

Just For Openers January-December 2026 1

The Hamm Brewing Company The Beer Behind The Opener by Don Thornton

QUESTION: What German-American brewery got its kick start with a loan gone bad and later survived a mobster kidnapping and a \$100,000 ransom?

ANSWER: Don't know, need more clues.

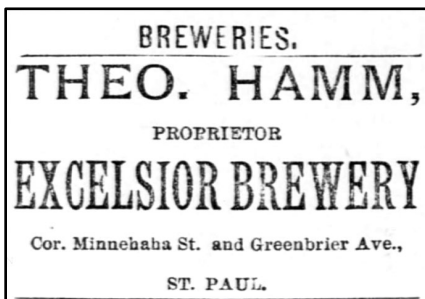
QUESTION: How about the jingle: "From the land of sky blue waters" and a goofy but lovable cartoon bear?

ANSWER: Easy, Hamm's beer!

German immigrant Theodore Hamm was a Minnesota butcher and saloon owner when he by chance took possession of a small brewery built over the artesian wells off Phalen Creek in St. Paul in 1865. Hamm had become friends with one of his saloon customers, Andrew F. Keller, who had launched the unlikely named Pittsburgh Brewery in St. Paul in 1858.



Theodore Hamm c. 1880



St. Paul Globe listing

Keller needed money and there are two stories as to why. One was he wanted to finance a major expansion of his brewery and the other was for a California Gold Rush excursion. Whatever the story, Keller put his brewery up for collateral and Hamm loaned him the money. Keller defaulted and Hamm took possession, changing the name to the Excelsior Brewery. Hamm hired fellow German-American Jacob Schmidt as his brewmaster and the business started to take off. (Schmidt went on to establish the Jacob Schmidt Brewing Company in St. Paul).

After Schmidt's departure about a year later, Hamm hired, in what turned out to be a stroke of genius, Christopher Figge, launching a dynasty of three generations of brewmasters. Christopher was followed by his son William and grandson William Jr. The Figges became part of the glue that kept the business successful.



Left: Hamm's Brewery started early with corkscrew and opener advertising. The "Shomee" Bar Mount Corkscrew (1 Screw Clamp), Crank Handle For Inserting & Extracting Cork, Clamp For Holding Bottle, Designed by Albert Baumgarten of Chicago, IL., Mechanical Patent No. 675,032 May 28, 1901. From the Collection of Pete Nowicki. (Only Known Example)

Just For Openers January-December 2026 2

The Hamm Brewing Company

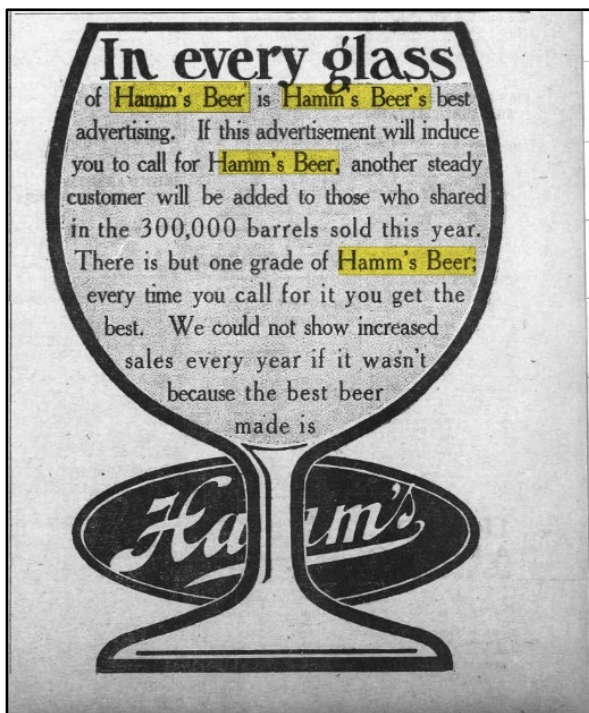
The Beer Behind The Opener by Don Thornton

Hamm changed the name of the company in 1896 to the Theodore Hamm Brewing Company and incorporated with the secretary of state of Minnesota. Theodore Hamm was listed as president and son William Hamm as secretary and treasurer. Hamm noted the new name in a November 18, 1896 advertisement in the *St. Paul Globe*. Sales and growth came quickly and the family became very wealthy.

