

The following article was researched and written by Carl H. Miller for Diehl, Inc. in commemoration of its 125th anniversary in Defiance, Ohio. It was published in the *Defiance Crescent News*, July 2, 1995.

What A Diehl!

There was a day when virtually every city or town of any consequence supported a local brewery or two. It was a time when drinking a beer other than your hometown brand was a little like rooting for a rival ball team. Communities took pride in supporting their local enterprises, and breweries were certainly no exception.



In many cities, there came to be a single name which was virtually synonymous with beer. In Milwaukee, it was Schlitz. In St. Louis, it was Busch. In Detroit, it was Stroh's. And in Defiance, the name was Diehl. For over 85 years, the Christian Diehl Brewing Company turned out barrel after barrel of a brew which enjoyed the strict loyalty of beer drinkers for miles around.

The Legacy Begins

On October 21, 1870, a twenty-eight-year-old Christian Diehl arrived in Defiance to take a position as brewmaster at the local brewery. He had learned the art of brewing beer in his hometown of Hessen-Darmstadt, Germany before emigrating to America in 1861. European-trained brewers like Christian found employment easily in mid-nineteenth century America due to the hundreds of small breweries operating throughout the east and midwest.

The young Christian Diehl took full advantage of the demand enjoyed by his profession, traveling from state to state exploring his newly adopted country. Before coming to Ohio, he worked in breweries in New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Missouri. Just prior to his arrival in Defiance, he had been employed by a Toledo brewer.

The brewery which lured Christian Diehl to Defiance was established in 1867 by German immigrant Jacob Karst. Known simply as the "Defiance Brewery," the works was situated on North Clinton street just near the Maumee River. In 1869, local saloonkeeper Joseph Bauer purchased an interest in the brewery, and it was the firm of Karst and Bauer which hired Christian as brewmaster in 1870. By the following year, Christian had accumulated resources enough to buy Karst's share in the brewery, and the partnership of Bauer and Diehl was established. Aside from a brief participation in the business by Bauer's son, the brewery operated basically unchanged until the passing away of Joseph Bauer in 1883. Christian, who had apparently achieved a certain degree of financial success with the brewery by this time, purchased Bauer's interest from his family in 1885.

The Next Generation

In 1896, three of Christian's sons -- Christian Jr., John C., and Albert F. Diehl -- were initiated into the brewery's management. The young men had virtually grown up inside the brewery and each was already well acquainted with the business. Christian Jr., in fact, had shown such an early "adaptability for business" that he was put in charge of the firm's books at age thirteen. John C. Diehl, having graduated from the American Brewing Academy in Chicago, took over his father's post as Diehl brewmaster.

Although the elder Christian Diehl officially continued to fill the office of brewery president, he gradually relinquished control of the family business to his sons. After the turn of the century, Christian spent much of his time tending to the family farm just outside Defiance, where he died in 1928.

The young Diehls lead the brewery into what was perhaps the most prosperous period in its history. By 1899, the Diehl brewery employed 21 men and produced annually about 12,000 barrels of beer (32 gallons per barrel), a nearly five-fold increase over the brewery's early days. And production continued to climb well into the new century.

The great majority of Diehl beer was consumed within Defiance County in the years before Prohibition. However, a small portion of the brewery's product was shipped to outside markets. Proximity to the Maumee River provided easy transportation to, among other locations, Ft. Wayne and Toledo. The latter city was quite possibly the brewery's largest market outside of Defiance. By 1911, sales of Diehl beer in Toledo had justified the construction of a brewery-owned distribution depot in that city. The brewery was said to have sent beer as far north as Grand Rapids before the onset of Prohibition.

Nevertheless, the Diehl brewery's lifeblood was its local market. In fact, the brewery's long-time feature brand of beer was named in honor of the city itself: Centennial Beer was introduced in 1894 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Fort Defiance. Early bottle labels for Centennial Beer depicted General Anthony Wayne engaged in the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Other early Diehl brands included Hofbrau and Diehlgold. All were advertised as being "Diehlicious."

The Big Drought

By about 1910, it had become apparent that prohibitionist groups such as the Anti-Saloon League and the Women's Christian Temperance Union were rapidly gaining ground in their quest to abolish the manufacture of alcoholic beverages. The Diehl brothers, having fostered significant growth and expansion of the brewery throughout the early years of the century, were now charged with guiding the family business through what promised to be uncertain times ahead.

The Diehls felt it prudent to begin investigating alternative fields of business in the event that the brewing industry suffered a fatal blow. The milk condensing business emerged as a promising option due to the surrounding farmland, the lack of local competition, and the compatibility of the brewing equipment. Christian Jr. traveled to Wisconsin to observe state-of-the-art condensories in operation and returned with a glowing account of the condition of the industry.

The Prohibition crusade, in the meantime, had reached its peak. A 1918 statewide referendum left Ohio completely dry beginning in May of 1919. And, shortly thereafter, ratification of the 18th Amendment marked the beginning of National Prohibition. Brewers nationwide scrambled to find new areas of business in hopes of being among the lucky few who survived.

