Girl Scouts, but about a business that was located here three decades before the Girl Scouts erected this building.

The first German immigrants came to Bloomington with the railroad crews in the early 1850s. Following close behind them were whole families of immigrants from Germany. By 1855 the Germans had established a Turnverein in Bloomington, an organization that would unite the Germans regardless of their religious or political views. They built homes, schools, and churches that established the places where they would associate with other German speaking people and preserve their customs. By 1870, Germans made up about 13 percent of the population and by 1900 a third of our population was of German extraction. (Turnverein book, p 4) Germans established the first (and only) Jewish Synagogue in Bloomington, as well as German language schools, churches and newspapers. the German language was everywhere in Bloomington, but its use would come into disfavor with the Great War and violence would be used to quiet the German language, eliminating German in Schools, the German newspapers and even changing the name of the German American Bank. even before the war, however, Germans faced some resistance to their traditions, especially that of beer drinking.

When the first settlers arrived in McLean County, they found that the place they settled in was called "Keg Grove," which offended their Methodist sensibilities, so they renamed the place Blooming Grove. The Temperance movement was extremely strong in Bloomington, and, as many of you know, Normal was dry for decades. A quick survey of the book Good Old Times in McLean County for the word "beer" results in statements of proud men stating they had never taken a drop of beer or any other alcohol. Mysteriously, these men overlooked the fact that hard cider was commonly drunk by entire families in McLean County. Many families are noted to have produced their own cider. Cider was a safe alternative to water, because boiling the water and the growth of alcohol killed the germs and bacteria in the water. The tradition of cider drinking became a symbol of the election of 1840. During that election, the Whigs built cabins, carved canoes and hauled in barrels of hard cider to promote the candidacy of William

Harrison and John Tyler. Harrison had been a general in Tecumseh's war and had defeated the native Americans in Indiana, which was his claim to fame. In Bloomington one man carved a huge canoe from a single oak tree. It was placed on wheels and pulled to Peoria for a campaign event. In this picture painted by Martin Wyckoff you can even see men chasing a raccoon up a pole in an imitation of frontier hunting. The aristocratic Harrison encouraged such displays which made people think of him as a person of ordinary means rather than one of the elite.

When Germans built their breweries and advertised their wares, they were quick to pronounce the health-giving properties of beer. Julius Deitrich, a German Newspaper man, preserved the history of the breweries in Bloomington in a very brief paper. The first brewer known in Bloomington was Margraff, who built his brewery off Main Street just off Main Street, outside the city limits in 1859. IN 1862 Anton Meyer and Francis Wochner purchased the brewery from him and thus began the operation of the longest running brewery in Bloomington. Margraff continued to work in the brewery as did another brewer named Moss, and independently brewed their own beer. In 1865 there was a "Fracas" at the brewery and Margraff was shot dead by Samuel Botts, a retired law enforcement officer. The cause of the fracas and the outcome of the legal case against Samuel Botts have been lost to history. Another incident fueled by alcohol was the violent death of a young man visiting Bloomington in 1882 in a confrontation with Francis Wochner Jr. and a group of Meyer and Wochner workers. Wochner was acquitted, but the sad incident would have confirmed the arguments against alcohol.

We know very little about other breweries that were in Bloomington. There was Louis Stein's brewery off the Springfield Road from 1861 to 1875. (Julius Dietrich) Meyer and Wochner bought out this brewery as well, perhaps because it was conveniently located near their own property. Another brewery run by a man named Frederick was on Market Street near Sugar Creek around 1862 or 1863. Dawson and Parkhurst's Union Brewery on Albert Street between Clay and Olive existed between 1862 and 1863. The Steam Brewery, owned by W.T. Ragland (1864 – 1868) was on Market Street. The last two breweries, however, were Americans of English descent. They specialized in cream ales.

Anton Meyer and Francis Wochner were brothers in law, and immigrants from Baden Germany. The Wochners had immigrated as a family and Anton Meyer immigrated alone at the age of 16. After arriving in America Anton Meyer learned the brewing trade in New York and worked as a brewer for several years before he met the Wochners and married their daughter. In 1862 they were all living in Springfield, where the Wochners had a farm. Meyer and the younger Wochner heard of a brewery available for purchase in Bloomington and decided to put Meyer's skills to use. Wochner and Meyer moved their families to Bloomington and made their homes on the acreage surrounding the brewery.