Theodore Hamm died July 31, 1903 at the age of 78. The *Globe* said he had been bed-ridden for six weeks and attributed his death to heart failure. The newspaper paid tribute to Hamm, saying his acquisition of his brewery "became the nucleus of the great industry his enterprise developed. Gradually he added to his brewery till today it is the largest in the Northwest." Theodore's son, William, and his son, William Jr. took over. The two Williams continued the newspaper campaign with dozens and dozens of advertisements over the years, including a 1904 spot boasting about 300,000 barrels sold in one year and another one in 1907 featuring a drawing of the sprawling and still growing brewery complex.



St. Paul Globe 1896



Just For Openers January-December 2026 3

The Hamm Brewing Company

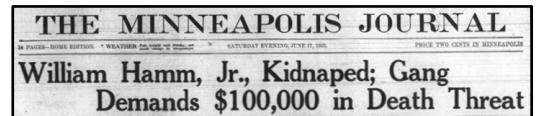
The Beer Behind The Opener by Don Thornton

The company continued to prosper until 1920 when Prohibition halted beer and other alcohol production in the U.S. The company survived, switching to soft drinks, near beer and syrups. It was near the end of Prohibition in 1933 that a tumultuous event upended the Hamm family and resulted in a firestorm of nationwide publicity.

Theodore Hamm's grandson, William Hamm Jr., then 39 and president of the brewery, was kidnapped by gangsters as he was leaving his office on June 15, 1933. He was forced into a waiting car and whisked to a hideout in Wisconsin and later to Illinois. The gang sent ransom notes to the Hamm family, signed by the kidnapped Hamm, demanding \$100,000 (more than \$2.5 million today). Two days later the family paid a ransom and William Jr. was released near Wyoming, Minnesota. According to the FBI, the kidnapping was the work of the notorious Ma Barker-Karpis gang, including Alvin "Creepy" Karpis, Arthur "Doc" Barker and Charles Fitzgerald. The FBI used a then new forensic silver nitrate method to lift fingerprints from the ransom notes to link the gang to the kidnapping. The gangsters eventually were killed or went to prison.



William Hamm Jr. c1935



Weather

Minnesota — Fair tonight and Tuesday; cooler tonight and Tuesday. Temperature at 8 a.m. today 15 above.

The St. Cloud Daily Times

and The Daily Journal-Press.

Home Edition

VOL. XLVI. NO. 228.
Associated Press Leased Wire
ST. CLOUD, MINN., MONDAY, JUNE 19, 1933
TWELVE PAGES—PRICE THREE CENTS

KIDNAPERS RELEASE HAMM, RANSOM PAID

FRANCE SERVES WARNINGS UPON MARKET RIGHTS

Production Control Is Seen as Necessary to Avert Dangers

OPPOSE U. S. PLAN

49 Nations Agree to Roosevelt Plan of Tariff Truce

London, June 19 (AP)—The French minister of colonies, Albert Sarraute, today announced that the French government had agreed to a plan of tariff truce for five years, provided the other nations of the world agreed to do the same.

ARMY PLANES FLY OVER LAKE MILLE LACS

U. S. DELEGATES REFUTE CLAIMS OF GROUP RIFTS

British Papers Print Stories About Split Among Experts

RUMORS DENIED

Tariff Plan Approved Even Though Yankee Bloc Uninformed

London, June 19 (AP)—While sessions of the British press were going on today, U. S. delegates to the London conference refuted claims that there was a rift in the American bloc over the tariff plan.

