

Names of Interviewees: Cole Krueger, Mark Steinhardt, Bob Zirngible
Date of Interview: June 12, 2018
Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
Length of Interview: 56:46 minutes

Theresa McCulla: It's June 12, 2018. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I am interviewing Bob Zirngible, sales director of AJS Tap Handles, Cole Krueger, art director of AJS Tap Handles, and Mark Steinhardt, general manager of AJS Tap Handles. We are meeting at the production facility and world headquarters in Random Lake, Wisconsin. And this interview is part of the American Brewing History Initiative, which is a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in America. So, I'm going to ask each of you to introduce yourselves briefly in turn, and Bob, we'll start with you. When and where were you born?

00:37 Bob Zirngible: Okay. Bob Zirngible. Was born in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

McCulla: And, who were your parents?

Zirngible: Agatha and Larry, Agatha Bigaman and Larry Zirngible.

McCulla: And what did they do?

Zirngible: My dad was a carpenter and my mom was a teacher.

McCulla: Okay. And did you grow up in Eau Claire?

Zirngible: I did, yes. We have, I had nine brothers and sisters. We had a very large family. But, yeah, pretty much all of my family, except for one, still in the state.

McCulla: And, what do you remember about growing up in the neighborhood where you did?

Zirngible: It was back in the, the sixties and early seventies. And, I, I guess I just remember the freedom of being a kid much more than today. To be able to get on your bike and ride anywhere. No phones. No nothing. We'd go swimming on our own. I don't know how our parents ever, you know, trusted, you know, your, your behaviors and what was gonna happen to you. But, I think it was a safer, more, gentler time, I guess, to grow up. So, I consider myself pretty fortunate. And, we lived in a part of Eau Claire that was, it almost felt rural. It was right in the middle of the city, and we had a huge lake behind us and woods in front of the house, and we had a playground, we ski jumped, we tobogganed, we ice skated, played softball in the summer. It was, it was a very, very nice childhood. Yeah.

01:57 McCulla: And, do you recall, was, was beer a part of the community where you grew up?

Zirngible: It is funny you mention that, because yeah, Walters Brewery was in Eau Claire, and it was probably just a stone's throw from our house. About a half a mile. We lived up on a hill and they were down below the hill. And I can still remember walking past there, above the hill, and you could hear the bottles clinking as they were filling them, or going around, on the inside. One of my brothers actually worked down there, too. So, yeah it was a very, very cool place.

McCulla: Did, and did they, was the beer, did it stay local in the community? Was it distributed around the area?

Zirngible: That beer was distributed pretty much I think state-wide. I don't know how much farther than that. But, at that time, Leinenkugel's was still just a small brewery as well. And, there was kind of a rivalry between Eau Claire and, and Chippewa Falls, which is where Leinie's is. So, Eau Claire people drank Walter's. Chippewa people drank Leinenkugel's. Yeah. It was kinda funny.

02:54 McCulla: And, where did you go to school and what did you study?

Zirngible: I started out at grade school in Eau Claire. Went to high school there. And went to University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. My major was broadcast journalism. And pretty much worked in radio to start with right out of college.

McCulla: What attracted you to radio?

Zirngible: As a kid, I had-, I was surrounded by a lot of brothers and sisters. And all they did was listen to music. And so, I listened to all of that when I was a kid. I remember listening to a transistor radio at night, would put me to sleep, and I'd listen to all the DJs at night, and was like, "I wanna do that." And, so I was lucky enough, lucky enough and fortunate enough to be able to do it.

03:37 McCulla: Great. Alright, Cole. I'll shift to you.

Cole Krueger: Sure.

McCulla: When and where were you born?

Krueger: I was born in 1985 in Appleton, Wisconsin. I grew up in Sherwood, which is a small village on the northeast tip of Lake Winnebago.

McCulla: And, who were your parents? What were their names? What did they do?

Krueger: My dad's name is Mike Krueger. He started off drywalling and had his own drywall business. And then he transitioned to do, having his own custom homes business. So, he developed land and built houses. My mom's name is

Christine Krueger. And she taught choir at the high school I went to for about thirty-eight years, until she retired.

McCulla: And what do you remember growing up in the neighborhood where you did?

