


A LOOK BACK

SAN DIEGO BEER HISTORY FROM 1868-1953

By Sheldon M. Kaplan



The brewing industry writ large is always in a state of constant flux and San Diego is no different. Since the summer of 1987, when San Diego's current "New Brew Wave" kicked off at Bolt Brewing Co in Fallbrook, there have been various cycles of both growth and depletion. Recent San Diego brewery staff layoffs and some brewery closures have been well documented in the pages of this publication over the past few months and fortunately some brewery openings too.

As tempestuous as these times may sometimes appear, when the aforementioned Bolt started to brew there had been a fallow period of some 34 years in which San Diego had no commercial breweries. Prior to that period, from 1953 going back to the late 1860s, with the exception of Prohibition from 1919 to 1933, San Diego had a relatively rich brewing history, though again a past replete with ups and downs in the marketplace. Unfortunately, a great deal of the information about this early period of brewing in San Diego has either been lost to time or exists in (currently) inaccessible archives. That said, here is a primer of some of what we currently know, with hopefully more to come in the future.

Up until around 1868, all beer consumed in San Diego was brewed elsewhere and shipped in, almost always in wooden barrels. Various local depots representing one or more distant breweries would then either distribute the barrels and/or more commonly repackage the beer into bottles for both retail sales and/or distribution to local saloons. San Diego's first brewer of record was one Christian Dobler, an Austrian immigrant who arrived in San Diego with his wife, Martha, sometime in the late 1850s or early 1860s. Dobler's father had been a brewer in Austria, which makes it somewhat likely that is where Christian learned his trade. Interestingly, at around the same time in 1865, John S. Dobler established The Dobler Brewing Company in Albany, New York, though I have yet to establish if he and Christian were closely related or just shared a common family name.

By 1868, Christian and Martha had set up a brewery on their farm in Chollas Valley, not too far from the then-soon-to-be-established Mt. Hope Cemetery. The brewery has been referred to by various names, initially as San Diego Brewery, and then a little later as Pioneer Brewery and/or Pioneer Chollas Valley Brewery. The precise location of the farm has been lost to

time, however, it would have been necessary to be near a reliable water source. Some local farms in the Chollas Valley did have wind pump-driven boreholes for water, and there are reports of a natural spring known as Crystal Springs near the farm/brewery, so there is a possibility that was their water source. Another clue is that back in those days, at times, sections of Chollas Creek had some significant water flow, and it is possible that it was a potential potable water source or perhaps even a supplemental source.

There are reports that after the Mt. Hope Cemetery opened in 1869, mourners would stop at the farm/brewery for some liquid fortification on their way back to New Town – aka "Horton's Addition" – as the area around today's Downtown San Diego was then known. In addition to the previous information reported, and assuming that the mourners would have been heading back west to San Diego, an educated guess puts the location of the farm and brewery just west of 36th Street, somewhere near the K Street extension in the small valley slightly northwest of that location. That area is now bisected by the 15 freeway and is close to the 15 and 94 freeway interchange.

As to the type of beer Dobler might have been brewing, well, we really do not know. Some reports have suggested that Dobler brewed a lager-style beer; however, I personally find that notion highly unlikely, given the warm and fluctuating temperatures of Chollas Valley, coupled with the lack of available refrigeration. An educated guess is that the beer would have been some version of a Weissbier (wheat beer) and/or an ale of some type. Initially, wheat would have been more readily available than malted barley – from milling into flour for bread – though there was some malted barley being imported into San Diego at that time. Both ales and Weissbier are top fermenting beers and, unlike a lager, both of those styles would have been able to handle the range of Chollas Valley temperatures and still be good to drink.

There are also reports that Dobler began growing hops, which makes sense under the circumstances; however, again, I have yet to find proof to back up that claim. According to information obtained from the San Diego History Center, the brewery initially produced about 200 barrels annually, which would eventually grow to 500 barrels annually, as some of Dobler's beer was more than likely distributed more widely in New Town through City Brewery and Depot — more on

that in a bit — and also as more thirsty mourners sought solace on their way home.

