

## CHAPTER ONE



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### *German Beer, American Dreams*

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LATE SUMMER, 1844. Milwaukee, Wisconsin Territory. Phillip Best elbowed his way along plank walkways jammed with barrels, boxes, pushcarts, and people. He was headed for the canal, or the “Water Power,” as locals called it, a mile-long millrace powered by a tree-trunk-and-gravel dam on the Milwaukee River. Plank docks punctuated its tumbling flow and small manufactories—a few mills, a handful of smithies and wheelwrights, a tannery or two—lined its length. Best was searching for a particular business as he pushed his way past more carts and crates, and dodged horses pulling wagons along the dirt street and laborers shouldering newly hewn planks and bags of freshly milled grain. He had only been in the United States a few weeks and Milwaukee’s bustle marked a sharp contrast to the drowsy German village where he and his three brothers had worked for their father, Jacob, Sr., a brewer and vintner.

Phillip finally arrived at the shop owned by A. J. Langworthy, metal worker and ironmonger. He presented himself to the proprietor and explained that he needed a boiler—a copper vat—for his family’s new brewing business. Would Langworthy fabricate it for them? The metalworker shook his head. No. “I [am]

familiar with their construction,” he explained to Best, “. . . but I [dislike] very much to have the noisy things around, and [I do] not wish to do so.”

Wrong answer. Best possessed what the historian of his brewery later called a “fiery” personality and an irresistible fount of aggressive determination. Best cajoled Langworthy; argued with him; badgered and perhaps even begged. The metalworker may have been surprised at the passion that poured from the otherwise unassuming man before him, a slender twenty-nine-year-old of medium height, whose prominent ears and blonde hair framed deep-set gray eyes and a ruler-straight nose. Overwhelmed and overrun by the man’s persistence, Langworthy finally consented.

That obstacle behind him, Best prodded Langworthy to hurdle the next: lack of materials. Milwaukee, frontier town of seven thousand souls, contained just two sheets of metal. Langworthy needed eight or nine plus a bucket of rivets. Left to his own devices, he might have abandoned the commission; with Phillip Best breathing down his neck, that was impossible. Langworthy headed south, first to Racine, then Kenosha, and finally on to tiny Chicago. An exercise in frustration: He could not find enough material for even one section of the boiler. There was nothing for it but to dispatch an order to Buffalo.

Eventually the goods arrived, and Langworthy and his employees set to work transforming metal sheets and rivets into an oversized pot. They worked on a nearby dock, where what the metalworker called “the ‘music of riveting’—racket is more like it—drew an enormous crowd. “[A]ll came to see it,” said Langworthy, “and I think if the roll had been called at that time that every man, woman, and child except the invalids, would have answered ‘here.’” The finished product was a squat rotund vat, about four feet in diameter and four feet high, big enough to hold three to four hundred gallons of water.

When the boiler was completed, Phillip returned to the ironmonger's shop, this time lugging a cloth bundle of coins, so many that the two men spent more than an hour tallying the value. The task revealed the truth: Best did not have enough money. He explained that his family had spent nearly all of their funds—two hundred dollars—on a piece of property on Chestnut Street where they planned to build their brewhouse. Phillip had commissioned the vat in expectation of a forthcoming loan, but the money had failed to materialize. The bundle of coins represented his family's only remaining cash. Phillip asked Langworthy to keep the boiler until he could scrounge up the balance.

What happened next is a credit to A. J. Langworthy's generosity and Phillip Best's integrity. Langworthy was but a few years older than Phillip. Like Phillip, he had left the security of the familiar—in his case, New York—for the adventure and gamble of a new life on the frontier. Perhaps he glanced through the door at the mad rush of people and goods flowing past unabated from daylight to dusk. He was no fool; he understood that business out in the territories would always be more fraught with risk than back in the settled east. But what was life for if not to embrace some of its uncertainty?

He eyed the man standing before him. He knew about the family's decision to sell their winery and brewery and venture to the new world. Had come to understand that Best's "love for dramatic speech and action" stemmed not from swaggering braggadocio, but from the depths of a "born leader." The debt would never be paid until Best made some money, and the boiler was useless unless filled with steaming malt and hops.

Take the boiler and get busy, he told Phillip, and pay the balance when you can. Langworthy recalled years later that the man "was filled with great joy, and ever after my most ardent friend." Best promised his creditor not just the family's first keg of beer,

but free brew for the rest of Langworthy's life. (The promise outlived Best himself. On his deathbed in 1869, Phillip reminded his wife of the pact and charged his sons-in-law with the task of upholding the family's end. In 1896, Langworthy, well into his eighties, was still drinking free beer.)

It's not clear how Phillip transported his treasure the half mile or so from Langworthy's shop to the family's brewhouse. Perhaps his new friend provided delivery. Perhaps Phillip persuaded an idling wagoner to haul the vat on the promise of free beer. Perhaps one or more of his three brothers accompanied him, and they and their burden staggered through Kilbourntown—the German west side of Milwaukee—and up the Chestnut Street hill. But eventually the vat made its way to the Bests' property—the location of Best and Company and the foundation of their American adventure.