

"It Dates from Around the Turn of the Century"

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When Bill Mitchell asked me to speak at the Convention on some topic of my choice, I had no idea what that topic would be. Finally I decided to try to shed some light on what turned out to be an almost limitless topic, but one which we all have perhaps considered at one time or another, namely: Why were so many of the steins in our collections manufactured during that approximately thirty-year period from about fifteen years prior to and fifteen years after 1900, say 1885 to 1915?

As I began to dig into the topic, I solicited the help of my all-time favorite college German teacher and friend, Dr. Henri Stegermeier, who initially introduced me to *Bierkrüge* (also called beer steins) and even uttered the magic word "Mettlach" - all this while I was a junior in college at the University of Illinois in 1951.

Together with some very inciteful suggestions and references from Dr. Stegermeier, as well as bits of material from other sources, I've come to the following conclusions which are not intended to be earth-shattering revelations but instead are intended to be considered as a few of the factors which help explain the tremendous outpouring of steins during the years in question.

First of all, the period we refer to as the turn of the century was a time of great change in Europe and America. The agricultural system that had been in place in Europe for centuries was being broken down and there were large population shifts to the cities. In Munich, for example, the number of inhabitants (that means potential beer and stein consumers) grew from 90,000 in the 1830's to 538,000 in 1900. This influx, which affected most of the larger German cities, came from rural Germany as well as from other European countries.

How does this bear on the topic of beer steins? Well, there was now a mass market in the making with concentrations of customers in large cities scattered across Germany, and the same was true in the U.S.A., where we had a similar move to urban centers. Think of the great number of taverns always within reach of the city dweller, compared to a trip to town that a farmer might have to make to quench his thirst.

Also, the total population was on the upswing, growing from about 46½ million in Germany in 1884 to about 56½ million by 1900. And with the population increase came an increase in annual beer consumption... it went from about 22 gallons per capita (men, women and children) to about 31 gallons in this 16 year period. Of course, the brewers rose to the challenge and grew in size and output, incorporating the latest technical advances. One of the most important of these was mechanical refrigeration with all its advantages of year-long production and storage. The result was more people, more



beer and more need for beer steins. Oh yes, there was a time when people actually drank out of those vessels we so carefully handle today! Imagine what a patron of the *Hofbräuhaus* would have thought of someone someday drinking beer right out of a can! Would he have believed a waxed cup?

Here in the U.S., with our many citizens with German or at least European drinking habits, the beer taps were also working overtime. In 1884 about 600,000,000 gallons of beer were produced. By 1900 we were up to about a billion gallons! Beer steins were being imported from Germany for private use and salesmen from German potteries were finding ready customers at the thriving breweries, just as in Germany. Advertising steins were being given away, some even on a yearly, dated basis. Werner Sahm would have had a field day!

Of course, the production of steins also benefited from technological improvements in machinery and rationalization of production methods, such as those pioneered by Villeroy & Boch at Mettlach. The results were better and cheaper steins for more people to afford, enjoy, and collect.



To show off some of this technology, to say nothing of art and other cultural aspects of the day, some of the larger cities in Europe and America began to sponsor international fairs. There were 11 international exhibitions and fairs between 1876 and 1904, with millions of people in attendance. The Chicago Fair of 1893 had 21½ million visitors. Paris boasted 39 million in 1900, and the proud city of St. Louis brought in 13 million in 1904. An interesting sidelight is that the Saint Louis Exposition celebrated the Louisiana Territory Purchase from France in 1803. We paid \$15 million for the Territory, but the fair cost \$26½ million to produce. Unfortunately, only about \$12 million in revenue was generated by the fair, so financially at least it was a bit of a flop. The fair did, however, have the first sizeable display of automobiles (100), and that idea did turn out to be a bit of a success. These exhibitions were wonderful places to show off the best of the production of the world's factories and the beer stein makers were not left out. Also, a fair was a great place to drink beer... surely not out of waxed cups!

Turning back to Germany, there were additional changes that, indirectly at least, increased the production and purchase of steins. First of all, the unification of Germany in 1871 was accompanied by a great outpouring of nationalism. Just think of all the steins decorated with the imperial eagle or *Germania* personified, or those of Bismarck and other prominent statesmen and military leaders. It is interesting here to see the combination of pride and impishness as seen in the formal Bismarck, as well as the Bismarck radish head stein. Steins could and should be serious as well as fun.

