

# A Life in Beer Wholesaling

We talk with Hap Boening about his family's long beer wholesaling tradition

**H**ap Boening is one of the true beer guys, a third-generation beer wholesaler. His grandfather, Philip, a Long Island farmer, started out hauling spent grains from New York breweries for his livestock. His neighbors kept asking him to bring back beer on his wagon, and eventually he left the spent grain for other farmers, and just hauled beer. The business passed to Hap's father and uncle, and Hap spent his childhood clambering over the trucks in the yard, and going on sales calls with his dad. Hap took over in the 1960s, and under his watch, the two Boening distributorships (Boening Bros., in Lindenhurst, NY, and Oak Distributors, in Blauvelt, NY) built powerful Miller/Heineken franchises. With the much-publicized departure of Heineken, the company was forced to fall back on its multi-brand roots. While the loss of Heineken could have been crippling, the Boenings are fighters (and fortunately they have one or two RTDs to soften the blow). In the interview that follows, we talk with Hap about the evolution of beer wholesaling over his long career.



## Modern Brewery Age: The Boenings have been in the beer business for over a century now...

Hap Boening: That's right. My grandfather started the business in 1901. He was a farmer. My mother had seven brothers, and they were all farmers.

In the beginning, our major brands were Piels, Ruppert and Trommer's. There was R & H in Staten Island (*Rubsam & Hormann Brewing Co., 1870-1953, bought by Piels and operational through 1963*). The king of New York beer was Jacob Ruppert. But most of these men passed on, and didn't leave any heirs. Piels bought Trommer's, and they bought R & H as well.

My grandfather had pigs, and cows, and horses. He used to go to the breweries to pick up

Harold "Hap" Boening (center) flanked by his children: Deb Boening, vice president of Oak Distributing Co., Blauvelt, NY, and Harold Boening Jr., treasurer of Boening Brothers, Lindenhurst, NY. Deb Boening was a high school science teacher, and then worked for Sloan-Kettering hospital, supervising the clinical information department, before returning to work in the beer business in 1984. Harold Boening Jr. came to work at Boening Bros. immediately after graduating from Villanova in 1978. Hap is proud of his children. "Oak Distributing is now six times larger than when Deb took over," he says. "In Lindenhurst, Harold set up our warehouse to allow us to count every box, every day. Now we take two physical inventories a day here, and he knows every configuration on every pallet."



Boening is handling Yuengling in its return to the New York area market.

the spent grain. And his neighbors used to ask him to pick up a couple of cases of beer. He eventually figured that he could make some money hauling beer. My father started working right after grammar school, at 14. He would take a wagonload of beer, and deliver it to the farmers and road houses. The farmers used to have seasonal laborers working for them, so they went through a fair amount of beer. And at a certain point, they added soft drinks. One the earlier brands they got was Pepsi-Cola.

You couldn't deliver a lot with the wagon, maybe 100 cases. My father said that the horses

*Ave. in Brooklyn from 1861-1920). I've never seen a bottle of it, but in those days there were many smaller breweries in Brooklyn. Later, he used to go to Piels on Liberty Avenue in Brooklyn, and F. & M. Schaefer.*

Now remember, ice was precious, because of course there was no refrigeration. But the breweries had ice. My father used to bring a bucket of ice from the brewery, and put a few bottles in there, and put a piece of canvas over it. And my father would pass some farmer in his field, and my father would say, "Here, try a bottle of this." My father said these guys were working so hard,

motor vehicles started coming in. We were in the soft drink business, and we also handled near-beer. Trommer's had the number one near-beer in metropolitan New York. So we got through Prohibition with soft drinks and near-beer. In 1939, one of my father's brothers bought off the soft drink business, and my father Harry and his brother Phil stayed with the beer business.

**When did you start working in the family business?**

When I was 18, my father started sending me over to R & H in Staten Island. I was hauling beer over on the 69th Street Ferry. There was no Verrazano Bridge at that time.

