



This iconic, 1867 photograph shows busy Seneca Lake docks at the Seneca Lake Brewery, Madison Avenue, Watkins Glen.

Breweries Big at the Seneca's South End

By BARBARA H. BELL

Breweries were once busy places around the region. Watkins Glen was no exception.

An early brewery was owned by a Fred Davis, who had moved to the United States from England with his parents as a child. In 1857 he built his first malt house on what was then Washington Street and is today Fourth Street. His place was conveniently located next to shipment sites of Seneca Lake and the Erie Railway, the first one into the village.

Business was brisk, apparently. An old newspaper clipping reveals that in May of 1865, Captain Horace Baldwin had a cargo aboard his lake boat of malt from Davis which was valued at \$28,000, a rather hefty sum for a period so soon after the Civil War. It was said to be the most valuable cargo ever shipped on Seneca Lake up to that time. It was headed for New York City and Philadelphia.

Davis soon bought property from the I.Q. Leake estate near the foot of Bath Street, where both the lake and rail lines were nearer and there was also access from a north-south road through Jefferson (today Watkins Glen). The brewery built there in November 1865 was four stories high, 190 feet long, 85 wide and contained 500,000 bricks. It cost him \$30,000. He also took on a partner, J.E. Birdsall.

There were three graining floors for the handling of hops and/or barley to be turned into malt. The kiln room was 35 feet square and there was also a storehouse. Business accommodations included conveyors, boiler and engine and machinery to operate elevators.

In 1884, Davis had more orders for malt than he could fill from supplies on hand. He bought a boatload from Waterloo.

Davis maintained his office on East Fourth Street until 1886, when he had a new one built on the west side of the road which ran past his malt house. Soon he also installed a trestle to more efficiently transfer grains and the malt. Grains came from many local farms or from Canada and the Midwest.

Hops were the lesser of the two grains purchased by malt houses. The last known hop yard in Schuyler was near the foot of Cayuta Lake in 1887. People called "tramps," operating like migrant workers, were here to pick hops, beans, grapes and potatoes.

The time would come when sellers and buyers agitated for a reduced duty on Canadian barley from 30 cents per bushel to 10 cents.

In October 1886, just when the malting season was ready to go into full operation, Davis' malt house suffered a fire. Losses included the shipping elevator and machinery, the 30 horsepower boiler and engine, kilns with 3,000 bushels of barley, a 60-foot by 60-foot storage facility containing 25,000 bushels of barley, 2,000 more in process of malting and 7,000 bushels of malt. The loss was estimated at \$100,000.

Insurance policies with five companies, including W. Pellett and Skiff of Watkins Glen, paid \$50,000. Davis commended Watkins Glen firemen for their efforts at the conflagration and set about rebuilding. A.F. Chapman was the main contractor. The new structure had an iron roof and fireproof engine room. It was painted red with a light yellow trim.

During this period, what was now the Northern Central Railway moved its line, for a stretch of an eighth of a mile, seven feet to the east from the new building towards Seneca Lake. This included realigning two bridges. Such action indicates the value to the railroad of the barley, malt and coal business for Davis' enterprise.

During the reconstruction, one of major moments of local interest came when the smokestack, built horizontally, was raised to its upright position.

Immediately after the fire, the Lembeck Malt House, which was located in the first Davis plant, and another in Geneva offered their facilities so that Davis could continue the work just started that season.

When back in full service, it was not uncommon to see 25 teams in line at a time, waiting to get on the scales. A newspaper recorded that 1,600 bushels of barley had been unloaded from sleighs one day in December 1887. On another day, Davis received 4,000 bushels shipped by boat from Lodi. The railroad was kept busy with three carloads of malt leaving daily.

There came a time when Davis decided to retire. He sold his business to the H. Clauson and Son Brewery of New York City, which called for 16 men to work during processing. E.A. Gillette was manager here.

As liquor-making grew more sophisticated, the local brewery business fell off. In 1942, what was left of the Davis Malt House was being used for storage.

H.F. Lembeck, who had purchased the plant on the north side of the East Fourth Street when Davis left, continued in business longer. In 1884, he expanded by adding another malting floor. A.F. Chapman was the contractor, although he sublet some of the work to Patrick Downs. In 1886, scales were added for wagons and railroad cars. This brewery had lake frontage of 250 feet.

Age and health forced Lembeck out of business, and in May of 1890 Eagle Brewing Company of Jersey City took over. They began a building extension in 1892, but progress was delayed by a strike of iron workers. An enormous malt tank was built by Shepard's of Havana (Montour Falls). When completed, Eagle hired 25 workers. In one year, it was noted that they purchased 60,000 bushels of barley locally, an equal amount from the west and 10,000 more

from Canada.

The business exchanged hands in 1895 and became known as Lembeck and Betz. Manager was Thomas W. McAnarney.

It, too, was a victim of fire, burning on April 27, 1920. Another newspaper clipping reports that the Standard Oil Company bought the remains of the malt house with intentions to remove its remnants to make room for its own operations.