RELEASED

St. Paul Brewer Is Found Early Today In Wyoming Store

Tells Police He Had Been Treated Well by Gang of Extortionists—Amount of Ransom Paid Is Not Revealed—Blieved Less Than \$100,000

St. Paul, June 19 (AP)—William Hamm, Jr., kidnapped millionaire brewer, was released early today near Wyoming, Minn., and arrived at his home here shortly before 8:30 a. m. central standard time. Turned loose 43 miles north of here, he came home with police. Hamm told members of his family: Chief Thomas F. Dahl and "Doc" Barker.

Just For Openers January-December 2026 4

The Hamm Brewing Company

The Beer Behind The Opener by Don Thornton

Putting the kidnapping behind him, William Jr. continued the success and growth of the company until 1952 when he was elected chair of the board. He was replaced by William Figge Jr., who started with the firm as brewmaster following in the footsteps of his grandfather and father. He was plant superintendent when he was named president and remained in that position until the family sold the brewery in 1966.



The Hamm brewery complex c.1960

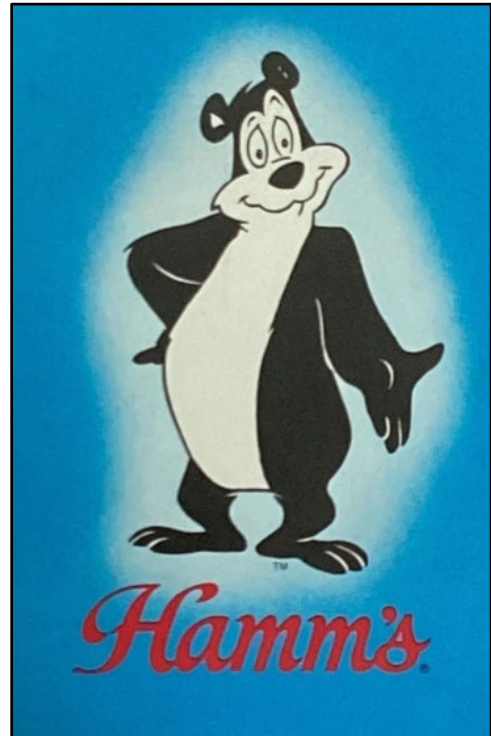
Figge made his mark by expanding Hamm into a national entity with the purchase of breweries in Baltimore, Houston, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Converted to producing Hamm beer, all were initially successful but eventually bit the dust.

Figge is probably best known for hiring the Campbell Mithun Advertising Agency of Minneapolis to create what became an promotional windfall for Hamm's beer featuring a catchy jingle and smiling bear. The unnamed bear was introduced on television in 1953 and was an instant success. Considered a pioneer in advertising, the bear was the first animated mascot for a beer brand. Accompanied by a riveting tom-tom drumbeat and the jingle "From the land of sky blue waters," the chubby bear danced through various hijinks in ads that propelled sales in 1964 to \$124 million.

