

Name of Interviewee: Peter Gentry
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Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
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Theresa McCulla: It's June 13, 2018. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I'm interviewing Peter Gentry, founder and president of One Barrel Brewing Company. We're meeting at the brewery in Madison, Wisconsin. And this interview is part of the American Brewing History Initiative, a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in America. So, Peter, when and where were you born?

Peter Gentry: I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, in August of 1979.

McCulla: And, what were your parents' names?

Gentry: My father is named James Albert Gentry, and my mother is named Ellen Jean Henningsen.

McCulla: And what did they do?

Gentry: My father is a woodworker by trade, so, he makes sort of functional art pieces out of wood. And my mother was a lawyer in some form or another.

McCulla: And, what neighborhood did you grow up in in Madison?

Gentry: Grew up, I grew up on the near east side of Madison. Actually, probably five blocks from where we're sitting right now. So, I went to Madison East High School. I even went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Getting off topic maybe a little, but I traveled around, I lived in L.A. briefly after college, and Denver after college. Ran out of money and moved back here and I've been here ever since.

01:19 McCulla: Alright. And, what do you recall about growing up in the neighborhood here where you did?

Gentry: Yeah, it was a really friendly neighborhood. I mean, the east side of Madison's fairly eclectic. And, all the hippie stereotypes still, even to this day, nearly forty years after I was born, rings true. But, really, friendly neighborhood people all looking out for each other and things like that. This corner where we're at right now was a little rough around the edges, if I recall correctly. Even in high school there was, they say, like a neo-Nazi bar here, which ironically is now a vegan restaurant. So, that's great. You know, we, we came in six years ago. We weren't the first on this corner to start to, for lack of a better term, gentrify it. But, then, you know, certainly when we came in, about six years ago, things really

started to pick up on this street. And now it's one of kind of the premier retail, entertainment districts in town.

McCulla: And what is this intersection outside?

Gentry: This is called Schenk's Corners. It's historic for, I think a lot of train lines came through here. Two banks on the corners. I'm told, my employee who's been with me since the beginning's great-grandfather owned one of the banks here, and he got his money because he was the one who won the contract to basically fill in the land for, in Madison, it was a big swamp mostly. So, it's a, it's a historical corner.

02:48 McCulla: Wow, sounds like it. And, again, back to growing up, what do you remember eating and drinking as a kid here?

Gentry: My dad was the primary cook, and he was a good cook. He was drafted in Vietnam, but he actually served in Korea, so, we would actually eat a lot of Korean and Asian food a lot. I, my parents were hippies too, so I didn't have white bread until I was probably six. I had-, all the other kids got cake and I got watermelon. But, I would say it was a, you know, healthy and, and good food upbringing. I've learned to love to cook myself. You know, my dad always had two Point-, Steven's Point Lagers at dinner every night. My mom barely drank until she retired. [Laughs] So, you know, there wasn't a lot of, a lot of beer around the house. I think my taste for beer came in high school. [Chuckles] I worked at a, I probably shouldn't mention this, but I worked at a little grocery store and was, I had access to their craft beer. So, you know, when everybody, when the bosses were gone, the kids could buy their six-pack of beer and sneak it out. I won't mention which grocery store that is. But, back then it was, you know, we have, we had the, you know, one of the country's first and largest food co-ops, in the Williams-, Willy Street Co-op they call it. And, so they were doing a lot of progressive things with food. And then on the beer selections, even back, you know, when I was, what was that, twenty years ago now, when I was eighteen or so, we were starting to see some craft here. I remember Pete's Wicked Ale, which was a great hat to wear as a high schooler. Like, "Hey, I'm cool, I like beer and it's got my name on it." Redhook, you know? Those were sort of the craft brands that were sneaking in.

McCulla: And, so that would've been around the year 2000? Or a little before?

Gentry: 1998 or so?

McCulla: Yeah.

Gentry: Yeah.

04:42 McCulla: Do you recall some of these early craft brands that you tried, the tastes, or the flavors? Did any of them make a particular impression?

Gentry: Yeah. I, I think, I think my gateway beer was probably Leinie's Berry Weiss. Which was a real sweet, I mean, really it's like a, it's like a wine cooler in beer form. But, that's, you know, when you're drinking soda pop, and you're switching over to beer, it, you look for those sort of mild flavors. But, I think I gravitated pretty quickly towards the hoppier beers. Sierra Nevada Pale Ale is probably, even to this day, one of my favorites. Their-, the Bigfoot Barleywine from Sierra Nevada is, I would say, my favorite beer. So, and those are all beers that we'd, start trickling in even '98, 2000. And, so, I don't know. I, I started pretty, pretty tame. You know? Schmidt's Ice and Leinie's Berry Weiss, and whatever was cheap in college, of course. But, then, we would transition to buying a six-pack of something a little, little better. Dogfish Head, Bell's, Sierra Nevada were what I cut my teeth on, I think.

