

# St. Michael Historian



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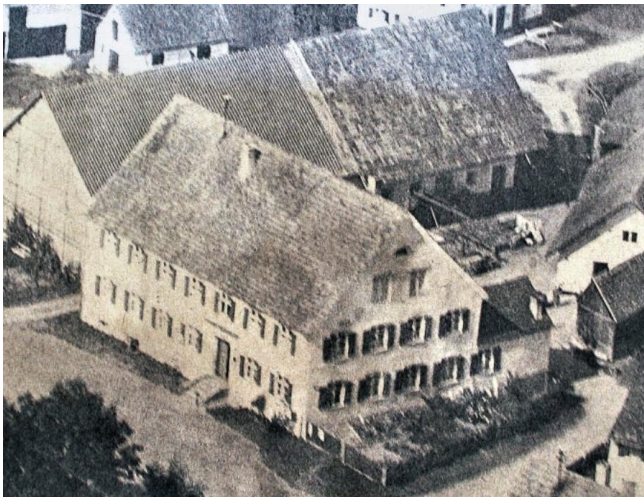
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## St. Michael Family Rooted in Minnesota Brewing History

By Bob Zahler

As of May 2019 there were 172 breweries in Minnesota. That's a pretty incredible number considering that in 2008 there were just ten, and between 1975 and 1985 there were just four. However, in the first few decades of Minnesota's statehood, there were numerous small breweries across the state. The highpoint of the first quarter century of statehood was the year 1875 when there were 123 breweries in operation. Keep in mind that Minnesota's total population then was just 160,000. Because the yearly production of many breweries then was fairly small, today we might call them microbreweries, but they were just breweries whose production goals were to serve the customers in their town or neighborhood. Most of the early brewers were German immigrants who brought the art of brewing with them to America. It is no wonder, then, that Minnesota's familiar beers are German names like Schell, Schmidt, Gluek, and Hamm. But those are the beer family names that survived into the present day. In the 1870s one would have heard many others including the names Yoerg, Stahlmann, Orth, and Zahler. That's right, Zahler.

While the Zahlers were just one of many brewing families in Minnesota, what was unique about them was the number of siblings known to have worked-in or owned a brewery. The siblings were among the 13 children of Johann Georg Zahler and Marie Anna (Zahn) Zahler. Records show that between 1860 and 1880 the following Zahler siblings were all involved in the brewing business: Joseph, Anton, Frank, Michael, Victoria, Otto, and Eugene. And while the other six children don't show up in the records as having worked in a brewery, it is probable that they all did some work in brewing since it was a family business.



*Above: this 1944 photo shows the inn, tavern, and farm that was owned by Johann Georg and Marie Anna Zahler in the Bavarian village of Ingstetten. The Zahlers lived here for 15 years and many of their children were born here. The buildings behind the inn are part of the farm. The inn and farm, but not the brewery, are still in operation.*

### Germany

The immigrant father and brewer was Johann Georg Zahler who was born in 1811 in Ettenbeuren, a small village in the Swabia region of Bavaria. According to German civil records, his father, Franz Joseph, had the legal right to run a butcher shop, tap beer, and distil spirits, indicating that the family's involvement in brewing goes back at least one more generation. After Franz Joseph's early death in 1829, the property and the business licenses transferred to Johann Georg, the eldest son. In 1831 he married Marie Anna Zahn, the daughter of a beer brewer in the nearby village of Stofenried. While not technically an arranged marriage, the union between two people who shared a common economic background was very common. It points to the fact that marriages were both business partnerships as well as romantic partnerships, although those two ideals were not always equal. That Marie Anna and Johann Georg had 13 children suggests that both business and love were important.

In 1839 the growing family of Johann Georg and Marie Anna relocated to the village of Ingstetten where they operated

a small farm along with a *Gasthaus* (hotel and tavern), and a small brewery. Having multiple businesses was a common arrangement in rural areas where doing just one thing could not provide a sufficient income. By the mid 1850s the economic situation for the Zahlers was not improving. Their large family, along with the pressures of a German economy that was pushing people from villages to the industrial cities, and the inability to purchase more farm land, all lead Johann Georg and Marie Anna to make plans to emigrate to America. By this time the oldest four children, all boys, were entering adulthood and faced limited prospects. In May of 1854 they sold their property in Ingstetten and purchased a less expensive *Gasthaus* in the village of Schiessen, presumably to put away some money to pay for the trip. That August, their oldest child, Joseph, arrived in the United States to pave the way for rest of the family.

### St. Michael

Joseph made his way to Minnesota, arriving in 1855 just in time to be among the first to pick out newly available lands west of the Mississippi. He selected a 156 acre tract in the future town of St. Michael along the Crow River that included artesian springs and a gentle hillside: two qualities ideal for a brewing operation. Another Zahler brother, Frank, followed the next year. Frank arrived in St. Michael in January of 1857 and took a claim immediately west of Joseph's. Johann Georg, Marie Anna, and the other 11 children arrived in the fall of 1857 and settled with Frank and Joseph in their log cabins. Frank's cabin was near the present intersection of County Road 19 and Carissa Lane, while Joseph's cabin was located on top of the hill overlooking what is now the St. Michael Recreation Center. He built his brewery right into the hill itself so that the lower level could be used for cool storage and cool fermenting (lagering).