Just For Openers January-December 2026 5

The Hamm Brewing Company

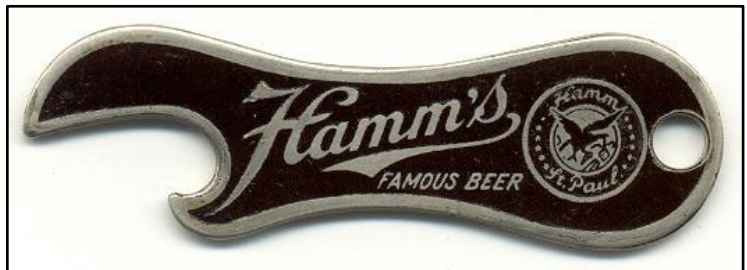
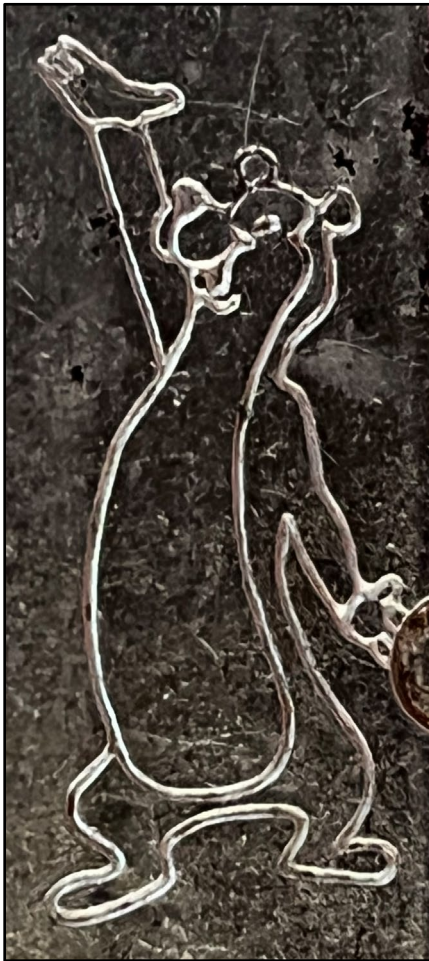
The Beer Behind The Opener by Don Thornton



Just For Openers January-December 2026 6

The Hamm Brewing Company The Beer Behind The Opener by Don Thornton

The bear was so popular Hamm's featured it in a raft of promotional products including calendars, playing cards, coasters and bottle and can openers. The mostly give-away openers and at least one corkscrew branded with the company name were a staple for Hamm's dating back decades. Beginning in the 1950s, they were also marked with an image of the bear and "From the land of sky blue waters."



Just For Openers January-December 2026 7

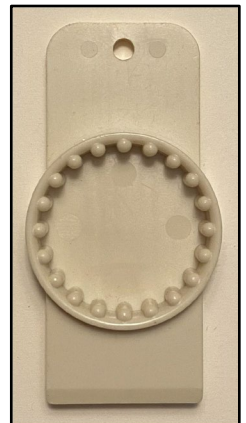
**The Hamm Brewing Company
The Beer Behind The Opener by Don Thornton**



After the bear was retired and the company celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1965 the Hamm family decided to diversify and sold out in what became a musical chairs of owners. The St. Paul brewery, by then covering 33 acres with 54 buildings, was closed in 1997 and remained abandoned and dilapidated until redevelopment efforts were launched about 2020. While beer was no longer brewed in St. Paul, the Hamm brand and legacy survived with limited production by the Molson Coors Brewing Company. What also survived was a dedicated fan base, with roots dating back to the introduction of the Hamm's bear. The loyalty of the base is such that members are referred to as "Hammpions."



Hamm's[®]
Beer
30 Pack
\$15.99
Save \$3.00



2026 newspaper advertisement

Just For Openers January-December 2026 8

The Hamm Brewing Company

The Beer Behind The Opener by Don Thornton

SIDEBAR: For the record, here's the cocktail of Hamm owners: Heublein, Inc. of Hartford, Connecticut, paid a reported \$63 million for Hamm's in 1965. In 1973 with sales going south, Heublein unloaded Hamm's for a reported \$6 million to Brewer's Unlimited Inc., a group of Hamm's beer distributors, which in turn sold it to Olympia Brewing Company of Tumwater, Washington, in 1975. Pabst Brewing Company of Milwaukee purchased Olympia and its Hamm's assets in 1983. Pabst moved Hamm's production to Milwaukee and sold the St. Paul plant to Stroh Brewing Company of Detroit in 1984. Stroh produced its own products in St. Paul until 1997 when it closed the plant. The brand changed hands a couple of more times before ending up in the beer family of the Molson Coors Beverage Company of Chicago (Hamm's is currently brewed by Miller Brewing Company owned by Molson Coors).



Another Hamm's barmount corkscrew called the "Champion". Fairly rare but this example in outstanding condition.

