

The Littlest Brewery

Has weathered prohibition, take-over rumors, new owners

Shiner is the home of the Spoetzl Brewery, the only independent brewery now left in Texas.

The Shiner Brewery Association was founded in 1909 by a group of local businessmen and farmers.

"This was a farming and ranch area settled by German and Czechoslovakian people," said J.L. "Speedy" Beal, the brewery's sales manager of 25 years. "Unlike the English, they had to have their beer with them everywhere they went, so instead of setting up a whiskey distillery, they set up a brewery."

Due to expenses, the small corporation was forced to sell. The brewery then passed into the hands of Kosmos Spoetzl, a German-born brewmaster working for the Pyramid Brewing Company of Cairo, Egypt.

Moving to South Texas because of ill-health, Spoetzl leased the brewery in 1914 for one year with the option to buy. In 1915 the Spoetzl Brewery was born.

For the next three years, Spoetzl's brewery was a thriving success. Then, in 1918, Prohibition almost knocked him out of the business.

"Spoetzl turned this brewery into an ice factory and at the same time, made near-beer," Beal said. "However, the near-beer wasn't the only beer he produced. He also put out a 'good beer.'"

Near-beer is regularly brewed beer with the same flavor, but the

alcohol has been boiled out of it. It can't contain over one-twelfth of one percent.

Joe Green, a retired employee, worked for the plant for over 45 years driving a delivery truck, remembers the boiling process.

"I remember when we'd have to reboil the beer to get all the alcohol out. I live up from the brewery and some days you could almost get drunk from the smell in the air."

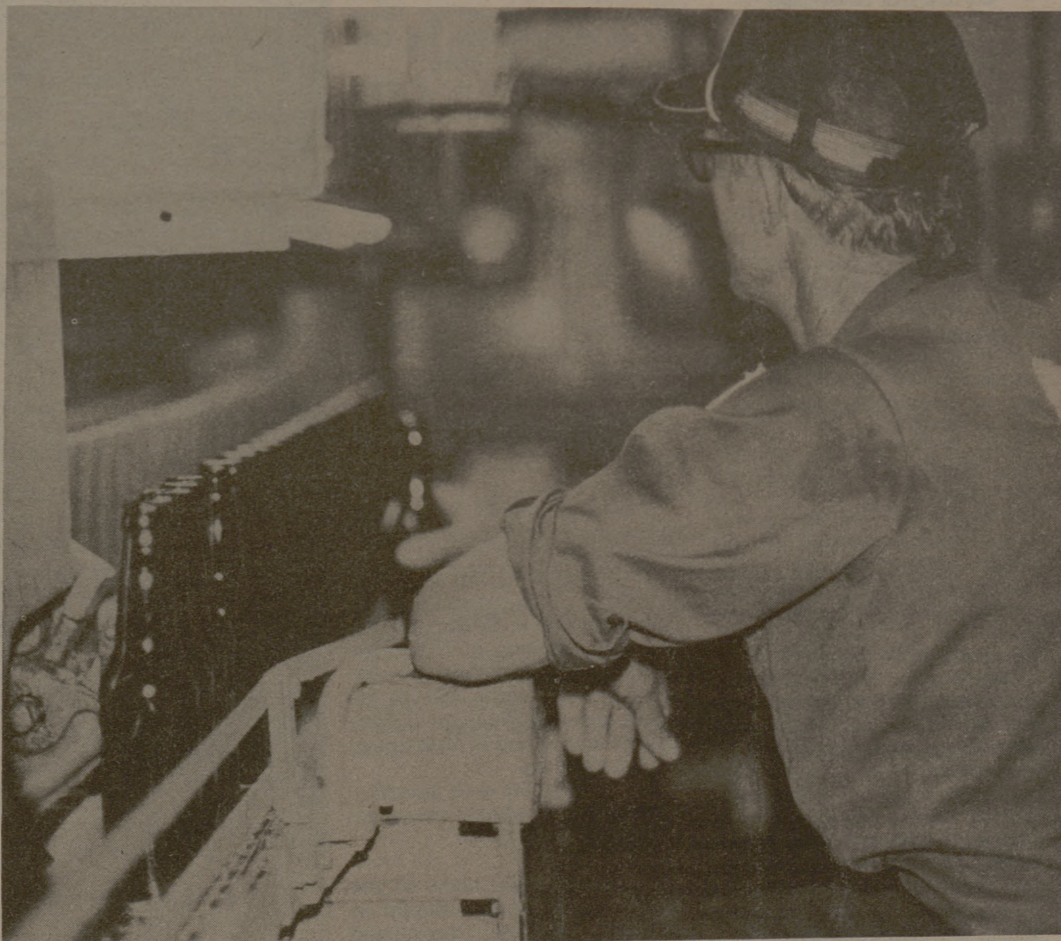
Spoetzl's brewery and the Pearl Brewery were the only Texas breweries producing near-beer during the Prohibition years. In spite of the federal laws, Spoetzl still managed to produce "good beer," which found its way to Spoetzl's special friends.