05:47 McCulla: And, so you went to Madison here for school?

Gentry: Yeah.

McCulla: And what did you study there?

Gentry: I studied marketing, actually. Almost switched over to nursing. But, stuck with it. So, it actually gave me a good background. I, I lament sometimes the fact that I never was actually that good of a brewer. I, I started hiring people to, to do that work, 'cause I don't have the chemistry or biology background. But, I did, did have a background-, I knew some basic accounting. I knew, selling to small groups, big groups, you know. Some of the concepts there which sort of helped me get things going. I know how to write a business plan. I had a suit, so I could go to a bank for a loan, you know? So, that was, I, you know, I always say, like, marketing didn't, you, you can't be a scientist with a marketing degree, but you can be a, in marketing with a science degree. However, I do think I learned some pretty valuable lessons about business anyway. And then, then craft beer is quite the business. There's a lot that goes into it.

06:48 McCulla: Sure, sure. And so, at what point did you become interested in brewing?

Gentry: So, I was at soccer practice, rec league soccer practice. I was out of college at the time. But, one of the guys in, on my team was, had to go to the homebrew shop in town here because one of his classes had a fermentation component to it. So, he had to go get a homebrew kit, 'cause that was like their final project was to make a beer, which is pretty cool. That was maybe 2002. And, maybe 2003. So, I went with him because I figured, Father's Day's coming up. Maybe I'll get a kit, too, and I'll do, I'll, something to do with my dad. So, I guess I first started brewing with a kit that was a little plastic ale pale, which, I don't even, I, I, I doubt you can even buy those anymore, 'cause homebrewing's gotten

so sophisticated. But, I was brewing in a, in a food-grade plastic bucket with my dad at their house. Again, five, five or so blocks away from where we are now. And he, he wanted to keep kinda making the same porter that he really liked. And I wanted to expand out into some other beers. So, I probably had more free time on my hands, so, I ended up taking the kit to, to my home and expanding it from, from there.

07:58 McCulla: And, so, and what were some of the recipes you experimented with?

Gentry: We started with a lot of kind of dark beers. Porters, browns, all ales for the most part. Started getting some bock beers later. But, I really just wanted to run the gamut of different styles. I would host these little homebrew tasting parties in which I would have, like, my style compared to a classic style. Like, I'd have an APA [American pale ale] next to Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. So, I, I would really run the gamut. I probably brewed, I don't know, half of the styles out there as I was doing that. And then, I'm obviously guessing this might be the next question, but, I decided I didn't really, I was pretty, I was winning some contests, and I, I enjoyed brewing. And I didn't enjoy my regular job. So.

McCulla: Which was what?

Gentry: I was in sales for the *Wisconsin State Journal*. And then, actually, I was probably the last salesman-, sales manager, for *The Onion* newspaper when it still printed. So, it's kind of an interesting thing. The *State Journal* purchased the franchise rights, and they assigned me to manage that, 'cause I was, I worked with a lot of bars and restaurants. That was sort of my, my beat, as a salesman. But, it was a tough job, you know. Hard, print is, is a tough sell these days with the internet. So, I saw an opportunity. I was doing well at homebrewing. I knew I could do okay at that. I had, I was in a lot of bars and restaurants. Both socially and for work. I had, I saw what people I thought were doing wrong. And I saw what I thought people were doing right. Had some mentors that could help me through the process of opening what really amounted to a bar when I got started. I mean, the idea was, this was gonna be a, a local neighborhood tavern type space with a, with a hook to it. And that's where the nanobrewing kinda came in.

09:42 McCulla: And so, this idea to, to found a, a local tavern. Wisconsin has a, a great tradition of neighborhood taverns and bars. And, could you speak to that a bit? It seems unique for the state.

Gentry: Yeah. It's sort of where community comes together. So, that was the idea here. We wanted, I mean it, it's not really a place to go get drunk and get wild. It's like a coffee shop with beer, in essence. That's how I've always sort of framed it. And, the decor in here even, I decided to take a rur-, like, the rural, lo-, rural Wisconsin tavern feel and give it a city twist, kind of. So, you can see there's, there's deer mounts on the wall, you know? We've got the dollar bills up on the ceiling, which I borrowed that from a local tavern in Monroe. So, that was the

whole idea, was a place where people could gather and try something new. And, you know, I think even six years ago in Wisconsin, the nanobrewery concept was unique, so it really brought out a lot of people who might not even go to a bar, because they didn't, I don't know, they didn't feel comfortable or whatever. But, here they could try something new, talk to their friends. And, and, you know, six years later we have a hundred-person Mug Club, and we have no openings, ever. So, it's like, somebody has to move away in order for a spot to open up. So, we have a hundred regulars which it, you know, makes my heart warm a little bit. All these people you get to know over, over the years. So, it's a, it's, it's a pretty cool and I think unique thing to Wisconsin, this whole idea of a local friendly gathering tavern.