There were still a lot of local breweries, and that's where we built our business. Our warehouse was in Rosedale, NY, on the farm where my mother was born. It's right on the borderline of Queens. I was born on that property as well.

Within the business, My father did sales, and my uncle Phil took care of the equipment. I worked in the family business during the summers, when school was out.

We kept getting different brands, and we built up the business based on service and continuity. I will tell you how diligent my father was. We had a little office building on the farm, and we had the old type phone, with the operator sitting there plugging in the lines. At night, they turned it off, but we had an extension in our house. As a ten year old, I remember taking orders on the phone. It would ring at all hours. My mother wasn't too happy about that, I remember.

On Sundays, my dad would take me out for a ride. He would go around and chase down customers who hadn't paid. So he'd work six days a

**"MY UNCLE TOLD ME HE WOULD SEE MY FATHER RIDING ACROSS THE PLAINS ON HIS HORSE AND WAGON, DELIVERING BEER IN ANY KIND OF WEATHER."**

used to get tired, so he would unload part of his load at a certain point, and then pick it up on the way back and deliver the other part of his route, so as not to wear out the horses. My father worked very hard. One of my farmer uncles used to tell me he would see my father riding across the plains on his horse and wagon, delivering beer in any kind of weather, through rain and through blizzards. This was back in 1914, 1915.

The first beer they ever had was Welz & Zerweck (Note: *The Welz & Zerweck Brewery, or High Ground Brewery, operated on Wycoff*

and it was so hot, you could sell them anything cold. And the guy would take three cases.

My father liked working for the farmers. They always paid on time. He told me that most of them used to keep their money in tin cans in their basements. He would carry the beer down to the cellar, and they'd say, "take what we owe you." There was a lot of trust in those days. It's hard to visualize that time, even for a guy my age.

**What happened to Boening Brothers during Prohibition?**

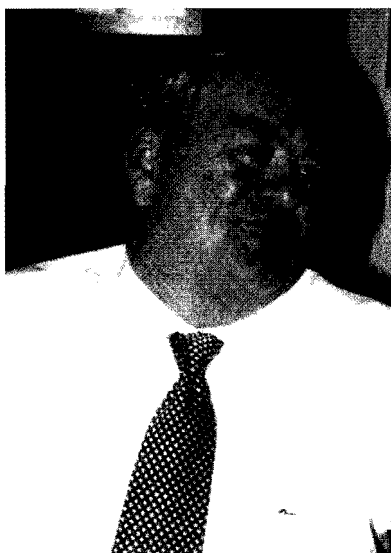
Prohibition came in 1919, just around the time

week, and do a little collection on Sunday. We liked it, because we got to ride in the car, and we'd always get ice cream. That was an ice cream day, I remember that.

### **How did the onset of World War II impact the business?**

During World War II, it was tough getting beer. It was a non-essential industry. There were no vehicles made. We didn't get a new truck from 1942 until 1946. We had gasoline rationing and tire rationing. But my father stayed in business. We bought a couple of old trucks from farmers, and we rebuilt them ourselves. My father was very careful about the gas ration.

Nowadays, when someone 20 miles away calls for a barrel of beer, we make sure he gets it. But during the war, if we did a route on Monday, we wouldn't go back there until the next week. We just couldn't get enough gas.



It was also very hard getting help. All our guys went into the service. Most of them were in there 20s, and they were drafting up to about age 35.

We were getting beer out of a brewery, the Old Dutch Brewery (Old Dutch Brewers, Glenwood Rd. in Brooklyn, 1934-1948). A guy named Hertzberg owned five or six old breweries, and got the grain allotment for each of them. But he made all the beer in this one brewery. We'd go there extra early in the summer. In 1942, I was about 11. We'd go at 3:00 a.m., so we were sure to get the product. My dad would park his truck by the conveyors, and they'd load up all those wood cases. My father had to drive himself, because we couldn't get a driver. The men that didn't go into the service went to work at Grumman and Republic. Near those factories, they had diners that were open 24 hours a day, and they'd go through a lot of beer. So we were

getting beer from all over. We were getting beer from a brewery all the way up in Troy, NY, Fitzgerald's (*Fitzgerald Bros. Brewing Co., Troy, NY, 1866-1962*) and from Narragansett, in Cranston, RI. We had truckmen that handled the hauling for us. We had some growth during the war, but not a lot, because we just couldn't get enough beer. But right after World War II, we really started to grow.

