

HISTORY OF HAMMEL BREWERY & CLARENCE HAMMEL OBITUARY

Albuquerque Journal, March 8, 1981, p 1E: "SOCORRO MAN'S PRIDE ROOTED IN BEER – State's First Brewery Built By Dad in 1884", by Thomas O. Martinez, Assistant State Editor: [1/4 page photo of Clarence Hammel at left, with brother Frances and Father William, Posed in Brewery Office in 1914].

Socorro – Clarence Hammel, 82, has no regrets that his honesty and a fateful decision by his grandfather kept him from becoming a millionaire. The retired Socorro businessman is proud that his family established the first brewery, ice plant, and soda pop bottling operation in New Mexico.¹ Hammel is a second-generation American who has forgotten how to speak German, but speaks English and Spanish with a flair. His grandfather, Jacob Hammel, came from Germany in the 1840s with Eberhard Anheuser and turned down Anheuser's offer to form a partnership. Anheuser went on to establish Anheuser-Busch in St Louis, MO., one of the nation's leading breweries.

"My grandfather and Mr. Anheuser came over from Germany together in 1848. They were good friends. Mr. Anheuser was so poor, my father told me, that grandfather had to lend him a coat to get married in. Mr. Anheuser asked my grandfather to go into business with him. He said no. That was the biggest mistake he ever made," Hammel said. Instead of joining Anheuser, Jacob Hammel opened a brewery in Lebanon, Ill., in about 1865. The product was known as Hammel's Lager Beer. William G. Hammel, one of Jacob's sons and father of Clarence, learned the brewery business from the elder Hammel and moved to New Mexico in 1881.

My father came to Socorro for his health. Socorro was booming when he came here. It was about the biggest city in New Mexico. There were 40 saloons and dance halls and you could see \$10,000 - \$15,000 lying on the tables," Hammel said. After arriving in Socorro, William Hammel began importing his father's beer from Illinois. He bottled and sold the beer locally. In 1884 Hammel bought some property and established the first brewery in New Mexico.

In 1887 Hammel added an ice operation and in 1904 the buildings constructed in 1884 were razed and the present stone structure was erected. The firm was known as the Illinois Brewing Company – the same name used by Jacob Hammel in Lebanon, Ill. A bottle of beer sold for about 15 cents.

Clarence Hammel who says he has been drinking beer since he was six months old, said he began his visits to his father's brewery at an early age. "My mother told me I used to drink beer and cuss like hell. When I was about 5 she would tell me I'd go to the brewery to drink beer. My father's employees cursed a lot and that's where I picked it up from. Then I would go home drunk as a skunk and cursing up a storm." Hammel said.

By 1908 Hammel's father had added a soda pop bottling works in conjunction with the brewery and ice plant. The alcoholic product, Export Lager Beer, contained malt, barley, rice, and water from a local spring. My father made the beer 1884 to 1918. The water came from a spring here in Socorro which was ideal for brewing a fine beer. We had people from all over the U.S. say it was the finest beer in the nation.

There's lots of stories I could tell you about its reputation," Hammel said. For instance, from 1910 to 1914 a German band from Germany visited the U. S. every year and before they returned to Germany they would make a special trip to Socorro. They would play all over and then come by the brewery. It would cost my father an eight-gallon keg² each day they were here, but they told my father his beer was the only beer in the U. S. comparable to the beer made in Germany." Hammel said another group that would have been happy to endorse Export Lager Beer were gypsies who came from throughout the

U.S. to Socorro from 1912-18. They came here from all over the U. S. in horse and buggies and later in big automobiles. There must have been 150-200 of them – men, women, and children. They came to Socorro every year to choose their chief for the following year. One day my father asked them why they came to Socorro and they told him they came to drink his beer. They told him it was the finest beer in the U. S.”

My father quit making beer in 1918,” Hammel said. National prohibition (outlawing alcoholic beverages) came in 1919, but the state of New Mexico closed October 1918. That’s when we were forced to close up. The equipment couldn’t be used for anything else and it deteriorated. It caused my father a lot of mental anguish. He wasn’t compensated five cents for his investment. Bars, breweries, and anything else associated with the business had to close. It made paupers out of those people and millionaires out of gangsters.