Krueger: It was small. When my parents moved there, I was maybe four years old. And I think there was probably five hundred people in the village when we moved there. Now it's about maybe five thousand or so. And there was basically a golf course and the state park, High Cliff State Park. So, I took golf lessons. I did a lot of golfing, 'cause our house was right on the golf course. Met a lot of my friends through golfing. Worked there. Me and my friends all at one point who lived out there worked at the golf course. So, I don't know, life revolved a lot around the golf course and, like, just going to the State Park. And spending time there. So, a lot of my other friends lived, I went to school in Kaukauna, which was about ten miles away. So, we were kind of like the village kids. And then there was, like, the Kaukauna City kids. So, like, we were out, we were kind of like, until you could drive, you know, it, we kinda, I kinda had my little group of friends in the village. So, that's what it was like.

05:40 McCulla: And, was, was beer part of growing up in, in the area? Or at what point did you become interested in beer or brewing?

Krueger: I wouldn't say that it was at any, at, maybe more than it would be to any extent anywhere else. There was no breweries close to where I lived. My parents didn't drink a lot of beer. They were more mixed drink-type people. So, I'd say I didn't really get into craft brewing or really get into the beer industry until I came to work at AJS.

06:16 McCulla: And, where did you go to school and what did you study?

Krueger: I went to the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design for college, which is located in the Third Ward in Milwaukee. It's a private art school. And I studied illustration. My major's actually in illustration. And I have a minor in graphic design.

McCulla: And what drew you to design work?

Krueger: I really loved to draw when I was a kid. It was just something I always did. My brother was six years ahead of me. So, I didn't spend a whole lot of time with him. We were very, you know, he was kinda off doing his own thing. So, I got dragged to a lot of, like, dinner parties with my parents and things like that. And so, something I would always do was just get a piece of paper and a pencil and draw. Something I always loved to do. So, I knew I was always gonna do something art-related. And then as I got into high school and college, I kind of

also enjoyed graphic design, and so I kind of did both hand in hand. And, yeah, that's just kind of how that developed.

McCulla: And one more question about that. What, what about graphic design in particular attracted you, would you say?

Krueger: I had a, I really, when I started in college, I thought I was gonna be an animator. And it turned out to be far more work than I was anticipating it being. It was a very difficult profession to get into. And I had a, a professor in college that, I took one of his graphic design classes, I really liked him as a professor, I really enjoyed doing graphic design, I really enjoyed working with type and laying out advertising. I had a lot of fun doing that. And I found that being good at drawing and being good with composition helped graphic design. They kind of help inform each other. So, it's just something I kind of spent time doing both.

08:09 McCulla: Makes sense. Alright, Mark, I'll shift to you. Could you tell us where and when you were born?

Mark Steinhardt: I was born in Plymouth, Wisconsin, which is about fifteen miles north of here. Moved to Sheboygan when I was about five years old and primarily grew up in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, which is very close as well. My parents are Gerald and Marleen. And my dad was a auto mechanic and my mom was a schoolteacher.

McCulla: And what do you recall about growing up where you did?

Steinhardt: Well I, there were, there were six of us, six kids in the family. So, being one of the oldest, I spent a lot of time playing with brothers and sisters. So, that was, that's one of the primary memories of my childhood. As it relates to beer, there were a few smaller regional breweries back then, but in the, in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, there weren't anywhere near the number of breweries that there are now. I mean, that was kind of the low ebb of the number of breweries in the country. But, there were a few local ones. Kingsbury in Wisconsin, in the Manitowoc area, was one that I remember from my youth. And they're no longer around. But, I remember as a kid, when we'd get together for family gatherings, Pabst was the beer that the adults were drinking. That was, like, the popular beer from back then, at least in this area.

09:53 McCulla: And would you say at the time, was beer something that was mostly consumed at family gatherings? Or would people go to bars in town? Or kind of a mix of, of all?

Steinhardt: A mix of all. My father certainly spent his time in the bars drinking beer. [Chuckles] But that's a whole different subject. Yeah. So.

McCulla: Would you say that women consumed beer to an equal extent? Or was it primarily a..?

Steinhardt: I don't think so. From my recollection, I think, I mean, women would enjoy beer too, but it was kind of the man's drink back then. At least, from what I can remember when I was a young lad. [Chuckles]

10:34 McCulla: And so, where did you go to school and what did you study?

Steinhardt: I went to the Milwaukee School of Engineering and studied mechanical engineering. And that's what I did for most of my career, before I joined the company here. I still maybe dabble in a little engineering from time to time, but mostly do my general manager responsibilities which don't require too much engineering.

McCulla: And can I ask what drew you to engineering as a discipline?

Steinhardt: I always enjoyed cars and machinery and working on cars and got into it kind of gradually. I started as a draftsman, then a mechanical designer, and then completed my schooling at Milwaukee School of Engineering. Designed automation equipment for a couple of companies. And really enjoyed that. It's like making a puzzle or, or creating something, just like Cole creating an illustration or a design of a tap handle. It, it was always fun and enjoyable to me to create a piece of equipment or machinery. So, I found that interesting.