### **I gather that this area really grew in population after the war...**

Sure did. After World War II, this area started to develop as a suburb of New York. And as Long Island grew, we grew with it. Up until then, this was farm country. But the population of Nassau County really grew, and of course we grew as well. Our brands also changed after the war. In 1949, we became a Miller wholesaler. We were the first people on Long Island to have Miller. That

### **Was Piels your number one brand at that time?**

We were the largest Piels wholesaler in the country. Budweiser and Miller were a few pennies more per case, but Piels, Rheingold and Schaefer ruled the New York market at that time. Ruppert had started to decline, because all the family members had died. Rheingold ended up buying Ruppert in the end. Ballantine was in Newark, NJ, and they were the biggest brand here, although we never sold it. They had the largest single brewery in the U.S. in those days. We used to buy beer at the brewery next door, Pride of Newark on Freeman Street. (*Christian Fiegenspan Brewing Co., 1875-1943, bought by Ballantine in 1943, operated until 1948*).

Anyway, I attended the Piels course after Korea, and I was interested in modernizing the business. I wanted to develop a better bookkeep-

**"IN 1949, WE BECAME A MILLER WHOLESALER. WE WERE THE FIRST PEOPLE ON LONG ISLAND TO HAVE MILLER. THE BREWERY HAD A REAL SPARK THEN, AND THE BRAND REALLY SOARED."**

brewery had a real spark then, and the brand really soared. It was family owned in those days, by a guy named Frederick Miller. My dad knew him, and thought he was a great guy. He was killed in a plane crash, along with his son, as I'm sure you know. The brewery changed hands a couple of times, before Philip Morris bought it in the early '70s. Anyway, we had large growth with Miller after the war. In those days, we had Nassau County and part of Queens.

The brewers used to give us a lot of help in those days. A lot of that has changed. I remember that Piels ran a very good school. I went there when I came out of the service. You worked in every facet of the business—plumbing, warehousing, selling. They would bring us in, and show us the ropes. We were learning the business. They would do odd things. They'd ask you, "how many gallons are in this vat?" and they would give you the size of the vat. This red-headed guy in my class was brilliant, and he had it right to the gallon. I was thinking, "mother, I can't do this." I was pretty good at math, but he was brilliant with numbers. I think he lasted about two weeks in the beer business, something about embezzlement [laughs].

ing system. We had a machine called a Sensomatic, I wanted to go to the Sensotronic. The new machine was \$10,400, and my uncle was very skeptical. But I was sure we'd save that much in errors alone. And when my father heard about this idea, he was, let's just say, pretty upset. He was yelling, "What do think, we burn dollar bills around here?" But my uncle took my side, and we ended up buying it. This was a big machine, and we needed new stationary, and all this. It was a real investment. My father wasn't one to throw too many compliments, but about a year later he said, "That machine don't work too bad."

### **When did you take over the business?**

My uncle Phil died in 1962. At that point, we incorporated, and I became president. And my father became less involved in the business. He would still come in, and walk around, find a dent in a truck, give me agita [laughs]. We moved out here to North Lindenhurst in about 1967. We were covering Nassau and Suffolk Counties, and this location is right on the borderline. In addition, all Miller beer came by rail, so we needed a rail siding. Most of the Long Island railroad lines are elevated, and you can't run freight. But we eventual-



Boening Brothers, purveyors of beer and ale in Lindenhurst, NY

ly found this property. It was on a rail line, and they told me this was the last rail line on Long Island that they would ever raise. We were doing a lot of rail cars then. The 7-ounce bottle was a real home-run for Miller, and our Miller business was really growing.

