

# St. Michael Historian



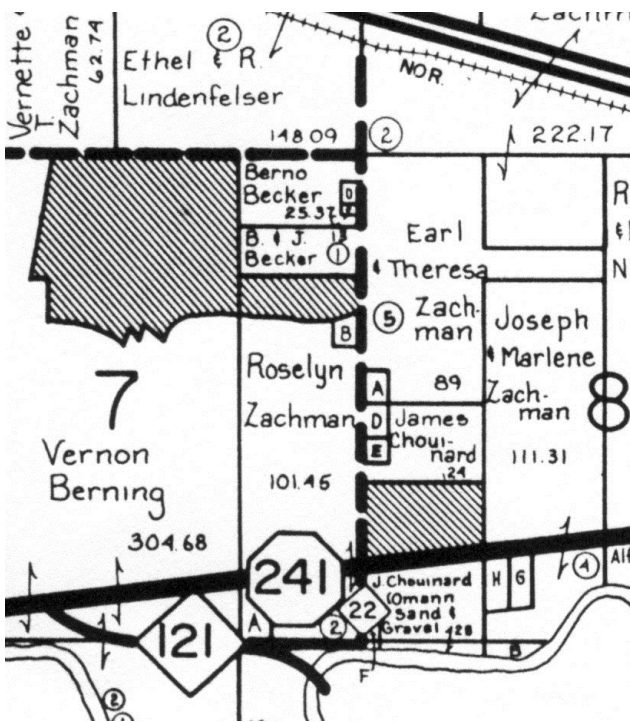
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## How Grain Belt Beer Saved the Becker Big Woods

by Bob Zahler



*On this map from 1983, the Becker Big Woods was still owned by Berno Becker (map courtesy of Bob Zahler)*

Understandably, the title sounds far-fetched and maybe even ridiculous. In the interest of historical truth it should be stated here that there is absolutely no concrete proof that Grain Belt Beer is solely responsible for saving the Big Woods. Yet, there is a connection and a probability that beer was a part of the reason why this small chunk of land remained untouched at a time when just about all tillable land in Frankfort Township was used for agricultural purposes. And while other wooded lands still exist, most of these are not tillable because of topography (ravines, borders of rivers and lakes) or they were used for other purposes that destroyed their native uniqueness; so it is first important to discuss why the Becker Big Woods is significant in our history and therefore worth preserving.

At the time of Minnesota's early settlement in the 1850s more than a third of the state, in north-central and northeastern Minnesota, was an expanse of pine and aspen forests, lakes, bogs and swamps. Another third of the state, including the entire western edge of the state and most of southern Minnesota was prairie. Running in a diagonal from northwest to southeast was a strip of oak savanna and small pockets of hardwood forests that seem to act as a transition between the two larger vegetation regions. One island of hardwood

forest, however, seemed out of place. The early French fur traders called it the "Grand Bois" or Big Woods. It was mostly surrounded on its southwestern, southern and southeastern borders, by prairie. On its northern borders was oak savanna (open areas with fifty percent or less oak tree canopy). In 1875 Minnesota Geologist Newton Horace Winchell commented that "The existence of this great spur of timber, shooting so far south from the boundary line separating the southern prairies from the northern forests, and its successful resistance against the fires that formerly must have raged annually on both sides, is a phenomenon in the natural history of the State that challenges the scrutiny of all observers." According to ecologists Dan Wovcha and Fred Harris the creation of the Big Woods was a relatively recent event happening about 300 to 400 years ago when the climate cooled enough to slow down the rate of regularly occurring fires that kept the growth of forests in check. Fires occurred more frequently on the flatter and drier areas surrounding the Big Woods such that prairies and savannas became the prominent vegetation, but the rolling hills, lakes and rivers of the Big Woods region limited the damage of the fires allowing the growth of large stands of elm, basswood, sugar maple and oak trees over the next several hundred years. While the Minnesota DNR still uses the name "Big Woods" to describe the subsection of the state that was once covered in these deciduous trees, less than 2% of that native ecosystem now remains, mostly along rivers and lakes and in the Nerstrand-Big Woods State Park.

The 2,882-acre Nerstrand-Big Woods State Park survived the lumberman's axe because it was mostly surrounded by prairie and the first settlers in that region recognized that this island of forest would be useful for their future lumber needs. Following the European traditions they brought with them, the hardwood forest near Nerstrand was divided into 10 to 20-acre woodlots that individual families managed for their own needs.