11:53 McCulla: Alright. And so, these would be questions for all of you, but could you describe simply what the company does and how each of you came to the company?

Zirngible: We produce more tap handles in the United States than any other company. The tour that we had taken earlier, Mark had mentioned that we sell about eighty percent of the, the handles that we do are, are made of wood. And very proud of the fact that we, you know, we have a U.S. workforce that's, that's handmaking these, whereas a lot of our competitors are getting all of their stuff done a hundred percent in China. So, what drew me to the company was the fact that we were actually going to Hanksraft and, and AJS are parent-, Hanksraft is the parent company of AJS, and that's where I was working in Reedsburg for sixteen years. And, when I was approached to, to try to help bring two, the two companies together, the display division and also the, the tap handle side, I thought it was an interesting opportunity, and I wanted the challenge to be able to not only learn, I mean, I knew the, the beer industry and the, the brewing industry was, was really hopping, if you will, right now. And Mark is a wonderful man. He's a great, great boss. And the team here is, is very friendly. Very open. There's no egos. I think everyone works together very well. And, so the opportunity came for me to, to try to bring the two companies together, the display division and the tap handles and, I did that last August and, and it's been going fairly well so far.

And, I'm enjoying it. The brewing industry is incredible. It, the people are, are so friendly. And they're not as competitive as what you might think. It, it's, it's something that really struck me when I first got into, into the beer industry, was in, in the display business where you're talking about, you know, big corporations making signs and getting them into stores and deadlines are deadlines and one company won't let another company see what they're doing. It's very, very cutthroat. In the beer industry, they, they, they get along. They all get along. They feel almost like a brotherhood. That it's, it's something that, it's in their blood. It's, it's who they are. They, there aren't, they're, they're craftsmen. Brewing beer is an art. And I think a lot of them toss their egos aside and, and really realize that they really have something unique that's going on here with their company and with their, I mean, to be able to start up a brewery, I mean, anyone to start up a business right now, it's very difficult. A brewery, it's amazing when you hear some of the stories that, from some of the clients, that a husband and wife, you know, the guy was sick of work and decided, you know, I can do homebrewing. And he starts doing homebrewing, and his wife is like, you know, this might be something we could do, and, it, it usually starts like that. In a garage somewhere.

Krueger: Yeah, they're all kind of entrepreneurs.

Zirngible: Yeah.

Krueger: When they start the breweries, they, it all starts small. You know, unless you're talking to a Miller or a Bud, it.

Zirngible: Right.

Krueger: It all started from some very small operation and grown, and it's cool to see that happen.

Zirngible: And, and the industry that just, they seem to just all get along.

Steinhardt: Yeah.

Zirngible: Which is unbelievable.

Steinhardt: They, they really are a fraternity. And they share best practices. And, they subscribe to the saying, you know, a rising tide floats all boats, and they, their industry has grown on account of it.

15:34 McCulla: What, and, it's interesting, this comment is interesting because you, you design tap handles that might be next to each other on the same bar, and, and they're essentially, you know, the brands are competing against each other. But, but, you, you find a sense of camaraderie, perhaps, among the breweries.

Zirngible: Yeah. And they like to taste each other's beer, too. You know, we, we belong to a lot of brewer's guilds, which is a form of, of, I guess, the smaller breweries uniting together to, to form one, one voice. Specifically, I think they started for legislative regions-, reasons, I'm sure, in the states. But, when you go to some of these conferences, we have an opportunity to, in some cases, put out a display table and, and sell our, our tap handles, or at least show 'em some of our wares to, to these guys. And, the, the camaraderie is just incredible. I mean, it's like they are really, you know, all in it together. And they love sharing stuff, and it's kind of unheard of for an industry, really.

16:32 McCulla: Mark, you spoke a bit earlier about the history of tap handles. Could you repeat that perhaps? Why, what, what purpose do tap handles serve, and what is their general history?

Steinhardt: Okay. Well, they're, they're obviously an advertising piece. And back, and the date escapes me, I should've refreshed my memory on it, but at one time tap handles were just a generic knob on the beer faucet. And, the bar patrons didn't know what beer they were being served. They had to take the word of the bartender. And a law was enacted that whatever beer was being served needed to be displayed on the tap handle. So, the bar patron knew what beer they were getting. And back then, of course, the tap handles were very simple and understated. And nowadays they're very elaborate and unique and whimsical in many cases.

McCulla: And in, at what point would you say they, the design tipped into something so appealing, like what we see today?

