

*The Night the*

# HOME BREW



*Blew Up*

BY LOUIS SCHMALKE

YOU can always tell an old *heim-gemacht* man, one of the genuine pre-Repeal stalwarts. Though it is now many years since the people sprung the bung on Prohibition, your true veteran of the cellar vats never fails to eye with suspicion the bottom of every bottle of factory beer he drinks.

It is purely a reflex action. He looks from habit for the yeast residue that in good old homebrew often gathered half an inch thick on the bottom. A greedy guzzler sometimes stomached a shot of this unawares, and usually regretted it audibly. This was a *faux pas*, and the mark of a novice.

The other day, when I was rummaging around below-stairs at the old homestead, I came upon a venerable bottle capper, rusty and forlorn, and I remembered the last time I had used it — the time the homebrew blew up. . . .

I was just getting around on my shaky pins as a diapered shaver when, as my father says (bitterly

still) they betrayed the boys in uniform and shoved the Volstead Act through before the khaki-clad hordes could come home to vote. I don't know exactly when homebrew came to our house, but I do remember standing on my tiptoes at the sink in the evening, not even high enough to look over the edge, yet begging like a puppy for my libation of the fermented malt.

My father, a giant in baggy pants, would bring the quart bottle out of the icebox. He would reach for the opener. He needed only to touch the cap — the beer seemed to erupt from the bottle of its own force, as the foam mounted in a creamy fountain six inches high.

There were 10 kids, most of them far below the age of consent, ranging downward, I would say, to about two years old. We all loved homebrew. Cold and sweet and stingy to the nose, it was wonderful to quaff deeply and not let go until the parental hand pulled away the glass. Most times Pop opened another

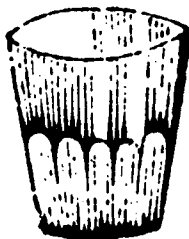
bottle for himself — we had killed the first one dead.

It must have been early in the '20's when my father, accompanied by his mentor, went down the cellar for his first try as *braumeister*. From somewhere he had bought or scrounged a ten-gallon crock. He had bought a bottle capper, a box of bottle caps, a rubber hose with a clamp on the end, a couple of No. 2½ cans of malt, sugar and yeast. With this equipment and some quart soda bottles and pint ketchup bottles, Pop was in business.

tightly all around each window. It was a complete blackout, years ahead of bombing blitzes, and it added drama that put an extra tang into every batch of brew fermented in such high secrecy.

When the malt was poured out of the cans into the old wash-boiler for heating, the labels were stripped from the cans and burned in the furnace. Then the cans were cleansed again and again under the water tap before they were finally tossed into the trash basket.

After the brew was mixed and



As my father and his instructor put down their paraphernalia on my mother's laundry table, they grew cautious. I don't know if it was the atmosphere of the time or what, but they seemed to talk out of the sides of their mouths, and their movements were definitely furtive. Crouched under the laundry bench, I trembled with excitement, and so did all of my brothers and sisters gathered 'round.

First the men took copies of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* and the old *St. Louis Times* and tacked them

muddled with a large wooden paddle, it was ready to set. We always hung over the side of the crock to smell the malt; it seemed to us that the beer was already there. But Pop said, "It's got to work."

It took three days, as I remember, for the brew to set and work and ferment and transform itself into the vigorous, mellow, tawny brew which old-timers called *heimgemacht*. It was a good word, this *heimgemacht*.

My father could never have overlooked the time for bottling. At supper, around the long table in the

dining room, there would be many eager eyes watching Pop. When no word came from him, one of us would sing out, "Time to bottle the homebrew tonight, Pop!"

"*Ach, ja,*" my father would say, grinning.

And he would rise from the table and descend the creaking, well-worn cellar stairs, with his troupe behind him. The crock, giver of all good things, sat there squat and loaded, its handmade wooden cover on top. Pop would take off the cover, peer into the mysterious depths of the brew, and pronounce it ready.

Meanwhile we were washing bottles in the laundry tubs. Then the bottles were filled to about an inch of the top, and the production line started. Pop must often have viewed with satisfaction his large brood busy at the bottling, handing the full bottles out from the tub, handing the next cap to the capper, plunging down on the capper handle and sealing another bottle of glorious pleasure, then carrying the bottle off to the cabinet where it would set until ready for ingestion.

HOWEVER, despite such experience, I was the guy that blew up the homebrew that shattered our paradise, that ruined a good thing. My mother, while in no sense a prude, had always opposed this fury of homebrewing. Though the rule in my home, loosely enforced, was that no child under two could drink homebrew, we did see other parents

who let small Dutchmen of less than a year wet their button noses in the pail, and I believe my mother felt this practice pretty close to sin.

