

Blowin' in the Wind

It was bright sunny day and there was a brisk breeze blowing the day after Christmas December 26, 2004. I walked out of the house and noticed one full sheet of news paper blowing across my sidewalk. I looked at the tumbling trash as some sort of message and not the nuisance of just another piece of litter.

As I approached the big sheet of black and white paper I noticed it was completely open and just floating along. I picked it up and began to read looking for a message. The page was from the New Jersey state section of the Home News Tribune. The Home News Tribune is one of the most widely read news papers in Central Jersey, second only to the Star Ledger.

To my shock the first headline I saw read "Brewery's Coming Demise Has Neighbor's Worried". I immediately thought of the old Pabst Brewery in Newark since there were rumors that the facility may be torn down in the near future. With it would go the giant crown top bottle visible to all who drive the Garden State Parkway.

The article went on to say that the two large buildings that have stood vacant and crumbling for the past 18 years will be torn down in order to pave the way for a \$33 million redevelopment project. Most of the remainder of the article focused on asbestos removal concerns but there was mention that "Pabst began brewing beer at the 10-acre site on the Newark-Irvington border in 1934 until it shut down in the mid-1980s."

That was the message - it was a full blown red alert! I was off from work that week so I grabbed the digital camera and jumped into the van – destination: 'The Big Bottle'. I just had to get some pictures before the bottle came down. Suddenly I had a sinking feeling, was the bottle gone already? Was it torn down? How terrible that would be. I have thought about photographing it for years and researching the structure in order to write an article for AB&GC. That seed was planted by Ralph Finch who wrote the great article about a big ketchup bottle a number of years ago. Since then I have found a new appreciation for these one of a kind behemoths. These bottles are true prizes, one of a kind and just too darn big to display at home. There is a Hood's milk bottle that is actually a building somewhere in or near Boston. I took a photo of it once while on vacation. The photo shows the bottle painted white with red letters. Wonder if that baby is still out there....

Anyway back to my predicament, driving up the Garden State Parkway hoping and praying the bottle is still standing tall on its platform and visible from the Parkway. I arrive and 'ah yes' it is there. I carefully pull onto the shoulder and snap some photos while passing commuters beep, yell and swear. All the while I'm thinking that one false move and I'll end up planted in the graveyard directly below the overpass I'm parked on. Finally with the pictures taken the first part of the journey is now a success. I take the next exit and head down South Orange Avenue for some close ups of the bottle. I stop along the street and photograph the structure as I approach it. In this less intense situation people drive and walk by looking at me as if I were perfectly normal. This is

New Jersey and there are people doing much stranger things than reveling over a big rusty bottle. I move in closer yet and took photos on Grove Street and the rest of the way around the block.

This bottle has a presence. It was really neat seeing it in different backgrounds and at different angles than that classic look you get while on the Parkway. Wrecking had begun on some of the smaller supporting buildings and piles of rubble were everywhere. How much time did the bottle have left? Well at least I had some pictures of it still standing. I felt I had done a small part in preserving a piece of modern day New Jersey treasure.

A friend said he recently saw a story on the big bottle in Weird New Jersey magazine. I explained that this write up probably contained the factual history necessary to complete my article. It is the #23 issue dated October 2004. The title of the article is "Beer and Abandonment: Perfect Together". The Article is written by Mark Sceurman who gained permission to enter and photograph the buildings for Weird N.J. magazine. The third paragraph sums it up nicely : "Now seeing the bottle from the distance of the Garden State Parkway, one can only think that, 'Man that's a big bottle'". Standing on the roof of the brewery's bottling plant, the enormity of the structure almost makes you dizzy. Gazing up at it you almost feel yourself falling backwards."

The article goes on to say: "Once the icon of the Pabst Brewing Company on South Orange Ave., the 60 foot water tower was constructed in 1930 by the Hoffman Beverage Company, and advertised their famous Pale Dry Ginger Ale. The bottle is 185 feet above street level, and can accommodate six men standing on top of its crimped bottle cap. It has a capacity of 55,000 gallons of water.

In 1930, when the Hoffman Company opened the bottle could boast being the largest in the world. It was made of ¼ inch copper-plated steel and had a diameter of 17½ feet at its base. The Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer Company purchased the building and bottle in 1945.

These days the bottle looms up over the vast cemeteries that sprawl beneath it, as if beckoning the dead to one more drink for the road. Now a faded brownish shade of rust, it seems to perfectly reflect the dilapidated neighborhood that surrounds it, and the ominous abandoned factory that once produced millions of gallons of beer."

In the article it is estimated that it would cost \$60,000 to remove the bottle from the roof. That's about what a good Jared Spencer flask would go for these days. Just imagine explaining to your wife that you were bringing home the Big Bottle instead. A recent article in the Star Ledger claimed that experts estimated \$200,000 to remove the bottle and that it was structurally unsound.

People have mixed feeling about the bottle. Some think it is a reminder of the troubled economic times in the area and some feel it is a treasure. As of now no one has put

money forward in the interest of the bottle's preservation and its fate seems destined for the wrecking ball and eventually the scrap metal yard.

A quote from the Weird N.J. article sums it up nicely: "The era of Newark's proud beer making heritage is long gone. Once names like Krueger, Ballantine, Hensler, Anheuser Busch, Feigenspan and Pabst employed thousands of residents of the city. Today only Anheuser Busch on Routes 1 and 9 remains. We'd love to see the Big Bottle saved as a symbol of all these once great Newark beers and the community that brewed, bottled and breathed the beers that made Newark famous".

Update: I wrote this article for AB&GC magazine in 2004. The bottle was demolished and scrapped. As far as I know there are no traces of it left.