Steinhardt: Well, I think as the craft beer industry has grown and exploded, we've seen the designs of tap handles become more and more varied and unique. Back, you know, fifteen, twenty years ago, I think they were more generic and understated. And as time has passed, to the present day, they really tended to grow into something different and, and each one wants to be unique.

18:21 McCulla: I'm curious about the process really from start to finish, also, from a design perspective and also fabrication. What, what comes first? Or are they related?

Krueger: It's cool. I would say that it, it kind of depends on the client. So, if they'll come to us with a, with a request, they'll want maybe a certain amount of tap handles. They'll have a certain price point in mind. And then just by looking at their website, their advertising materials, the like, the art that they provide us with, you know, I'll come up with, with a unique design that kinda speaks to their brand. So, you know, usually the process will start, usually starts on the design end. So, I'll work with the customer and with the salesperson to get to a design that they really like. And, you know, to a price that's comfortable for them. And then from there we'll go into production. I create production files, I pick Pantone

colors, I create decal art, pad printing files, anything that the shop or China would need as support files to create the handle. And then from there we move into production: producing the handle, either domestically or internationally. And we usually create a prototype handle. If it's something, unless it's something very generic or very, you know, a very low price point, something really simple, we'll create a prototype handle that the client will sign off on. Then from there we'll go into full production on the tap handle.

19:58 McCulla: And are, could you think of an example or two recently of a design that has been particularly unique or challenging or interesting?

Krueger: Well there's a lot of them. I have a few handles right now that are in China. There's one, Lorelei Brewing, which I did a design for that's actually a, the whole handle is like a mermaid. And it has, like, a shell at the bottom that has like a little like a paper insert that can be slid in and out, depending on the variety of beer. Have another client called Lazy Beach Brewing, which has a, like a column of water, like a, shooting up, and then it has like a barrel on top with like a banner and like a sand dollar on the front of it. So, they can get very complicated. Anything like that that I do I'll usually draw and color in Photoshop. I'll do like a front view, a side view, and a back view. And then those handles will be either 3D-modelled or they'll be actually created out of like a clay mold. And then finished from there. So, they, they really range. Some of them can be as simple as like our Smith & Hook handle over there, which is just made from a barrel stave. And then that's engraved and color filled. So, that has its own unique kind of look to it. It's not as complex as, you know, making a palm tree or something like that. But, yeah, they really kind of run the gamut.

21:22 McCulla: And do you find that brewers, is, I, I'm, I assume that a handle has multiple goals. It's to attract customer attention. It's also to communicate the ethos of the brewery, if you will.

Krueger: Right.

McCulla: Who are the different perspectives feeding into a, a design?

Krueger: It's usually, I would say it's usually the, whoever's running the brewery or the owner of the brewery. They tend to be pretty involved in, especially if it's a smaller craft brewery. They tend to be pretty involved in the direction that they want their tap handle to go, and their marketing. And when you're dealing with the bigger guys, it's kind of a design-by-committee thing. You know, a lot of people have to see the design and sign off on it before it kinda gets run through the process. I mean, sometimes I'll design a handle and it'll be signed off in a week and we'll be going to prototype. And then in the case of maybe a Miller Lite or a Coors Light, it could be six months and we make fifteen models and we do, you know, tons of legwork into it. So, it really usually depends on the size of the brewery.

22:29

McCulla: And then from a fabrication perspective, what is the process like?

Steinhardt: Well, it depends on the, on the material that we're ultimately going to be making the handle out of. If it's wood, generally it's, it's done here and it starts out with the raw material, which as I mentioned on the tour, we use a lot of hard maple from a variety of North American suppliers. If it's cast, we do some of the urethane casting here. Cole mentioned the China connection, and Bob mentioned earlier, our largest competitor produces everything, all their tap handles in China. So, there are some that for us to be competitive, we need to send there, too. If it's a highly figural cast tap handle that requires a half hour to an hour of hand painting, we just can't be competitive doing it here domestically. So, that would be a, a case where we done off-, offshore. But, we do some of the simple urethane tap handles here as well as the wood handles. So, if it's urethane, it gets cast. And then you have to go through a process of cleaning up the parting lines, taking off the rough edges, sanding it down, getting it ready for paint. They'll drill it and put the screw in the bottom where it attaches to the beer faucet. That connection is also used, as you saw, when we rack it on the boards for painting. And then it goes through the decorating process, be it applying labels or hand painting, or printing directly on, on the handle. And the, and the wood handles kinda go through that same process, too. It might, the wood might be cut on a CNC [Computer Numerical Control] router depending upon the shape of the handle. It may be turned on one of our lathes if it's cylindrical in shape. And then go through sanding processes and applying and attaching the metal hardware, and all the way through paint finishing and decorating.