By 1870 the population of San Diego had reached 2,300 people, which may not seem like much, but that was four times more than 20 years prior. That same year, in a partnership with Philip Wedel, Dobler established The City Brewery and Depot at the northwest corner of 5th and B, where the Bank of America tower stands today. By around 1871, Dobler and Wedel purchased a mill from San Francisco in order to grind their own grains, though again we have little knowledge of the styles of beer being brewed. An exception we do know of is a “Buck Beer” which was advertised in the *Daily San Diego Union* on July 4, 1872. This beer was most likely not a traditional German “Bock Beer” which is a lager, but rather a brown ale brewed to the consistency and color of a traditional bock with a similar alcohol level. This was a style known “out West” and had been previously brewed by Denver resident and German immigrant brewer Moritz Sigi in the mid-1860s.

In February of 1872 a report in the *Daily San Diego Union* paper noted, “A brewery will be erected shortly in the Chollas Valley near to the one already in operation at that place. Nothing but ale and porter will be brewed at the new establishment. San Diego has two breweries at present both of which make first class malt liquors, which are pronounced by many to be superior to those turned out of the San Francisco establishments.”

There are a number of other historical references in regard to additional breweries around this time that we know nothing about today. In the San Diego city directory of 1886/7 there is a listing for a Valley Brewery with the proprietor listed as Jacob Hoefle and the address listed as “East San Diego.” Was this perhaps a reincarnation of Dobler’s “Chollas Valley Brewery” or maybe the aforementioned unnamed brewery announced in the *Daily San Diego Union* article of 1872? The area in question would have at the time also been considered as “East San Diego.” Unfortunately, we really just don’t know.

There is an additional brewery mystery from that time. On an 1880s city map of San Diego there is an open area listed as “Brewery Tract” that today would lie somewhere in the quadrant now bordered by 32nd and 33rd Street and Logan and National Avenues respectively, and that’s all we have on that score – a name on a map.

Wedel passed away in 1875, and his widow Magdalena retained an interest in the The City

Brewery and Depot with Dobler until he too passed away in 1882. This is the same year that coincides with what we believe to be the closing of the Pioneer Brewery and/or Pioneer Chollas Valley Brewery. Martha Dobler would live until 1926, reaching 92 years of age. She and Christian now rest for eternity in the same plot in Mt. Hope Cemetery not too far from the location of their original farm/brewery.

After Christian Dobler died, his deceased partner’s widow, Magdalena Wedel, sold the business to John Diehl who changed the name to the City Brewery Saloon and Beer Gardens, an early brewpub prototype. This business would remain in operation for at least the next six years, until 1888, with a reported production of 1,000 barrels a year. This is not that surprising as San Diego was booming, and by 1886 the population had grown to some 40,000 people.

Four years later, the land boom went bust, and the population dropped to around 16,000 people. In 1888 the City Brewery closed, while the beer garden remained open, serving beer purchased outside the region. The premises then became the Prescott Lodging House with the attached saloon and beer garden remaining in operation at that location until 1898.

In 1896 things were taken to a whole new level of brewing in San Diego with the establishment of the San Diego Brewing Company (note: this company is related in name only to the brewpub opened in Mission Gorge in 1993). The company was headed up by Jacob Gruendike and other investors, including “city father” Alonzo Horton (the original developer of “New Town”) and John D. Sprekels, the industrialist and entrepreneur. At the time of its inception and for a number of years thereafter, the San Diego Brewing Company was the largest commercial manufacturing entity in the county.

The brewery, with an initial annual capacity of 14,000 barrels, was located at 32nd Street and Bay Front (now Harbor Drive). The brewery had state-of-the-art refrigeration for that time, which allowed them to brew lager-style beers – according to the *San Diego News* of June 11, 1906, “they [SD Brew Co] manufacture nothing but a lager beer” – and also the ability to produce ice. Some of the ice was for local consumption; prior to this, most of the “local” ice was brought to San Diego from Lake Tahoe.

There are also reports that a portion of the San Diego Brewing Company ice was exported as far away as Hawaii. Today, this may sound a little far

