

MEET RAY BARBER by Brian R. Sheridan *Photos courtesy of Brian R. Sheridan*



Ray Barber is a well-known collector of Erie beer memorabilia and the author of several books.

If Koehler Beer was known for “the collar that it keeps,” Ray Barber, 72, is known for the collection he keeps – memorabilia from the Erie beermaker’s extensive history. Barber has about 1,200 Koehler items that he has been collecting for decades. His love of all-things Koehler started at his childhood home when his dad let him taste the golden liquid.

“My dad drank nothing but Koehler,” Barber said, “and so I sipped on his bottle for beer at home. By the time I was 21, drinking Koehler beers was nothing special or new. We even toured the brewery. After leaving home, I went back to help my dad clean up the basement about 30 years ago. When I came across an unopened original can and a tray, he let me take them. That was the start of my collection.”

Koehler Beer started as a product of the Jackson Koehler Eagle Brewery in 1883 which merged with The Erie Brewing Company in 1899. The complex’s German-style architecture made for an imposing sight at 21st and State Street until the company closed in 1978 and the historic building was demolished in 2006. Barber, of course, acquired original bricks from the building for his collection.

After the name changed owners a few times, a pair of Grove City brewer brothers named Bryan and Bruce Koehler, ironically no relations to the Erie family of brewers, resurrected the Koehler name, recipes and logos in 2017.

Barber’s collection mania didn’t kick in fully until he retired in 2008. He wasn’t into cars, fishing or golf, he thought, he was into Koehler. “I wondered just how many Koehler things could there be? At first, I was going to only get a few items of remembrance. Once I retired though, I didn’t want to become a couch potato. My drive went into overdrive with Koehler and Erie beer history. I just kept finding more stuff and more information and more stuff and more stuff ...,” Barber said.

At first, he found items by just asking friends or visiting flea markets, yard sales and estate auctions. These were pre-Internet times. When Barber found eBay, the online auction/sales website, he suddenly found hundreds of Koehler pieces he never knew were out there. As he discovered, Koehler items had made their way out of Erie to far flung places around the globe.

“eBay was a big thing,” Barber said. “People don’t believe that I’ve purchased labels and coasters from Poland, Russia, and Great Britain. Canada has a lot of stuff. Many people moved to Florida when they retired. Then they wonder why they brought this stuff to Florida, or they pass away, and their items go for sale online. A lot of the items I have I would have never found, or known about, if it weren’t for eBay.”

Barber enjoys lending out pieces to special displays and events. For many years, his collection spent time in boxes at his Summit Township home. This year though marked a big change for Barber’s collection. He moved it into his new home, and Barber made just one request of his wife Jane, who apparently is a saint.

“I just didn’t have the room at home (for the collection). I told my wife that if we move, I have to have a place where I can put everything out on display. And that’s how we

ended up moving to Millcreek. Most people downsize. We didn't downsize. I can look at the whole collection on display," Barber said.

The two-floor condo now houses the Koehler collection like a beer museum. Every inch of the second floor's 1,450 square feet is devoted primarily to Koehler with some space featuring Wayne Brewing Company, another brewery from Erie's past. Barber had the floor finished with 10-foot ceilings and enough electrical outlets to plug-in all of his neon Koehler signs. The walls are all decorated with Koehler ads, plaques and prints. Shelves hold rare cans and bottles opened and unopened. He actually completed the second floor before setting up the condo's first floor living space.

Among Barber's favorite pieces in his collection are corner signs. These signs were hung on buildings at intersection corners, offering views from both streets at intersections. His pristine Wayne Beer and Ale sign is among his favorites.

And Barber is still acquiring Koehler pieces. He recently had a friend find a piece of memorabilia Barber had never seen before at a flea market in Cleveland. It surprises Barber that so many Koehler logo items were made by a small Erie beer company back in the days when advertising and marketing wasn't as ubiquitous.

There is one "Holy Grail" item, however, that Barber dreams of owning.

"Before the advent of (cigarette) lighters, people used to carry a little metal box called a match safe. You would keep stick matches in it," Barber explained. "There also was a stamp safe in which you would keep stamps. I saw a picture of one that had advertising on it for Fred Koehler Brewery from the 1890s so I know it exists. It is just an odd piece."

If you can't swing an invite to Barber's condo, beer history fans can see photos of his collection – and learn the history of Erie's breweries – in two new books Barber co-wrote with historian Robert Musson, "Pour a Koehler Collar" Volumes 1 and 2. They can be purchased at the Hagen History Center, Werner Books in the Liberty Plaza, eBay, or from Barber.

While as much as Barber enjoys beer, including the new Koehler, it is the thrill of the hunt that keeps him chasing Koehler pieces for his collection.

"I never know where I'm going to find something or when it is going to show up. You just don't know," Barber said.



Ray Barber has been collecting beer memorabilia for decades. He recently created an entire display on the second floor of his condo.

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New Koehler Brewing: <https://koehlerbrewingcompany.com> LEL