**Heineken became an important brand as well, is that right?**

Up until last year, we were the oldest continuous

in Garden City, and I know Oscar Hoffman will take a couple of cases." The strong import in the '50s was Lowenbrau, it outsold Heineken ten to one. But my father sold those cases.

Leo, senior, was a tough guy, but he was very constant. He wasn't all over the place. In those days, this business was much more based on personal relationships. We had our differences with the Van Munchings over the years,

drinker, so I had to do something with all that beer. I'd pour it in flower pots, I'd take a bottle to the bathroom, whatever. We wanted to show it was moving through [laughs].

One of the first chain stores out here took Heineken, and we sent each store five cases. When I went to their Massapequa store, I looked around and I thought to myself, "man, this is high-priced stuff for this neighborhood." So I sent my wife go in there, to buy a six-pack every three days [laughs].

Heineken was a good supplier, and their brand grew to be fantastic in New York. I was the second largest wholesaler in the U.S., I think. Oak did more Heineken, than we did out here, because it was very big in Manhattan.

Heineken USA came in, and they wanted to do something different. It didn't make us happy, to say the least, but they paid us a fair price. It will be a challenge to do what we are doing now, but we will manage.

**What are the biggest changes you are seeing these days...**

We've seen a lot of consolidation in recent years. I understand why that is happening, but I would caution that the breweries better be very careful. If too much consolidation occurs, the industry will lose its grass roots strength. The key to politics is the grass roots. Tip O'Neill said "all politics

**"LEO VAN MUNCHING, SENIOR, WAS A TOUGH GUY, BUT HE WAS VERY CONSTANT...IN THOSE DAYS THIS BUSINESS WAS MUCH MORE BASED ON PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS."**

Heineken wholesaler in America. Leo Van Munching, senior, he came out in a Cadillac when I was in high school. He sold my father 25 cases of Heineken. There was a very small market for imports then. My uncle thought my father paid too much for it, and he said, "you'll never sell it." But my father said, "I can sell that—I'll sell it

but they knew we were loyal to that brand. For years, I spent every Wednesday opening new accounts with a Heineken vice president named Jim Connolly. We did nothing else. We'd sell a guy two cases, and then we'd come back the next week, and we'd keep ordering bottles of Heineken. Now, I've never been a big beer

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is local." I wasn't a big fan of Tip O'Neill, but I use that quote a lot. If the wholesaler becomes one guy for the whole state, he's not a small businessman, he's a conglomerate. His political influence is negligible. He may spend money, whatever. But nothing is more powerful in this country than family business.

I've been on the board of NBWA for a long time. I think David Rehr is doing a great job. Ron Sarasin also did a good job. Our New York state association has improved dramatically under Mike Vacek. He has done an excellent job for wholesalers in the state of New York.

Kirby Lawlis passed away recently, a very good friend of mine. Kirby did a lot of good work for NBWA, and even before Kirby, Joe Huggins was instrumental in starting the PAC. I was in the group that hired Sarasin, and that started the upswing. He hired David, and we've seen what's happened. I think their legislative conference made a difference to the whole industry. The first time I went to the legislative conference, I was

I was reading an article, and it confused me, because it said in a metropolitan area, there may be only two wholesalers in the future. I scratched my head, and I thought, "Each of those guys is going to have a 1000 SKUs, if they want an opportunity to sell them." I don't see it in New York. New York can handle three or four wholesalers. People in New York want selectivity. Maybe in Iowa, it would work.

People want choices here. To give you an example, I find more and more Italian restaurants want Italian beer. The Chinese restaurants want Chinese beer. People in Japanese restaurants want a Sapporo. And we want to give it to them.