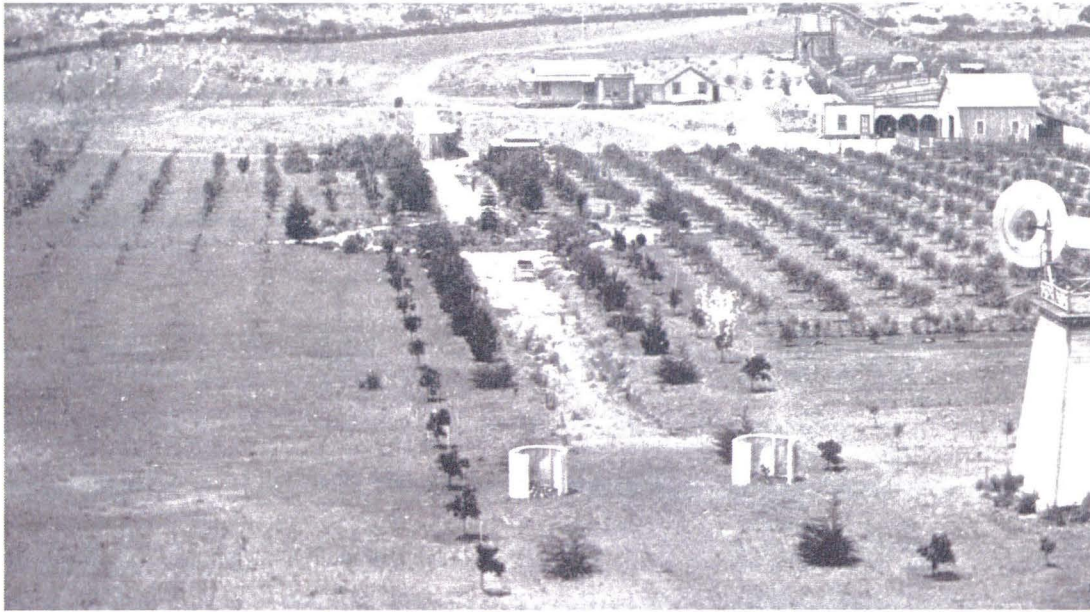
fetched to some, however, consider that Frederic Tudor had already shipped ice from New England to the Caribbean in the early 1800s and then later to Calcutta, India in 1833.

In 1905, two businessmen who had been involved in brewing in the Midwest and Kentucky, George Stadler and J.H. Zitt, purchased control of the San Diego Brewing Company from the estate of Jacob Gruendike. At the time the brewery continued to brew lagers, a “San Diego Light”, a “San Diego Dark”, and “Corona”. In 1909, following the death of George Stadler, the company name changed from San Diego Brewing Company to San Diego Consolidated Brewing Company.

By that time, the company had evolved into three separate locations: the brewery location, a separate warehouse location, and administrative offices on California Street. Initially, the office was on the 1500 block of G Street. In 1914, San Diego Consolidated Brewing Company also purchased the Mission Brewery, whose building still stands today, now converted into offices, at the corner of Hancock Boulevard and Washington Street (then Harasthy Street).

The Mission Brewery building was initially established in 1912 as the Bay City Brewing Company (incorporated in 1911, and no relationship to the current brewery of the same name that operates on a different part of Hancock Street). Bay City Brewing Co was controlled by F.C. and August Lang who were the father-in-law and brother-in-law, respectively, of the aforementioned J.H. Zitt. That entity fizzled out prior to actually brewing any beer, though in 1913 Mission Brewing Company was established at that location, reportedly brewing two beers, “Old Mission Lager Light” and “Old Mission Lager Dark”. According to an article in the *San Diego Union Tribune* of March 19, 1913, these beers were brewed to help supplement the brewing capacity of San Diego Consolidated Brewing Co, which was unable to keep up with demand.

In the summer of 1915, perhaps seeing the Prohibition writing on the wall, the Mission Brewery started to brew a non-alcoholic malt and hop soft drink they called “Hopski”, which was brewed at the location until the brewery closed in 1917. “Old Mission Lager Light” and “Old Mission Lager Dark” continued to be brewed at San Diego Consolidated Brewing Co up until Prohibition. In 1918, after the Mission Brewery closed and through 1919, the brewery building served as a hospital during the flu epidemic. It was



From the top: (1) A Chollas Valley farm circa 1870. Note the wind pump located in the right foreground. Courtesy San Diego History Center (2) Dobler farm location (3) (Left) City Brewery and Depot, opened in 1870. Courtesy San Diego History Center (4) (Right) Where City Brewery and Depot would stand today, at 5th & B



Dobler's Farm/Brewery (1868 - 1882) most likely located somewhere in purple rectangle



