

# Hugo Thuemler: “Hausmaler” to America

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Special to *Bottles and Extras*

Highly decorated beer steins have been associated with Germany from time immemorial. During the early period of their manufacture in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, painting was done by “*hausmaler*,” German artists who worked in home studios decorating blank bodies furnished by porcelain factories. Although Hugo Thuemler used more advanced techniques, he was the closest thing to a *hausmaler* America has produced and his company’s attractive and antique ceramics are found and collected nationwide.

Thuemler was born in 1847, almost certainly in Germany where he probably learned the craft of decorating steins and mugs. During his youth, German manufacturers developed a process of transfer printing that allowed more mass production of decorated steins. A picture was printed in glaze colors on tissue paper that was then positioned on the stein body. Firing burned away the paper and at the same time fixed the glaze colors onto the ceramic surface.

## Hugo Comes to America

Exactly when Thuemler arrived in the U.S. is unclear, but he brought with him the Old World knowledge of decorating both pottery and glass. In 1894, when he was 45 years old, he is recorded as living in Rochester, Pennsylvania, a Beaver Valley river town not far from Pittsburgh [Figure 1]. His occupation then was listed as “salesman.” Likely a boarding house arrangement, he resided at the Masonic Temple. A Miss Anna Thuemler, possibly his sister, was recorded by the census at the same address.

By 1896 Thuemler apparently had become the manager of a lumber company in Rochester. The Wheeling W.Va. *Register* in that year reported that Hugo had been in town talking to local businessmen about erecting a plant in West Virginia devoted to the “decorating and etching of glassware.” He seemed to have impressed the locals. The newspaper headline read, “New Industry of Considerable Importance to be Located Here.” The article also reported that Thuemler would resign from the Rochester lumber mill and run the

Wheeling operation as its owner. For unknown reasons, the enterprise never came off. Hugo stayed in Rochester. Two years later, in 1898, a Rochester area business and professional guide carried a notice for the Thuemler Manufacturing Co., which described itself as a “manufacturer of novelties, decorators of china and glassware.” A Rochester mark is found on many Thuemler pieces [Figure 2].

## Hugo Relocates to Pittsburgh

Details about Thuemler’s personal life and his business operations are at best sketchy. For reasons unknown, by 1901 he had relocated his operation out of Rochester. Pittsburgh directories for that and subsequent years indicate that his company now was headquartered in the Second National Bank building in suburban Sewickley, Pa. The directory indicates that his decorators worked there. Listed as chairman of the firm, Thuemler also maintained a second address, probably a sales office, at 1507 Liberty Avenue in Pittsburgh. At this time, his wares began to bear a “Pittsburg” (the official spelling for a short time) pottery mark [Figure 3].

Thuemler’s firm filled an evident need for American breweries. Many of their proprietors had come from Germany and the idea of advertising through steins and mugs was strong. In the past such items



Figure 2: Thuemler’s Rochester mark. Figure 3: Thuemler’s Pittsburg mark.

had to be ordered from German suppliers with added cost and delay. Now Thuemler’s output filled that gap. He was a New World *hausmaler*, buying stoneware blanks from local potteries and putting his decorators to work doing the transfer printing for his customers.

A prime example of his customer base was the Kuebeler-Stang Brewery of Sandusky, Ohio. The Kuebeler boys, Jacob and August, were natives of Hesse in Germany. The eldest, Jacob, was born in 1838 and came to the U.S.A. in 1860. Employed briefly by an Akron beer maker, he later moved to Sandusky and worked several years for another brewery. In 1867 Jacob struck out on his own and formed a partnership with brother August establishing his own Sandusky brewery. They incorporated it later as the Jacob Kuebeler Brewing and Malting Company. Within a few years the Kuebelers built a plant that one observer said: “...resembled the palace of an European monarch... The