The Meyer and Wochner Brewery was located on over 100 acres of rolling land, with a large pond that supplied spring water. In 1883 there was a large brewing house, two ice houses, two malt houses, a cooperage, the well house and barns for the livestock. There were at least two houses, which were described as large brick houses. According to the Pantagraph, all the machinery and equipment was of the latest design for the most modern production of beer. A steam driven pump drew the water from the pond and in the later 19th century, M&W had a refrigeration unit for cooling the beer.

At the Meyer and Wochner brewery a pond had existed or was created and periodically the brewers had to sink another well to fill the pond. On one occasion in 1868 the well drillers hit gas, which caused a terrific noise from which all the workmen fled, leaving the augur at the bottom of the well. Anton Meyer, owner and brewer, leapt to the well to recover the augur but was driven away by the sudden ejection of the augur by the force of the gas. Burning wood shavings were thrown into the hole and the gas began burning. Somehow the well filled with water, the fire continued and the well had the appearance of a bubbling cauldron. The fire continued burning for days and the Pantagraph advised readers they could go see this curiosity.

Thirty feet below the buildings and in the side of the hills were beer caves where the barrels would rest and age. Some of the caves were 150 feet long, lined completely with brick and vented to the surface. Only one cave is shown in the 1896 Sanborn map, but some of the caves were in the Stein Brewery part of the property, a half mile away from the complex of buildings.

Meyer and Wochner beer was made from Barley and hops, like most beer, and started with the cracking of the barley to make malt and then boiling it in water to create a mash. Hops were added to the mash and further boiling of the two created the beer. The Pantagraph reported that the kettle for the mash was immense and could produce 100 barrels of beer a day during the winter months. This 1896 Sanborn Insurance map includes details of the equipment inside the brewery, showing the mash tub and the beer kettle. During the summers beer production was slowed by the warm weather and was reduced to just 3 brewings a week, for a total of 15,000 barrels of beer each year in 1886. Ten years later, production had doubled to 30,000 barrels according to another Sanborn map. Once beer was brewed, Meyer and Wochner aged the beer in the caves for six to eight months. They pointed out to customers that other beer brewers did not age their beer, resulting in an inferior product.

Barley and hops were grown in McLean County, but not in sufficient quantities to supply all the needs of the breweries. Wochner owned 240 acres immediately west of the County Farm in addition to over 100 acres around the brewery, but there are no records to indicate if he grew barley or hops there for the brewery. Mr. Oberkotter and Mr. Jacoby grew barley on their farm west of Bloomington and supplied it to Mr. Spurgin, who owned a malt house on the west side of Bloomington. In 1881 George Anderson, outside of Towanda, harvested 900 bushels of

barley on 21 acres and sold it to Meyer and Wochner for a dollar a bushel, which was a better return than that for corn that year. One report stated that Meyer went as far as Canada for a supply of hops and at least one advertisement for Meyer – Wochner beer stated that they made their beer with Canadian Barley and hops.

Meyer and Wochner named their brewery the Gambrinus Brewery. Gambrinus was a folk hero associated with brewing. He was king of Flanders and Brabant and was said to be the first brewer of beer. Gambrinus is a name used for beers in Germany and the Czech Republic today. One of the beers M&W produced was “bock” beer, which is a dark lager. They advertised Bock beer as being especially good for a bad stomach or invalid ladies and young mothers. This beer was only produced in the springtime. And I have it on good authority from a German neighbor that bock beer is still consumed for an upset stomach in Germany.

In 1866 the Pantagraph printed a list of the top manufacturers in Bloomington and the amount of taxes those businesses paid. Meyer – Wochner Brewery paid the third highest amount of taxes after the C & A railroad and the soap and candle factory. To promote their business, the Brewery sold or gave away promotional items, such as these glasses in the MCMH.

Beer drinking, beer gardens and taverns were all an important part of German life. The Meyer Wochner Brewery grounds and the Stein brewery grounds were used for picnicking by the German community and hosted large association picnics every year. The Kadel band would play, and a dance floor was provided for dancers. This photo is of a German Picnic at Stein’s Grove. The band is there on a temporary stage, and a permanent summer house is in the background.

Here we have a crate and bottle from the Meyer – Wochner brewery with the Brewery name. Meyer and Wochner beer was served in local taverns and possibly other central Illinois taverns. The difficulty of keeping beer cold during transportation hindered more distant sales before the 1890s. Some taverns would accept an entire barrel of beer and then bottle it for sale in the tavern or for home delivery. Otto Kadghin sold and delivered M&W beer by the bottle. Prior to 1877 beer bottles (and other bottles) were sealed with a cork and a string or wire was tied around both to hold the cork in place. In 1877 a wire and rubber device for sealing a bottle was patented. In 1892 the crimped crown cap was patented.