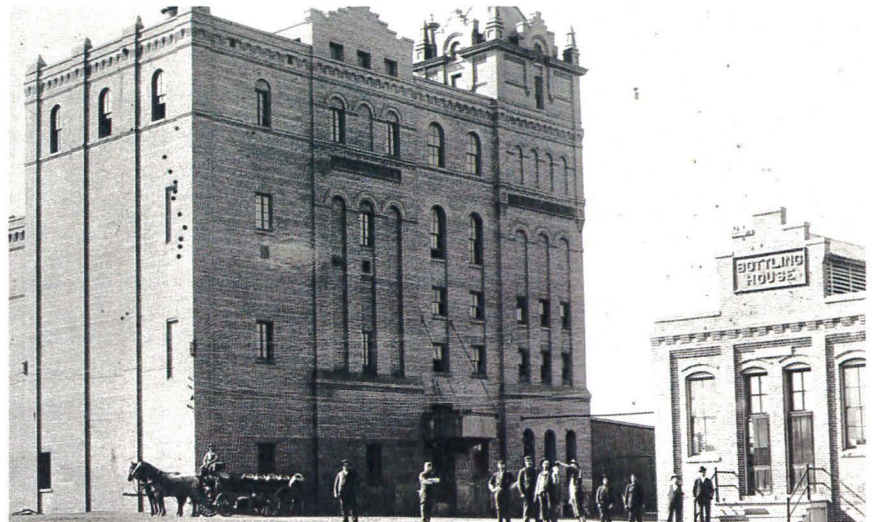
then vacant until 1925 when the American Agar Company was established on that site.

In the late 1980s, Paul Holborn, founder of the by-then-defunct Bolt Brewery, attempted to start a new brewery project on that site with funding raised by Mike Foote, a former San Diego Charger. The brewery was to be known as the Mission Brewery (no connection with the current brewery of the same name in the East Village) and the brewery did manage to brew some pilot brews before ultimately running out of capital due to the Savings & Loans crisis of that time.

In more recent years, beer has been brewed at that property, however, the original brewery itself is long gone. In the mid-to-late oughts, in a smaller brewhouse, Clint Stromberg (now of the new incarnation of Bolt Brewery) brewed under the Five Points banner, and New English Brewing Co brewed beers there for a while too. Coronado Brewing Company also leased the brewhouse for a period until their Knoxville Street brewery came online. More recently, Acoustic Ales brewed at the location, and the brewhouse is currently being operated by the Latchkey Brewing Co.

San Diego's surviving first wave of breweries was given the death knell by the implementation of Prohibition in 1920. In a 2006 article in the *Journal of San Diego History*, Ernie Liwag notes that "before Prohibition, San Diego had approximately 112,000 people, seven breweries and fifty five saloons." Some of these San Diegans would soon join others in various places in Mexico, including Baja, in order to drink alcohol openly. In 1928, in Tijuana, the Agua Caliente

San Diego Brewing Company around the turn of the century, at 32nd & Bay Front. Courtesy San Diego History Center



Casino and Hotel opened, and shortly thereafter an associated horse racing track. Some of the beer for this resort was supplied by a brewery in Mexicali – Cerveceria Azteca, S.A., aka Aztec Brewery, which had originally been established in 1921. The quality of the beer was good enough for its "ABC Beer" to win a gold medal in 1929 at the International Exposition in Seville, Spain.

After Prohibition ended in 1933, a decision was made to move the Aztec Brewery to San Diego. According to reporting by A.J. Burgess in the 1980s, Edward P. Baker and Herbert Jaffe were the braintrust behind this move. Baker was an investor in the aforementioned Agua Caliente Casino and Hotel resort, and Jaffe owned a distillery in Tijuana. Jaffe had also at one point studied to become a brewer in Pilsen, in what

was then Czechoslovakia; he reportedly brought brewers from there to work at Aztec.

The new brewery location was at 2301 Main Street, the former site of the Savage Tire Company, which was renovated into a state-of-the-art brewery with an initial capacity for brewing 100,000 barrels a year. Some of Aztec's equipment and some personnel (the Pilsen folks?) moved from Mexicali to San Diego, and on July 20, 1933, the brewery delivered an initial 14,000 gallons on draft in San Diego, Orange, and Ventura counties, with bottled beer going on sale about one month later. Production grew rapidly, with beer being sent to Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, and Hawaii under the "ABC" brand with the name "Famous" now added to it for its San Diego incarnation.