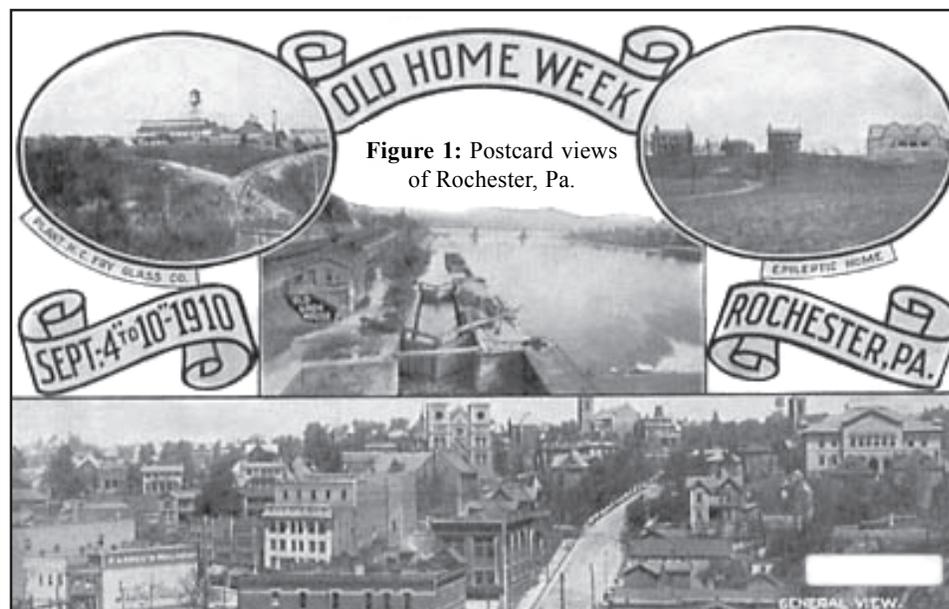


Figure 1: Postcard views of Rochester, Pa.



**Figure 4:** The Kuebeler-Stang Brewery.

ornate tower was the dominant landmark in the west end of Sandusky.” [Figure 4]

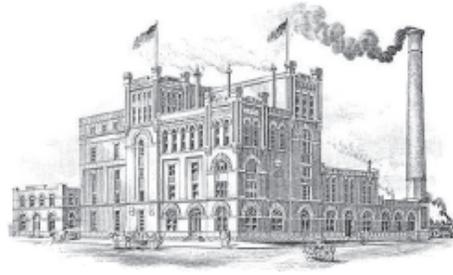
In 1896, following a fire in another Sandusky brewery owned by the Stang Brothers, the two firms merged. Jacob Kuebeler became president and John Stang vice president. The new entity was called the Kuebeler-Stang Brewing and Malting Company. Its principal brand was Crystal Rock Beer, so named because its water reputedly came from Crystal Rock Spring, five miles away. When the owners desired creation of a highly decorated beer stein advertising the spring water origins of their brew, they went to Thuemler. His decorators designed a stein of considerable distinction [Figure 5]. By 1904, however, the spring had been just about pumped dry and quietly was replaced by Lake Erie water from Sandusky Bay. The change apparently went unnoticed by consumers.

### German-owned Breweries & American Eagles

The fact that Thuemler himself was of German birth probably assisted his sales. He was also listed for a number of years as a member of the German-American Society of Technologists, indicating a certain pride in his national origin. But he also seems to have specialized in patriotic depictions of the American eagle and Old Glory for his wares. Note the theme set by the Pabst “Union” stein [Figure 6]. Another German, Jacob Best, had founded this brewery in Milwaukee in 1844. Fred Pabst was a steamer captain who married into the Best family and eventually took charge of the operation. Pabst changed its name to the Pabst Brewing Company and rapidly built it into the Nation’s largest brewery. Pabst became a particularly strong customer of Thuemler, commissioning steins, beer mugs [Figure 7] and mini-mug match strikers. Indicating the international nature of his business, Hugo used a similar design

for a Mexican beer [Figure 8]. In a takeoff from the well-known Schlitz beer slogan about Milwaukee this mug in Spanish claims that Moctezuma is the beer “that made Oirzaba famous.”

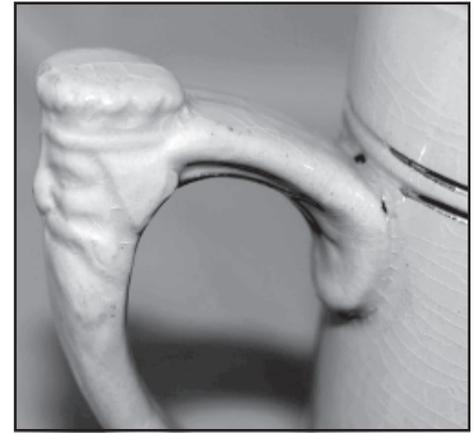
Thuemler created American patriotic decoration on ceramics for several breweries, including the American Brewery of St. Louis [Figure 9], Heidelberg brand [Figure 10] and Consumers Brewery of Erie, Pa. [Figure 11]. All had German ties and Heidelberg’s beer ads boasted that it was made “The old German way.”



**Figure 12:** Drawing of Fred Sehring Brewery.

Another major client with strong German ties was the Fred Sehring Brewery of Joliet, Illinois. The founder, Frederick Sehring, was born in Hesse, Darmstadt in 1834 and came to the U.S. when he was 13, settling near Joliet. After a career in the hotel business and as county treasurer, he purchased an interest in the Columbia Brewery in 1867. Coming into full ownership in 1883, he became president and changed its name to the Fred Sehring Brewing Co. Under his leadership the brewery became one of the largest and most modern in Illinois [Figure 12]. With Frederick’s death in 1892, his son, Louis, who had been superintendent of the brewery, took over. Right after the turn of the century Louis commissioned a number of items from Thuemler, including steins with annual calendars (1901), a Victorian beauty (1905), and a striking flow blue design (1907). [Figures 13-15].