Julius Deitrich, our local German historian that the Meyers and Wochners owned at least three bars: The Gem, Frank’s Bank and the Costello. But Meyer and Wochner beer was drunk almost everywhere in the city. In September of 1882 a young barkeeper at Capt. Reibsame’s saloon bet a group of Meyer and Wochner employees \$10 that he could lift and carry a half barrel of their beer across the saloon floor. Johnnie Sims was quite a small and slender young man, so everyone thought the bet against him was a sure thing. But Johnnie Sims hefted the barrel and

manfully carried it through the saloon! Such wagers were probably common entertainment in Bloomington's saloons before the advent of radio, television and juke boxes!

South Hill was dominated by the German community, its churches and schools. One important place that all Germans shared regardless of their chosen religion was the Turnverein. The Turnverein was a social athletic club for Germans. Classes in gymnastics and fencing were offered for men, women and children. In a book published locally, Velda Adams remembered how she would go to the Turnverein every Tuesday afternoon to do gymnastics for two hours.

Adolph Mols was the teacher at the Turnverein and in 1905 the German community convinced the Bloomington school district to add physical education to the school curriculum. Adolph Mols became the physical education director at the high school. Mols was educated at the Normal College of American Gymnastic Union of Indianapolis and Milwaukee, which was established by the North American Turnerbund. Once physical education was established at the schools, every year there was a large field day at Fan's Field, where the children would drill with wands and Indian Clubs to Mazurka music. An article in the Pantagraph at the time of Adolph Mols' retirement recalled the same field days as featuring up to 3000 students drilling with clubs and flags, forming pyramids and dancing around a Maypole.

The Turnverien principles were stated in an early publication: Liberty, against all oppression; tolerance, against all fanaticism; reason against all superstition and Justice, against all exploitation. In Germany the Turnverein had at one time been banned as being opposed to the Kaiser's government, leading up to the revolution of 1848 which caused the large mass immigration to the US at that time. Dr. Hermann Schroeder claimed that he left Germany because the Kaiser had put a price on his head for his revolutionary ideas.

In 1902, three years after the death of Francis Wochner Sr. in 1899, the Wochners left the brewing business, selling out to the Meyer branch of the family. thereafter, the Wochners became bankers. They organized the German American Bank along with other Germans, including Paul Beich. The Wochners thus avoided the losses the brewery would suffer when Bloomington went dry for two years in 1914 and then again in 1920 when nationwide prohibition eliminated the brewery business altogether. However, the bank had its own setback in 1933 when the German American Bank was closed by the U.S. government, along with hundreds of other banks, during the Great Depression. The Wochners took responsibility for reopening the bank with an infusion of \$100,000 of their own savings but requested that depositors accept half the value of their savings when the bank reopened. There is a letter to this effect, but how the reopening mechanics were completed was beyond the scope of my research.

As I said, before prohibition, the city of Bloomington was dry for two years between 1914 and 1916. This occurred because of a local option vote in April 1914, the 2nd year that Illinois women were allowed to vote in local elections. Women came out in force at that election and voted the city dry. In the fall of 1913, 25 Southern Illinois cities had the local option on the ballot and 24 of those cities became dry as a result. When Bloomington voted on the issue in April of 1914 46 Illinois counties became entirely dry.

The women had shown their ability to organize and educate voters. Clubs provided instruction for the women with sample ballots that identified the candidates who supported a dry city. On election day 6,600 men turned out for the voting, more than had ever voted in a local election. The number of female voters was reported as being only a few hundred less than male voters. Even so, enough men voted with the women so that Bloomington was declared a dry city.

Following the start of Prohibition, the brewery closed in 1920. In 1922 the city of Bloomington was looking for a place for a golf course and offered the Meyers \$48,000 to purchase the real estate. In 1902 the Meyers bought out the Wochner family's interest for \$90,000, so the loss to the Meyers was very significant.

