

The Fairmont Brewery

Although Fairmont was considered a temperance stronghold in the 1870s, ironically, at that time in history it became the home of a brewery. It all came about during the late 1800s when there was an active group of English settlers in the area. They made every attempt to maintain the “upper-class” customs from their homeland including horse racing and boating.

Then Gideon Smales, apparently an industrious individual, arrived in Fairmont in 1877 to join his brother. Smales was certain he could profit from the natural local market, that being primarily the English settlers, for his art of brewing ale and porter. He thought the local environment seemed ripe for his entrepreneurial brewing adventure claiming that these libations were highly recommended by physicians as containing strengthening and medicinal properties.¹

Smales initial brewery site was a building he had purchased on the corner of North Avenue and Third Street, previously the location of a horse livery. By early 1878, Smales was advertising pure English Ales and Porter in kegs or bottles at what he considered reasonable rates.

In August of 1878, he felt business was brisk enough to justify construction of a new brewery at the foot of Main Street. That new facility included a large cellar, referred to as “an eighteen hundred dollar hole.”² His further expansions included an ice house and a bottling house. In all, Smales had invested approximately \$1,700.00 in brewery improvements and additional buildings.³

Regretfully, his brewery expansion may have developed a bit too rapidly. Smales, a stockholder in the Bank of Fairmont when it failed in 1879, also had an overdraft of nearly \$1,700.00 at that time. That overdraft was deemed a contributing factor to the bank’s failure. Interestingly, at the sheriff’s sale held in 1879 to settle the bank’s accounts, the brewery property seemed to attract the most active bidding. Consequently, the short-lived history of an active brewery in Fairmont came to a rather abrupt and tumultuous end.

¹Doug Hoverson, “Land of Amber Waters – The History of Brewing in Minnesota,” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p.36.

² Doug Hoverson, “Land of Amber Waters – The History of Brewing in Minnesota,” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 222

³ Doug Hoverson, “Land of Amber Waters – The History of Brewing in Minnesota,” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 222.

Now, one might now wonder what became of the actual physical structure housing the brewery. According to Claude Swanson in an article from the November 28, 1961, edition of *The Sentinel*, it was torn down in 1900 by Fairmont contractor George Hengel. Hengel described the layout of the brewery as being parallel to the lake on the northeast shore of Lake Sisseton. He also said that there were two caves, one at about lake level and the other above it. The entrances to the caves were said to be constructed of stone. Perhaps conservation was a priority at that time as the lumber salvaged from the demolition of the brewery was used to construct three houses on South Main Street.

If anyone reading this article has a picture or pictures of this brewery, the MCHS would appreciate being able to make a scanned copy for their records. Contact the Pioneer Museum at (507) 235-5178 if you have a picture to provide.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.