Beer in Boca? (or California’s First Lager – Boca Beer)

By Dave DePuy

Today, Boca and its reservoir is known for being a small exit on Interstate 80 Hirshdale’s exit, but it once was a vibrant town next to the brand-new Transcontinental Railroad.

The town was built at the confluence of the Truckee River and the Little Truckee River. Where the railroad passes over the Little Truckee River, it emulates a mouth. So the town was named “Boca”, the word for “mouth” in Spanish by Judge Edwin Bryant Crocker, older brother of the Charles Crocker, one of the Big Four for the Central Pacific Railroad.

Boca was important for fifty years from approximately 1870 to 1930 for three reasons:

1. It was a major lumber depot as it joined a significant narrow gauge spur and lumber mills with the Transcontinental Railroad.
2. The Little Truckee River could be easily diverted onto the relatively flat terrain near Boca. Into the man-made ponds, ice could be made, sawn, and stored through the summer. This ice was much cheaper than the ice imported from Alaska and could be used to cool fruits and vegetables from California’s central valley heading to eastern cities. The ice was also sent to bars and hotels in San Francisco on the rails.
3. Boca had access to all of the important ingredients to make a top-notch beer in an old-world style for a thirsty new-world setting. And it could export beer via rail throughout California, the United States and beyond.

Not All Beer Is The Same

There are two major types of beer: Ales and Lagers. Ales do not require the same amount of refrigeration as lagers and they use a different strain of yeast. That said, in the late 1800s, lagers were highly appreciated.

When the idea was conceived to make a brewery in Boca, it was decided to use the delicious mountain water and the readily available ice to make a lager which many beer drinkers think have a smoother, mellower flavor. Lager uses a fermentation process that requires a cold environment for the yeast. The other major type of fermentation, ales, do not require expensive refrigeration while being made. It should be noted that the other significant advantage of beers made in the tradition of ales is that they can be produced much quicker than lagers.
Boca Had The Right Stuff

To make a great lager, the major ingredients are: a knowledgeable brew master, investors, barley, hops, yeast, water, and ice. Due to the Gold Rush started in 1849, there were many immigrants that had come from other countries to California, including a former brew master, Leonhard Friedrich from Baden, Germany. He knew how to make a delicious lager beer. To get the barley, he used a 2-row barley grown in the Sacramento Valley. The cluster hops were also from California’s central valley. The water came either from the Truckee river or from the five springs in the hillside above the brewery on the hillside (just below where the Meadows residential development of Truckee stands today).

In 1876, the Boca Brewing Company produced California’s first lager. It was a major success and production soon rose to 25 to 30 thousand barrels of beer per year. It employed approximately 40 people from a wide range of countries, especially beer drinking countries.

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2 Boca Article, July 1, 1977, Doug Barrett, My Place In The Sun
3 Boca 4 article
To the brewery’s credit, they were well located on the rail line. From here, they could quickly ship beer west to the California markets in a few hours or to the large eastern cities in less than a week. They could even export the beer internationally. Boca’s brew was so delicious that it was served to great acclaim at the Paris World’s Fair in 1878.  

Fire, or was it Arson?  
Unfortunately, in 1893, a fire on January 9 destroyed the brewery. Damage was especially large because much of the fire fighting equipment was frozen due to the cold weather.

There was speculation of arson for the 1893 fire. In part this came from an earlier, 1886, complaint. In the complaint filed in San Francisco, the firm of London, Liverpool and Globe Insurance Company, it stated that William Hesse, Jr. secretary for the Boca Brewery Company asked E. L. McLellan of Boca to set fire to the mountain brewery. However, the accusations and facts of 1886 did not warrant an arrest in 1893. No one was ever convicted of arson as a result of the 1893 event.

Although there are many reasons why the brewery was never rebuilt, one reason could be that by the 1890’s the cost to produce ice was rapidly falling so the brewery’s lager monopoly was likely to be broken soon. Additionally, the fire corresponded to the start of a large recession. It would have been difficult to raise funds in the face of high unemployment. Lastly, in the mid-1890’s a consortium of breweries was becoming stronger controlling distribution and Boca was not invited to join.

Fortunately for us, there has been a renewed interest in California Lager. Anchor Brewing Company has recently released their own California Lager as part of its Zymaster series. Using the recipe of Boca Beer, the California Lager is maltier, hopier, and stronger than most of today’s lager. That said, the brew has a very smooth creamy finish and is drawing a significant following. Anchor’s California Lager is available in many fine bars, restaurants and stores including the Truckee Safeway refrigerated section.

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4 https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5825433s/f6.image.r=Bi%C3%A8re?rk=64378;0  
5 Boca 15  
6 Boca 16  
7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_recessions_in_the_United_States
In summary, without the Transcontinental Railroad, California would have been deprived of its first lager.