A Bavarian immigrant and brewer by trade, brewer Christopher Stahlmann went in search of caves and clean spring-fed water along the Mississippi until finding the brewery’s ideal location in St. Paul, Minnesota. He started a brewery which merged in 1891 with three other small area breweries to form the Minneapolis Brewing Company. The company’s flagship beer was Grain Belt Golden, introduced in 1893. Like his German brewer colleagues, Stahlmann commissioned a striking stein from Thuemler. The transfer is crisp and well designed and the gold trim has been



**Figure 17:** King Gambrinus handle.

added by hand. [Figure 16] The handle of this vessel, also found on other Thuemler products, featured a ceramic portrait of King Gambrinus [Figure 17]. Gambrinus was a storied German royal and is the unofficial patron saint of beer and brewing [Figure 18]. German legends dating from the 1500s claimed that the king learned the art of making beer from Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess of motherhood and fertility.



**Figure 18:** King Gambrinus.

### Other Thuemler Products

Although beer steins and mugs are Thuemler’s best-known products, his decorators also turned out a large line of transfer printed ceramic items for Victorian tourist sites, fairs and expositions, anniversaries, and non-beer companies. A wide variety of root beer mugs and steins also bear the Thuemler mark on the base,

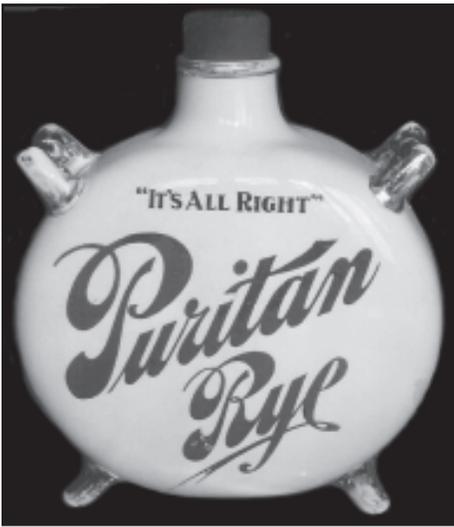


Figure 22: Puritan Rye canteen jug.

including four shown here. [Figure 19].

Thuemler also made a series of whiskey jugs. Four such have come to light, Puritan Rye for D. Sach & Co. of Louisville [Figure 20], Faultless Pure Rye for S. Stansberg of Baltimore, and Compliments of C. Knoepper of Indianapolis. Finally, shown here, is a jug commissioned by Henry Meyer of Terre Haute, Ind., showing a vivacious lady crashing through the jug surface [Figures 21, 22]. These jugs all have a canteen shape and, unlike other Thuemler products, are decorated on porcelain rather than stoneware bodies.

Among sparse details about Hugo Thuemler, we know that in Sewickley he lived in the Elmhurst Inn, originally a private mansion. It was located in an area of the town that had seen many fancy homes built in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century but was in decline by the 1890s. The house had been enlarged and turned into a boarding house and hotel. [Figure 23] According to his obituary in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Thuemler died at the Elmhurst Inn on September 1, 1908, at the age of 61. Cause of death was listed as “acute indigestion,” which raises speculation about the quality of cooking at the Inn. The paper reported he had been president of the Thuemler Glass Manufacturing Company. After 1908, references to the firm disappear from Pittsburgh directories. Extensive research at libraries in Rochester, Pittsburgh and Sewickley has failed to reveal further information.

Despite the lack of data about him and his firm, Hugo Thuemler will not be forgotten so long as the many ceramic items that he produced continue to be avidly collected. Because his company vanished



Figure 19: Thuemler root beer mugs.



Figure 21: Meyer canteen whiskey jug/front.



Figure 22: Meyer canteen whiskey jug/back.

with Thuemler’s death, most of his products have attained or are approaching 100-year-old antique status. Many bear striking designs and all readily can be identified by their marks. Some items now fetch as much as \$550 at auction. With time they will grow even more prized and valuable. As *hausmaler* to America, Thuemler — whatever else his life might have been — was a success. In his memory, let’s hoist a stein to Hugo. Prost!

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**Notes:** Thanks go to librarians and researchers in Pennsylvania who diligently searched on my behalf city directories, newspaper indexes and census data for information about Thuemler but could find only sparse references. None of the newspapers in Rochester, Sewickley or Pittsburgh apparently carried stories about his enterprises or even his obituary. The



Figure 23: The Elmhurst Inn, Sewickley, Pa.

Internet yielded information about the breweries, many of them now defunct. Thanks go to ePodunk for permission to use the postcard view of Rochester, and to Don and Betsy Yates, authors of the highly informative *Ginger Beer and Root Beer Heritage*, for the photo of Thuemler’s root beer steins. Portions of this article originally appeared in the *Ohio Swirl*.