



MASTER BREWERS ASSOCIATION OF THE AMERICAS

Providing technical leadership for the brewing industry

In 1987 the 100th anniversary convention of the MBAA was held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The convention program that year was published as an insert in the September 22 issue of the Brewers Bulletin. Included in the program was the following story which editor Marge Jones wrote after interviewing Henry Hilton. Henry passed away 10 years later in 1997.

—Jerry Hilton, Heritage Committee Chair

The Golden Years of Henry Hilton and the MBAA

The Master Brewers Association of the Americas, chartered 100 years ago under the title of the Master Brewers Association of the United States, is an organization "Dedicated to the Art and Science of Brewing." This dedication to quality is followed in every segment of the industry and is accompanied by an underlying, but strong, comradery, found in its membership.

The following story is about a particular member of the MBAA in a particular segment of the brewing industry, but it is intended to reflect the memories of the older members of the Association, the aspirations of the newer members, and the pride that is taken in providing a quality product or service for the brewing industry.

Henry Hilton entered the brewing industry exactly at the right time. He joined the Aluminum Company of America immediately after college in 1929 and learned the aluminum industry inside out. He thoroughly understands the process necessary to obtain and refine aluminum, and there is a reverence in the tone of his voice when he speaks about seeing the first nuggets of aluminum obtained by Charles Martin Hall.

Although this was the time of the Great Depression and Prohibition, Henry was optimistic enough to take a bride in 1930 and the couple was grateful to have the \$175 monthly stipend on which they could live. (Henry and Alice recently celebrated their 57th wedding anniversary.)

Henry attended his first Master Brewers Convention in Detroit in the fall of 1932, and recalls that it was organized with the knowledge that Prohibition was finally coming to an end!

He has very fond memories of the era that was just beginning. He speaks with great affection of the primary organizers of some of those early post-Prohibition MBAA Conventions, like John Russert and Fritz Gettelman (Fred and Tom's father). "They were wonderful men who worked very hard for the MBAA."

At age 84, soon to be 85, Henry Hilton has at least two distinctions to his name. First, he just happens to be the person who is credited with the invention of the aluminum beer barrel and, second, he just happens to be the oldest person in the Master Brewers Association of the Americas who is still working in the industry.

When asked how he came up with the idea for the aluminum beer barrel, Henry explains: "It was at the Pabst Brewing Company. It looked like Prohibition was coming to an end, and we (his company) were always looking for companies that used copper." The thought was that perhaps an aluminum product could be used to replace the copper and, at the suggestion of his boss, Henry went over to Pabst to check out their copper kettles. Well, Henry called on a Dr. Schedler, who was then the Chief Chemist at Pabst, and asked him if they would consider aluminum for the next kettle they might buy. Henry chuckles as he remembers, "Dr. Schedler looked right at me and laughed as he said 'Why Henry, when we buy a copper kettle, it lasts 100 years!' " But he also told Henry that what he ought to look at was the barrel. The chemist explained about the need for a bung hole on the side and a peerless tap on top ... and away Henry went with a smile on his face and great hope for the new idea.

Henry took some sketches for the barrel to his company's plant in New Kensington, Pa, where sample barrels were created for Henry to take to the MBAA Convention held in Chicago in 1933 to put them on display.

He recalls that he sold his very first barrel to the Bechaud Brewery in Fond du Lac for \$10 and it was a struggle to get the brewery to approve the purchase of that one barrel.

One of his favorite stories is about the time he went to see the Brewmaster at Schlitz to see if he could sell him on

the idea of the aluminum barrel. He prefaces this story by saying that "things were very different then. A salesman could just walk into the brewery and meet with the Brewmaster or chemist or whomever he needed to speak with without an appointment." They were all friends. Even competitors were very friendly, having met at an MBAA meeting or during the course of business, and the plants were open to everyone without regard to corporate supervision. "Now, of course," Henry notes, "one must have an appointment and it might be a week or two before you can get the half hour allotted." Anyhow, Henry went to call on Franz Hankie, the Brewmaster at Schlitz, and when Mr. Hanke saw Henry coming through the door, armed with the new barrel, he said with a grin on his face, "Hilton get the hell out of here (his office), it will always be wooden barrels." A few months later, Schlitz purchased 10,000 barrels at \$10 each, a tremendous price for the year. Now it was Henry who had a grin on his face.