11:14 McCulla: And how does the Mug Club work?

Gentry: So, you pay, the Mug Club works, so, you pay a yearly fee, and then we get a new mug designed every year. You can keep your old mug or you can leave your, you can, you can basically use whatever year mug you want. And then you get discounts on certain days. And you get to fill up in a bigger, in a bigger glass. And it's just sort of a symbol of prestige, I feel like. And we even sell our barstools here for forty-five hundred dollars. But that gets you a lifetime membership to the Mug Club.

McCulla: Okay. I see, is that a name on the back of a stool? Or no?

Gentry: Yep. That's one. Yep.

11:47 McCulla: Alright. Great. And so, then back to this idea of a nanobrewery. How would you, how would one define a nanobrewery?

Gentry: So, a nanobrewery, I think the technical definition is anything under three barrels of capacity. So, that'd be six traditional kegs that you're used to seeing at frat parties or whatever. And a barrel is thirty-one gallons of beer. So, it's pretty much the smallest commercially viable volume of beer that you can make. Home, the typical homebrew volume is gonna be about five gallons. Although, more and more, as the hobbyists get more serious about this, often you see half-barrel homebrew setups, or even barrel, one-barrel homebrew setups. And our brewery is actually fairly rudimentary, 'cause we bought it six years ago. Things have transitioned so much. But we bought basically large homebrew equipment, and we made our own control panel and things like that. So, you know, the nano concept is just one that is certainly small, but it allows you to be experimental and brew a lot of different things without worrying about losing, you know, three thousand gallons of beer.

12:50 McCulla: Right. And, you mentioned as you were thinking of setting up a business that you had seen kind of the good and the bad out there. What are some, some examples of, of each of those?

Gentry: Well, for, for me personally, I, it's bar management. You can see a lot of people who, I don't know, it's easy to get down the wrong path with alcohol and maybe even gambling, and there's a lot of stereotypes around that. So, you see things that you don't wanna do. You don't wanna be here every single night. To some degree, that might help business for a while until you become that sad guy who's sitting at your bar. But, I also saw some good managers who did exciting things, fun things, and creative ways to bring people in. Like, you know, a good friend of mine owns a bar that focuses on soccer. So, that's was his hook to get a lot of people in. And now he, we actually opened a bar together, but I had to sell that in order to keep, maintain my brewing permits. So, you know, I saw things I didn't wanna do in terms of bad habits or bad management, or just bad customer service, even. But then I saw people that were doing it right, I thought. They would find ways to bring people together. And it wasn't always necessarily exactly about the alcohol part. I mean, sure, that's fun and loosens us all up. But, there were other, other things that you could do to make a successful gathering place.

14:10 McCulla: So, and you mentioned a bit earlier as you were walking me around the, that the construction of the brewery was kind of a, a community effort or a joint effort. Could you speak to that a bit?

Gentry: Yeah. We had to start pretty small. Back, nowadays banks will give money to breweries it seems like left and right, but back then it was very challenging. It was my first loan, of course. But it was hard to get money. I went to several banks and, you know, I was, it's cliché, it sounds like, I was literally laughed out of one of them. So, the, my loan was in the high five figures. It was a small amount of money to build out an entire space. So, we had to do it on a budget. A friend of mine who's an architect did the plans for free. Another friend, who was kind of a general contractor, worked just hourly. And then my dad and myself did all the other, all the rest of the work. And I remember a buddy of mine came down from Minneapolis to help me gut the building. And we had to get it done in like a day. So, we didn't even turn the power off. We just ripped everything out. [Chuckles] So, got a few shocks there, but we, none, no worse for the wear. So, yeah, I, I think the thing that I'm most proud of, as I mentioned earlier, my dad is a woodworker and he made the bar. So, you can see there's this little, under your phone there, there's a little, that's kind of his signature thing, an inlay. And the idea is that's a, supposed to look like a barrel from the top. And you can see under the bar, we have a barrel supporting the bar. So, you know, this was a cool project for him. He, you know, hand-made all this stuff. He, he jigged out the bar rail with, so he could cut the, cut the curve with a table saw, and then sand it down. I mean, me and my dad probably went to, you know, made measurements at ten different bars to see how high things had to be, and everything like that. And people are looking at us like, "what are they doing with a tape measure in here?" But, you know, we found a real nice old building with some character. And that helped mold everything. And, you know, the space is

simple but warm and inviting. And, I don't know. It, was sort of serendipitous. I actually almost went in two other spots, but the landlord had this idea for me. And, it worked out.

16:16 McCulla: So, at the time you opened, were there other craft brewers active in Madison? Or, it sounds like your business plan was less familiar to some banks who might?

