

Contemporary Collectibles: Beauty queen gave brewer a head start

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Believe it or not, there was a time when a large segment of the population in the Northeast was more interested in the outcome of the Miss Rheingold contest than in who would be Miss America - or perhaps even president. And for those who weren't around in the '50s, '60s or early '70s, Rheingold was at one point New York state's No. 1 beer, for which the elect-Miss-Rheingold ad campaign that ran from 1940 to 1965, was largely responsible.

Rheingold was a Brooklyn-based brewery founded in 1855 by Samuel Liebmann under the name S. Liebmann Sons Brewing Co. Liebmann was a member of a German-Jewish beer-producing family that immigrated to the U.S. in 1850, and opened a brewery with his three sons, Joseph, Henry and Charles, who carried on the business after Samuel's death in 1872.

Anti-German feeling during World War I and an informal boycott of German beers almost destroyed the brewery, which survived by producing lemonade and what they called "near beer," through the years of Prohibition.

Following the 1933 re-legalization of alcohol, they hired the German emigre Hermann Schulein, who, with Philip Liebmann, developed the European-style dry lager that would bring the company its great success. Rheingold dominated the New York State beer market for 30 years, but by 1976, as a local brewery, it could no longer compete with such national companies as Miller and Schlitz, and it shut its doors - to be revived in 1999.

The Miss Rheingold campaign was the brainchild of a then-26-year-old adman named Bob Wechsler who in 1939 met with brewery head Phillip Liebmann to present a new printing process for the brewery's ads, using photos of a model named Jinx Falkenburg to demonstrate the quality of the printing.

Impressed more by the attractiveness of Falkenburg than the technical process, Liebmann hired her as the visual representative of his premiere line, dubbing her "The Rheingold Girl." Her smiling face was soon seen in newspapers, magazines, on billboards, in subway cars, and in packaging as well. When sales of the beer rocketed, Liebmann and Wechsler's agency decided to let retailers elect "Miss Rheingold 1941" from a group of 24 top models. The following year any pretty girl could apply, and the voting was left to the public, with ballot boxes placed in groceries and bars.

The public responded enthusiastically, until by 1959 the total votes exceeded 22 million - second only to the presidential election. The way the process worked that aspirants to the title would come to the grand Waldorf Astoria Hotel's ballroom before a panel of film and sports world celebrity judges, among whom were Casey Stengel, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Rosalind Russell and Tony Randall. The accent was - supposedly - on personality and wholesomeness, with no effort made to show any cultural diversity.

The one Miss Rheingold to reach fame past her reign was the very first titleholder, Barcelona-born, Brazil-raised Jinx Falkenburg. As a teen she had been a tennis star in Chile and then a swimming champion in Chile, followed by a successful modeling career. The attractive brunette appeared in a number of 1940s movies, but became better known for the popular morning radio show, "Tex and Jinx," in which she conversed with husband Tex McCrary, and such varied guests as first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Groucho Marx; the show moved on to television, with comparable success. Interestingly enough, two of the runners-up, Tippi Hedren and Hope Lange, did go on to become movie stars, and a 19-year-old from Philadelphia named Grace Kelly was dismissed from the 1948 contest for being too thin.

Among the collectibles associated with the campaign are beer cans with photos of the finalists, advertising material, and square printed paper ballots.

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