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Left: Mission Brewery circa 1914. Courtesy San Diego History Center, Right: The Mission Brewery plaza as it currently stands



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The brewery also contracted for several other private brands, according to John Crihfield, a collector of San Diego beer ephemera from that period. Crihfield notes that Aztec would contract brew for any private label brews as long as there was a minimum order of 500 cases (12,000 bottles).

Aztec wasn't the only San Diego brewery at that time with Agua Caliente connections. In 1933, Baron Long, a colorful character, established Balboa Brewing Company in Los Angeles. Initially, the brewery was going to be called Ritz Brewing Co, however, after some of the partners' friends started saying, "Ritz is the shits!" and/or "Ritz gives you the shits!" they decided that Balboa Brewing Co might be a better choice. Long, part of a group known colloquially as "The Border Barons" had been one of the founders of Agua Caliente resort, and was also the owner of the US Grant Hotel in downtown San Diego, which he had acquired in 1919.

One of his partners in the Balboa Brewing Co venture was Wayne D. McAllister, an architect whose first major commission had been the Agua Caliente resort. McAllister spent a lot of time in Mexico during and after construction of the resort, and at some juncture supposedly learned to brew down there.

The relatively small Balboa Brewing Co brewery was located at 808 Imperial Avenue, which had previously housed, among other businesses, the Campbell Creamery. The brewery was only in existence for approximately one year in San Diego before moving production to a larger brewery of the same name in Los Angeles. The general consensus is that the San Diego brewery was established in order to get the brand off its feet, while the main brewery was being built in Los Angeles. The Imperial Avenue location of the Balboa Brewing Co is now located inside the grounds of Petco Park at the street level of the building that houses the concession stands behind sections 308 and 310.

We know that Balboa Brewing Co brewed lagers. The late Dave Williams, a San Diego collector of brewery ephemera, noted the existence of a "Balboa Old Style Lager" and John Crihfield has some old Balboa labels showing "Bock Beer brewed in San Diego". Balboa Brewing Co in Los Angeles would undergo a name change to Monarch Brewing Co in 1936, and would eventually go out of business in 1942. Wayne

Aztec Brewery circa 1930 Courtesy San Diego History Center



McAllister continued his architecture practice and would go on to design numerous restaurants as well as hotels such as the Desert Inn, El Cortez, The Sands Hotel, and Fremont Hotel and Casino, all in Las Vegas.

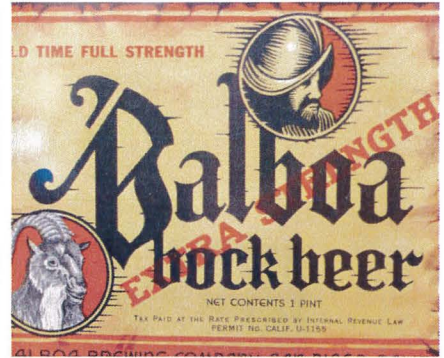
In 1935, the San Diego Brewing Company was revived by J.H. Zitt, previously the head of Mission Brewing Co, and a group of investors. I have been unable to find out too much about the beer that was brewed at the San Diego Brewing Company at that time, though a bottle label from the period states "Bavarian type brewed according to the old Bavarian process and fully aged", so obviously a lager, which makes some sense given that the brewery had previously been noted as a "lager brewery" and had made other lagers including those for Mission Brewery. The post-Prohibition beer was marketed as "San Diego Beer", and we know they also made a Bock Beer.

Brewing continued at 32nd Street and Bay Front until 1942. At that time, the US Navy, then occupied with World War II operations, expropriated the land to expand the scope of operations of the Naval base which still stands at that location today. The brewery buildings were demolished in 1945.

Aztec Brewing Co meanwhile had continued to expand, including building open fermenters in 1934/35. Again, according to Dave Williams, by 1944 Aztec had posted a gross profit of \$6.5 million – approximately the equivalent of \$92 million in today's dollars. In 1948, Aztec was sold to The Tivoli Brewing Co of Detroit (that same year Tivoli changed their name to Altes Brewing Co due to the success of their Altes branded lager). They spent around half a million dollars remodeling the brewery, which included enclosing the previously open fermenters, adding a water purification system, and a larger bottling line. The