Although the Diehls' plans to enter the milk condensing business had not fully materialized by the time Prohibition came, the proposed venture had attracted a significant amount of local interest. By 1922, several investors with experience in milk condensing had been recruited, and the Defiance Dairy Products Company was soon in full operation in a portion of the old brewery. The Crescent News called the opening of the condensory "a milestone in the commercial life of Defiance." Indeed, the milk condensory -- still owned and operated by the Diehl family -- is today one of the city's largest enterprises.

Incidentally, the brewery was kept in operation well into Prohibition, making "near beer," a de-alcoholized version of real beer. The bottling works remained active as well, packaging a wide variety of soft drinks.

Happy Days Are Here Again

After 13 years of speakeasies, rampant bootlegging, and the rise of organized crime, the National Prohibition Amendment was repealed in 1933. Beer became legal at Midnight on April 6th, a date which soon came to be known as "New Beer's Eve" in response to the many late night celebrations which ensued.

The Diehls' popular old Centennial Beer was back on the market by April 19th, but the Diehls announced that they would initially service only customers within a 25 mile radius of the brewery. Brewing capacity was about half of what it had been in 1919 due to the operations of the condensory, and the Diehls were quick to make certain that their local customers were given priority until production could be expanded.

Those who re-entered the brewing business after Prohibition found it vastly different from the old days. While saloons had always been the primary outlet for beer in earlier times, many consumers now preferred their beer in take-home packages. Women, who once were labeled "loose" if they drank at all, now found it fashionable to drink beer. And the disappearance of the old horse and wagon in the shadows of the automobile allowed for easier transportation of beer to further markets.

The Diehls adapted well to the many new challenges, and the brewery was soon on sound footing. Quite appropriately, advertisements for Centennial Beer featured the clever slogan "A New Diehl," playing on President Roosevelt's New Deal social reforms.

Part Of The Family

By 1940, both Christian Jr. and John C. Diehl had passed away, leaving brother Albert F. Diehl the sole family member still involved in the operations of the brewery. However, many of the brewery's long-time employees were considered as much a part of the Diehl family as the Diehls themselves. More than one worker reached 50 years employment at the brewery, and it was not uncommon for three generations of the same family to have made their living brewing Diehl beer.

And the Diehls took good care of their employees. While brewery owners in other regions were battling to keep unions out of their plants, the Diehl family encouraged its workers to organize a union so as to send a clear message to customers in union-dominant cities that all Diehl products were squarely on the side of the working man.

A New Era

In 1949, Albert F. Diehl passed away, and son John F. Diehl took over management of the brewery. Another son, William A. Diehl, was in charge of the milk condensory. Together, the brothers ushered in an era of great change for the Diehl family business.

By 1950, the long-lived Centennial label had been retired, and was replaced by the new Diehl Five Star Select Pilsener Beer. Interestingly, the brand was named in honor of Five Star General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who, after receiving a case of the beer from the Diehls, proclaimed it a superior brew.

However, the decade of the 1950s was not a favorable one for many regional brewers, the Diehls among them. Competition from highly-capitalized national brewers grew dramatically. While the developing interstate highway system brought more and more competition, the birth of the mass media advertising campaign began to chip away at consumers' loyalty to local products. The brewery mortality rate soared.

Ohio breweries in particular faced a significant disadvantage in competing with out-of-state brands. Ohio's beer tax -- which amounted to 36¢ per case -- was three times higher than that of the surrounding states, thus reducing profits for Ohio brewers and causing outsiders to

"dump" larger quantities of beer into the state to compensate for the slim profit margin here. Ohio brewers continually argued their plight in front of state legislators, but to no avail.

In March of 1955, amidst a climate of virtually insurmountable competition, the Christian Diehl Brewing Company brewed its last barrel of beer, thus ending a nearly 85-year family brewing tradition. The Diehl plant -- capable of brewing 75,000 barrels of beer annually at its peak -- was the 43rd Ohio brewery to fall victim to adverse conditions since the repeal of Prohibition. Many more have since followed.

Anniversary Beer

Although the present Diehl, Inc. has thrived in a variety of non-beer markets since the closing of the brewery, the Diehls have always held a fond respect for the role that beer played in their lives, and in their success and prosperity in Defiance.

And now, in celebration of the 125th anniversary of the family business, the Diehls are resurrecting their brewing heritage with the introduction of the first Diehl beer in over 40 years. Called Diehl Centennial 125th Anniversary Beer, the limited-run brand appeared in local stores on Friday.

When a young and eager Christian Diehl arrived in Defiance in 1870 to take a job as brewmaster at the local brewery, he certainly never imagined that -- a whole century and a quarter later -- his offspring would still be quenching the summer thirst of Defiancers. It is not too difficult to imagine old Christian Diehl now, looking down with a smile at the brewing legacy still alive in his grandchildren, great grandchildren, and great great grandchildren.