

The Making of Milwaukee

Milwaukee like all early Wisconsin cities was a by-product from the fur trade. It's network of rivers, access to the Great Lakes and abundance of diverse geography, made it a perfect location for the fur trade. Although it was not among the earliest cities such as Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, several European fur traders were in the area by the early 1800s.

Milwaukee got its name from the Algonquin Indians that lived in the area and used the network of rivers for food and furs. The rich legacy that nature bestowed on this area caused the natives to name the region "Man-na-wah-kie" meaning the good land.

In 1817, a British census reported that 1,000 people were in the Milwaukee area, It was describes as a land of marsh, tamarack, swamp and extensive stands of timbers. Indeed, it was a land of marsh and tamaracks. The tamarack is a conifer (evergreen) that likes damp sites. It is unique in that it loses its needles in the fall. The mouth of the Milwaukee River supported huge stands of tamaracks. The tannic acid found in its bark is used for tanning furs and hides. The tamarack became an important part of the history of the city. When settlers first started arriving in the area around 1830, an active tanning business sprung up. The abundance of furs in the area and the availability of tanning supplies made a great combination. By 1879, Milwaukee was the largest tanning center in the world and exported \$4.3 million worth of tanned hides. It was also the 4th largest meat packer in the US.

Water also played an important role in the making of Milwaukee. The network of the Milwaukee, Menominee, Root Rivers and Oak Creek made the area perfect for early water travel. The mouth of the Milwaukee River made an ideal harbor. Much of the success of the city may be traced to an early settler's impractical dream. Byron Kilbourn had a vision of linking a canal between Milwaukee and the Mississippi River. He started his project in 1838, but was forced to abandon it 4 years later, having dug only 1 mile. However, the canal may have been the key to an active seaport. The dam at the start of the canal also provides a handy source of waterpower. Industries sprung up along the mile stretch. Grain became one of the key exports from the city. By 1863, Milwaukee was the leading grain shipping port in the world. That year it shipped 140,771 tons of wheat, corn and barley. This also points out that farming to the north, south and west was very productive.

The bluffs along the Milwaukee River were full of cool clear spring water that early residence used for drinking and cooking. This water along with the abundance of grain spurred a new brewing industry from the heavy influx of German immigrants. By 1850 more than 1/3 of 20,000 residence were from Germany. The first beer made in Milwaukee was produced by 3 Welshmen in 1840. The first lager brewery was opened by Herman Reuthlisberger in 1841. In 1889 the Phillip Best Company changed its name to the Pabst Brewing Company. It was now under the leadership of Captain Frederick Pabst and was the nations largest brewery. By 1902, the Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company surpassed Pabst to become the largest brewer in America. Frederick Miller had

the third largest brewery. Together the breweries led Milwaukee to US dominance of the beer industry for many decades.

The same bluffs along the river that provided clean water provided hand dug caves that were used to store the many kegs of beer. Ice cut from the river in winter and stored in the caves allowed the beer to be shipped long distances. A byproduct of the caves was magnesium and calcium rich clay that was used to make the bricks that went into many of the buildings. The light colored clay produced a distinctive brick that was described as the color of the September clouds – they were called “cream” and gave birth to the cities nickname “Cream City”.

Milwaukee started out as 3 villages. In 1818 Solomon Juneau established an American Fur trading post on the east side of the Milwaukee river (Juneautown). In 1834 Byron Kilbourn settled the west side (Kilbourntown) and George Walker settled the south side (Walker’s Point). By 1842 the population soared to 2,700, with 800 building, 12 inns and 50 stores. Competition for business and settlers was fierce between the villages. In 1845 the bridges between the 3 villages were destroyed. War was about to break out but cooler heads prevailed and the leaders concluded that few outsiders would come to their location if such a feud were under way. A truce was declared and in 1846 the 3 villages joined to become the City of Milwaukee. Solomon Juneau was elected the first mayor of the city, which now was 7.3 sq. mile large. When Grandpa Frank and Grandma Louise Becker moved to Milwaukee in 1900 there were 285,000 residence. A strong sense of work and abundance of jobs brought thousands of immigrants to the city. The original German and Irish settlers were joined by the Poles, Serbs, Hungarians, Italians Greeks, Czechs and Hispanics. Milwaukee was always know as the city that works and for many decades was well known for its global business importance.

Was it the tamaracks, the bricks, the water or the beer that made Milwaukee? It was a combination of them all along with a deep heritage of working people that made Milwaukee.

References:

Lakeside Legacy – Eric Lucas

Milwaukee: At the Gathering of the Waters – Harry Anderson & Frederick Olson