By the 1930s, when large stands of hardwoods were already a rarity, a lumber company wanted to purchase the forest, but trying to make deals with what had become 169 different owners proved too cumbersome thus saving the Nerstrand-Big Woods to be eventually purchased by the state of Minnesota in parcels starting in the late 1930s and continuing for the next 60 years. Without question, the Nerstrand-Big Woods is the most significant remnant of that ancient ecosystem, but what about St. Michael's relatively small, 28-acre chunk of the Big Woods? Why did it survive?

Unlike Nerstrand, St. Michael had very little natural prairie at the time of settlement in the 1850s, only a few hundred acres along the Crow River between what is now the St. Michael Recreation Center and the City of Hanover. Most of what is now St. Michael (and Albertville) was thick hardwood forest with small lakes and swamps scattered throughout. It became the primary task for the early settlers to clear as much of this forest as they could as it would be the only way they would be able to make a living. Tales passed down through the generations tell of the first families cutting down the trees and planting their first crops between the stumps using grub hoes. There was so much timber available in the first years of the settlement that they couldn't even sell it. Much of it was simply burned in large piles. Despite the need to clear the land for farming, it was still common for most farmers to reserve a woodlot for their own lumber needs and as a place for the cattle to rest from the hot summer sun. As the years went by, however, even these lots were cleared since cheaper milled lumber became more readily available and the acreage was more valuable as crop land. Additionally, many woodlots that were set aside were used in such a way that the native undergrowth was permanently destroyed. For example, farmers often allowed pigs to root in the undergrowth, or the woodlot became the place to junk old equipment. While many of the native species of trees may have survived, the native undergrowth was destroyed and so only a part of the original ecosystem remained. The Becker Big Woods in St. Michael is unique in that it contains many of the native elements that would have been found there in the 1850s including rare plants and wild flowers. So, were the early owners of this parcel of land thinking ahead and purposely trying to preserve it? No, probably not. In fact they were mostly just preoccupied with beer. Yep, here's the part where the interest in beer may have allowed the Becker Big Woods to make it past the era of swinging axes.

In 1870, at a time when land clearing was still in progress throughout Wright County, Joseph Anselment sold a 40 acre piece of his still un-cleared land. Described as the NE ¼ of the NE ¼ of Section 7, a portion of this is today the Becker Big Woods. The land was purchased for \$250 by Anton Zahler, a German immigrant and resident of St. Paul who was then foreman at Christopher Stahlmann's Cave Brewery, Minnesota's biggest brewery at the time. What Zahler intended to do with a 40 acre parcel of land forty miles from his home is not clear. He did not own any other land in the area, but perhaps he was simply looking at it as an investment. He did have brothers and sisters who lived in and near St. Michael and so he may have been thinking about his future retirement home. Regardless of any plans Anton Zahler may have had for the land in 1870, it is clear that they were secondary to his primary goal of building his future in brewing. In 1872 Anton Zahler left his employment with Cave Brewery to start his own brewery, City Brewery, in Minneapolis. Zahler operated City Brewery by himself for the first five years and then in 1877 made his brother-in-law, Frederick D. Noerenberg, his business partner. A year after forming the partnership, Anton Zahler died. According to the Minneapolis Tribune, Zahler died of erysipelas, a skin infection curable today with penicillin. Zahler left behind a young daughter and a pregnant wife. The probate court ordered the sale of Zahler's property. His partner, Frederick Noerenberg, took over the brewery and also purchased the 40 acres in Frankfort for \$200 at public auction. Again, one wonders what Noerenberg had in mind for the land in Frankfort. Noerenberg certainly had no plans for becoming a farmer. He thrust his full energies into his brewery, building it into one of the largest breweries in Minneapolis. In 1890, at a time when price wars between competing breweries were hurting the bottom line, Frederick Noerenberg joined forces with the Orth, Germania

and Heinrich breweries to form the Minneapolis Brewing Company. That same year he built one of the first permanent homes on Lake Minnetonka, an eight bedroom Queen Ann mansion on 73 acres of lakefront property (in 1972 the Lake Minnetonka property was donated by one of his daughters to the Three Rivers Park District which still maintains the Noerenberg Memorial Gardens). In 1893 the Minneapolis Brewing Company started selling their flagship beer: Grainbelt. Noerenberg started off as vice president of the company and later became its president.