Shortly after that sale, Henry received a letter of commendation from the President of the Aluminum Company of America and this was followed, a few months later, by a generous increase in salary.

Not that, things always worked out the way he had hoped Henry also remembers the time he went to call on the Brewmaster at Stevens Point with a crude sample of the barrel. The Brewmaster said that the barrel didn't seem to be very strong, so Henry, ever the optimist, picked up the barrel and threw it down 6 concrete stairs for a dramatic demonstration of its strength. Unfortunately, the barrel broke in half, and the sale was lost.

"Those were the Golden Years," says Henry. "From 1937 through the early '50s, why there were 47 breweries in Wisconsin that you could call on. " Everyone was very friendly, and it was almost imperative that you be a member of the MBAA in the sense that that was the best way to do good business.

Henry had the opportunity to serve MBAA District Milwaukee as entertainment chairman for a few years. Things were very different then. Women were not allowed at some of the parties and today's parties and events would seem very tame in comparison - For instance, Henry remembers one MBAA Christmas party held at the Wisconsin Club in Milwaukee. "The members were looking for something unusual," so Henry brought in a live pig, a live cow and some ducks up to the 2nd floor dining room to raffle them off. "Karl Fauerbach, a Madison Brewmaster, won the pig, and Karl and another guy put the pig in the back of their car to take it home. The next morning, Karl's kids took the pig out for a walk. A dog chased the pig, the pig bit the dog and the pig was subsequently donated to an orphanage to be eaten. " Henry remembers the laughter at the sight of a cow on the slippery oak floors in the dining hall, and how much the MBAA members enjoyed Karl's tale of the disposition of the pig.

Henry has another story about an event at the Wisconsin Club, and the reason why District Milwaukee MBAA has never held another meeting there, but we hesitate to print it here. If you meet him at the Convention though, he'd be happy to tell you the story. "They were great, great days," Henry says, "and they will never, never be the same again." We tend to agree with Henry, but the new generation of Brewers and suppliers, assisted by the veterans of the industry, are working diligently at a renaissance of those Golden Years and are beginning to create memories for their own Era.

With the advent of World War II, aluminum companies turned their attention to the war effort and Henry spent some time in Washington, D.C.

The expansion of the '40s helped to make the Industry a 'Camelot' for those involved in it, but some of the younger members of brewing families were reluctant to carry on the traditions of their ancestors, and the larger companies started to evolve into the giants that they are today, changing the complexion of the Industry.

Henry decided it was time for him to move on and on July 15, 1945 The Hilton Company was formed. The aluminum companies had been making half barrels for the industry, so Henry began creating some 1/4 and 1/8 barrels, but when stainless steel came into use for the barrel, Henry turned to another direction. A sanitary ladder had been indicated as a need for the Brewing Industry, and the aluminum ladder would fill that bill. "It was a natural," Henry says. He also made a 'stamp protector,' which helped to keep the paper tax stamp on the barrels. This was successful until the government changed their policy to taxing the product by metering directly from the tanks in the breweries in 1948. The Hilton Company also repaired barrels and made 'chimes', a ring around the barrel, to help prevent denting.

As a fitting prologue to the decline of the aluminum barrel, Henry received a call from one of the major Milwaukee breweries, saying that they wanted to sell their stock of aluminum barrels for scrap. He made arrangements for the shredding of the barrels and the shipment of the scrap to Japan for resale and, as a result, was the recipient of a \$60,000 commission on the deal.

In addition to his involvement with aluminum, Hilton served as company representative for Rahr Malting Co., Bishopric products, and S.S. Steiner.