Gentry: Yeah. Yeah. There were larger breweries. I would say most notably would be, like, Capital Brewing Company in Middleton. And, I guess Ale Asylum was expanding into a new facility. And those are both pretty big, I think, Capital's, in its heyday was like thirty-thousand barrels. And I think Ale Asylum's pushing twenty. So, you know, big breweries. But there weren't-, and there was Great Dane Brewpub, I think is probabl-, is like, one of the more successful brewpub groups in the country. But that would be most of it. I'm probably missing some, so, forgive me. But, you know, my concept of the small thing, they treated this as like it was a bar, and nobody lends money to bars. And, so, it, it was challenging for them to see what this could become. And, I was lucky enough, I got, I was on the front of the wave, at least in Wisconsin in the Midwest. I know this was happening, certainly in, like, Portland, Seattle. But, I found myself in a place where people really wanted this product. And I was successful enough that I could spin it up into a full-scale brewery. We obviously don't brew here, 'cause we still brew on the one-barrel setup. But, we were able to kind of spin the brand up quite a bit to share the product with, you know, the masses, I guess.

17:42 McCulla: Right. Okay. And so, when you opened, what were, what was the first batch you brewed?

Gentry: Boy. I do-, I gotta tell you, I don't remember. This was a period in time in my life where my mother pulled me aside and said, "Son, I have to share something with you." And I was like, "Oh, what could this be?" And she told me, "Sometimes you stink at work." Because I wouldn't have the time to take showers. I mean, I was so busy trying to get this thing going, and we were bootstrapping everything. And, I mean, I weighed probably thirty pounds less than I do right now. So, I don't remember the first beer. I remember, I literally, and this is another I think business cliché, but true in my case. I had seven hundred dollars in my bank account the day the doors opened. I was starting to worry, 'cause I had a, you know, nine-hundred-and-fifty-dollar home payment. If you can believe that, these days. But, there would, and then there was a line out the door. So, I was just, that, that's what I remember, is being, feeling relieved. [Chuckles] And, then running out of beer like six days later. So, we didn't have enough beer to, to sell people, because it was so, it was so popular.

18:45 McCulla: And who were these customers in line?

Gentry: They were just local folks. You know, I guess we're kind of crafty and foody on the east side here. But, people probably from all over Madison. A woman did send me, one of my former co-workers' wife sent me a picture from opening day. And it's funny to see how, again, skinny I was and how barren the walls were, but the place was just packed. The air conditioner couldn't keep up. It was like a hundred and four degrees, which is sort of rare for Madison. And, the big air moving coil or whatever, the duct work, was dripping because it was so hot in here. And people kept asking me if I could turn the A/C up. And I said, "Well, you can go, you can leave, but I don't want you to leave, you know?" [Laughs]

McCulla: Right. Right.

Gentry: So, that, that's mostly what I remember. I, I guess I couldn't name the beers. I guess, I guess I should be able to name the beers, now that I'm thinking a little harder about it, 'cause two of 'em we still now sell in six-packs, they're our most popular beers, so.

McCulla: What are those?

Gentry: Our Penguin Pale Ale. Which is a riff on Sierra Nevada Pale Ale, so it's got a little more malt and it's a little darker in color. More ambery. And then our Commuter Kolsch, which is our light option. And the reason we started with a Kolsch style, it's a German style ale, as a homebrewer I wasn't really easily able to lager beers. Luckily, that Kolsch style has really expanded. People enjoy it. It's a lightish beer, but it's got more malt and a more bread character, so, people like it, like it quite a bit. And that one's become our top-seller as of, as of late out there in the market. So, so I guess I do know what two of those beers were, anyways. I think, we only started with, I think we had six, six lines of our beer, and six lines of other Wisconsin beers when we started. And, that was just by necessity. We couldn't, definitely couldn't keep up. And now, finally, I think, it took us three years to get enough beer in the pipeline and to get our system all sorted out to have twelve different beers on tap. But, now we're good.

20:34 McCulla: And so, how did your brewing evolve? What kind of styles did you add?

Gentry: We started focusing a lot more on our IPAs. I brewed probably for only the first six months. And then I hired a, actually a local teacher was walking by, kind of, as school was letting out for summer. He said, "Maybe I might wanna bartend here." And then started brewing. He was a homebrewer, too. So, he was, he was a brewer for about three years. Transitioned, actually, doing some other, I think, stay-at-home fathering, and I think they're looking at doing some farm work and things like that. And then I hired Matt, my current brewmaster, and he was, again, a homebrewer with a chemistry, biology background. And I snatched him away. He was gonna go into like sea biology or something like that.

Something not too sexy. But, and he really has expanded our, our water chemistry. He's really tweaked that. Brought a lot more hop flavors. We started doing sour stuff here, too. So, we've, we've evolved, or sort of followed the main patterns I think, of, generally, the industry as a whole. Hoppys and sours and, you know, of course everybody's doing these juicy New England IPAs, we fiddle with that here. One cool thing about our little scale, though, is we can test market everything here. We brew two kegs, and usually it takes, I don't know, sometimes it could take three days to fourteen days to go through that. And if it takes three days, we'll consider scaling it up. And if it takes fourteen, we'll probably maybe not brew it again.