24:44

McCulla: And, and, Bob, you figure into part of this as a sales director. Could, could you describe your role selling these products to brewers?

Zirngible: Sure. It's, it's a combination of, I tend to deal a little bit more with the, with the big guys, with Miller and, and Budweiser. That's kind of where my background comes from. But, when it comes to calling on smalling brewer-, smaller breweries, you, you know, you, you basically have to, you know, meet the decision maker and, and in most cases some of the smaller ones it's, it's the brew master or it's the, the wife or the husband of who is ever, you know, doing the operation. And you, you get a feel for, for their brand, for their message, through their brewpub. I mean, usually the surroundings that you see pretty much will tell you what their handles are gonna look like. A lot of these are in abandoned warehouses, which is, it's pretty, in some cases it's kind of scary [Chuckles], and some cases it's pretty cool. We've visited some, in some warehouses where that, you wouldn't want to go there at night. At least I wouldn't, anyway. I, I kept one of my female sales reps from actually going to a couple of them down in St. Louis when we were on a trip together. But, they're very receptive. I, they're just as creative as, as anyone I've ever met. I mean, because I think that it's just that, it's that mindset, you know, that if you were, if you're gonna be doing this on your own, you're, you've got the, the guts to do a, a business on your own, there's a lot

of things that go into that brain and a lot of it is creativity. And, none of them are afraid of hard work. They put in a ton of hours. But, again, the, you know, they're, they're smiling because they love their beer. I think it's really, it's the fruit of their labor, which they can actually see. And, and touch and feel. And they can see.

Steinhardt: And taste.

Zirngible: And taste. Yes. Big time. Yeah. I was gonna tell you one interesting story we have with Central [Waters] Brewing, which is one of our customers, using materials that for, for tap handles and that kind of stuff, that, that he brought, this is probably about two months ago when he came in. Maybe six weeks.

Krueger: Central Waters, Anello?

27:01 Zirngible: Yeah. Anello. Very nice gentleman. We do their tap handles right now. But, he has a bunch of, of barrels that are bourbon barrels. They'll use bourbon barrels to age the beer in for sometimes two, three years. Depends on what they're trying to accomplish. But he has probably hundreds of barrels at his facility that, and they'll only do it once. So, his idea, and I, and I met him at the trade show, and we were bouncing around some ideas and he wanted to bring in some of these barrels and see if we could do something with them. And, so, he shows up one day with two barrels. One cut probably, just the end of it, just, probably like about this thick, about a foot thick. And then another one probably about six inches thick. And didn't have a chance to really wash them up. And you could smell the beer in 'em. He brings them into the table and sets them down. And it was like, mmm, it smells good in here. You know? And, the bottom line is we're gonna try to utilize the actual barrels themselves. Clean them up. Dry them up. And see if we can make some signage for him, which is what he, his customers been begging him to do some signs. And this would really fit in well with his brewery, too, because it's, it's just kind of who he is and what the brewery is. Recycling and the old barrel look. So, we're thinking about, Cole did some designs, putting some metal on the front of it with the, his logo. Utilizing the, you know, the actual barrels. And as I said, dressing them up, cleaning them up. And then also I thought about the idea of taking some of those barrels and actually cutting holes in them so that he could make displays, and actually put his six-packs in them, in stores as well, too. So, that was one of the more, I guess, ingenious efforts by one of the breweries that I've been working with, as of late. So, I just thought I'd share that with you.

28:54 McCulla: No, that's great. Great. And, to what extent do brewers request materials as, in addition to the design? Or is that something primarily that you, Cole, have-

Krueger: They'll request something be used at, you know, it kinda depends on our capabilities. Usually we'll use just ash or maple wood here in our facility. But, we've had breweries ask us if they can send us wood and use that to make tap

handles. And it sometimes depends, if it's something we can finish, then, you know, we'll do that. Or, like, we've used barrel staves to make handles and, yeah. The, the cool thing is it's always a unique challenge with every, every different brewer. You know, they all have a different idea and, you know, the Coors Light handle that we produce now is made out of metal. And, you know we work with metal sometimes. And a lot of different materials. But, usually it's something that, when I do the design, I'll suggest the materials. Whatever works best for the design that I've come up with. And, they'll usually sign off on that if, if they like what they see. But for the most part, yeah, it's kind of informed by, by the design.