One of the national movements was the *Turnverein* founded earlier in the 19th century by the venerated Father Jahn whose image, together with symbols of the Turners, decorate hundreds of steins. Personally, I can't imagine a good workout not being followed by a trip to the local tavern. How else do we replace those lost body fluids? In addition to the Turners, who were also active in the U.S., you also found shooting societies, singing societies and a host of others, all working up giant thirsts which were quenched with the help of steins emblazoned with the symbols of the group.

And here we must not forget the German student fraternities, which could almost be called *drinking* societies with some very serious drinking going on at the chapter meetings. Many of you will think of "The Student Prince", created by Wilhelm Meyer-Forster in his book *Karl Heinrich*, written in the late 1800's and later turned into a play titled "Old Heidelberg," and still later "The Student Prince" operetta by Sigmund Romberg, and later the movie, and still later...

There must have been something endearing about all of that stein waving and chug-a-lugging! Students joined fraternities, fraternities had emblems and these were often beautifully painted on porcelain lids or on the face of the stein, creating a whole sector of stein collecting.

How much beer did the students drink? Well, imagine the necessity of having your student

song book (*Kommersbuch*) studded with hobnails (*Biernägel*) just so that the book would not get wet during one of the very frequent sing-alongs! No wonder so many foreign students wanted to study at a German university. And during this enlightened period, increasing numbers of students coming from a growing middle class attended universities and technical institutes. Why, they even allowed some women to attend. In fact, by 1910 the women had their *own* song book... surely without hobnails... perhaps mini-hobnails or thumbtacks. And of course more students meant more beer and more steins.

Other movements were also underway in this changing and ever more progressive era. More people were traveling, more professional conventions were being held and there was more discretionary income. Why not buy a beer stein to commemorate your trip or convention? This is a custom carried on by some groups even during the present day. Just look around any stein sale room and see how many items fit this category. Once again, more tourists at the turn of the century meant more hotels, more *Gasthäuser*, more beer, more steins, and best of all, more future fun for us.



And then, of course, we must touch on the category of reservists' steins, so thoroughly described by Ron Heiligenstein at multiple conventions. In spite of what we have heard of Prussian militarism and young men fleeing to America to avoid the 1 to 3 years of reservist training, it must have been a period in many a young German's life that he wanted, with some pride, to recall in later years, especially when, for many, it marked a passage into manhood. The reservists went into the service as raw boys for the most part, went through rigorous training and came out men, men who were then accepted back home at the local tavern, men who could raise a stein without feeling self-conscious. After all, part of the training consisted of drinking when off duty. And those who saw active duty could be a little prouder, and as their tales of heroism and adventure grew more daring, so did the number of beers grow in number. The one million potential reservists' steins Ron alludes to certainly helped swell the number of turn-of-the-century steins. And since these pieces are dated, there is no question as to when they were produced. At any rate, more soldiers meant more beer consumed out of more steins.

The last point that I would like to make is that as Germans emigrated to America, for whatever reason, they brought their culture with them. This included a love of beer and the steins to drink it from. The states that had large numbers of German-Americans living in them tended to have many breweries. This is obvious when we look at the names connected with brewing in America: Ehret, Anheuser, Busch, Schlitz, Blatz, Stroh and so on. "The Register of United States Breweries 1876-1976" lists the breweries by state and city or town in one volume and alphabetically by brewery name in the other. I opened the volume which lists the states, and by chance it happened to be Minnesota. Just a few of the city names on two pages give us a good idea of what was going on: New Munich, New Prague and New Ulm were listed alongside native names like Oshawa and Owatona.

In our growing country, just as in Germany, the breweries grew, expanded, consolidated and like to think that they were putting out a product that was pure, healthful, temperate and just about what the doctor had ordered for nursing mothers and the like. At its peak in 1890, there were about 1900 breweries in the United States. Most of these were concentrated in states with large German-American populations. New York alone boasted about 600 breweries. At the time of Prohibition these numbers were greatly reduced, so that there were only about 700 major breweries in 1933 and only about 45 left today (although there is a bit of renaissance in brewing by way of microbreweries and brew-pubs which are popping up around the country).

Unfortunately, at least in America where we sometimes tend to go to extremes, beer

drinking and drinking in general seemed to get out of hand, and one by one the states began to pass dry or prohibition law. Finally, in 1920, a general national Prohibition closed down all the breweries. Of course, quite a few bathtubs continued in production, but in general, brewing was not legal again until 1933 when nursing mothers and quite a few others were no longer denied. During the period 1920 to 1933 most beer steins got a well-deserved rest and were put up on the shelf to be preserved for future collectors who, seeing them there, grew up feeling that was the natural place to keep them.

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