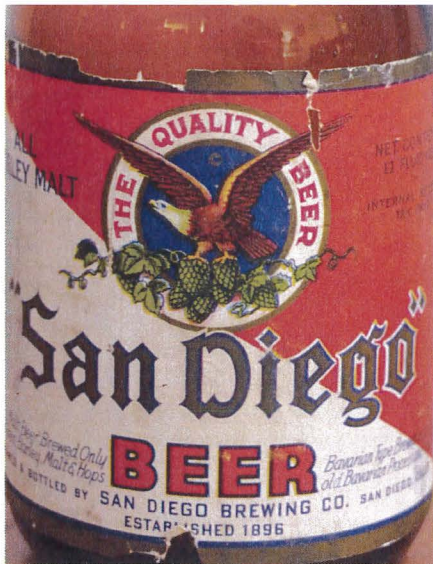
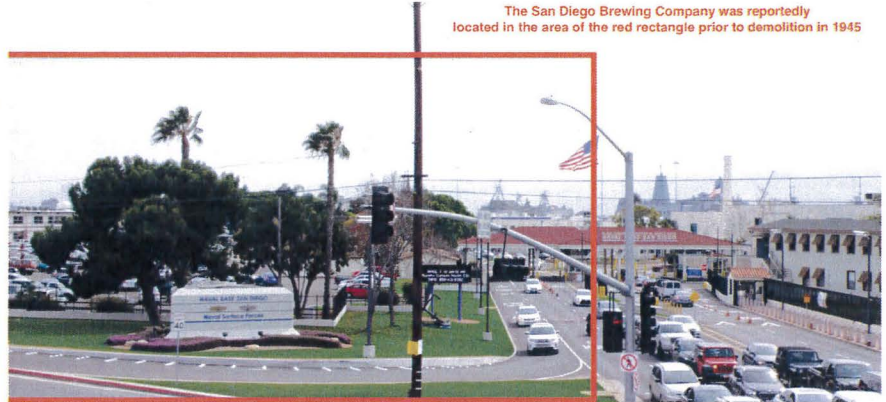


Middle: Mid-1930s Aztec Brewery "ABC" cans, Bottom: A private label Aztec Brewery beer circa 1940



Clockwise from top left: (1) Campbell Creamery on Imperial Avenue circa 1926. This location would become home to Balboa Brewing Co in 1933 and 1934. Courtesy San Diego History Center (2) Balboa bock beer label circa 1933/4 (3) Former San Diego Brewing Company location (4) This Altes beer may have been brisk, but sales were not (5) Where the original Aztec Brewery would stand today (6) San Diego Beer circa 1935

The San Diego Brewing Company was reportedly located in the area of the red rectangle prior to demolition in 1945



brewhouse capacity was increased to 300,000 barrels per year, and Altes branded beer went on sale on March 1, 1949. The change of brand name didn't go down too well, as Altes was seen as an "Eastern beer" – it didn't help that Altes marketed their beer as "the only Eastern beer brewed out West" – and was no longer recognized as local to the West Coast which hurt local sales. That, coupled with the rise of the national beer brands from the Midwest, resulted in continuing declining sales, and the closure of the brewery in March of 1953.

According to John Crihfield, "the ABC brand name was licensed to Maier Brewing Co in Los Angeles and beer was brewed under that brand up until the late 1950s or early 1960s." Some of the Aztec

brewery equipment was shipped back to the Altes brewery in Detroit, and the remainder was sold locally at auction. The property became a parts warehouse for the Rohr Aircraft Corporation, and later, somewhat ironically given its origins, the warehouse for Dorman's Tire Company, before being demolished in 1989 due to the building being declared an earthquake hazard by the city.

Today, it is the location for a parking lot for a Navy defense contractor. Some of the brewery's remnants – some lights, some wooden panels, and other miscellanea, are on permanent display today at Logan Heights Branch Library. The Aztec Brewing Company name does live on. In 2011, John Webster and his partner, Claudia Faulk, revived the once-famous brand at a small production brewery in an

industrial park in Vista, and continue to pay homage to the legacy of its namesake.

Author's note: It is always a challenge trying to find needles in haystacks, as was the case with this report. Along the way I got some much needed assistance from the following folk at the San Diego History Center: Matt Schiff, Carol Myers, Renato Rodriguez, and Chris Travers. Thanks also to John Crihfield for sharing both his knowledge and collection of San Diego brewery ephemera; writers Ernie Liwag, A.J. Burgess, and David Williams; Judith Downie at the Brewchive of CSU San Marcos Library; and Krishna Jackson, PAO Naval Base San Diego. ▲