30:06 McCulla: Right. Makes sense. We talked about this a bit earlier, but I, I would love to hear your perspective on, on the brewing industry overall. How have you felt the impact of growth in the industry in the last several years?

Steinhardt: Well, one of the things that we've seen with the growth of the, the craft beer industry is, years ago we obviously served fewer customers, but our average order quantity was higher than it is now. Now our average order quantity is significantly lower, but we're producing a greater number of orders going to the, through the shop at any given time. So, that's something that has kind of changed our business model a little bit. There's more set-up and changeover involved. And, lead times need to be fairly short and it's, seems like because a lot of the craft customers are wearing so many hats running their business, they may not think of the tap handles way up front, so all of a sudden it's like, "We need tap handles! How fast can we get 'em?" So, that's a common theme, you know, how fast can we produce the handles for them. So, it's something that has kind of really been pushed to the forefront over the years.

31:31 McCulla: You mentioned something very interesting earlier, too, about the seasonal nature of your business, that orders vary by season. Would you mind mentioning that again?

Steinhardt: Yeah. A lot of the brewers refer to the summer as beer season. And, that's typically the start of the year. Obviously, with bigger companies, the bigger breweries' budgets are new at the beginning of the year. Maybe the smaller craft breweries aren't as affected by the budget cycle. But, often times new tap handle designs or new orders for tap handles would come out at the beginning of the year. And then they would want those handles shipped and be ready to be out in the market by spring and summertime. So, the first half of the year through summer tended to be our busiest time of year. And then it would slow down towards the end of the year. As we've added more and more craft brewers to the mix, it's kind of balanced things out a little bit. And we don't have quite the surge at the beginning of the year as we, we used to. So, it's kind of leveled our business and smoothed out our workload a little bit.

32:42 McCulla: And how often do the bigger breweries request renewed designs or different kinds of handles?

Steinhardt: Not as often as they used to. There's been some changes with the big breweries over the last several years, starting with, and it's probably quite a few years ago already as time flies, where InBev bought out Anheuser Busch, and it seems like their tap handle spend went down. They used to do more redesigns in the past than they have as of late. So, we don't see it as often, but the big guys, maybe every three, four years, they'll redesign their tap handle and, and make a change.

Krueger: Yeah. It's, it usually corresponds to when they do, like, a brand refresh, if they changed their graphics significantly.

Steinhardt: Right. Changed their packaging.

Krueger: Or if their marketing changes significantly, then they'll want a tap handle that kinda ties into that marketing package, I guess you would say.

33:49 McCulla: Have you seen any, any big trends in that, in the kind of brand refresh? Are, are bigger breweries trying to communicate different things, would you say?

Krueger: I, I, I would say some of them, they try to hop onto the, the craft look. You know, Miller Lite, I think, it, they definitely went more crafty with the design they have now, you know. It has, they have the white-washed wood kind of look. And, you know, that's gotten popular as you see more, more craft breweries come out with kind of a more hip look, I guess you would say. Or a more crafty sort of mixed material look. You'll se-

Steinhardt: The large breweries still tend to have a little more corporate look.

Krueger: Right. They're a little more monolithic.

Steinhardt: Yeah.

Zirngible: They're more stately.

Krueger: They don't like to go too off-brand.

Steinhardt: Iconic as they like to say.

Krueger: Right. Right. Like, Coors Light didn't really go very crafty looking.

Steinhardt: Yeah.

Krueger: Theirs is still, like, kind of a corporate look I guess you would say.

34:47 McCulla: How would, I know it's hard to define, but how would you define a crafty look? You know, mixed materials you said.

Krueger: Right. Wood, metal, something that looks more natural or used almost. Or something with very bold branding or something very, like a urethane molded handle. So, you know, something that maybe looks like, you know, looks like it's made out of rock, or, you know, just something really out of left field would be kind of a, you know, crafter-, craftier look, I guess.

Zirngible: A lot more creative. A lot more artistic than like, say, what a, what, a big brand would be probably too anxious or too nervous to try to do something like that. So, you actually see more creative handles out of the craft brewers than you would from Budweiser or, or Miller, or anything like that.

35:42 McCulla: Do you think that is because the big brewers, they don't want to upset or change their customer base, or make it seem like they are serving something different, or?

Zirngible: They're trying to sell to the most people. Offend the least amount, I guess, is what you could say, you know. So, the more generic, the more bland, I guess, and, and really just, the name. Just get the name out there. Not necessarily the look, but the name.

Krueger: Yeah.

Zirngible: And that's, when you look at their handles, that's really what you see.

