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The F.C. Lucas Brewery: Castanea, PA



The brewery building as it appeared in 1982.



Copy of an old photograph of the brewery in its heyday. Telltale hole in the floor indicates the position of the kettle.



The first half of this "blast from the past" article appeared in Home Fermenters Digest with the Indian beer tray. Unfortunately the magazine folded and the second half never appeared! So here for the first time in its entirety and with additional illustrations is Rich Dochter's long awaited story.

By Richard Dochter

Harvey's Gap is a 900 foot deep notch in the Bald Eagle Mountain in Clinton County, north central Pennsylvania. It is the last ridge of the Appalachian Ridge and Valley system before one encounters the Allegheny front of the Allegheny Plateau to the west. At the bottom of the gap, Harvey's Run empties into the Bald Eagle Creek. One and a half miles north across the creek lies the city of Lock Haven along the Susquehanna River. The name Lock Haven pertains to the numerous "locks" of the canal system that ran through town and connected cities and towns in Pennsylvania before the advent of the railroads. At the top of the run is a double mountain system and then the rolling farms of the east end of Salona Valley.

The first hint of brewing activity in the gap was in 1863 when Philip Fable purchased the land where the brewery was to be built. Fable was already brewing on the north side of the 400 block of E. Church St. in Lock Haven. He was probably producing English-style ale at this operation and may have had his eyes on Harvey's Gap as a site to produce the increasingly popular German lager beer. He would have needed fresh cold water, caves, and ice to make the lager. The Lock Haven area was already booming with lumber, railroad, mining, and clay and brick industries so the demand for beer was present and growing.

By 1868, Charles Fable had cleared the chestnut forest (castanea is the generic name for chestnut in botanical classification) leaving a grove of chestnut trees. He erected a two-story frame brewery at Harvey's Gap complete with a cave, a mash boiling tub, a beer cooler, numerous outbuildings including a tool shop, fire-proof stables, and probably the ice pond. United States Treasury Department records show Philip Fable registered as a brewing operation in the Lock Haven area up until 1870, however mandatory registration dates from 1876. From 1870 until 1883 the brewery was registered with the federal government by Mr. Fable. Sales were recorded at 456 barrels in 1878, and 443 barrels in 1879. A barrel contains thirty one gallons.

Concurrently the settlement of the town of Castanea was progressing in the Harvey's Gap area. In 1870, Jacob Brown and Peter W. Keller purchased the Joseph Bamburger farm, laid out a town and sold lots. From 1869 on, Lock Haven developed the Harvey's Run watershed as a city water supply. By 1877, Castanea Township was separated from Dunnstable Township.

Fable ceased beer production sometime in the early 1880's and the ownership passed to Sheriff Peter B. Smith. He in turn sold it to William A. Simpson, cashier at the State Bank in Lock Haven.

The, shall we say, classic period of the Castanea Brewery begins with George Luther and Ferdinand C. Lucas purchasing the old Fable Brewery in 1883 from Simpson. F.C. Lucas of Natrona, PA was the more active partner and the licensed brewer. We know little of Mr. Luther but may speculate that he supplied the capital.

The Castanea Brewery was to remain under the direction of Mr. Lucas for thirty-seven years until Prohibition intervened, so let us examine his background. Ferdinand C. Lucas was born in Germany on February 9, 1862 to Ferdinand Christian and his wife. It is somewhat confusing as both father and son affixed Sr. to their names during their lives. When F.C. was eight years old his family sailed for America from Bremen. The Franco-Prussian War was raging but Lucas was able to obtain passports since no family member was of military age. As Ferd remembered it eighty years later in a newspaper interview, it was seven weeks and four days later that their ship docked at Castle Garden, NY. The Lucas' located in Natrona, Allegheny County, PA (of which Pittsburgh is county seat) and by age ten young F.C. was working in a lye factory. By the age of seventeen he had left Natrona to apprentice himself to a baker in Steubenville, OH. He remembered the work as not being difficult, but he gave up the trade and relocated in Pittsburgh where he was employed at a brewery. Having missed his early education, Ferd picked up the basics of reading, writing, and lager beer production during this period. Why Ferd, a twenty-one year old brewery worker would move to Clinton County is open to speculation, but he appears on the scene as a partner and licensed brewer in the reactivation of the old Fable brewery in 1883.

Reactivating the brewery must have meant a tremendous amount of hard labor as well as skilled work for the partners, but they were marketing beer by 1884. Meanwhile, Ferd married Louisa W. Wellinger, one of the three daughters of John Wellinger of Pittsburgh, on May 25, 1885. These were thirsty times and lager beer was coming to dominate the trade. Railroads, cheap local grain, and the developing economy must have made it possible for the Castanea brewery to prosper in the mid-1880's.

