

## A Peek At The Past:

### Fermenting history: Ferd Lucas and his brewery

October 30, 2010 - by Matt Connor - For The Express

They say great minds think alike, but this was ridiculous. After spending several precious hours of research at Ross Library, I read with mounting discomfort an article in Thursday's Express by my friend Lou Bernard. Lou and I often run into each other at the library, but this week we had somehow missed each other.

A shame, since we were both apparently working, separately, on historical articles involving the same individual, Ferdinand C. "Ferd" Lucas. Luckily for us both, Lou and I had each set our sights on different aspects of Ferd's business life.

The industrious Ferd was a force behind at least two large industries in Castanea. In Thursday's Express article, Lou focused on the Castanea Brick and Tile Company, which Ferd purchased in a sheriff sale in 1913. By then he had become one of the company's largest stock holders.

My interest, however, was in beer, not surprising for those who know my fondness for inebriating beverages.

Ferd Lucas purchased the Castanea Brewery in 1883, completely rebuilt it five years later and continued to operate it successfully until prohibition was passed. At that point he wisely got out of the beer business, briefly tried his hand at the soft drink trade and eventually retired to the lovely brick home he built for himself at 329 E. Main St.

He was not, however, the first to attempt a beverage manufacturing business in the township. In 1865 the American Tea Factory was launched in Castanea with great fanfare. Writers for the Clinton Democrat newspaper used soaring language to describe this enterprise, which was touted as giving then-dominant Asian tea manufacturers a run for their money.

"During the past summer many of the visitors to our thriving and prosperous town have had their attention called to a factory that stands half-hidden in a beautiful grove of chestnut trees on the southern bank of the Bald Eagle," wrote the effusive Clinton Democrat reporter. "Secluded and separated from the busy hum of our numerous mills and shops, it has thrown around it an air of mystery. Why any manufacturer should have erected his factory away from all apparent sources of material and labor, to the uninitiated seem unfathomable. Yet to the visitor to this building all the mystery is revealed."

The Democrat reported that the air surrounding the factory was "filled with the rich aroma of tea" and that "immense baskets" contained "hundreds of pounds of gathered leaves; whilst in the distance the rapid rolling wheels, the quick running of belts, and the noise of the ponderous machine around which the busy move forms are gathered, all proclaim that some great and important work is being carried on."

Apparently the plants from which the tea was manufactured at one time grew in great abundance in Castanea Township.

"It being indigenous, it requires no specific cultivation," the paper reported. "The experience of the past few years proves moreover that it is not in the slightest degree injured by being deprived of its leaves by plucking. Its vigor enables it, moreover, to successfully contend against all other plants. The source of supply thus seems to be inexhaustible."

Well, not exactly. Sadly, the American Tea Factory endured for a surprisingly brief period of time. The company soon vanished, a victim, it was said, of the sudden disappearance of the allegedly vigorous plant from which the tea was derived.

There does not, however, seem to have been any shortage of that other noble botanical, barley, because the production of beer in the township endured for a far longer period of time. Within a few years after the publication of the overly enthusiastic Clinton Democrat story about the tea factory, Charles Fable had cleared out a section of Castanea's noted chestnut forest, according to a 1984 article in Home Fermenter's Digest magazine, and built a two-story frame brewery on the site.

"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," wrote author Richard Dochter in his Home Fermenter's Digest article. "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 31 gallons."

Fable shut down beer production sometime in the early 1880s and his factory was sold in a sheriff's sale to William A. Simpson, a lumber baron whose massive home still stands at 118 W. Water St. Simpson, in turn, sold it to George Luther and Ferd Lucas in 1883.

Born in Germany in 1862, Ferd Lucas was a remarkably ambitious man who taught himself to read and write in his late teens by studying a dictionary and the daily newspapers of the day, laboriously jotting down words he didn't know, and looking them up.

At 21 he arrived in Lock Haven and became the youngest U.S. licensed brewer in the country. He expanded aggressively and within a few years had bought out his partner, Luther, and was running the brewery on his own.

"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," wrote Dochter in 1984. "German immigrants were active in the brewing business across the state and the country. Within a 35 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."

In 1950, 88-year-old Ferd gave a long interview to The Express about his nearly four decade beer-making career. His interviewer was likely legendary Express editor Rebecca Gross, who waxed on at length about the impressive beer wagon Ferd had purchased in Pittsburgh.

"The wagon was something beautiful to behold, and Ferd put his thumbs in his suspenders and puffed his chest with pride," The Express reported. "It was red, trimmed in yellow. Two fine mules drew it, with shiny harness, newly made in Lock Haven, and silvery buckles.

"Leather covers for the mules collars carried the name of the 'Castanea Brewery' in bright metal buttons, then quite the stuff in smart business circles. The crowning touch was the hand painted picture - the Castanea Brewery - on the steel plate across the rear and the art work done by the late Miss Annie Snyder, a Lock Haven girl who knew how to wield a brush."

Seizing an opportunity in an age predating electric refrigerators by decades, Ferd got into the ice making business, building the first ice plant in Clinton County in 1906, and he did very well in that enterprise as well. The same year he built his large brick home on East Main.

Despite his business acumen, however, Ferd was on the wrong side of history. In 1920 prohibition became the law of the land and he quickly got out of the beer business. For a few years he continued to sell ice and carbonated soft drinks, but in 1924 he turned the business over to his son, Ferd Jr., and sold the brewery to James Jordan, of Emira, N.Y., for \$20,000 (the equivalent of \$251,000 today, based on the Consumer Price Index).

It should be said that while the ice business thrived until the World War II era, the soda business was limp at best, according to Ferd's 1950 Express interview.

"They didn't drink pop in those days as they do today," Ferd told the newspaper.

And, it seems, Ferd's son decided to stay in the beer business despite its illegality. Here's how it was done, according to Dochter: "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 (\$6,260 today) 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."

But even that gravy train had to end sooner or later. In 1929 a rail shipment of Castanea Beer was impounded in Cleveland and traced to the brewery in Castanea. Federal agents padlocked the brewery and fined Jordan \$25,000, the equivalent of \$313,000 today.

Meanwhile Ferd Sr. lived in comfortable retirement in Lock Haven. An avid gardener blessed with longevity, old Ferd was known to spend long summer days sitting on his front porch discussing neighborhood tomato crops. But he himself, he would say, was "strictly an onion man."

"When the green tops reach so high he will have scallion sandwiches," The Express reported. "He will not only eat his green onions aplenty, but - like our brass lined forebears - he will have them for breakfast."

The scallions and, no doubt, the occasional German lager, must have had a beneficial effect on Ferd's health. He died at Lock Haven Hospital at age 89 in 1951, claiming at the end of his life to be the only living man who was in business in the city of Lock Haven in 1883, a fact well worth bragging over.

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