

Legends of Oregon Brewing: Henry Weinhard

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Before the Widmer brothers were even a glimmer in their great great grandfathers' eyes, Portland's German brewing traditions were solid as a keg drum. Henry Saxer¹, credited with establishing Oregon's first commercial brewery, and German-born Henry Weinhard, founder of Oregon's first brewing empire, started their enterprises in 1852 and 1856 respectively. Little can be verified about Saxer. He started Portland's Liberty Brewery in 1852. He sold it to Weinhard in 1862. He made lagers and hired German immigrants to brew his quaffs. Much more is known about Weinhard. Considering his impact on Portland and the reach of his beer, this is little enough.

Born in 1830 in a little town in southern Germany, Weinhard made his way to Portland slowly after an apprenticeship to a Stuttgart brewery. He left Germany in 1852 and spent four years in Cincinnati. He arrived at Ft. Vancouver, then a garrison town full of thirsty soldiers, by ship through the Panama Canal in 1856. After working for John Meunch's Vancouver Brewery for six months and then trying his luck across the river in a partnership with George Bottler, Weinhard returned to Vancouver and bought out Meunch's interest in 1859. In 1862, Weinhard moved to Portland permanently and established what would become the lucrative City Brewery.

The City Brewery

The City Brewery and Weinhard's enterprises grew rapidly. In 1857, the Vancouver Brewery had a capacity of less than 600 barrels. In the 1860's and 1870's Weinhard bought out other breweries and purchased more and more land on NW 11th and 12th Streets. He also built or purchased warehouses up and down the Columbia River including a large storage facility in Astoria. Around 1890, production was at 50,000 barrels per year. In 1899, the City Brewery had an annual capacity of 100,000 barrels.² In the early 1890's several English businessmen offered Weinhard \$1,175,000 for his empire.

Weinhard predominantly brewed lagers. *Lager*, the German word for storage, is a less winy beer and thus less likely to turn sour. Opposite of brewing ale, where yeast rises to the surface during fermentation, yeast drops to the bottom during fermentation of lager. Although they require a cool environment, lagers keep better than other styles of beer, enabling Weinhard to ship his product to working men, families, and steamships up, down and across the Pacific including San Francisco, Alaska, Siberia, China, and Japan. In Portland, Weinhard catered to not only the rough and tumble crowd that made up "Stumptown" during his time, but also to the many families, such as his own, that regularly drank beer at mealtimes. Like many other prominent business men of the era, Weinhard owned establishments consisting of a saloon on the main floor and a brothel in the upper chambers. For Weinhard, it was also an outlet for his product. The Columbia Saloon, pictured above, among others, only sold Weinhard beer.

¹ **Saxer or Saxton?** Saxer is difficult to pin down. The 1860 Portland Census lists a 21 year old Henry Saxer born in Switzerland. This is likely not the same Saxer Weinhard worked with in 1852. Turn of the century Portland historian Joseph Gaston refers to brewery Henry Saxton who sold out to Weinhard in 1862, who likely is the right brewer.

² By way of comparison, Bridgeport Brewing Company currently has a 100,000 barrels per year capacity.

The City Brewery's recipes were based on Weinhard's studies in Germany and the Midwest. Unfortunately, most of the original recipes disappeared along with the rest of the corporate documents in 1979 when the brewery was sold to Pabst. The legendary Henry Weinhard's Private Reserve is still brewed today according to Weinhard's specifications. This brand, credited with reviving the Weinhard brewery in the 1970's when it was unearthed, is based on one of his original recipes.

Family and Civic Life

Weinhard was an active business and family man. He married another German immigrant, Louisa Wagenblast in 1859. They had five children, but only two survived to adulthood. By 1863, the Weinhard's had built a family home next to the brewery. Weinhard was often seen walking to work with his fox terrier trailing after him.

The most infamous story about Weinhard is charming, but suspect. It is said that Weinhard offered to pump beer from his brewery to the Skidmore Fountain for the fountain's unveiling in 1887. Charles Erskine Scott Wood, who told the story nearly thirty years after Weinhard's death and fifty years after the event, was Weinhard's lawyer. It is very unlikely that the staid, practical Weinhard offered to hose vast quantities of his beer to the Skidmore Fountain. Logistics alone (it's roughly twelve blocks from the site of the City Brewery to the fountain with 1880's canvas and natural rubber hoses and an incalculable foam factor) would've made this an impressive feat. But then again, Weinhard did know his hoses. He was a long time volunteer with the Portland Fire Brigade and his distinctive signature is visible on the rolls on display at the Historic Belmont Firehouse. He, like many prominent Portland business owners, believed in protecting his assets from one of the greatest dangers to a town built out of timber.

Weinhard and his family were involved in countless other civic and charitable organizations, many of which Henry and Louisa Weinhard founded. These included building Arion Hall to house the Arion Society, a German singing group; constructing a Lutheran chapel next to the brewery for brewery employees to worship daily; building Altenheim, a home for aging Germans; and active participation in the German Aid Society, a charity organized to help German immigrants down on their luck.

What is most remarkable about Weinhard is his success. His empire lasted over 140 years, from 1856 to 1979. His original recipe is still brewed today and a nostalgic favorite for north westerners who went to college at any time between 1950 and 1999. One trips over his name in every quadrant of the city, from Altenheim on SE Division to the Brewery Blocks in Northwest to the Weinhard Building downtown. Weinhard died in September 1904. His obituary summed up his life simply: "Man Who Came from Germany Fifty-Two Years Ago and Built Up Great Fortune—Active in All Public Enterprises."

For more on this subject, see "Henry **Weinhard** and Portland's City Brewery," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 102 (Summer 2001): 180--95