1887 seems to have been the year F.C. Lucas made the big move and became the sole owner of the brewery. Apparently he had been having visions of expansion, for in 1888 he rebuilt the brewery from the ground up. The two-story stone and brick brewery building which stands today, and the red yellow roller-type beer wagon that is still talked about today, are the two most impressive legacies of F.C. Lucas' vigorous expansion in 1888. The stone portion of the brewery remains attractive and intact today after many years of neglect. The complex of buildings constructed by Mr. Lucas must have given the observer a feeling of solid Teutonic functionality but with an eye for beauty as well. The memory of that Pittsburgh-style beer wagon on the streets of Lock Haven made F.C. Lucas puff his chest with pride in 1950 (at the time of the newspaper interview), but it must have been a very good business maneuver back in the 1880's. With its two fine mules in monogrammed harness and a flashy portrait of the brewery across the back it must have been a spectacle, but the wagon continued to function for twenty years. Lucas appears to have expanded the original caves and built the standing brewery house at this time.

Business must have been booming for the Castanea Brewery with the expanding railroads, extensive lumber industry, mining, and the claypits which were located adjacent to the brewery; all bringing thirsty workers to the area. The brewery's printed ads of the time stress a dedication to excellence in method and ingredients. Indeed, for the thirsty citizen a single outing to the Brewery's cool Chestnut grove and picturesque buildings on a hot July day should have made a customer for life!

Expansion continued and by the turn of the century a third floor was added to the brewery building. This frame addition was used for grain storage. The ice pond and ice house were in full operation supplying the needs of the brewery as well as a local retail business.

Meanwhile, the Lucas family was growing. F.C. Lucas Jr. was born late in 1887 and was to be groomed for business. He attended brewmasters school in Pittsburgh and by 1909 was the brewmaster at the brewery in Castanea. John G. Lucas was born on November 12, 1888 and by 1909 was the bookkeeper for his father. The family's residence was at the brewery until 1896 when they moved to the large red brick home Ferd had built for them at 329 East Main Street in Lock Haven. The house stands today and would probably be rated a mansion if it was in the right neighborhood. Younger daughters Claire and Elma were born later and never seem to have had any involvement in the brewing business. F.C. Lucas was noted as a front line citizen and respected businessman in publications of the time. His beer-related dealings took Ferd beyond the brewery as he purchased hotels and taverns to provide an exclusive outlet for his products. At one time or another between 1890 and 1920, Lucas controlled or owned six area hotels (some of which still stand); The Old Corner, St. Cloud, St. Charles, The National, and Mill Hall Hotels, the Lucas House. Ferd's brother, Charles J. Lucas and his wife Mary, were proprietors of the St. Cloud Hotel from at least 1915 until 1921.

Expansion continued and F.C. Lucas installed Clinton County's first mechanical ice machine in 1906. This addition made more ice available for retail trade to the community and became a large segment of the Lucas trade. Ferd's reputation for a good deal is illustrated by his selling 100 lbs. of ice delivered for fifty cents, compared to his competition which sold the same quantity at the plant for one dollar prior to World War I. The 1890's and the first decade of the twentieth century must have been the "Golden Age" of the Castanea Brewery. They were using well printed labels manufactured in Chicago on their bottles, and colorful beer trays were issued at least twice in 1894 and 1904.

The brewery employed about nine people whose weekly wage averaged \$6.00 during this period. The core group of workers appears to have been F.C. Lucas Jr., John G. Lucas, John and William Schadt, Clarence Heineman and Stewart Quiggle. It must have been arduous labor for these men in the days of resin-lined kegs and wire-topped bottles to produce, at maximum capacity, twenty-five to thirty barrels of beer per day. In the years before Prohibition Lucas registered an annual output of 1500 barrels with the Federal Government. Actual production may have exceed this amount, for it was not uncommon for brewers to "re-use" tax stamps. By whatever means the brewery complex continued to grow. In 1908-09 the office building was added and in 1911 a stock house was erected. The stable which stands and is now in use, was constructed in 1906.

Although mention is made of Lucas' brewery producing Porter, the basic product over the years was lager beer marketed locally as "Castanea Beer." Advertisements of the day laud the product as having exceptional nutritional value as well as being a powerful digestive agent. It was invigorating, animating, and a home product all of which made it worthwhile (according to a 1909 ad). Actually, it was made from water secured from the municipal water supply dam above the brewery on Harvey's Run, and grain grown in Salona Valley which was hauled by wagon over Bald Eagle Mountain. The brewery also manufactured soda for retail sale, but this was a minor sideline according to Mr. Lucas.

The story of the F.C. Lucas and the Castanea Brewery, which well illustrates the success of small scale brewing operations between 1890 and 1920, is by no means unique. German immigrants were active in the brewing business across the state and the country. Within a thirty -five mile radius, five other breweries were in operation: Widmann's Fountain Spring Brewery in Lockport, across the river from Lock Haven, Binders Brewery, outside Renovo, the Flock and Star Breweries of Williamsport and the Koch Brewery of South Williamsport. These were all substantial, family enterprises involving at least as much labor and capital investment as the brewery in Castanea. Many German-Americans found the road to success in this country through the lager beer industry.

