

The Blue Island Tunnels

From The Keyboard Of Joe Gatrell

Publisher and historian John Volp addressed the subject of "caverns," i.e. tunnels, in his Sun-Standard and THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS. After Prohibition ended, beer trucks began their deliveries in Blue Island. Mr. Volp noted this happy occasion in the April 14, 1933 edition of the newspaper and segued to the underground when writer R.W. Harmon Jr. reminisced: "*Blue Island around the time of the Chicago fire, in 1871, was quite a brewing center, and many a haunting tale stalks the walls of the "Old Brewery" below the summit of the hill on Gregory between York and New Streets. Busch and Brand, some 60 years ago, was the first to build on this site. Although the caverns were built earlier, Herman Jauchzer, secretary of the Brand estate, and F.W. Koenecke estimate that they were dug at least 80 years back.*" The caverns first were created in the 1850s. They were strictly for cooling and storage.

Now and perhaps definitively, Mr. Volp and Mr. Harmon were specific about our "tunnels." The article continued: "These caverns which extend from the foot of the hill to Gregory Street have created many myths and some of them still go the rounds. Due to inadequate icing facilities, in those days most of the beer was made in winter and cooled by nature's icy blasts. The caverns were then used to store the beer and keep it cool in summer."

So according to the recollections of our earlier historians and interviews conducted by them, the caverns, which you may call tunnels if you prefer, extended only from approximately Irving to Gregory, if that. They did not run under Western Avenue or to other parts of town. They were not used by bootleggers as avenues of escape or hiding places.

During Prohibition, local bootleggers and those who sold their product needed no such protection locally, and they seemed not to fear arrest by state and federal agents. There were stills all over Blue Island and the surrounding area. Among the most popular make-shift breweries were abandoned houses, which occasionally blew up when the stills were left unattended. A vacant house on the 12800 block of Sacramento just happened to burn the ground on the night of the Lorenzo Juliano murder. It was a location where "alky distillers," as Mr. Volp called them, had a still. In 1935, a still in an empty house on the 2100 block of 121st Place blew up and almost took the contents and next door neighbor Alvina Jaros with it.

Now back to Blue Island being a town where the fix always was in. During Prohibition, there were stills. The saloons were licensed by the city as "soda pop parlors," and they served booze. There were slot machines. If the State's Attorney or the feds showed up, a still was busted, and product was destroyed or confiscated. If anyone was arrested, they were processed locally. There may have been a fine for someone making or selling booze. There is no record of anyone going to prison. It was the same with slots and other forms of gambling. By the way, in those days, every saloon seemed to have its own bookmaking operation for horse racing.

If locals had nothing to fear even from higher law enforcement authorities, why would they need escape tunnels?

One of the funniest stories pertains to Blue Island's eighth mayor, Frank Kasten. During 1932, State's Attorney's agents descended upon Blue Island, raided joints all over town, and confiscated slot machines. It was estimated that 50 machines were found. Mayor Kasten responded by calling this story bunk. The mayor said that Blue Island was clean, and there were no slot machines in the city. Not before, during, or after any raid.

Frank Kasten was a great cheerleader for Blue Island. He was great at public relations. When it came to the truth, eh, only if it was absolutely necessary. At that time, the American Legion had its headquarters in City Hall, and the Legion had slot machines. Mayor Kasten probably could hear the tinkling of them from his office.

Bob Adams ~ My Mom always referred to the hill on New Street, between Gregory and Irving, as "Brewery Hill". We used to sled down it - very fast (and dangerous).

Bob Adams ~ By the way, Joe, my Grandfather was Herman Jauchzer (my Mom's father). He had already passed away by the time I was born, so I never got to know him. Anything that you come across pertaining to him, I would appreciate. I think he was an alderman at one time.

JG ~ Right you are, Robert. Your Opa was one of the alderman of the First Ward for two terms, 1910-11 and 1912-13. I have come across his name a few times during my research. He must have been quite a prominent citizen.

Susan Muir ~ When will your book be finished Joey? My mom and dad are very excited to read it! As are Ken and I!

Marge Mineika ~ I think my Grandfather John Rickhoff used to repair/make stills in BI. He was a hoot!

Evelyn Cote ~ Marge Mineika my great-grandmother was Elizabeth Rickhoff Mosel how are you related?