Krueger: And they have the largest installed base of beer drinkers. You know, a craft brewery is really trying to stand out in a tap line. They're trying to get their name out. They're trying to get people to go, "Oh," like, "That's an interesting tap handle." Like, "I'll try that beer." And then maybe, and then, get the, kind of the snowball effect from that. So, you know, a craft brewery has less to lose with just kind of.

Steinhardt: Taking a risk.

Krueger: Taking a risk. Right.

Steinhardt: On their tap handle design. Yeah.

Krueger: Yeah.

36:37 McCulla: Interesting. Looking around your showroom here, which has a really impressive array of handles, you also design handles that are, for other than beer. Could you describe, speak to that a bit?

Krueger: We, we've started to do a lot of liquor and wine tap handles. A lot of liquor companies have, like, you've maybe seen like a Jägermeister machine. They have, like, a dedicated machine that serves, like, chilled Jägermeister, or something like that. And they have them, they'll want a handle for their machine. Or, I, I tend to find a lot of the liquor brands, they like to showcase their bottle. A lot of them like to do that. They have, they have unique bottle shapes. And they, they like to showcase that, like, basically a smaller version of their bottle on the tapline. 'Cause they tend to be recognizable, you know. Like, everyone knows what a Patrón [tequila] bottle looks like. And, you know, they just, they have very kind of recognizable shapes. So, they tend to like to use that.

McCulla: Interesting.

Steinhardt: Yeah. But we've, we've seen a growth of wine on tap over certainly the last five years, maybe a little bit more than that. So, that's in addition to the beer tap handles. Wine, spirits, cider, cider has definitely been a growing part of the industry.

38:05 McCulla: I have a question about economics. You mentioned you, your production is split partly between here and China. Why, why do any of it here? A simple question.

Steinhardt: We'd like to do it all here, but, again, it's a matter of being competitive and hitting the price point that our customers, the craft brewers, are looking for. But, sometimes if we can't do it as cost effectively domestically as, as they want, then that's an option for us to send it to our facility in China. And we probably do eighty percent of the tap handles here in Random Lake, and, you know, fifteen to twenty percent at our facility in China. But, but again, it's the ones that have such a high labor content that we just can't do them cost effectively here.

39:06 McCulla: And what is the, what is the history of this area in terms of economics or, or agriculture?

Steinhardt: The particular?

McCulla: Of Random Lake.

Steinhardt: Random Lake?

McCulla: Yeah.

Steinhardt: Well, I think it's primarily agricultural. A lot of dairy farms initially. There was a brewery in the area that, they haven't been around for quite a few years, but [William G.] Jung, J-U-N-G, was the local brewery in Random Lake.

Zirngible: Is the brewery, is it still open? I mean, are, the, does the building still exist?

Steinhardt: No. I don't, I don't think so. I'm not sure what building it was in, if they're, you know, one of the old buildings in town was the brewery. I don't recall the history. It's, it's way before my time here. But, I think up Highway 57, there may be a barn that still has their sign on it.

Zirngible: Cool.

Steinhardt: Or, faded painted on the, on the barn. But, the area, the Random Lake area is primarily an agricultural, dairy farming area. And then, some other smaller industry. A lot of it related to agriculture and the food industry. There's a canning company that cans, you know, vegetables and peas and sweet corn and things of that nature, in town. And some other businesses.

40:33 McCulla: And so, how did AJS come to be located here?

Steinhardt: AJS was started in 1987 by Andy Sanfilippo, hence the name AJS, Andy J. Sanfilippo. The current ownership bought AJS in 1999. And the business stayed here. But when Andy started the business in '87, he built the, the original part of the building here on this location in Random Lake, and we've added onto the building three or four times since then.

41:09 McCulla: I'm curious, too, about the employees who work on the floor. Do they come here from, what kinds of work backgrounds? Is this a new kind of work for them? Or, they ever?

Steinhardt: I think it's a, you know, a new kind of work for, obviously there's not a lot of tap handle manufacturers. We're kind of a niche industry. Although, it seems like as the craft beer industry has grown, our competition has grown. There's a lot of small companies starting up, wanting a piece of the action. So, we do see new competition starting up throughout the country. But as far as our workers go, the local area particular-, particularly Sheboygan, was known for furniture manufacturing. So, a lot of woodworking. So, we drew some employees from that area because of their woodworking experience. That's not specifically why the business was located here. Andy Sanfilippo is from the area, or was from the area. But, it was an advantage since a lot of our tap handles are made out of wood, to have people with that woodworking experience. But, but now we draw people from the immediate Random Lake area, and Sheboygan, Plymouth, and other communities in the area.

