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The History of the Wood-Pulp Beer Coaster

Max Nelson

University of Windsor

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The History of



Wood-Pulp Beer Coaster

By Max Nelson, Ph.D.

The wood-pulp coaster or mat, the primary function of which is to soak up the liquid from the vessel placed upon it, is little more than a century old. Drip trays of various materials were long in use to protect table and counter surfaces but the idea of employing a small wood-based product comes from late nineteenth century Germany. In 1892 Robert Sputh of Dresden patented (under patent number 68499, class 54, paper products) a process for creating what he called "Holzfilzplatten" or "Holzfilzdeckeln", that is, literally, wood-felt boards or covers; these were to be cut in round or square shapes, inscribed and decorated, and, because of their absorbency, could be placed under beer vessels and used as "Bieruntersetzern", that is, beer coasters. Today the word «Deckel» to mean "coaster" is in general use in Germany, where the terms Filz ("felt"), Teller ("plate"), and Untersatz or Untersetzer ((under-placer)) are also in use.

Sputh himself produced coasters for a few breweries, including the Dortmunder Union Brauerei, and these usually included brief sayings. Many other manufactur-

ers got into the business, and mats soon came to be used as cheap, plentiful, and easily replaceable and changeable means of advertising products (and not just beer). Since that time well over 100,000 different brewery-sponsored coasters have been produced in Germany, more than in any other country. Some of these have been made for foreign brands. Thus some of the few known American pre-prohibition coasters were made in Germany, such as those for the Virginia Brewing Company of Roanoke, which also included sayings (some in German), as well as the Olt Brewing Company of Dayton, Ohio. "E. M. Blumenthal and

coasters probably dating to the early 1910s for the Kalamazoo Brewing Company of Michigan (see figure 1) and Hubach's Brewery of Tiffin, Ohio.



FIGURE 2 (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

Since at least the mid-twentieth century, German coasters have also had another function: to keep tally of how many beers were ordered by a customer by marking a line on the coaster for each beer. Some coasters were even designed with compartments for each tick (see figure 2). In some places in Germany today, placing your coaster on your empty mug means that you are ready for a fill up. Coasters were also informally used as postcards, with a little message and stamp being affixed before



FIGURE 1 (GBORGBBARONB COLLECTON)

Company Chicago-Germany" is found printed at the bottom of

being sent by mail. Since then numerous coasters doubling as postcards have been produced. Coasters of course have had



FIGURE 3 (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

many informal uses, including scribbling doodles, providing mapped out directions, or passing on phone numbers. Konstantin Chernenko once claimed that in the 1950s secrets were

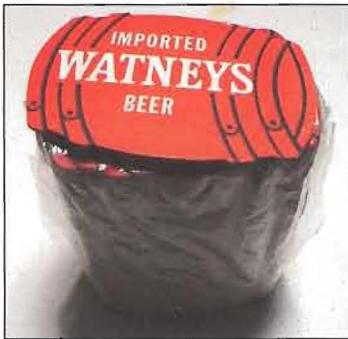


FIGURE 4 (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

passed to Soviet agents in Britain by writing them on beer mats which would be folded and placed under the short leg of a table in a pub, since no one would tamper with them there.

Coasters in general are notoriously difficult to date precisely, though fortunately some are printed with a date (see figure 3), particularly if they commemorate a special event. From the early thick and coarse round or square, monochrome examples, coasters

have evolved to become thin, smooth, multi-colored, and die-cut into various shapes (see figure 4), and thus a careful study of such details can provide rough dating criteria. Although coasters had long been taken and kept as free souvenirs, placed in scrapbooks and pinned on walls, it was not long after World War II that coaster collecting clubs came to be formed. The term "tegestology" (though it should properly



FIGURE 5 (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

be "tegestology", from Latin *teges*, meaning "matting"), referring to the collecting of coasters, is first attested in 1960, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and one of the earliest clubs, the British Beermat Collectors Society, was founded in the same year. Brewers themselves responded to the desire of collectors and began to produce coasters as collectibles, putting out sets, sometimes numbered, and some of which could be joined together like a jig-saw puzzle to form a larger image. Some coasters have been printed as coupons or games (with crossword puzzles, tic-tac-toe grids, word search puzzles, or trivia questions). Others have cut-outs which can be assembled to make toys (see figure 5). Prices for coasters have only risen in recent years, in tan-

dem with the popularity of antique and breweriana shows and online bidding and selling sites. The internet has also allowed tegestologists to share pictures of their private collections. Thus George Barone has gathered together practically all known American coasters at *Beer Coaster Mania* at members.aol.com/gbarone/; links to other similar sites are there provided.

Further Reading:

Ian Calvert, *A Guide to Collecting Beer Mats* (Edinburgh 2006).

Martyn Cornell, *Beer Memorabilia* (Edison, New Jersey 2000), pp.91-108.

Ulrich Klever, *Bierdeckel* (Munich 1980).

Kenneth Osborne and Brian Pipe, *The International Book of Beer Labels, Mats, and Coasters* (London 1979).

M. J. Powell, *The Beer Drinker's Guide to Tegestology* (Derby n.d.) (online at

O. O. Uhlig, *Bierkrug-Deckel* (Rosenheimer 1982).

Ralf Wetzig, "Von Bierdeckeln und vom Bierdeckelsammeln:" in Gitta Böth and Jens Bergmann, eds. *Baierisches Bier aus Westfalen: Zur Geschichte westfälischer Brauereien* (Hagen 1998), pp. 127-130.

Dr. Max Nelson Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada N9B 3P4
Tel: (519) 253-3000, ext. 2886,
Fax: (519) 971-3648