JG ~ Susan Muir, the book is back with the editor. It should be in print by early February. Marge Mineika, I remember Mr. Rickhoff. Mike and I visited him at his home on 122nd. He WAS quite a guy!

JG ~ Hey, Bob Adams, that hill is a bit steep for sledding. I'll bet you guys had some wild rides. Someone at this site told me that the hill at Central Park was a challenge, too.

Marge Mineika ~ Hi Evelyn, I will defer to my cousin Patti Wolf Bennett. My Great Grandparents were Amelia & Clarence Rickhoff. I'm sure we're some kind of 3rd or 4th cousins???

Bob Adams ~ You had to watch out for cars coming down Irving at the bottom of the hill. I also remember a nasty park bench at the bottom of the hill at Central Park. Hey, we were young and fearless. Or is that young and dumb?

Bob Adams ~ Hey, we also slid down that slope along side Brewery Hill that goes up to the bank parking lot. How did I NOT get killed?

Bob Adams ~ My brothers and I were the original "Jack Ass" guys!

JG ~ You were right the first time. Young, fearless, and carefree. Blue Island back in the day sledding was like scenes from "It's a Wonderful Life."

Pat Wolf-Bennett ~ Evelyn Cote, YES, Marge Mineika is a cousin.... Marge Mineika, Elizabeth Rickhoff Mosel was, my grandfather's (Herman) sister. She was the mother of Charlie, who was the father of Lorraine Neitfeldt. Elizabeth would be the great grandmother of Kim Hass.

Pat Wolf-Bennett ~ Marge Mineika... that would be Herman & Amelia Rickhoff.. Clarence was your grsndfather's brother.

Paula Wagner Bialek ~ If grandparents are brother and sister - 2nd cousins

Bob Peetz ~ When Charles Volk platted Blue Island in the 1850's, he highlighted the location of the school, picnic grounds and four - count 'em four - breweries.

Bob Peetz ~ My Grand-dad Otto & his sons ran a "soda parlor" at 143rd & Western in Posen and my Grand-uncle Henry ran one across the street from were Jeben's Hardware is now on Olde Western. Cook County was fast becoming one of the most corrupt places around during the time of Prohibition thanks to the mafia boss turned Chicago Mayor Big Jim Colosimo. Any slot machines confiscated in Blue Island by 'agents' probably went to 'Friends of Big Jim Colosimo' who paid enough graft. Those contributing the machines, probably didn't pay enough...

Gregory Tamason ~ One of the tunnels led to St. Paul's church cellar on Gregory. We referred to it as the catacomb (sp?).

The entry was blocked up. It offered our youthful minds intrigue and mystery.

It looked like it angled NW toward St. Ben's. Maybe they ran communion wine back and forth.

Pat Wolf-Bennett ~ Marge Mineika and Evelyn Cote, you are 3rd Cousins

Debbie Zebell ~ I love Blue Island history.

JG ~ No question that Cook County was corrupt, Bob Peetz. Those slots probably were recycled somewhere. In Blue Island, the gambling boss was James Hackett. Mr. Hackett probably made a call, and perhaps as soon as a few hours after the slot machines disappeared, replacements arrived. Just as video poker machines disappeared and were replaced until Illinois legalized video gambling. I don't believe that was history repeating itself as much as it was the fix being in.

JG ~ Yes, I've heard about that passageway, Gregory Tamason. No question that it existed. The area is right, but the church connection doesn't fit. Perhaps a passageway into the Afterlife?

Kurt Wagner ~ My family also went to church there. As teenagers we were in it many times. It didn't go far.

JG ~ Are there any oldtimers who belonged to the church who could shed some light on the passageway?

Kurt Wagner ~ My Mom (Jule Wagner) who is one of the oldest on here (if not the oldest) who went to church there. She said they were from the old breweries but not why it connected to the church.

JG ~ Thank you, Mrs. Wagner and Kurt.

Kurt Wagner ~ Maybe when they dug the basement for the church they ran into a tunnel?

Paula Wagner Bialek ~ The church was built in the early 1890's - my grandmother - Edna Hofeldt - was the first baby baptized in the new church in January 1895. So probably hit the tunnels when they dug the basement -or- strategically built the church to get to the beer in the tunnels, you know how us Germans love our beer - lol

JG ~ Nothing wrong with that! Thanks for the information, and here's to ya, Paula!