

There is more to the history of beer in Esquimalt than terry-towel table cloths, dark smoky rooms and pitchers of a cheap, fizzy yellow beverage. At one time Esquimalt was famous for making some of the best ales and lagers in North America. In 1891, on Head Street between Dunsmuir and Paradise, a state of the art Brewery dominated the waterfront and the provincial brewing industry.

The Phoenix Brewery on Head Street replaced an aging plant located on the corner of Yates and Blanshard. It increased production 10 fold, improved quality using modern sanitation and refrigeration techniques and gave its owners a much needed competitive edge against American and Eastern Canadian beer producers.

But the story doesn't start there. Throughout history beer traveled with people as they explored the world. The British Navy carried beer because once water was boiled with malted barley, steeped with hops and fermented with yeast, it remained drinkable on those long voyages where fresh water deteriorated to a form of punishment. It kept the crews happy and provided a welcome nutritional supplement to sparse shipboard cuisine. Family ale recipes were packed, along with barley seed, in the trunks of pioneers coming to homestead on the island.

In 1858 gold rush fever brought a major influx of hopeful prospectors to Esquimalt Harbour. Saloons, euphemistically called 'hotels' sprang up at wharf side to meet the travelers needs. Howard's Hotel, the Steam Boat Exchange, the Ship Inn Saloon and many more such establishments prospered from the Caribou Gold

Rush without ever leaving the harbour. The DND Ship Repair Facility now stands where the Bucket of Blood (aka The Esquimalt Hotel) once plied its trade.

In 1859 James Bland came to Esquimalt. He bought a parcel of property along Old Esquimalt Road and found it to be blessed with an abundance of well water. Mr. Bland built a Public House and, in 1861, registered it as one of the first breweries on Vancouver Island. The name has changed but it is still known to local residents for its location on the trail as the Halfway House.

Good beer is made with good water and the Esquimalt/Vic West region had (and still does) bountiful sources of clean, pure water. Next to seize the opportunity after James Bland was Henry Fairall. He convinced Alfred Napier to join in building the E&N Brewery on Catherine Street and Esquimalt road. From 1888 to 1908 the brewery expanded, changed owners and names until it was finally known as The Fairall Brothers Brewery.

Using hops from the premier hop growing region of North Saanich, the reputation of Mr. Fairall's brewery reached well beyond the island. The brewery grew to meet the demand for its ales and lager until, at one point, Esquimalt road actually ran through the buildings. A tunnel was constructed beneath the street so grain could be taken from the railway cars to the malting house of the brewery across the street.

It was at this time Charles Gowan decided to move his brewing operations to Esquimalt. By 1890 the new Phoenix brewery rose on Head Street. Property was purchased across the street, along the water, with the intention of building wharves for shipping in supplies and shipping out beer to the world.

In 1914, one of the Henry Fairall's sons, James, decided to open his own brewery and acquired property on Viewfield road where he opened the Esquimalt Brewing Company. Producing lagers for two years, the operation came to an abrupt and suspicious end when it blew up, burning to the ground.

One of the Phoenix brewers, Harry Maynard, lived in a elegant house on Head Street and the present Esquimalt Road. While still a resident of Esquimalt, Mr. Maynard became the general manager of yet another brewery starting up in Vic West but demand for their ales soon brought about rapid expansion. When there was no room left to grow, Harry Maynard and the Tate family made the bold move of taking over the Fairall Brother's property and consolidating operations at the Catherine Street location.

In 1917 prohibition came to British Columbia. Alcohol was legally available only for military, scientific and medical purposes. This resulted in an epidemic of illnesses curable only by those tonic properties found in stouts and ales as well as certain single malt distilled spirits.

A booming medical demand and selling offshore to our American neighbors, helped local breweries scrape by until the tide changed. By 1924 Esquimalt was once again a 'wet' municipality. It developed a reputation as the place to go to drink because Temperance remained as law in neighboring Victoria for 20 more years.

Federal laws imposed a variety of hurdles, including provincial trade barriers, to make it difficult for small brewers to compete. Combined with restrictive provincial controls on sales and distribution, larger breweries began buying up the smaller

ones. By the 1950's, Silver Spring was part of Coast Brewing Ltd. and was the only brewery left standing on this side of the blue bridge. Even then it was producing only the minimum amount of beer required to retain it's brewer's license.

In 1954 Coast Brewing became Lucky Lager Breweries. In turn it was purchased by John Labatt Ltd. which wanted a foothold on the coast. All that remains today of the massive Silver Spring brewery is a windowless brick building on Esquimalt road between Catherine and Mary Street. Formerly the brewery's steam-power plant, it became a distribution warehouse for Labatt's and its subsidiaries.

The beautiful Maynard house is now a strip mall; the Phoenix brewery a group of small homes nestled at the foot of Head Street. The descendants of the great brewing families, however, the Blands, the Tates, the Fairalls can still be found living here in Esquimalt.

Ironically, just when the major brewers thought they were dismantling the last remnants of independent brewing in British Columbia and Vancouver Island, a revival in the art of craft brewing underway. In 1984, a block away from the old Silver Springs site and less than a mile from the old Halfway House, Spinnakers, the first post-prohibition in-house brewpub, and one of the first in North America was established. Within a few blocks of the site of the James Fairall's explosive Esquimalt Brewery, Lighthouse Brewing and Phillips Brewing are working successfully to rebuild this area's reputation for innovative and quality beer making.