21:58 McCulla: Right. And so that was one question. With your small scale, do you feel like you incorporate consumer feedback more than bigger breweries are able to? Or does recipe formulation come from, from you as well?

Gentry: Yeah. I would say we're able to-, we're more nimble than the big guys. And I have ideas, or I read about things, like pastry stouts, or like that. And then I, at this point in time I hand it down to Matt to, to work through formulation and all, you know, I'll ask questions and I'll be involved. But, we just, we brew enough different styles here, and we try to keep a menu where there's something for everybody. We'll have a Belgian, we'll have a German style, we'll have two IPAs, we'll have a couple dark beers. So, you know, I would say we get some feedback. We started doing sours because a guy named Greg Hull wanted us to do a lambic, and we named the beer after him after we released it, so. He was a Mug Club member for quite a while, too. Moved to Indianapolis or something like that. So, we don't see a lot of him. But he's still a Mug Club member, which is cool. So, you know, I guess it's direct and indirect feedback. We'll hear something from a customer and we'll fiddle with it. But, I think the most feedback you get is, is this good and do we wanna continue down this direction? What do they like about this beer? How could we change it?

McCulla: Right.

Gentry: So, after the beer's made, I think that the consumer feedback comes in.

23:20 McCulla: And since you've been open, how have, how have consumer tastes seemed to change related to beer? What, what are you seeing now? What do you see coming?

Gentry: I think there was this dramatic shift away from these big imperial beers, to, to quote, unquote, session beers. And even imperial IPAs sometimes we have a hard time getting rid of. So, that's been a big trend. Hops are still cra-, people are going crazy over all the new hops. I mean, that, I think everybody knows that. I think it is interesting to see how sweet these beers are getting. And I think that trend is actually probably here to stay. I think when I, when, you know, when, like, what I call 'dad craft,' like, old guys drinking ambers, or, or porters in their

basement or whatever, or like Huber Bock or something like that. It's sort of how this all got started. And then we were going towards sort of tame hops. But it's still, still what you would think of as like, historically, beer. It's still, you know, dry, refreshing, and then maybe with some hoppy bitterness. But, now what, you're getting a lot of these new flavors like, the, the New England and stuff like that. And I'm gonna grab these guys real quick.

[Pause in recording]

Theresa McCulla: Alright. Well, this is, this is part two, with.

Peter Gentry: Part two.

McCulla: With Peter Gentry. Yes.

Gentry: Okay.

McCulla: Of One Barrel. So, so you were talking about a kind of trajectory of, of, of craft.

Gentry: Yeah.

McCulla: You started dad craft, and then.

Gentry: Yeah.

00:14 McCulla: Saw a kind of phase of tame hops. And then what would you describe our current phase that we're in?

Gentry: I don't have a, a unique descriptor yet. But, I think we're in the era of sort of sweet, over-the-top, sweet-flavored beers. You know, we just, even this gentleman who just interrupted our interview [Chuckles] was talking about the, using new yeast strains to get the sweetness out of it. I think that's, goes along with kinda the American taste. I mean, you know, I hate to say it, but to some degree we're, we are, McDonald's found a great way to sell people salty stuff. And then Coca-Cola found a great way to sell people sugar. And, and, beer is not immune to that. So, I think, I think the sweet trends are here to stay. You know, you're not seeing a lot of bitterness in the hops. And then you're seeing an explosion in fermented malt beverages. You know, like, alcoholic waters and things of that nature. You know, you got, what, Twisted Teas, and things like that. So, the consumer preference is, is going that way from like a volume standpoint. You know, we have delved into a cider, although we are doing a dry version. So, you know, we're pushing as hard as we can up against it, I guess, to some degree. But, I think there's still a lot of room, I think maybe the volume is in a lot of the sweeter things. But, to maintain your relevance as a smaller craft producer, you still stay true to a lot of those different styles. So, we'll fiddle with things. But, I

mean, we released a, our, our first full-scale IPA release was an homage to the California IPA. So, you know, and it's been wildly successful. So, people still do want the traditional flavors that they had. And I wish I knew what was next, because, I wouldn't tell you anyway. But [Chuckles] if I did, I would, you know, I would've made it by now. So, you know, it's a, it's a roundabout way of, of saying that things as, as much as things change, they also stay the same.

02:09 McCulla: The customers who drink your cider, are they also your beer drinkers? Or are they?