It was in the early '30's when the homebrew blew up, almost in our faces. My chance to do the bottling all by myself finally came. My father had set the batch, and then a friend called up for a hunting trip. The trip would take several days. Pop wanted to go very badly, but there was the batch brewing away, and ready for bottling that night.

"Let me bottle it!" I begged. "I can do it. I've done it lots of times with you — I can do it by myself."

So he agreed, slipped on his hunting jacket, and took off with his shotgun, leaving me for the first time as sole superintendent of the crock. After supper I sneaked down to the cellar alone. After I had readied the bottles, I took the wooden top off the crock. The top was brown and stained with malted age, and beaded with fine droplets of the sweating brew. I slipped the tube down into the crock, and sucked on the end. The almost-beer gushed forth. Then I began to bottle.

It had always irritated me that Pop would fill each bottle only to within an inch or so of the top. I took this to be a lack of courage, a failure of finesse in filling, and since mine, I was sure, was the steadier hand, I filled them all to the very top, and a good job it was, too. Then I capped them.

Pop was gone hunting, and the family, somewhat chastened without the man of the house present, had gathered around the tremendous dining room table to draw courage from companionship. So we sat and talked until a terrific explosion rocked the floorboards. We were stricken dumb with terror. My hair rose on my head. Then another explosion, and another concussion, followed by the tinkling sound of much glass falling.

"It's the homebrew!" said my mother. They all looked at me accusingly.

"I filled the bottles to the top," I said defiantly.

Another boom rent the air, and we heard the cabinet door swing open from the force of the explosion. Glass fell again. They all looked at me, all ten of them. I walked slowly to the cellar door, opened it, and began to walk down the stairs. Most of the beer was in a cabinet, but a dozen bottles or so which wouldn't fit in were on an open shelf, and now one of these, a fat quart by the sound of it, blasted me into scurrying back.

"Never mind," said my mother as another bottle blew up, "your father will be back tomorrow, and I'll speak to him about it then."

That was just what I was thinking,

too. We all went to bed upstairs a little later. The next day my father came home. At the risk of our lives, he and I went down to the cellar and viewed the remains.

Pop looked at me sadly. There were real tears in his eyes. "Ach," he said.

Some of the bottles held up under the strain of the expanding brew ("never fill a homebrew bottle all the way full," my father said, too late) and these we carried to the icebox.

Pop nursed them along, charming as he had never been before. Dejection stared us in the face. The air was redolent of splattered homebrew malt for weeks, and all of this was the last batch of homebrew. "The woman" would ever let us make

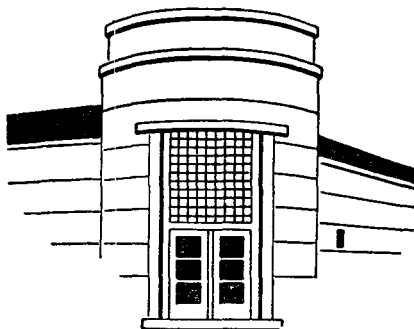
We were on our last half-dozen bottles when it came — the emancipation proclamation for lovers of the brew. A month or so later, the new factory beer arrived on the store shelves, and we first tested it at Uncle Otto's house.

"Schmeck's gut," said Pop. "Schmeck's gut," I said. Thus we said goodbye to an era.

But to this day Pop never drinks a factory bottle without cocking a suspicious eye at the bottom of the bottle. And neither do I. You can always tell an old homebrew man by that.



By  
VIRGINIA  
ROLLER  
BATDORFF



# BIG Business' Little Brother

THERE was a time — only a few months ago — when half of our colleges and universities feared they would have to do more than teach courses in bankruptcy. They were afraid they would practice it, too.

Today, however, they are making ready to toss out their four-year-old bottles of red ink and order some black. And for this happy switch in their finances they are thanking none other than corporate business which has picked them up, shaken them off, and is helping put them on their financial feet again.

Money troubles which have always plagued our colleges and universities to some degree really began in earnest about fifteen years ago. It was then that the large endowments, which many had been accustomed to receiving from America's "robber-barons" — the men who made fortunes, lost them, and over-

night made them again — evaporated. The death blow, however, came when the last of the G.I.'s shook hands with college presidents and filed across the commencement stages with their sheepskins in one hand and 50 per cent of the schools' operating income in the other. Inflation took care of the rest of the colleges' money.

In more than a thousand serene-looking administration buildings across the land, not-so-serene college presidents and university administrators racked their brains to conjure up a way to get hold of the minimum \$250 million a year they figured would keep them in business.

By early 1951 they came up with two of the brightest ideas they ever had. First, they decided that in order to get hold of any sizable chunks of money, they would have to banish their old school rivalry and adopt a