According to both Daniel Ross Farnham and Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, who both recorded the early history of Wright County, Joseph started brewing beer in St. Michael in 1862, but Doug Hoverson noted in his book, *Amber Waters, A History of Brewing in Minnesota*, that the "Zahler Brothers" don't appear in the excise tax records until 1864. The discrepancy could be attributed to either inconsistent brewing in the first couple of years or incomplete tax records by the assessor.

While no death record can be found, Johann Georg died somewhere around the year 1863. He was only in his early 50s, and his early death put pressure on Marie Anna and the older boys to produce an income. Wilhelm, who was 18 when they immigrated, took over developing the farm which meant clearing the land of trees before planting crops. Frank took a job building roads and then was drafted into the Civil War. The St. Paul City Directory of 1863 shows that both Anton and Michael were working for Christopher Stahlmann in his Cave Brewery. Michael, then 23, was listed as a laborer while Anton, then 26, was listed as the brewery foreman. To be foreman at such a young age is evidence of Anton's knowledge of the brewing trade.

Joseph also apparently went to find work in St. Paul. When he married Mary Burkhardt in 1863, the marriage record noted that he was a resident of Ramsey County, and so it is likely that he, like his brothers, was working for another brewer in St. Paul. We do know that the couple moved back to St. Michael as their children were baptized at St. Michael's church. Also, tax records show that the brewery in St. Michael was definitely producing beer in 1864. In 1867 the brewery burned for the first time and was shut down for a period. Since Joseph was also trying to clear and farm the land, he could not devote all of his time to the rebuilding the brewery. In 1869 Joseph's sister Victoria, who had moved to Red Wing to find work, moved back to St. Michael with her husband George E. Weis, who she had married in 1864. George and Joseph immediately formed a partnership and rebuilt the brewery.



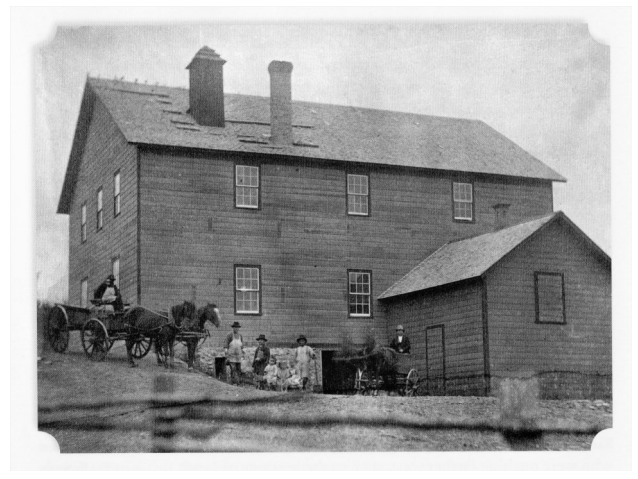
*Left: From an 1879 map of Wright County. The land marked as M. Adelman was part of Joseph Zahler's original claim. The road running past Wilhelm Zahler's farm is Co. Rd. 19. The other two roads running by the Eagle Brewery were abandoned by the early 1900s. Today, Lander Avenue (River Road) turns west just before the site of the brewery near the St. Michael Rec Center.*

In 1871 Joseph and Mary decided to change directions, at least a little, and moved to Hudson, Wisconsin where they would operate a saloon until Joseph's untimely death in 1878. George and Victoria Weis took over sole ownership of the St. Michael brewery, but it burned down again shortly thereafter. They rebuilt only to have it burn in 1877 and then again for a fourth time in 1884. If they were brewing large batches, a significant fire under the brew pot would have been necessary. Without constant attention, fires could easily get out of hand.

The name of the brewery in St. Michael was uncertain. In 1879 it was called the Eagle Brewery, or at least that is the name that appeared on a Wright County map from that year. More than likely, the brewery's name and the beer's brand name was irrelevant to the customers as it was the only brewery around, and so they probably just called it Zahler's beer or Weis's beer. According to tax records accessed by Doug Hoverson for his book, there was a short time in the early 1880s that the brewery was leased to "Zahler and Frey". This was likely Otto Zahler and John Frey. Otto was Victoria's brother who had married Christine Frey, John's sister. Otto, who was just a child of ten when the family immigrated, gained experience in brewing with his brother Joseph as well as with his brother Anton in Minneapolis. The Zahler-Frey partnership was short-lived and George and Victoria ran the brewery themselves again through 1889. An article in the *Delano Eagle* from April of 1889 stated that the brewery was not only successful, but that "its product—including bock beer—is said to hold its own side by side with the best Milwaukee beer". After running the brewery for 20 years, George and Victoria sold it in late 1889 to the partnership of Frank Preusser and Hubert and Henry Dick. George and Victoria then left St. Michael and retired to a small farm outside of River Falls, Wisconsin not far from their widowed sister-in-law Mary Zahler.

