

An Era has Pabst

by Gary Corbin

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I heard the news this weekend that Pabst Blue Ribbon was closing the doors on its Milwaukee, WI brewery. Of course, this was pretty bad news for the workers being laid off. On the other hand, this is not such terrible news for “real beer” lovers – after all, one of the reasons given for the closure was the way craft brews had cut into the market for megabrewers like Pabst.

Nevertheless, I was a bit saddened by the news, for it had a personal impact. I had toured this brewery in 1994, and it was a pretty interesting experience. Unlike micro brewery tours – or even my UK experiences – a Pabst brewery tour didn’t expose much of the brewery to the visitor. Fully two-thirds of the tour was on the bottling and packaging of the beer.

This was a smart move on the brewer’s part, and not only for sanitation and safety reasons. First of all, there were a lot of moving parts; “things happened.” Second, they’re really good at it – best to show off your strongest suit. Third, you could see with your own eyes that they really *did* sell a lot of beer!

My favorite memory was of the packaging line, where the cans and bottles were assembled into six-packs, and six-packs into cases. Dozens of men strolled the factory floor with huge wrenches, adjusting here, tightening there, flipping switches to turn off parts of the aging infrastructure that needed immediate attention before more product flowed through it. At the end of the line, several forklifts worked full-time just to move market-ready product to the loading dock. The sheer size of the operation – acres and acres of carts, cartons, rollers, and mechanical moving parts – was jaw-dropping.

But it was the factors that gave it charm that ultimately closed the plant. Today’s breweries cannot afford an army of mechanics constantly fixing what goes wrong; it just has to be right to begin with. The required modernization, an expensive proposition even for a financially healthy brewery, could not be justified by the market. Clearly, the closure of this brewery marks the end of an era.