Gentry: They seem to be, you know, I had to correct one of my sales reps in a meeting, 'cause he was like, "All the lady golfers 'll love it!" And I'm like, oh man. What year is this? And also, everybody loves it. I mean, we, I've got a text from, you know, male bar owners all over town who are like, "Oh, this stuff's great." You know? "We're selling, flying through it." And they like it. And people that drink it, it's all over the golf courses in town here. So, if you can find something that appeals to many people, I, this, the cider that we happen to stumble upon might be that. It's, you know, the right blend of beeriness with sort of wineyness that, I don't know, could, could cross over to any, any sort of flavor profile.

02:57 McCulla: Related to this idea of a flavor profile in a, in place, Wisconsin has a history of course of being such a, a strong lager producing state.

Gentry: Yeah.

McCulla: Do you think customers here are different than customers in other states or regions?

Gentry: I don't think so, really. I think we have a strong history just because it's where beer orig-, originated, you know. Germans came here and we had Miller and, you know, Budweiser in St. Louis, still basically Midwestern. But, you know, the big beers, the, the major brands are still light lagers. So, that is probably here to stay. You know, my best-selling beer is ostensibly a light beer. So, a lot of people, you know, you get your session IPAs, Founder's All Day IPA would be, you know, it's pretty light in body. It has some hop character to it. So, I don't know if I'm answering your question exactly, but. [Chuckles]

03:50 McCulla: I guess part of the question is, you know, through my research, I travel around and I, I speak with people from different regions. And I do, I do like to ask if, if brewers think region matters to American brewing anymore? Does it?

Gentry: I, well, you certainly see trends coming out of certain regions. So, I think so. But, it takes a lot less time now. I mean, the New England IPA realistically probably started four years ago. But, it didn't take that long for everybody to be making them. And then changing the name to "juicy" and everything like that.

And, so, I think there are different styles come out of different places. You know, the California IPA happened. The East Coast New England IPA happened. You know, you've got a lot of unique things coming out of Northwest. You know, well, so, so, so maybe the answer is in the Midwest, we're still gonna be focused on those light beers. It does not frankly seem like a lot of new things are coming out of the Midwest. But, we can follow trends and make them better, I guess. Hopefully.

04:53 McCulla: I have a question again about the, the nano scale at which you started. Certainly it seems there's a, a certain amount of volume that is necessary perhaps to be profitable. How did you, how did, how did, how have you succeeded at a nano scale and then a larger scale?

Gentry: So, the beauty of the nano scale is you are selling at retail markups. So, it costs me just as much to make a keg of beer here as it would be for me to buy it from a distributor. So, I feel like because I'm doing it myself and we have the variety, that will bring more customers in. And then they buy the beer at retail prices. When I expanded into wholesale, the margins get a lot thinner. You know what I mean. I make five dollars a case now. Whereas across the bar I make basically five dollars a beer. So, it, it becomes a volume play at the wholesale level. But, you know, I still like to think that my main goal is to kinda get something I'm proud of out into people's hands. So, I make less money per unit or whatever, but people get to enjoy the brand and, you know, I even put my last name on a can, so. [Laughs] That was fun and exciting.

06:07 McCulla: And related to packaged beer, you can and bottle your products.

Gentry: Yeah.

McCulla: What is more useful for you if there, if one of them is more useful?

Gentry: It's a, it's, we're at like an interesting time right now where craft seems to all be switching to cans. And there're a lot of good reasons for that. They're lighter. They're cheaper. They're more environmentally friendly. But, I still feel as though for, for, for our brands, we maintain six-packs of bottles to speak to those people who are moving from Miller to, you know, our behemoth craft beer in Wisconsin, Spotted Cow, to maybe our Penguin Pale Ale or something like that. So, we want them to be able to go find something they're comfortable with as craft. And, as all the other craft breweries are rushing to going to cans, there's a, a wide-open space for us to put more bottles in. But we do put our beer in, some beers, our most popular beers, into twelve-pack cans, just so people can have that option, you know. Summer's short here, so you gotta get all your drinking in, so you might as well, you need beer on the golf course, beer on the boat, beer on-, at the park, you know? [Chuckles] Beer after the soccer game. So, we give them the op-, that option with, with the cans as well.

07:15 McCulla: Do you feel like beer is a strongly seasonal drink in Wisconsin? Or?

Gentry: Well, the numbers for me bear out. It's, it's strongly seasonal. You know, in the summertime we have a lot of outdoor festivals and people are just more active. And I am three times busier. Not at tap, the taproom's pretty steady. And actually we're probably a little busier in the fall. But, from a wholesale point of view, yeah, June, July, August is, are like triple of February, January, February, March.

07:45 McCulla: So, and, you mentioned the Mug Club. How else have you seen the community continue to use your taproom as a, a gathering space?

Gentry: We do a lot of charity events. I mentioned the dollar bills on the ceiling.

McCulla: How are they a?

Gentry: Neat. It's. [Laughs]

McCulla: How are they appended to the ceiling?

Gentry: It'll cost you a dollar to find out.