"I bootlegged, but I never got caught," Green said. "I hauled it to Brenham and Smithville. We'd go in at night to a big shot's house and he'd get so much. Then he'd get with us and we'd go from house to house until we'd unload."

One of Spoetzl's unmarked bootleg trucks was stopped in Houston for running a red light. When the police found the good beer in unmarked bottles and tops, they turned Spoetzl in to the Federal officials. He was forced to close his brewery down for 12 months and rely on his ice business alone.

Spoetzl was held in high regard by his employees, Green said. He was considered a fair man, but he also expected the work to be done.

"Mr. Spoetzl was a fine man to



A Brewery worker checks to make sure sterilized bottles have no cracks.



Joe Green, a retired employee, worked for the brewery for over 45 years driving a delivery truck. He says he bootlegged during prohibition, but "never got caught."

work for. He told me once that he didn't want to be a rich man, just a good liver," Green said. "He was always giving away something."

"He'd see a hobo walking by and he'd go out to help him. He'd give him money and tell him to go buy shoes or food, but not to tell anyone how much he'd given him. It didn't matter if he was talking to a big shot, if he'd see some little boys with ragged pants on, he'd excuse himself and go help them."

After Spoetzl died, his daughter, affectionately referred to as "Miss Cecelie" by the brewery workers, took over the production and became the first woman in American history to have sole ownership of a brewery.

During this time, non-returnable bottles were added to the Shiner collection of draught kegs and long neck returnable bottles.

Miss Cecelie and her father both felt the need to keep the brewery on a small, local level, which explains the lack of expansion, Beal said.

But after 52 years of family ownership, the brewery was sold to Bill Bigler, a native of Denmark. Bigler tried expanding, but found it impossible with a small sales income and a limited budget, Beal said.

In 1968, he sold the brewery to a group of 10 businessmen in the Shiner area. They are the present owners.

Although the brewing capacity did expand from 20,000 barrels a year to 42,000, the brewery has remained friendly, informal and basically small. Employees are still allowed to drink beer on the job, as long as it doesn't interfere with their work.

The slow, German brewing process takes about 28-30 days, beginning in a mash tun where corn grits (dehydrated corn), barley malt

and Artesian well water are mixed together.

This mixture or run, is boiled for about 2 and one-half hours. It then goes into a copper brew kettle where the hops, a heavy syrup that gives beer a bitter taste, and water is added. This brew is boiled for 8 and one-half hours.

Afterwards, it is sent to the fermenting tank where yeast is added to it from the top of the tank, making it a lager beer. The beer settles out for 10-12 days, and is sent to the cellar storage tanks where it is allowed to settle and filtered again.

The last stop is the bottling room where the bottles, cans and crates are sterilized and the labels applied.

All beer, except for the beer that is placed in kegs, is pasteurized for about 45 minutes after being placed in containers. The Spoetzl Brewery turn out about 2,000 cases of beer a day.

Beal said the Spoetzl Brewery has an advantage over other semi-large breweries.

"There is a continual fight for survival in small businesses, especially in the brewing industry. The top five breweries (Anheuser-Busch, Miller, Schlitz, Pabst and Coors) have over 65 percent of the market and it is growing every year.

"We have an advantage over the regional breweries, such as Lone Star and Pearl, because (they) couldn't fight the nationals."

The regional breweries have to operate in five or six states to branch out, Beal said, and soon they are overcome by the nationals. So in this sense, the smaller breweries really have a

better chance for survival, by only concentrating on one state.

Almost all national breweries have large advertising budgets and make their own cans. Therefore, they can afford to sell their beer at cheaper prices.

The Spoetzl Brewery, which is third place behind Anchor's Steam and an upstate New York beer as the smallest brewery in the nation, has to have their bottles and cans made and sent to the brewery. They also have a very limited advertising budget. Shiner's standard retail prices however, are less expensive than the top five competitors.

"Our advertisement is mainly through human interest stories," Beal said. "We are known in College Station because the Dixie Chicken, for example, has Shiner Beer."

"The Littlest Brewery" is naturally feeling pressure from larger breweries to sell out.

"I've been here 25 years and every year rumor gets out that the brewery is going to be sold. We are too small for a brewery to be interested in us since Spoetzl intended for the brewery to be small, we plan to keep that tradition," Beal said. "We're small, unique, mystic and I guess that's what keeps us rolling."

No matter how tough the battle for survival gets, the people at the Spoetzl Brewery will keep their optimistic theory and head-strong attitude. Although the brewery is small, the product is good and therefore then will be a market because there is always room for a good local beer.

Photos and story
by Margaret Johnson