Meanwhile, back in Frankfort, Noerenberg's 40 acre parcel of raw land just sat there undeveloped. While most of the land around it had been cleared for crop farming, these 40 acres and some adjacent land owned by Herman Berning remained wooded and unused due to be being owned by an otherwise preoccupied and absent landlord. In 1902, near the height of Grainbelt's pre-Prohibition popularity, Noerenberg finally disposed of the 40 acres in Frankfort. It is likely that he forgot that he even still owned the land until an accountant probably asked why he was paying taxes on property in Wright County.



Frank and Kilian Becker, 1895

*photo courtesy of Jeanne Becker*

The local buyers for Noerenberg's forty acres in 1902 were brothers Frank and Kilian Becker. Kilian Becker kept the southern 13 acres for his uses while Frank took the other 27 acres, the parcel which today comprises the Becker Big Woods. Frank Becker's farm was just down the road (Naber Avenue) toward the river, presently the location of Omann Brothers asphalt plant. By this time it seems that Frank was interested in the parcel as a woodlot. It was not conveniently connected to his other property and so it probably didn't make sense to clear this small plot for farming. During the next 50 years, the Beckers used the woodlot to cool and water some of their young stock in the summer and as a source of wood for their stoves. Until purchased by the city, there was still a water pump located near the corner of Naber Avenue and 50<sup>th</sup> Street. The 27 acre parcel was sold to Berno Becker in the 1950s and he built a house on the edge of the property in 1960. During the next 50 years, other homes were built along the western, southern and eastern borders of this land while the land to the north had been cultivated by the Lindenfelser family for several generations. Becker's woods survived, virtually untouched, an island of shade and solitude, a place for kids to play and pick wild flowers.

*(Continued on page 4)*

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*We're on the Web!*

*See us at:*

*Wwww.stmhistsoc.org*

Meetings held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the library meeting room.

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As early as 1998, the City of St. Michael included the Becker property as “open space” it hoped to acquire as part of its long-range vision during the period of rapid residential development, but the introduction of city water and sewer nearby increased the value of the property beyond what the city could afford, or at least was willing to spend. By 2000 a coalition of teachers, students and community members formed to work with the St. Michael City Park Board on ways to raise funds and public awareness to help the city purchase the environmental resource. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources was willing to contribute \$350,000 in grant money to purchase the property, but that wasn't enough to purchase the rapidly rising value of the property. Late in 2001 the city decided to hold a referendum to get the approval of city residents to use tax dollars to make up the difference of the \$924,000 purchase price and on April 2, 2002 voters passed the Big Woods referendum by a vote of 556 to 430. The City Council then voted one week later to approve the purchase. The 27 acres of the Becker Big Woods had now escaped two forces of human shaping: cultivation and residential development.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the wise and careful stewardship of the Becker family that preserved this small chunk of the Big Woods for prosperity. But during the early years of St. Michael's agricultural development in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the thoughtless neglect of two brewing pioneers that allowed the Becker Big Woods to dodge the bullet of forest clearing and cultivation. So raise a glass to the beverage that helped save a piece of our ecological history. Prost!

## **St. Michael Historical Society elects 5 members to the Board of Directors at annual meeting.**

At the 2012 annual meeting of the St. Michael Historical Society, held on Monday, April 8th, five members were elected to new three year terms on the board. Re-elected were: Harvey Zahler, Bob Zahler, Harry Welter and Earl Vetsch. Elected to the board for the first time is Crystal Sayen.

Also, at the annual meeting, election of chair officers took place, as the two year terms of the present officers had expired. Re-elected to new terms are president Bob Zahler and vice-president Sheldon Barthel. Re-appointed are Matt Eiyneck as Secretary, and John Jaeb as Treasurer. Stephen Barthel will continue as liaison for the website, Crystal Sayen as Media Specialist, and Rose Ann Gindele as archivist, for the coming year.

## **Meet the newest member of the Board**

### **Crystal (Lehn) Sayen, Media Specialist**

Crystal was raised on the Lehn family homestead in rural St. Michael and is the daughter of Gary & Gloria Lehn. Her love for history started after finding old photos, at a very young age. She currently works for the State of Minnesota and in addition owns a photography business, Crystal Sayen Photography. She is a graduate of St. Cloud State University and is currently pursuing her MBA at Concordia University. She resides in Monticello with her husband Erik, son Wyatt, and their 4 dogs.

