The Centennial Brewery

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson. 594 words 4:10

America’s centennial in 1876 wasn’t lost on Butte, even though the town had just begun to grow from the low point two years earlier, when the population was somewhere between 60 and 250 hardy souls. Butte commemorated the centennial with at least two businesses that opened that year: The Centennial Hotel, opened July 4, 1876, at the corner of Granite and Main where the Hennessey Building stands today, and the Centennial Brewery, west of town along Silver Bow Creek. It was Butte’s first commercial brewery.

German immigrant Leopold Schmidt was a carpenter, politician, and miner, but he’s most remembered as the founder of the Centennial Brewery in Butte, after a short time managing a brewery in Deer Lodge for a friend. By 1899, the Centennial Brewery had a hundred employees, generating a $12,000-per-month payroll, and was spending ten times that each year on five million pounds of Montana barley. Their primary Uptown outlet was the Centennial Saloon at 123 North Main, a building that’s still standing today.

That same year, 1899, a new independent brewery opened in Butte. The Olympia Brewery stood along Silver Bow Creek where Harrison crosses it, on Olympia Street behind today’s Met Tavern. By 1902 the Olympia was controlled by the owners of the Centennial Brewery.

Leopold Schmidt had departed Butte in 1896. He set his sights on the artesian spring water at Tumwater, Washington, where he established the Capital Brewing Company in 1896. Capital Brewing changed its name in 1902 to Olympia, one of the most successful beer companies in the Pacific Northwest. Butte’s Olympia, connected to the more famous one through the Centennial Brewery and Schmidt, shut down in 1911.

The two best customers of Butte’s Centennial Brewery in the 1900s and 1910s were Daly’s Place, a saloon at 106 North Main Street, and the huge Florence Hotel, known as “The Big Ship,” where enough alcohol was reportedly consumed on a Saturday night to float a ship. It was on East Broadway, a vacant lot today west of the Broadway Cafe. Daly’s Place and the Florence were both owned by Hugh O’Daly. In appreciation of the business they provided to the Centennial Brewery, Centennial president Henry Mueller gave O’Daly 2,500 shares in Centennial worth $5,000. O’Daly received a monthly dividend from that stock averaging $175 a month from 1907 to 1919, more than double a well-paid miner’s wage during most of that time.

It all ended in 1919, when Prohibition began in Montana. “The most dasterly law ever passed,” according to Hugh O’Daly, shut down all of Butte’s breweries until 1933. The Centennial, together with the Butte Brewery on North Wyoming Street, was poised to reopen with Prohibition’s repeal, but the mothballed Centennial Brewery burned down just before alcohol became legal again. O’Daly recalled that the insurance premium was unpaid, a week past due, and his investment became worthless. The only brewing operation in Butte to continue past Prohibition was the Butte Brewery.

Today, the only reminder of the Centennial Brewery is Centennial Avenue, the road that once led to the brewery.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.

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