

Understanding Regimental Beer Steins

by R. Ron Heiligenstein

[Note: This article is based on the illustrated lecture given by the author at SCI's Annual Meeting in St. Louis this summer.]

Collecting and understanding regimental beer steins need not be confusing. It just takes a little time and a little homework. Collecting regimentals entails the same fundamentals as collecting other types of steins, including: the scarcity of certain types, the appearance or eye appeal of a stein, the stein's condition and the history of a stein, assuming the stein indeed has a history.

There is another very important consideration in collecting regimentals that's not shared by all the specialty areas of stein collecting. Specifically, regimental beer steins can be easily cataloged. This is the single most important point I want to make: unless collectibles, including beer steins, can be cataloged, they are unlikely to ever have broad collector interest or a following.

It is the ability to catalog that makes collecting stamps, collecting coins and collecting regimental beer steins such fascinating hobbies. Indeed, filling-in the missing items from a list or a catalog is perhaps the most fascinating and compelling aspect of collecting anything of importance.

It's an easy task for regimental stein collectors to put together their own list by simply turning to the book on regimentals by John Harrell*, a book you can buy from most stein



Fig. 1: Three steins to the 20th Bavarian Infantry Regiment; from left to right, 1902, 1908 and 1910. Note differences — and similarities.

dealers. You can then expand on the list you've taken from Harrell's book by reviewing all the units mentioned in the "Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Card Book". You can further broaden your list of German military units by reviewing "Ruhmeshalle Unserer Alten Armee", which translated means "Hall of Fame of Our Old Army". The *Cigarette Card Book* and the *Hall of Fame Book* show the existence of many army units not contained in Harrell's book. There is also a *Navy and Colonial Troops Cigarette Card Book*, which includes, among other things, a listing of all the ships of the Imperial German Navy.

* "Regimental Steins" by Maj. John L. Harrell (Ret.), Old Soldier Press, Maryland, 1979

When you have created your list of all the old military units to determine what is rare or at least what is scarce, you simply start by placing a check mark next to the unit name of every regimental stein in your collection, those you see in the stein auction catalogs, plus those you see at stein shows and in other people's collections. Soon it will become quite clear what is common, what is scarce and what is very rare. It's really quite a simple process.

What can you expect to find regarding the mix of regimentals? In other words, what was the total number of units in the German Army and what was the breakdown by infantry, cavalry, artillery, etc.? A close look at the numbers in the accompanying table

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will help you get a feeling for what is common and what is very rare! Obviously, a stein from a small, obscure or uncommon military unit could be considered "rare".

You may have read the series of eight articles I wrote about regimentals starting in the June 1985 issue of *Prosit*. At the outset of those articles, I defined "unusual" as those regimentals whose appearance is something other than what one normally expects of a stein from a particular unit.

be alert! You may be looking at something that is literally worth its weight in gold. Remember, if you can't find the unit designation of a regimental stein in Harrell's book, the stein is probably rare. If a stein has differing characteristics, for example if it is made of glass or if it is a character regimental or if it has a double screw-off lid, you know you have something unusual. If you have a stein incorporating several of these anomalous features, you may indeed have what we call "one of a kind".

GERMAN ARMY UNITS

Years		Year	
1899- 1900		1914	
48 %	Infantry Regiments	40 %	
22 %	Cavalry Regiments	20 %	
10 %	Field Artillery Regiments	18 %	
5 %	Engineer Battalions	6 %	
5 %	Supply Battalions	5 %	
4 %	Rifle Battalions	3 %	
4 %	Foot Artillery Regiments	4 %	
1 %	Railway Battalions	1 - %	
1 - %	Telegraph Battalions	1 + %	
0 + %	Air Ship Battalions	1 %	
0 %	Aviation Battalions	1 %	
100 %		100 %	
Total = 447 units		Total = 549 units	

Regimental steins from the same unit usually have certain similarities. But it is important to keep in mind that the similarity between regimentals from the same military unit diminishes as the time-spread between the dates on the steins increases. In other words, a stein dated 1910 should look somewhat similar to another stein from the same regiment dated 1908, while a stein from the very same unit dated 1902 probably will look less similar.

To determine what is unusual, as you catalog, simply record or mentally note the appearance of steins from specific military units. Soon you'll see a pattern develop, unit by unit, and you'll develop a distinct impression what a stein, for instance from the 20th Bavarian Infantry Regiment, should look like. Then, when you see a stein from the 20th Bavarian Infantry Regiment that *doesn't* fit the pattern you've established on paper or in your mind, you will know that you may be on to something unusual. This stein will then merit a much closer inspection and perhaps considerable additional research.

