

CAMRA Victoria: The First Year

Where did it all start? My brother, Rob, joined CAMRA UK in 1974, and started a branch in Boston, Lincolnshire, and soon after became president. Thereafter, every time we visited England the CAMRA Good Beer Guide was our tour guide. We weren't allowed to go in a pub if it wasn't in the GBG! Visiting Spinnakers in early 1998, I asked if the "Real Ale" sign behind the bar meant what it said, and I was told about the regular Friday cask. On the bar were application forms for CAMRA Canada, so Carol and I quickly joined. For a while all went well. I even wrote an article in 1990 for CAMRA Canada's What's brewing on what was happening in Victoria. By late 1989 things were not going too well for the society and we wondered what had happened to our memberships. CAMRA Canada faded away a few years later.

Early in 1990 I stopped in at Gavin Welch's Hobby Beer and Wines in Shelbourne Plaza out of curiosity. He mentioned that another CAMRA UK member was interested in getting CAMRA started in Victoria and so I met Phil Cottrell, another unhappy CAMRA Canada member. Phil and I spent one evening on the phone to the president trying to persuade him that sending money to Ontario didn't do anything for us. So we decided to go it alone. Phil invited Dave Preston, Carol and I, and a couple of friends for a meeting at Spinnakers on the evening of April 7th 1990, and that was the start. Nobody wanted to be president so I got stuck with the job!

The second meeting was in May at Swan's and about 25 came, including Phil Atkinson and Darlene. (Swan's owner, Michael Williams, stuck his head in to find out what we were doing.) We formed an executive of me and the two Phils. We also collected a dollar from all present so we could mail out a newsletter. Shortly after this Phil Atkinson took over the newsletter and christened it "What's Brewing". The first issue under that name was June 1990.

We decided to incorporate as a BC society, and while we were discussing this Phil Atkinson pointed out that there had been a Vancouver-based CAMRA BC incorporated in 1985, but that it was no longer in existence. We therefore went ahead and applied for incorporation and it was approved September 24th, 1990. Victoria was the only branch for a while at first.

For several years we distributed free copies of What's Brewing in pubs and homebrew shops. There was a bit of controversy as some members were of the opinion that we were allowing the public to get a membership benefit without actually joining. I felt that this was an advertising device to get new members, so I exercised presidential authority and for two years we continued to give out free copies. For the most part we were a harmonious and enthusiastic group brought together by our passion for all things beer.

Don Harms was the bar manager at the old Fogg N'Suds on Broughton Street. We haunted that place as it really did have 80 Beers from Around the World: some lunch hours we'd try three or four American or Belgian beers. Don suggested that we hold the third meeting at Vancouver Island Brewing (which had just changed its name from

Island Pacific Brewing). Dave Preston's friend Graig Piprell wrote a great article in Monday Magazine about the new microbreweries in Victoria and promoted our meeting. To our delight and astonishment 70 people showed up. For most of us that was our first visit to a real brewery. Incidentally, we were told that VIB was brewing 10,000 barrels a year of draught, and that year had just obtained a bottling line. We were, for the first time in nearly a decade, going to be able to drink locally brewed bottled beer!

That summer we held couple of social events: a BBQ in July at Dave and Lesley Preston's, and in August a golf tournament at Henderson Park Par 3 course. The next formal meeting was in September at Fogg N'Suds. My brother, Rob, gave a talk and slide show on the Bateman's Brewery in Lincolnshire, and, appropriately, Bateman's XXX was on tap. In November, the late Greg Evans gave a slide show on the history of brewing in Victoria. The year ended with 45 members and guests at Christmas party at our house.

This is my version of the events of 1990. I don't think much of it is fake news.

The Hopbine (30 years On)

(Spellchecker still doesn't like the word "Hopbine". So frustrating – it's right there in the Oxford and Webster's dictionaries.)

I wrote a column for the first issue of What's Brewing and needed a name for it. I was growing a hopbine in the garden and I realised it's twisted stem just about described the twisted content of what I was writing. I was writing about any item to do with beer that didn't warrant a full article. I covered everything from, say, a new beer at a brewery (not very frequent 30 years ago!), a ragbag of trivia news from around the world, beer book announcements (also rare), new brewer appointments (even rarer), all scattered with my own opinions and comments. Sometimes I'd throw in an old saying or poem from the good old times. For example, a 17th century politically incorrect graffiti from Studely Castle, England:

“When we drink, we get drunk.
When we get drunk, we go to sleep.
When we go to sleep, we commit no sin.
When we commit no sin, we go to heaven.
So, let's all get drunk and go to Heaven!”

Sometimes I'd report sales figures when available (mostly to do with what were called microbreweries in those days). By the way, in 1989, the per capita consumption of all beer in BC was 79.2 litres, and in 2019 it was 60.6 litres per person. See, I can still find these little useless gems.

I would like to end with a note that, if I was still expected to write a monthly version of the Hopbine, it would fill What's Brewing. When we started I had a full time government job and there were so few breweries and brewpubs in the province that it was easy to

keep up. There was certainly room for lots of trivia and snippets of international news. With today's brewery numbers I think I'd be overwhelmed!