However another world paralleled the robust, beer drinking world of F.C. Lucas and the other brewers; the Temperance Movement- which grew out of the Protestant churches, the women's movement, and the old-line ethnic communities. While not powerful in Clinton County, the Temperance Movement was an influential and proper segment of American society at the time. During the austere days of the First World War the Temperance Movement triumphed as the U.S. Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution which prohibited the manufacture and consumption of alcoholic beverages. It was ratified by the states in January of 1919 and went into effect the following year. The nation was off on a noble experiment which left many a German-American brewery broke and dry.

Thirty years later, F.C. Lucas was still bitter about Prohibition and its effect on his business, but in 1920 it was real and the brewery ceased its production of lager beer. The story which circulates is that the last batch of beer was dumped and excited locals came running to scoop up the last batch of Castanea Beer. Lucas quickly sold off his hotel interests as Prohibition settled into effect. He continued in business as the Castanea Ice and Beverage Company to sell ice, produce soda, and mine clay in the pits adjacent to the brewery. Apparently the ice and clay trade did well, while the soda business did not make much money. The brewmaster, Ferd C. Lucas Jr. tried his hand at the ice cream business on a site in Lock Haven for a few years after the brewery closed. By 1924 when F.C. Lucas was sixty one years old he turned the retail ice and soda business over to F.C. Jr. and sold the brewery and ice plant (and soda business) to James A. Jordan of Elmira, NY for \$20,000 (\$10,000 held in mortgage by Mr. Lucas).

Little is known about the new owner than about the Lucas family but Mr. Jordan was known as a hard drinking, free spending young man. There must be some truth to the stories that he came from a wealthy family and had two uncles who operated a brewery in New York. He did move to Castanea and lived in the house on the brewery site with his wife, Mary. Jordan's exact motives in buying the brewery are not known, but we can surmise that he had more than ice and near beer in mind when he completely renovated the brewery equipment. Modern steel vats replaced those made of wood and the stable was converted into a bottle shop. Jordan succeeded in obtaining a federal license to produce near beer, which was marketed along with the ice by F.C. Lucas Jr. Near beer production involved the making of real beer with the subsequent removal of all but one half of one percent of the alcohol before it was sold. It must have been tempting to divert some of the real beer to quench real thirsts!

At some point in time soon after the brewery reopened, Jordan and F.C. Lucas Jr. must have agreed on a scheme to sell real beer. As the illicit orders for real beer came through Jordan's contacts, the brewery would fill kegs with real beer and immediately move them to a shed on the Lucas property beyond the brewery. The kegs would later be delivered by truck with Lucas riding lookout in a separate vehicle. Southern New York State and Johnstown, Pa were frequent stops in this operation. It is quite likely that the tales of \$500 per month payoffs to local law enforcement officials (up to the State Police level) to protect the brewery are true. In spite of several close calls with enforcers of the Volstead Act, Jordan and Lucas grew bolder. By 1928 and 1929 they were brewing large quantities of real beer and shipping it from the Castanea station of the New York Central R.R Agents at the rail station augmented their railroad wages by shipping kegs of beer as oil.

These practices came to a halt in 1929 when one rail shipment of Castanea Beer was impounded in Cleveland, OH, and traced to the brewery in Harvey's Gap. Federal agents padlocked the brewery, lifted Jordan's near beer license, and fined him \$25,000. Jordan did not pay the fine and the case remained pending until it was dismissed when Prohibition was repealed. Jordan and Lucas remained in business on the site selling ice, but were unable to re-open the brewery when beer came back in 1933. Several tentative efforts were made by others to purchase the brewery, but Jordan was too far in debt to make this feasible. In 1937, F.C. Lucas Sr. foreclosed his mortgage and regained control of the brewery complex, however Jordan had scrapped the brewing equipment to pay debts. The elder Lucas was seventy-five years old, comfortable, and the brewery was stripped of equipment hence, he never seriously considered reopening. The ice plant continued to meet Lock Haven's decreasing need for ice until it closed in 1942; the end of commercial operations related to the Castanea Brewery.

What became of the brewery and the people involved since that last batch was brewed? James A. Jordan disappeared from the area in 1937 and nothing is known of his fate. F.C. Lucas Jr. died at his home above the brewery in 1942 at the age of fifty four. John G. Lucas operated a radio repair business in Lock Haven after Prohibition began, but left the area in 1936 to pursue a business career in the midwest. He died on June 12, 1981 at his retirement home in Lakeworth, FL. Louisa Lucas died of a stroke at her home on July 30, 1948, at the age of eight-four, F.C. Lucas lived on into the 1950's bragging about his early tomatoes, eating scallions for breakfast, and talking about the brewery. He finally died after having lived a remarkable life spanning the years from the early lagers in wood kegs to mass produced beer in cans. The brewery stables were converted into a vehicle repair garage in the early fifties and remain so to this date. The main brewery building still stands but is in disrepair, especially the frame portions. The office building is also standing, but appears close to collapse. The remnants of the grove and park remain but are not well maintained. The Harvey's Run watershed and dam are still operating part of the municipal water system for the city of Lock Haven.

So it is, the legacy of a once successful lager brewery in the state of Pennsylvania, if not the nation, little more than a shell of its former self.

<http://pabreweryhistorians.tripod.com/castanea.htm>