

THE WEST END BREWING COMPANY 100 YEARS OF QUALITY

by Jon J. Landers - 1988

On March 15, 1888 a group of Utica people associated together to form a corporation to manufacture and sell ale and lager beer. The company's capital stock was \$20,000 and was divided into 200 shares of \$100 each. With this petition, The West End Brewing Company of Utica, New York came into existence but any chronicle about this brewery would be incomplete without first reciting the history of Charles Bierbauer and his brewery. Charles Bierbauer was born in Bavaria Germany on February 18, 1818. In 1848 he immigrated to this country locating at Lyons, New York. There he married Barbara Strohm and moved to Utica, New York in 1850. Mr. Bierbauer operated a small brewery at 93 Third Street for three years after relocating to Utica. This location proved to be inadequate and Mr. Bierbauer purchased six lots on Edward Street where a new brewery was erected and his lager brewing operation was moved.

Up until the 1840's the beer made in the United States was the top-fermented type English ales and porter also called "common beer." When Charles Bierbauer came to Utica in 1853 he introduced lager beer to the area. The arrival of large numbers of German immigrants during this period created a demand for lager beer. Lager beer is of the "bottom-fermented" type requiring a period of rest which is the meaning of lager. This resting period develops its taste properties, gives it a sparkling quality and lightens the alcoholic content. Mr. Bierbauer's business thrived and for many years supplied the bulk of the lager beer consumed in Utica.

In 1878, Theodore Matt moved his family to America and settled in Utica where he opened a meat market at 148 Schuyler Street. Mr. Matt's son, Francis Xavier Matt was age 19 at the time and had learned the art of making beer in his teenage years at the famed Duke of Baden Brewery in Rothaus Germany. Because of his experience in the unrivaled old world method of brewing lager beer, F. X. Matt immediately found employment at the Bierbauer brewery. A year later F.X. Matt was asked to go to Canajoharie, New York to work for Charles Bierbauer's brother Louis who had a brewery there. A short time after working at this brewery, F.X. matt was promoted to brew master and continued to work there for seven years.

On August 17, 1885 Charles Bierbauer died in Utica at the age of 68. His wife Barbara and adopted son George were unable to continue managing the Bierbauer Brewery and consequently put it up for sale a few months later.

On December 17, 1885 a group of people bought the Bierbauer Brewery and formed The Columbia Brewing Company. They continued operations on Edward Street, the capital stock consisted of \$50,000 and the five trustees elected to run the corporation were John Kohler (Barbara Bierbauer's brother-in-law), Henry Roemer, M. Bremmer, Frank Schaub and George Fretscher. John Kohler was president of the entity. It is not known why the Columbia Brewing Company failed but competition was plentiful during this period. The company defaulted on their \$10,000 mortgage from Barbara Bierbauer and the company and premises were sold on February 11, 1888 at public auction at the sheriff's office in Utica. The business and property was bought by the group of men who would transform it into the West End Brewing Company. Included in the sale of the premises were "all the fixtures, machinery, vats, pipes, hogsheads, barrels, and all other personal property used in and connected with the business of the manufacture and sale of ale and lager, including all the horses, wagons, sleighs, harnesses and other equipment used around said premises."

When the new owners formed the West End Brewing Company they continued operating the brewery on Edward Street. The actual brewing of beer probably never ceased during the transition. The five trustees elected to manage the corporation for the first year were Henry Roemer, Robert Cromie, Sylvester D. Powers, Frank X. Matt, John J. Fuess and George H. Bierbauer. The new owners of the brewery could only raise \$17,000 cash when they bought the business and agreed to issue \$3,000 capital stock to Barbara Bierbauer as the balance of the purchase price. Henry Roemer served as the first president and Sylvester Powers owner of the Senate Saloon, 116 Court Street was the first vice President. F.X. Matt returned from the Louis Bierbauer Brewery in Canajoharie to help form the West End Brewing Company and served as the superintendent and brew master. What part Robert Cromie and J.J. Fuess had in the corporation other than being financial investors is not known.

As a company logo and trademark, the West End Brewing Company chose a round circle with an image of Miss Columbia in it. It seems almost too much of a mere coincidence that an establishment evolving from the Columbia Brewing Company chose Miss Columbia as a trademark. The Columbia Brewing Company probably used the same or similar emblem and the new company continued to use it. This handsome patriotic motif is still used today by the brewery.

When the West End Brewing company started doing business they had to compete with approximately ten other Utica breweries including the well established Gulf and Oneida breweries. The new and larger Eagle Brewing Company started in business the same year as the West End Brewing Company. In addition to Utica breweries, there was competition from many other beers brought into the area to be sold. The famous Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company and the Genesee Brewing company both sold beer in Utica in 1888.

To make the West End Brewing company a success in 1888 required an aggressive manager not only to produce a quality beer but also to market it. F.X. Matt proved to be this energetic and forceful leader. Under the direction of F.X. Matt, in spite of all the competition, the West End Brewing Company was very successful. The brewery grew step by step and many extensive improvements to both buildings and equipment took place. With this success F.X. Matt became president in 1905. Mr. Matt continued to be very active in the brewery until his death in 1958 at the age of 99.

Many of the other Utica breweries went out of business during prohibition. The West End Brewing Company survived by selling non alcoholic beverages and other food stuffs. At a special meeting of the stockholders held at the brewery on January 22, 1920 the certificate of incorporation was changed to include other purposes, powers or provisions "to wit, the manufacture, production and sale of non alcoholic cereal beverages of every description, ginger ale and other soft drinks of every name and nature, ice, cold storage, packing preserves, syrups, vinegar and industrial alcohol, in addition to those now set forth in the certificate of incorporation." For 13 years the company survived manufacturing and selling soft drinks and other items.

In 1948, Fortune Magazine described the brewery as "the model brewhouse" and at the present time is recognized as one of the cleanest and most modern breweries in the country. Today the brewery is operating at the same location and is the 12th largest in the nation. The name has been changed to the F.X. Matt Brewing Company and is the only brewery located in Utica. In addition to its famous Matt's beer, the company still bottles Utica Club beer under the name of The West End Brewing Company. The company is guided by F.X. Matt II, grandson of the founder. F.X. Matt II is no less proud of his sparkling light bodied beer than his grandfather was 100 years ago. Like his grandfather, F.X. makes daily tours of the plant inspecting the brewing operation. A lot of pride and quality goes into a bottle of Matt's beer. In 1984 Matt's beer won first place for taste in a national competition. At the Great

American Beer festival held in Boulder Colorado, Matt's beer was voted number one for taste in the pilsner lager category. To be voted number one in the nation was indeed an honor for the 96 year old brewery. Today, at 100 years old, the F.X. Matt Brewing Company is still brewing high quality beers, beers of distinction and character, beers that rate second to none in our great nation.