If you find a stein that is both rare and unusual, you may have what we call a "one of a kind". These "one of a kind" regimentals command prices of \$2,000 to \$3,000, and even \$6,000 to \$10,000 in a few cases. So

What is important to know about a particular regimental stein and where can you get the information? From the body of the stein you should be able to learn the original owner's name, the owner's unit designation, the town or the city where the unit was garrisoned and the dates the stein's owner served his country. You can also uncover any special duty the original owner might have had while in the service, plus get a good indication of his standing (social status) in civilian life. From *the Army Cigarette Card Book* and the *Hall of Fame Book* you can find the date the regiment was originally formed and the important battles the regiment participated in, throughout history. Also, from both *Cigarette Card Books* you can examine in detail some of the colorful uniforms worn by the reservists in many of the old army and navy units.

It is important to know that traditions were a big deal in the old German Army. Being a member of a unit made famous at some battle in the "War of Liberation", or in the "Franco-Prussian War", was like playing football for Ohio State or Michigan - you just wanted the world to know that you were part of a team with a winning tradition. This unit pride was not only important during a reservist's years of active military duty, it was also a real mark of distinction in his later

civilian life. Having a feel for the old army traditions is a very important part of really understanding regimental beer steins. Therefore any books you can read on the subject of the old army or navy will be most helpful in your understanding and appreciating regimentals.

While a stein's appearance is very important, as you might expect, among advanced collectors it may not be a critical consideration if the stein is rare or unusual or both. Naturally, if you can have it all - rare, unusual and an attractive appearance, you have a real prize. Those are the kind of steins I'm always looking for! Rarely, however, is a person that fortunate. Often, there are certain trade-offs that one makes. My only suggestion on the subject of appearance and condition is: don't pass up an unusual stein or a stein to a very rare unit just because it is not tall or it has a small spider in the lithophane or whatever. You will make a big mistake if you do! An unusual regimental or a stein from a rare unit, regardless of appearance or condition, could still be a very desirable piece to have.

While the question of what is attractive is usually a matter of personal taste, there are still a few areas of general agreement. For instance, a tall regimental stein is generally considered to be more desirable than a short one (they simply display better). A bright pewter lid is more desirable than a similar stein with a dark pewter lid. Large scenes are usually better than complex or crowded scenes. Porcelain, since it was originally much more expensive and difficult to produce, is considered by most to be more desirable than pottery or stoneware. Glass steins are unusual and therefore they are more difficult to acquire than ceramic regimental steins. Custom lids and finials are better than standard lids and finials, and steins with relief bodies are more sought



Fig. 2: Two glass steins. Left, Garde Telegraphen, the Kaiser's telegraph detachment. Right, Matrosen Artillery Abteilung, a coastal artillery battery of a naval unit stationed at Kaichow, a German colony on the east coast of China.

after than steins with plain bodies.

Let me wrap up this article by shooting down some still popular misconceptions about regimental steins:

1. All old regimentals have straight sides. Most — not all; some do have tapered sides.
2. Regimentals were presented to reservists. Wrong! The reservists purchased the steins themselves.
3. All the reservists ordered steins. Only 10% to 20% did.
4. Regimentals were produced in limited quantities. Also wrong. With about 250,000 army recruits a year, and my belief that 10% to 20% of the reservists actually did purchase regimental steins, one might assume that perhaps 1,000,000 regimentals (give or take 100,000) were

sold during the twenty-five year period of their greatest popularity.

5. Mettlach military steins are also regimental steins. Only a few. Most are *military* steins, not regimentals.

The photographs accompanying this article are ones that, for one reason or other, were not included in the eight *Prosit* articles, 1985-1987. The captions accompanying the photos indicate why the steins are rare or unusual — or both.

Please especially note the stein on the far right of fig. 4, the one with the single bullet finial. It is most fitting that I conclude with this stein, my very first regimental. That stein is both rare and unusual, a "one of a kind", that my mother bought for me many years ago. She gave me this stein when I was a young student in college, obviously thinking it was essential to my education. One evening, when inspecting the underside more closely, I found a price sticker indicating that she had paid \$2.75 for the stein. Not too shabby for a "one of a kind". I think my mother had a very good eye for value ...



Fig. 3: An Austrian regimental, 1st Austrian Infantry Regiment — Innsbruck, the "Kaiser Jäger" or Austrian Alpine Regiment.



Fig. 4: Three baker's steins. Left, a stein with scenes of a garrison bakery. Middle, a tall baker's double unit stein with a very unusual lid resembling stacked bullets. Right, a baker's stein with just three names on the roster and a single bullet finial (yes, it is original) which is most unusual. I have never seen another like it.