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Side bar:
David Burkhart, historian for Anchor Brewing, is coming to the Donner Memorial Park Speaker Series, June 15, the third Saturday of each month during the summer. David will be bringing samples for attendees over 21 years of age. The doors open at 5:00pm and the presentation begins at 5:30pm. Parking fees are waived but a $5 donation is appreciated. Visitor Center, Donner Memorial State Park, 12593 Donner Pass Road, Truckee.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_kal6opEyc  Video on Anchor Brewing’s California Lager

- To learn more on this topic, join us on June 15, 2019 for a historical talk on the history of the Boca Brewery, 5:30 pm (doors open at 5 pm), Visitor Center, Donner Memorial State Park, 12593 Donner Pass Road, Truckee. Interpretive walking tour of the Town of Boca site, 10 am, exit 194 off Interstate 80.

- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to https://goldspike.org or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:
Dave DePuy is a retired electrical engineer, marketer and a volunteer for the Truckee-Donner Historical and Railroad Societies. Dave is also a board member of Tahoe Silicon Mountain.
From Wikipedia: Boca Brewery

The Boca Brewing company, founded in 1875, produced California’s first lager. Lagers require refrigeration and very cold temperatures during the fermentation process which is why most California’s breweries choose to produces porters and ales. Boca’s location was a perfect environment for brewing lager because of the natural springs, an unlimited supply of ice for refrigeration, cold winters, and access to the Central Pacific Railroad. Famed for using natural spring water in its lager, the Boca Brewing Company’s product was celebrated at the World’s Fair in Paris in 1883. The company produced 25 to 30 thousand barrels of the beer per year. The brewery employed as many as 80 people, which contributed to a population of close to 300 for Boca. The brewery burned to the ground in a fire in 1893 and was never rebuilt.

Anchor Brewing Company

In February 2012, Anchor Brewing in San Francisco introduced its Zymaster No. 1 Lager in honor of the Boca Brewing Company. An attempt to recreate Boca's original California lager, the single-hop beer uses two-row barley and mountain water and follows a traditional beer recipe which produces a maltier, hopper and stronger drink than most lagers on sale.

L’EXPOSITION UNIVERSELLE DE 1878 ILLUSTRE.

700

Vous en France à la suite d’un attentat dont faillit être rendu victime une des victimes politiques, il rejoint un mission confiné de la République en Syrie et de l’Euphrate.

Nommé en 1903, ministre de l’Ecart-Union de Colombo, il était porté, en 1904, par le parti conser-

vateur libéral, candidat à la présidente de ses Biens. Il est reconnu aujourd’hui le gouvernement de Bonaparte, à Paris.

Dans la littérature linguistique, son répertoire est depuis longtemps établi.

En flattant à faire connaître à l’étranger les principaux patrimoines, poètes et intéressantes de son pays, M. Tineo-Cailloue ne s’est pas seulement à l’est culturel, il fait preuve aussi de patriotisme. On ne peut retrou-

ver dans l’amour politique et dans la littérature le même emploi de sa présence, politiquement et initiatif par l’ex-

périence à la science des faits humains.

Tant est l’homme que le syndicat des Républiques sud et est de syndicats a placé à sa tête pour organiser l’Exposition, existeria à partir de deux de ces États avec la demande de toutes sortes et surtout depuis longtemps au travail, à l’étude et à l’industrie.

L’analyse est bien rendue le procès de la concurrence espagnole, un vaste champ ouvert à l’avenir.

Les conditions météorologiques favorisent donc d’une façon agréable la végétation et le dévelop-

pement de la richesse agricole.

De 1904 à 1927 l’exposition des importations est auréolé de : 1.500.771.23 à 5.000.061.49, et celu-

i des exportations qui déclinent de 1.507.404.56, attes-

ant en 1937 le chiffre de 2.179.583.09.

L’importation se fait par les marchands fran-

çais, anglais, allemands, savants, Italiens, etc.

L’exposition est basée sur des productions dont l’importance n’a jamais permis jusqu’alors nos accessibles :

Le café, l’indigo, le beurre (dit du Pérou), le camembert, le sucre, le riz, le tabac, les charpentes, la pêche, le bananier, le lait.

Avec les marchés brillants obtenus par la République du Chili au Mexique, l’Exposition d’Art et Science de la Chine en 1927, le gouvernement du Sud-Amerique, présidé par le docteur Don Raphael Zaldivar, n’a pas réussi à se rendre à l’aventure de la Répu-

blique française.

Nous avons été reçus curieusement par la richesse collection de bois dont on se compte par moins de l’accitant cinquante espèces (V. grandiflora... Ch. 46). Nous avions remarqué également (cl. 47) l’expo-

sion de plus de 30 plantes phytographiques et médicinales, notées par Don David Goméz ; puis le tapis de fleurs, pris aux jardins propriétaires (cl. 49).

Nous avions encore le mousse de la collection espagnole, un vaste champ ouvert à l’avenir.