

***Material Culture of Breweries.* Herman Wiley Ronnenberg. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011. 151 pp. \***

Reviewed by Lindsey Bray

*Material Culture of Breweries* is the most recent publication from retired teacher and brewing industry historian, Herman Wiley Ronnenberg. The book provides a historical overview of breweries of use to historians, archeologists, and anthropologists alike.

For Ronnenberg the purpose of the book is to “provide tools with which researchers can undertake their own studies of brewing processes, architectural evolution, and packing materials,” (p. 13). While very little historical research has been published on breweries, Ronnenberg’s book utilizes current resources and incorporates his own research and participation in archeological investigations of brewery sites. The volume is best suited to those with a general knowledge of the brewing process, but Ronnenberg writes to ensure that even novices can understand the brewing systems and their evolution, including a description of the basic ingredients and processes to make beer. The book contains three chapters, “Overview of Brewing Techniques With Emphasis on Changes in Equipment and Raw Materials: 1500-2000”; “Brewer Architectural Developments: 1500-2000”; “Makers’ Marks, Patents, Labels, Production Dates, Beer Containers, and Other Evidence”; and includes four appendices that includes a chronology of brewing in the Americas, a glossary of brewing terms, brewing organizations and archaeological excavations. Each chapter includes details on processes, anecdotes from breweries of the era described and diagrams and sketches of breweries and brewing processes. The diagrams and sketches are most helpful in visualizing the processes and how breweries were designed and functioned. The Industrial Revolution changed brewing practices dramatically and Ronnenberg describes how these processes changed and how brewers adapted and utilized new resources to make their processes more efficient. Ronnenberg includes information on tax law, state regulations, and census information to help readers know how to continue and further their own research.

Chapter one provides an introduction to the brewing process and a brief history of the brewing industry in the United States. Ronnenberg gives history in addition to information that has been discovered on archeological digs that he has participated in that adds to the more complete history of the brewing industry and its day to day operations. In the second chapter on architecture, Ronnenberg diligently describes layouts, usage of space, and building materials. The inclusions of illustrations are quite valuable as they help to provide readers with useful visualizations of breweries and their operations. A discussion of other structures that might have been included in the space is incorporated to help researchers to know what to look for to find a now defunct brewery. He even includes information on how to decipher a brewery on a fire insurance map. As with other industries, marks and patents are an important part of the brewing industry. Chapter three provides information on the items that have been left behind, including kegs, glass bottles, cans, caps, and closures. Each is distinct to a brewery and can help to make inferences and connections at a site. Illustrations of the items are also included to ensure readers

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have a visual of the potential objects that they would encounter. Also included is a brief description of breweriana collecting clubs, which is supplemented by Appendix III, which includes a list of clubs that are willing to assist in the identifying of artifacts. The timeline in Appendix I and the glossary of terms in Appendix II are especially helpful to novices who are learning about the industry. Both include valuable information that can help in various stages of research.

Overall, the book is well-written and detailed, providing valuable information for those who are looking to begin research on breweries or for those who are looking for more information on more specialized topics covered in the book. The one potential defect in the book is that the author relies heavily on his personal research of sites, which are unfortunately concentrated in the Midwest region of the United States, and little is referenced in other areas of the country. While researchers could anticipate that brewing technology would be similar around the country, each region could have differences in equipment or methods not described in the book. As Ronnenberg describes in the beginning of the book, only two historically researched books have been written about breweries in the United States, and Ronnenberg hopes that this book will inspire historians, anthropologists, and archeologists to begin research on breweries and the industry to help to expand the historical record.

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