The History Professional

An Interview with Theresa McCulla

Theresa McCulla is the historian of the American Brewing History Initiative, a three-year project at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. McCulla has earned a doctorate in American Studies from Harvard University and a culinary arts diploma from the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts’ Professional Chefs Program. Her research explores representations of race, ethnicity, and gender in 19th- and 20th-century consumer culture and material culture, especially in conjunction with food and drink.

Why did you decide to become the historian of the American Brewing History Initiative at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History?

This position is incredibly exciting to me because it involves tasks at both ends of the historical process. I am working to build an archive from the ground up. At the same time, I am interpreting the archive as it forms, writing and thinking about the objects, documents, and oral histories I am collecting. In other words, the work of the project is the historical process itself. Beyond that, there is no better stage on which to engage the public in the complexities of American history than the National Museum of American History. I feel the American Brewing History Initiative is a creative effort that is happening at the right time, in the right place.

The Smithsonian called the number of applicants for your position “unprecedented,” what was the hiring process like for you?

I was delighted (and also a bit befuddled) when the job posting appeared last summer. Working as a historian of beer and brewing at the National Museum of American History seemed almost too good to be true. I sent my cover letter, was excited to interview, and was thrilled to receive the offer. Much of the media attention surrounding the position imagined workdays spent drinking pints on the job, which I can assure you is not the case. But the enormous energy and enthusiasm that I have felt from the public and the brewing community make me excited for the future of the Brewing History Initiative. Americans love beer. That gives me an opportunity to use brewing as a lens to ask big questions about American history.

How can brewing history inform the study of the history of the federal government?

The federal government has long had an important relationship with beer and brewing. During the Civil War, the federal government initiated a tax on beer to help pay for military operations. Federal enforcement of Prohibition in the early 20th century, followed by federal oversight of brewery mergers in subsequent decades, meant that the federal government played no small part in the consolidation of America’s brewing industry. In the last few decades, tax credits have helped small breweries grow, but the federal excise tax on beer continues to be a central concern. When the Craft Brewers Conference met in Washington, DC, in April 2017, representatives from craft breweries and state brewers guilds participated in a “Hill Climb” to meet their representatives. Debates related to the regulation of beer sales, taxation, and more keep the House and Senate Small Brewers Caucuses active.

What are some strengths of the Smithsonian’s collection related to brewing and beer consumption in America?

The National Museum of American History (NMAH) holds rich, but limited, collections related to American brewing history. Highlights include stoneware beer vessels and steins, some dating to the mid-19th century; import records, some in German, for brewing ingredients that crossed the Atlantic, destined for breweries in Philadelphia or Baltimore; and brewing equipment from mid-Atlantic breweries operating at the turn of the 20th century. NMAH’s Archives Center maintains a fantastic variety of early 20th-century advertising material related to beer: trade cards, illustrated souvenir albums, calendars, posters, and more. A collection of sheet music from the same era reflects a
Surprising inclination for popular songs about beer. For example, the curious researcher can find the lyrics and music for “Budweiser’s a Friend of Mine,” which premiered at the Ziegfield Follies in New York City during its inaugural 1907 season.

What are areas in which you would like to improve the collection?

The goal of the American Brewing History Initiative (ABHI) is to build the central, national archive for the history of beer and brewing in America. ABHI will pay special attention to the histories of home brewing and craft brewing, movements that date from the 1960s to the present. Early home brewers, those responsible for technological or taste innovations, agricultural producers, consumers, and those with lesser-known histories (particularly women and people of color) all fall within my focus. To tell their stories, I am particularly interested in items such as recipes and brewing logs, brewing equipment, communications of home brewing clubs (especially pre-internet), business plans and advertising materials, and patents or object prototypes. Oral histories with brewers, growers, and other figures in the industry will also form a crucial component of the archive.

What shape will public programs related to brewing history take at the Smithsonian?

ABHI plans at least two public events per year. One of these will take place at NMAH’s annual Food History Weekend (October 26–28, 2017). Attendees can explore this year’s theme—“Many Flavors, One Nation”—through a series of roundtables, tastings, cooking demonstrations, and other activities. “The Great History of American Brewing” will take place on the weekend’s final evening. ABHI’s second public event will happen at a time and place to be determined, likely in a region far from DC. This will bring the work of the Brewing History Initiative to a different audience.

The public can also find updates on ABHI’s work on a dedicated page of the museum’s website (s.si.edu/BrewHistory) and follow #BeerHistory and #SmithsonianFood on social media. I also tweet about my research trips at @theresamccu.

How do you approach a historically recent phenomenon like craft brewing as a historical subject?

This is an excellent moment to begin this project, since those we might call the first generation of craft brewers are still present, active in the industry, and eager to share their stories and personal collections. Oral history becomes an especially important tool to preserve their histories in their own words. The work of building an archive requires me to think of the future as well as the past and present. In twenty years, fifty years, and beyond, what kinds of research questions might scholars ask? Which objects and documents should we collect now, for their future benefit? I am anxious to collect with an eye to breadth and depth, to preserve the big stories and those that may be more subtle, at least in the present.

What is your favorite aspect of your duties at the American Brewing History Initiative?

I have most enjoyed getting on the road and meeting the many people who have built this industry. They are creative, entrepreneurial, and collegial. As a historian of food and drink (beyond the scope of beer), I am fascinated to learn how brewers approach brewing as a matter of taste in addition to a science or business. It may be difficult for contemporary beer drinkers to imagine the homogeneity of American beer in the mid-20th century. Home brewers, and eventually craft brewers, changed consumers’ palates, one beer at a time. Now we have more breweries in America than at any point in our history, even before Prohibition. Cheers to that!

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**The 2017 Spurgeon Neel Award**

The Army Medical Department Museum Foundation is pleased to sponsor the 2017 Spurgeon Neel Annual Award competition for the article of 5000 words or less that best exemplifies the history, legacy, and traditions of the Army Medical Department.

Named in honor of Major General (Retired) Spurgeon H. Neel, first Commanding General of Health Services Command (now U.S. Army Medical Command), the award competition is open to all federal employees, military and civilian, as well as non-governmental civilian authors who submit manuscripts for publishing consideration.

The AMEDD Museum Foundation will present a special medallion award and a $1000 monetary prize to the winner, who will be notified in advance, at a Foundation-sponsored event early in 2018.

All manuscripts must be submitted to the AMEDD Museum Foundation, amedd.foundation@att.net, by 30 September 2017. At the time of submission, a manuscript must be original work and not pending publication in any other periodical. It must conform to the Writing and Submission Guidance of the AMEDD Journal, and must relate to the history, legacy and/or traditions of the Army Medical Department. Manuscripts will be reviewed and evaluated by a six-member committee appointed by the President of the AMEDD Museum Foundation. The winning manuscript will be selected no later than December 2017.

Additional detail concerning the Spurgeon Neel Annual Award may be obtained by contacting Mrs. Sue McMasters at the AMEDD Museum Foundation, 210–226–0265.