

A little history in every glass

Elizabeth Rudd/Lewiston Tribune

TROY - The "glass ceiling" in Herman Ronnenberg's home isn't like any ordinary skylight.

His ceiling is on the ground level of a multi-story house and the glass is made up of hundreds of beer bottles hanging in lines from string.

The beer bottle ceiling, which hovers over shelving for 100 or so beer cans, is a fraction of the local historian's collection of about 10,000 beer cans and bottles (5,000 each) and other beer-related items. It also only hints at his extensive knowledge about the history of beer and breweries, particularly within Idaho.

"One of the problems with collecting beer cans is when you move, you need an 18-wheeler," said Ronnenberg, who has published seven books on the history of beer and breweries.

Ronnenberg, a history professor at the University of Idaho, will share some of his knowledge of the history of Idaho breweries, specifically in Moscow, during the Latah County Historical Society's Brews & BBQ event April 12 in Moscow.

Originally from Evansville, Ill., Ronnenberg first began his collection in the mid-1970s, when he came to Idaho and met Ed Putman. He said Putman was working on his doctorate studying prohibition and had his own beer can collection.

"I thought, 'Well, hey, I can do that. It looks like fun,' " said Ronnenberg, who lives in Troy.

Ronnenberg had some prior interest in the subject and said his first book was his own master's thesis on prohibition and German Americans. Ronnenberg earned a bachelor's degree in history in 1968 and a master's degree in arts and teaching in 1973 from Lavern College in California. He later earned a second master's in library science from Central Missouri State University in 1976.

It wasn't until Ronnenberg started collecting items from the different breweries that he discovered each had endless stories.

"It's fun. It really is," Ronnenberg said.

Researching breweries went hand-in-hand with collecting the different cans, bottles, growlers, taps, hats, mugs, suspenders, even nail clippers and a walking stick. When he would find an item or beer brand he didn't recognize, Ronnenberg said he would want to know more about it. That eventually led to him visiting a town and instinctively thinking it must have had a brewery at some point.

"The two kind of went together," he said.

Ronnenberg said he has found throughout the years that breweries were often the first brick building and industry in a town, and it seems people always have some kind of story about their local brewery and beer.

"It's easy to get into," he said.

Ronnenberg has compiled files for every brewery he has found. The files combined with shelves of books make up a personal library of beer-related research material in a room above his garage - the room displays hundreds more of his cans and bottles. He said he has a 40-page bibliography - 10 entries per page - of all his research books.

"Some of them are rare, hard-to-find things," Ronnenberg said of his books.

His collection and research initially began as a hobby, but he has since started his own publishing company that has turned into a career. Ronnenberg's first books were published by UI Press until it closed in 2004. He then started Heritage Witness Reflections Publishing because he wasn't sure who else would publish Idaho history books.

Over the years, Ronnenberg has enjoyed traveling throughout Idaho and seeing where all the breweries have been and new ones are starting. He's planning a trip to the Selkirk Abbey Brewing Company in Post Falls - a fairly new brewery - to add a few items to his collection that dates back to the 1920s.

One of his more notable Idaho items is a cone top Sun Valley Beer can from East Idaho Brewing Co. in Pocatello during the early 1950s. Ronnenberg said smaller breweries during that time didn't have a lot of money and couldn't afford to can, but were able to use twist tops.

"Undoubtedly, my best item."

Rudd may be contacted at erudd@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-8465. Follow her on Twitter @elizabeth_rudd.