### Waconia

In 1865 Michael Zahler left Christopher Stahlmann's brewery in St. Paul to start his own brewery along the lake in Waconia. He had a couple of different partners including his brother Frank. Frank returned to St. Michael after the Civil War, and then in 1867 sold his property in St. Michael and went to Waconia to help Michael in the brewery. It may have been about the same time that another brother, Eugene Zahler, left St. Michael to join his brothers in Waconia. Like Otto, Eugene was just a kid when they immigrated, but he would have learned the art of brewing from his older brothers. The Waconia brewery suffered a fire in 1875, but Michael rebuilt it on a larger scale. Michael did well with the brewery, but he also had other business interests including a saloon and sawmill. Frank continued to work in the Waconia brewery off and on in the 1870s. In 1873 he was living in St. Paul and working as a malster at North Star Brewing. Frank and his wife Maria were having children at this time and all were baptized in Waconia, indicating that Frank may have been going back and forth between St. Paul and Waconia, working in both breweries as well as trying to start a small store in the now ghost town of Helvetia. Sadly, after losing a couple of children to disease and perhaps dealing with PTSD from the war (and maybe just feeling overworked), Frank committed suicide in December of 1876. Eugene Zahler also continued his involvement in Michael's Waconia brewery into the 1880s, but he quit brewing to devote his time to farming. By the mid 1880s competition from larger breweries in the Twin Cities convinced Michael to get out of the brewing business. In 1886 he leased the brewery to George Karcher, but it was shut down completely by 1888. According to the *Waconia Patriot* (newspaper) Michael became a salesman (or agent) for the Noerenberg Brewery in Minneapolis, then one of the largest breweries in that city. The connection to Noerenberg was more than likely through Michael's brother Anton.



Above: Mike Zahler's brewery in Waconia about 1885

### Minneapolis

Anton Zahler, as mentioned earlier, had been working as foreman in Christopher Stahlmann's brewery in St. Paul since at least 1863. While working there, he married Wilhelmina Noerenberg. In 1874 Anton decided to go on his own, moving across the river to start his own brewery in Minneapolis at 20th Avenue South and Bluff Street, an area referred to still as Bohemian Flats near the current 10th Avenue Bridge. Anton's brewery quickly became one of the top-producing breweries

*Right: Anton Zahler's brewery in Minneapolis as it appeared in 1874. Today, this area is part of the university's West Bank campus.*

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*We're on the Web!*

See us at:

[www.saintmichaelhistory.org](http://www.saintmichaelhistory.org)

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Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

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in the city. It was called "Zahler's Brewery" at first, but by 1876 was renamed "City Brewery". According to city directories, working in Anton's brewery was his younger brother Otto, who would later move back to St. Michael to brew and then farm near Pelican Lake. Also working in Anton's brewery was his brother-in-law Frederick Noerenberg. In 1877 Anton partnered with Frederick and the two increased production to over 2,000 barrels a year; a remarkable feat considering that three years earlier Anton had only produced 319 barrels. Tragically, Anton died in 1878 of erysipelas, an infection that can be treated with antibiotics today. Control of the brewery fell to his brother-in-law Frederick Noerenberg, who ran it successfully; so successfully that by 1890 Noerenberg was invited to merge with the Orth, Heinrich, and Germania breweries. Together they created the Minneapolis Brewing and Malting Company, later shortened to just the Minneapolis Brewing Company, which produced Grain Belt beer. While Anton and Wilhelmina did have children, none of them worked in Uncle Frederick's brewery (formerly their father's). Wilhelmina remarried and nobody in the Zahler family benefitted from the financial success of Frederick Noerenberg. There is, however, a very nice park on the shores of Lake Minnetonka where the Noerenberg mansion once stood.

### Conclusion

St. Michael's brewery had a short life in the hands of the Dick brothers. Like other small breweries, competing with the major Minneapolis brands like Gluek's and Grain Belt became futile. The St. Michael brewery, originally built by Joseph Zahler, ceased production in 1891, the same year that Marie Anna, the mother of the Zahler brewing family, died in St. Michael. In the late 1890s the Gluek Brewery briefly used the St. Michael brewery's cooerage. Hubert (HW) Dick became an agent for Gluek's beer in St. Michael, and then after Prohibition ended in 1933, HW's son, Lambert (LA), became a distributor for Grain Belt beer, whose origins trace back to Anton Zahler. And then in a really ironic twist of fate, Harvey Zahler would spend 32 years delivering Grain Belt for Dick Distributing. Some of the foundation walls of Joseph Zahler's brewery can still be found in the wooded hillside between the upper "Zahler's Field" and the lower baseball field of the St. Michael Rec Center. A few stacked stones are all that is left of St. Michael's first manufacturing business and of the Zahler family's beer brewing in Minnesota.

## Upcoming Events

All events and meetings held at the Gries Lenhardt Allen Library Room  
at St. Michael City Hall

**No meeting in December. Happy Holidays!**

Monday, January 13, 7:00 PM      Regular Board Meeting

Monday, February 10, 7:00 PM      Regular Board Meeting



*Above: The Gasthof Zahler in Röfingen, Germany was also once a brewery. It is still run by the Zahler family, cousins of the Zahlers of St. Michael*