William Hammel died in 1919 and Clarence, 18, took over the family ice plants and soda pop bottling business. Hammel was a recent High School Graduate -- one of three in Socorro’s first graduating class. Prior to the formation of the town high school, New Mexico Tec, then known as the New Mexico School of Mines, served as the area high school. Young Hammel was prepared for the awesome responsibility facing him. He and his three brothers had worked in the brewery as youngsters. One brother, Frances Hammel, is still living and resides in California.

In 1925 Hammel became the state’s first bottler of a soft drink known as Pepsi Cola. He lost that franchise in 1925 when the soft drink firm was sold but picked it up again in 1928. Illinois Brewing Company eventually bottled other drinks as well – 7-Up, Nesbitt Orange, and Grapette. With the repeal of prohibition in 1933, Hammel did not resume the brewery operation, but added a wholesale liquor distributorship to the business. “It would have been too much trouble to go into the beer making business again, but if I had been crooked I could have ended up a millionaire. With breweries opening up again I was approached by [business – part missing?] people, big people, to sell stock in the brewery. I could have sold stock for several million dollars...[part missing] but I’ve always been honest,” Hammel said.

Then in 1938 and almost 40, Hammel married Marcella Branum, a registered nurse from Texas. They didn’t have any children. The marriage lasted until Mrs. Hammel’s death in 1976. In 1955 Hammel sold the wholesale liquor operation and four years later divested himself of the soda pop bottling portion of the business. He continued to operate the ice plant until he retired in 1968. We were making two tons of ice a day. The spring water we were using wasn’t much good by then and my wife became ill so I just retired. I had put in 50 years into the business. I thought that was enough.

Hammel also devoted 54 years of his life as a volunteer fireman. I think that has to be a record, he said. After Mrs. Hammel’s death, Hammel was left alone directly across the street from the brewery his father built. Hammel is well known in Socorro and easily recognizable as he drives around his hometown in his 1940 Chevrolet coupe or 1955 Chevrolet sedan. Both cars are as well preserved as their owner. “I have no regrets. I’ve had a pretty good life here. We (the Hammel family) were honest, hard working people who tried to do the best we could to make an honest living. I was born and raised here in Socorro. I’m proud of that and wouldn’t change anything even if I could,” Hammel said.

Addendum: Other illustrations include a photo of Clarence in his office (which looks almost exactly the same today); a photo of a label from Grandfather Jacob Hammel’s first brewed Hammel’s Lager Beer; and the “crew” of the Hammel Brewery in 1915.

Footnotes by Robert Eveleth

¹: Clarence could not have known about the primitive pioneering breweries in early territorial New Mexico like the Meyers and Ott brewery in Santa Fe that was almost destroyed by a torrential rain in 1855 (New York Herald, 10/2/1855) or William Carl's "Western Brewery" said to be located along the old Fort Union Road in 1869 (Santa Fe New Mexico, May 5, 1869). There were doubtless untraced others.

²: The Hammel Museum of the Socorro County Historical Society possesses an historic beer keg from the Hammel Brewery. It is possibly the only surviving *territorial* New Mexico beer keg and it appears to be about 8 gallons capacity.

Socorro Chieftain, 8/23/1919, p 1: Excerpts from "Large attendance at funeral of W. G. Hammel: "William G. Hammel, the subject of this sketch, was born November 16, 1857, at Edwardsville, Ill...he came west [in 1882] and settled in Socorro. Soon after his arrival here Mr. Hammel established a bottling works on Manzanares Avenue and in 1884 went into the brewery and ice business, establishing the Illinois Brewing Co., of which he has remained the active head until his death.

Mr. Hammel was married to Miss Lulu Rattinger in St. Louis, Mo., on July 31, 1889. Five children were born to the union, all of whom, with the mother, survive to mourn the loss of a devoted father and husband...With his demise passed to the great beyond the last charter member of Socorro Hose Co. No. 1, of which he had always remained an active and interested member."