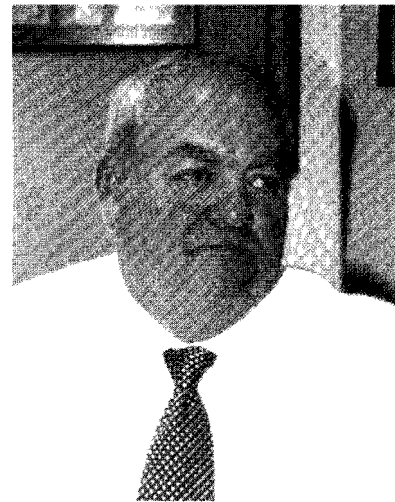
I see more and more people buying specialty brands, just to take home to have with dinner. I was just in a beverage center, and man came in and bought an 18-pack of Bud, and he had a six-pack of Tsingtao. And I asked him, why the Tsingtao? I do that kind of thing all the time [laughs]. People think I'm crazy. And he says, "We're having Chinese food tonight, and I'm drinking Tsingtao." This was one incident, but you see what I'm saying. We sell more Guinness Stout in March than any other month. Everybody's Irish in March.

Leonard Goldstein, president of Miller. Leonard had started with Ruppert, so I knew him his whole career. A lot of people helped me along the way, good beer men, good brewery men. People had foresight, and great ideas. But things change, and brands change. Ballantine was number one, and now it's disappeared. Bud Light is going up, Bud is going down. Brands change. We use different brands of soap, different brands of hair tonic. Wildroot hair tonic was one when I was a kid. I don't think you could find a jug of that around.

**Or of any other hair tonic...**

[laughs] hair tonic. You're right. I should be more modern [laughs].

I worked only the beer business for my whole career, outside two years in the military, and that was way back in the 1950s. I've been around beer my whole life. It's the only business



**"THE BREWERIES HAD BETTER BE VERY CAREFUL IF TOO MUCH CONSOLIDATION OCCURS, THE INDUSTRY WILL LOSE ITS GRASS ROOTS STRENGTH."**

the only wholesaler from New York there. You know how many New York congressmen there are? 43. I had 43 information packets to take around the Hill. The NBWA staff gave me a hand-truck, and I was taking that around. Now, of course, we have a lot more New York wholesalers going to the legislative conference.

**You mentioned the evolving nature of beer wholesaling, with larger entities. How do you think that will impact the business in the long run?** Well, it's true that we're seeing much larger wholesalers, and we're seeing more absentee ownership. I know a lot of these guys, so I don't want to knock it. I just don't know if it is the best thing for the consumer to have one or two wholesalers. You have much more consumer choice when you have 3, 4, or 5 guys competing for the business. When you get down to 1 or 2, choice is reduced.

New York is a little different. We have literally thousands of small accounts. You don't have Wal-Mart in Manhattan. That kind of store doesn't work there. So we still see small stores proliferating in Metropolitan New York. The beer business is local here.

I understand the reasons for consolidation. But this is something I think about. We've got a consumer product, it requires repetition to sell it. You can't build your fort and walk away. You have to keep going back. The key to the business is continuity. To sell a guy, you might have to see him 15 times. You walk in, "please, try my beer." And he says no every time. But you go in every week for a year, maybe you'll get him.

Last week, I went into a diner. I saw Miller Lite on the menu. I didn't really feel like drinking a beer [laughs] but you know me, I always order it anyway. So I order a Miller Lite. And the owner, this Greek guy, real nice guy, says "I printed up the menus, and Miller Lite is on there, but I don't handle it." So I go back to the warehouse, and put a case in my car, and a few table tents. So I walk back in to this diner, and I say to the guy, I've got a case of Miller Lite for you, and I can put up a few table tents, if you want. So this guy, he buys the case of beer, and I set up a few table tents. So now he sells Miller Lite. And I told him, "thank you for giving me the opportunity to sell my beer." We never give up. We're crazy maybe [laughs].

When I look back over the years, I realize I had some great teachers in this business. For example,

I've ever been in. I've seen a lot of changes, but I still like the business.

And what the hell, if Dick Yuengling can keep five generations in the beer business, I might as well give it a crack. I'm the third generation. My daughter Deb and my son Harold are 4th generation. My daughter Deb, over at Oak, works as hard as anybody in America, and my son Harold does all the work here at Boening Brothers. We're a family business here.

I may not be around to see the fifth generation, but hopefully we can get some munchkins in here for the 5th.

**Thanks for your time, Hap.**

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