McCulla: Okay. Alright.

Gentry: But, no it's, you, it's just a bar trick where you, you put a thumbtack in a dollar bill and you have a stack of quarters that weights it and you fold it a certain way, and when you throw the dollar up there the quarters will bang the tack into the ceiling and then the, the weight will unfold the bill and the quarters fall back down. So, so every year we donate all that money to different charities. So, you know, we've done a local pet rescue where I got my dog from. Right now we're doing the library system, South-, Southern Wisconsin Library System. They're building a new library down the road. So, we're donating to that. And actually, side note, I got, I took out all my business plan books from that very same branch. And then obviously they're making a new one now. But, *Business Plans for Dummies* is an actual thing, and helped me get a loan I guess. Or maybe it didn't help me get a loan. But, so, so you know, we have, we have all that going on. We definitely donate quite a bit to the neighborhood. You know, I couldn't put a number on it, but some breweries tout themselves as giving like eight percent to charity, this that and the other. I would guess we give like ten percent to charity, just because we really don't turn very many people down for just gift cards to here and there. Or, you've got a big, the, the Marquette Neighborhood Association, which is basically this area, they do some big music festivals. And we'll give them twenty-five-hundred dollar-, twenty-five-hundred dollars in gift cards to give away at their big festivals. Does it-, it does cost money to actually get your beer poured at some of these festivals, so, so that's, we consider that to be a donation as well. You know, we've had some political part-, like, different people wanna

announce their launch into politics, we'll host them here. What's amazing, as small as we are, about fourteen-hundred square feet, and how many, you know, people keep coming back and find ways to track us down just because I think, you know, other than charitable giving, we're just a friendly space where people feel, I don't know, charitable. [Chuckles]

09:56 McCulla: Right. Right. I mean, it's interesting, is there any, is there any similar kind of space in the neighborhood? Or where, you know, is it, is this truly a unique thing that you've created?

Gentry: Well, to some degree, I mean, there are other popular places for different reasons. I mean, even right across the street, The Alchemy's a great little neighborhood bar/restaurant that a lot of people go to. I think, ours just speaks to a certain kinda crowd. And, luckily, that includes everybody at some point in time. So, you know, there are, I think the William-, Williamson Street Co-op is probably the great space for community. We have a large Atwood Community Center that a, a local jeweler donates a lot of money. And that has all sorts of programs and things like that for different people to come into. But from, from like an entertainment segment, I think ours is pretty unique in, in at least le-, the smiles I see on people's faces and the comfortability and the fact that we really have no trouble here speaks to the positive outlook here.

11:02 McCulla: Alright, I have a, a few kind of bigger picture questions as we start to wrap up. This term craft beer is much debated. And I wonder if you find it to be a useful term?

Gentry: I think yes. The line is blurred more and more now. Obviously, with all these acquisitions. But, I mean, I guess I, I tend to think that flavorful beer is craft beer. So, even if you're Goose Island and you've been acquired by Budweiser, I still, I personally still see their beers as craft. So, so, you know, I think it's a really a catch-all term. It probably doesn't mean what it used to mean. But, now if you say craft beer, you're u-, you understand it to be something that's either flavorful or built or brewed on a small scale. So, you know, I still use the term. But we can, you know, I segment it up even to like, you know, microbrewery and regional brewery and every other thing.

11:54 McCulla: Right. Right. And, what do you see coming for the future of craft, then? Again, it's a, a competitive market.

Gentry: Yeah.

McCulla: Many new entrants into the field.

Gentry: Yeah. It's an interesting. I mean it's, since I started, I think like three thousand breweries have opened, which is wild 'cause there weren't even three thousand breweries when I opened. I mean, I think there were maybe two

thousand. It's, it's an interesting time with all these breweries coming in, I think you'll probably see a return to the, what they normally, or they originally were back when German immigrants started coming to America, or, they're gonna become like we are, gathering spaces. You're gonna have a lot more brewpubs that don't actually look to distribute because the distributors can't take anymore brands on. I mean, I think, I think not even ten years ago, the numbers have reversed, the number of distributors, the number of breweries. So, distributors have really merged and, and come together. I think there are like six hundred in the country now. And there were like six thousand before. And there were, it was the other way around. So, you're gonna see, distributors won't take on brands to become regional brands. But, you'll still get a lot of innovation and things like that from local taprooms who might self-distribute a little bit. And I think that's probably pretty healthy for them, you know. It's hard to, what I found, it's very hard to make a leap from really small nanobrewery to a regional player, because the economies of scale needed are so big. You know, all of a sudden your growth curve in a bar is pretty linear, you know. If I, I need one more keg to serve a hundred more people, but now I need to put fifty thousand dollars in every time I want to make a jump to any new level, you know. Like, the minimum amount of kegs I'd ever buy is like two hundred at a time, so that's twenty grand that you just gotta have laying around and it's hard to run a business keeping that kind of cash around. So, you know, I think there's still room for growth. I think there's some big news these days about bigger breweries going out, but that's I think, I don't think you'll see a lot of small ones failing. They'll just find their way. And I don't even know, I don't think necessarily the reason that some of these bigger breweries are-, have gone under is because the industry itself is suffering. I think they kinda made some, well, bad plays, for lack of a better term. They over-extended themselves. Tried to make a money grab while craft beer is hot, but there's something like organic and small-scale, 'cause people still seem to want from their beer. Sure, they're gonna drink Miller or Bud, you know, when they're trying to drink twenty of them or whatever. But, they have a relationship with craft beer that needs to stay, needs to feel small and close to what they like. And they need a personal connection to it. So, some of these big guys thought they'd open a, you know, seven-hundred seat taproom. Well, you can't feel at home with seven hundred other people. So, that's sort of what I think's gonna happen.