The city began planning the new golf course almost before the ink was dry on the deed. Tom Bendeloe, a well-known golf course architect, who laid out the first golf course in the U.S. -- was hired and drew up a temporary golf course as well as the permanent nine-hole course. In his 35 years working Bendeloe designed over 600 golf courses. The first was -- the Van Cortlandt City Golf course in New York City. The old brewery stables were used as a clubhouse, which was extensively remodeled in 1938 as part of a WPA make work project. The old brewery powerhouse was used for a garage and the icehouse was the pro shop. In 1938 the golf course was expanded to a full 18 hole course. Remember that gas fire at the well? The same gas was used to power Highland Park Golf Course.

After the brewery closed the caves were used sporadically. During the depression two men tried to create a money-making business by raising mushrooms in the caves, but they couldn't find buyers for their product. In 1947 the caves were difficult to enter due to earth blocking the doorways but because of the interest shown by people, a park custodian, E.R. Burnett, directed tours of the old caves that year. He took Don Goodrich, a Pantagraph photographer, and Carol Tudor and Ron Stutzman on a tour as well! The caves are now sealed off and inaccessible.

The Wochners and Meyers lived in houses on the brewery property. As the city limits moved closer and closer to the brewery, the block was described as the 1600 block. The entire Meyer family lived on this block until the brewery was closed in 1920. No photos of these houses are available, but they were described as large brick houses. In the 1896 Sanborn map the outline of one of the houses, its outbuildings and carriage house are drawn. In 1911 Architect George

Miller designed a house for Adolph Wochner and his bride. The house, at 104 W. Wood was later demolished so that a gas station could be built on the property.

Although the brewery closed and was replaced with a golf course, the story of the brewery was not quite over. In 1928 Davis and Hazle Ewing built what would become an iconic landmark of Bloomington – Sunset Hill. After a long trip around the world, the Ewings returned to Bloomington with grand ideas of the house they would build. They hired the Hooten and Lundeen Architecture firm to design the chateau-like house, complete with stables and courtyard. Davis Ewing owned a concrete company in Chicago in 1929 but had owned a concrete company in Bloomington before they left on their long trip around the world. The house is constructed of concrete, but is faced with limestone, cypress timbers and brick. When the limestone was brought to the site the architects described iron shavings being thrown over the stone to age it as it sat on the ground over the winter. The tie in to this presentation is that part of the old-world charm of Sunset Hill was created with brick from the defunct Meyer and Wochner brewery buildings. Davis Ewing salvaged the brick from a building that was being demolished and hauled to his work site. You can see the bricks in the courtyard and the tower above the stables. Thus, a very modern home in Bloomington was composed of some of the oldest brick made in Bloomington.

Davis built other concrete homes in Bloomington, including his former home at Olive and Mercer in Founders Grove. Concrete was first used for building as long ago as 3000 BC, when the Egyptians used a concrete like substance. (I would note that the first records of brewing alcoholic drinks came from the area of Iraq in 4000 BC.) The Roman architecture of 300 BC and later also used a material very close to modern concrete. Portland cement was not created until 1824 in England. the first apartment building built of reinforced concrete was Built in Cincinnati Ohio in 1901. The Lafayette Apartments are another concrete apartment structure, built here in 1920. Some of you may recall that one of the homes featured on the Old House Society Tour of Homes in 2022 had visible concrete beams in the basement and a concrete floor on the first floor. Today the use of concrete in home building is not considered a green building material because of the environmental impact of concrete, but as a fireproof building material, it did enjoy a period of popularity in the early 20th century.

In Bloomington-Normal we now have a handful of microbreweries. Most of the breweries have their own bars, and some have restaurants. Others host trivia contests and live music. Like the Meyer Wochner and Stein breweries, the Destihl Brewery has become a destination with a large park like setting for outdoor dining. They also host public events like the local art sales and rent out rooms for weddings and banquets. They may not recognize it, but they are continuing the tradition of the first McLean County brewers who welcomed the public onto their grounds with beer, music, and song.

Breweries in Bloomington:

Compiled by Rochelle Gridley for February 23, 2023, Old House Society program

1859 – 1862: Margraff Brewery (later sold to Meyer Wochner Brewery)

1862 - 1922: Meyer Wochner Brewery

1868 – 1875: Stein's Brewery (Springfield Road) (sold to Meyer and Wochner)

1864 – 1867: Steam Brewery W.T. Ragland (Market Street) Cream ales

1862 - 1863: Dawson and (Lyman) Parkhurst Union Brewery (Albert Street
between Clay and Olive) Parkhurst of English heritage – specialty cream ales

Dates are based on appearance of ads in *Pantagraph*