Background: Using Beer to Study American History

The history of brewing is an effective and engaging lens through which to explore many of our nation’s most important stories. Beer sheds light on histories of immigration, urbanization, business innovation, advertising, evolving consumer tastes, changing gender roles and much more.

Beer and brewing have been crucial to American society since before the nation’s founding. In fact, archaeological evidence indicates that Native Americans were the first to brew in North America. Women and enslaved people brewed beer in the colonial American home, and in the mid-1800s immigrant German entrepreneurs transformed brewing into a major American industry. Prohibition, industry consolidation and modernization of transportation networks in the first half of the 20th century reduced the stylistic diversity of American beer. Beginning in the mid-20th century, revived interest in regional ingredients and traditional production methods sparked movements in home brewing and “craft” beer in the United States. These movements changed the face of the industry, as well as Americans’ palates.

Project Overview

The American Brewing History Initiative at the National Museum of American History will document and collect the story of beer and brewing in America, with a special focus on home brewing and craft beer. Made possible by a gift from the Brewers Association, the initiative will build an archive of American brewing history for the benefit of scholars and the public.

Currently, the Museum holds rich, yet limited, collections related to American brewing technology and advertising from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The initiative, led by historian Theresa McCulla at the Museum, will build on these collections through research and collecting trips throughout the country. In addition, oral histories will preserve the voices of those who have shaped the course of American brewing in recent decades. Along the way, McCulla will share the project’s findings with the public via the Museum’s social media platforms and public events, including the annual Smithsonian Food History Weekend.

The goal of the initiative is to create a permanent, prominent role for the story of American beer and brewing in the Museum’s archival collections, public programming and exhibitions.

Collecting Efforts

The Museum invites donations of objects, documents and stories that tell a comprehensive history of beer and brewing in America, in every region of the country.
Collecting Efforts (continued)

The people whose stories we wish to tell include:

- Early home brewers and founders of craft brewing
- Technological, business and taste innovators
- Agricultural producers, e.g. of hops and barley
- Leaders responsible for shaping consumer tastes, e.g. brew pub owners, chefs and advertisers
- Those with lesser-known stories, particularly women and people of color
- Consumers, especially those involved in collectors’ associations and community celebrations (e.g. Oktoberfest)
- Those who prioritize community engagement/service in their work
- Brewers and consumers beyond our borders, whose experiences show how American craft brewing is having an impact on global beer culture

While the Museum is focused on collecting home and craft brewing history — movements dating from the 1960s to the present — we are also interested in exceptional items from earlier historical eras, such as Prohibition. Donated items must tell a story. Some represent everyday life; others represent extraordinary experiences.

Examples of potential object donations include:

- Recipes, brewing logs or brewing equipment of brew masters and home brewers
- Newsletters/communications of home brewing clubs, especially pre-internet
- Business plans and advertising material
- Innovative ideas, e.g. patents/object prototypes, significant to production and marketing advances
- Objects demonstrating the transition from home to craft brewing

Join Us

Be a part of this exciting and important initiative. If you are interested in donating an item or would like additional information, please write to BrewingHistory@si.edu. To stay up to date on the progress of the American Brewing History Initiative, visit s.si.edu/BrewHistory and follow #BeerHistory and #SmithsonianFood on social media.

The American Brewing History Initiative is made possible through generous support from the Brewers Association, the not-for-profit trade association dedicated to small and independent American brewers.