14:48 McCulla: What seems inter-, it's interesting, it seems like a combination between a kind of, the bottleneck created by fewer distributors and then a consumer demand for local might prompt continued growth at the hyper-local scale.

Gentry: Yeah.

McCulla: But.

Gentry: I think, yeah, I think that's exactly right. Then you, and honestly you can make as much money running one taproom like I have as you can running a, you know, five-thousand-barrel brewery. 'Cause it's just a, I mean, I guess, if you go

back to my math where I make five bucks a case or five bucks a beer, that's some, sort of sums up.

15:20

McCulla: Right. Right. So, what is your ideal, and you might not know yet, but ideal size or, growth strategy for One Barrel?

Gentry: We're, I'm still trying to grow. One challenge you have is if you're not growing, you're sort of dying in this industry. There's, momentum's a huge thing. Especially when you have a distributor trying to sell you, 'cause you not only have a distributor, but you have individuals within that distributorship who might feel one way or another about selling your product. So, my goal right now is, we are opening a second taproom to help increase revenue. And we're doing it in a pretty touristy area. Door County in Wisconsin. So, that it'll act as a billboard as well. There are some seasonal challenges of course, but hopefully vacationers will come up and maybe they haven't seen, but they live in, I don't know, Eau Claire or something like that, and they haven't seen the beer as readily available in Eau Claire. They'll go back to their hometown and they'll ask for it and, and we'll sell more of it elsewhere. So, you know, that I think's gonna be a big thing. It's gonna drive a lot of, certainly revenue for us, but should drive some growth. And then we're examining after-, we're hoping to get to about ten thousand barrels. We're gonna probably hit fifty-five-hundred barrels this year, up from like eight hundred three years ago, which is pretty crazy. So, if we can kind of continue on this path, and when I started, this is a little off, off-topic, but when I started I thought I was gonna go like fifteen hundred to three thousand, forty-five hundred, eight thousand, ten thousand. And then sell it to Budweiser and, you know, we'd all have a party. But, as things have tightened up, even in the last couple years, my growth has, still healthy, but has slowed, so I'm trying to find other ways besides just opening up new markets to increase my growth. One of them is this big taproom, which I think will really help out in that area in terms of wholesale, but also, you know, retail. And if we can get up to that sort of eight-thousand-barrel level, we're going to open a bigger production facility here. And probably then put a bigger bar next to it. I mean, I just got done saying I don't want a huge taproom 'cause I want to feel cozy and everything like that. But, you know, necessity might dictate that. And then, you know, this is between, this is still a concept, but then One Barrel, our original location will become Fish in a Barrel Sushi Restaurant. That's just. [Chuckles] That's just a concept, but. [Laughs]

McCulla: Nice.

Gentry: My wife's told me that's a terrible idea. [Laughs]

McCulla: No, that's. No. Great.

Gentry: So, that, you know, that sort of sums it up. We're, we're hoping to get to that ten-thousand-barrel range. I really don't think at this point in time many breweries are gonna, new breweries are gonna be able to get there, unless they get

huge infusions of cash from outside investors. You know, private equity firms. But, then that makes them ring hollow and, and you've seen it before where these breweries get a bunch of cash and then they sort of winnow away. So, you know, my goal really is to make this a family business eventually and keep running it at a healthy level and, and just sort of keep sharing the, the, the feeling that comes with the flavors that we offer people.

18:20

McCulla: Alright. Okay, one, one final question. It's a big one, but a simple one. What, what do you value most about what you do?

Gentry: I like the sense of community that I get in being involved in the community. One challenge for me is to be sort of the public face sometimes. People, you know, everybody knows who I am now, which isn't great, but along with that I get to sort of share something that I enjoy doing. And it, it sort of forms a bond between me and members of the community. So, it, you know, that is, sweet and simple answer is just these bonds we get by sharing things we make.

McCulla: Great. Alright. Well, thank you very much for your time.

Gentry: Thank you.