

Public Abstract

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Title:St. LOUIS'S GERMAN BREWING INDUSTRY: ITS RISE AND FALL

At one time St. Louis was one of the most prominent cities in America. Those days are long since gone, however, and the city is now only a shell of its former self. Over the years, the fate of St. Louis has inspired numerous studies from professional and amateur historians alike, the historiography producing a range of theories to explain the city's decline. While different theories have waxed or waned depending on the period, some explanations have gained greater acceptance than others. However, one explanation for the city's twentieth century collapse, strangely enough, has not been explored—Prohibition.

This study traces the rise of St. Louis from its origins as a frontier outpost to its national prominence and argues that German immigrants, more than any other group, were responsible for the city's remarkable transformation. For example, it was the flood of German immigrants to St. Louis that fueled the city's dramatic population growth in the antebellum period. The tens of thousands of German skilled blue-collar laborers and white-collar professionals made a significant contribution to the city's commercial and manufacturing strength during the period. In perhaps no area was the German presence felt more than in brewing, which became one of the city's most important industries by the outbreak of the Civil War. The success of the breweries in turn was largely due to the social drinking culture which the German immigrants carried with them to America.

Combining research obtained from census records, labor union archives, city directories, newspaper accounts, pamphlets, and other sources, this study demonstrates the instrumental role the German and later the German-American community had in St. Louis's continued success. In contrast to some historians' works, however, this thesis argues that the German presence in the city did not, in fact, disappear at the turn of the century or a decade and a half later with the outbreak of World War I and the nativism it produced. Instead, this thesis suggests that the German presence in St. Louis contributed mightily to the city's continued success until the dark days of Prohibition. While admittedly not the only factor, Prohibition proved to be the one development which could simultaneously diminish the city's economic strength and deal a crushing blow to the traditional German way of life, which for decades has been at the heart of St. Louis's society and culture. Although Prohibition would only last until 1932, it proved to be a disaster from which the city was never fully able to recover, thus setting the stage for St. Louis's accelerated decline in the second half of the century.

Ultimately, this study, although not dismissing earlier theories concerning St. Louis's decline, sheds light on a portion of the "beer loving" city's history which seems strangely neglected. And while focused on St. Louis, the research is applicable to other American cities, making a contribution to both urban and immigrant history.