42:35 McCulla: And so, in an increasingly competitive market, how, especially Bob, when you go out, how do you, what is the AJS brand? Or how do you sell the products here?

Zirngible: We really like to, to push the, the U.S.A., made in the U.S.A. for as much as we can. We also promote our quality, our lead times are much better than some of our competitors. We, we'll do with, with Cole's help, we can offer graphic design, free graphic design for people that are confused as to what they need to do for a handle. We can take them from, you know, from the very beginning, from a sketch, you know, to the, to the end in just ten to twelve weeks in, in most cases. A lot of our competitors can't do that. So, if we can keep the production here, and that's not, that's not necessarily to say that we sacrifice any creativity or anything like that to keep the handles here. We can do a lot of cool stuff here, and have done. So, that's, our number one pitch is really just to, you know, first off, the fact that we've been in business for thirty-one years. We've seen the industry grow. We've been hand in hand with it all the way through, through this craft boom. And as you can see and hear, there's not too many brands that we haven't hit. So, just try to stress that. The quality, the U.S.A., the lead times, and the fact that we, that we wanna, we wanna create something new for them.

44:06 McCulla: Makes sense. And given this long perspective, I am curious, this is such a, a important point in the brewing industry, and what do you see coming, you know, five years from now, or fifteen years from now? Does it feel familiar to something that's come before? Or, or different?

Zirngible: Me personally, and, and I've only been in the business for a little over a year, a year and a half, I see it almost getting to a peak now, where there is, there's gonna be some drawback. I think there's still like a, what, a couple hundred breweries starting up every couple months or something like that? I mean, there's still that going on. But I don't know that there's enough to support, you know, as, as, as big as this can get. I don't see, I see a small decline. I think it's just gonna be small. But I think that there's, there's still a bright future. I think people are just gonna have to be smarter and probably not grow as big as what they think they will. And that's, and, and I think the, the, the big boys are gonna continue to try to buy up more of the small craft breweries like they are right now. They want a piece of that action, and they've done that. I mean, Miller's bought, Anheuser Busch has bought. And the breweries don't, you talk to them, they don't like it, I think. But, when some of these get to a point where they get medium-sized, they, you know, if somebody waves some money in front of them and says, you know, hey, you know, what do you think? You know. Some of them just, you know, take the bait. But, I, I see it slowing down, but I don't see it, you know, disappearing by any means. I think it's just gonna, they're gonna get smarter as the, the industry continues to grow. That's my perspective, anyway.

Steinhardt: Yeah, I, I thought we were maybe starting to see the growth slowing last year, but again, over the last twelve months, what, about a thousand breweries? That, that boggles my mind. The, the growth rate has continued. So, at some point I see it tapering off. But, I'm not sure when. And, I agree with Bob. Maybe there'll be, continue to be more breweries, but a lot of brewpubs and

microbreweries that don't really have any intention of growing to a huge scale, but, it'll be interesting to see what happens.

46:40 Krueger: Yeah, when I started here, there, I was the only designer. We have one more now, Troy. And when I started there was maybe five or six of us in the office, I think, tops. And now there's many more than that. And more out in manufacturing. And the building was half the size. And it was a new thing to me. I had worked at Kohl's corporate. I was in a-, it was a huge corporation. I very much liked coming to a smaller company where my role was more visible and I didn't feel like a tiny little cog in a huge corporate machine. And it necessitated a designer here because of the craft brewery boom, and they were getting so many requests from people who were new, who didn't really have an idea of the kind of design they wanted, and they needed, and they wanted someone to kind of show them the land, that kind of thing. So, they needed to bring someone in to, to kind of do that design work. And I think before I started, either people, people would kind of pick a stock-ish, wood shapes, or they would come to us with a design already done.

Steinhardt: With a concept.

Krueger: Or if something needed to be done, we had a guy at Hanks Craft that we would kind of throw a few things to, and he would come up with some designs. But, our, the client, the number of clients had grown so much that, you know, I had to come on and, and, and pick up that design work. And, it's been really cool to see the industry grow like that. I, I wouldn't think that it could sustain the kind of growth that's been happening. But it's been going on since I've been here, which feels like a very long time now. Almost a decade. And, and being from Milwaukee, I see, I mean there's a new brewery every month, almost, just in, just in Milwaukee. But you do see some of them close down from time to time. And, you know, there's, there's competition there. The tap lines are bigger than they used to be. You know, you used to go into a bar and there'd, most bars would have three beers on tap, maybe. A lot of times, probably back when Mark was younger, maybe it was one or two. And, now you can walk into, you know, a, a brewery or a, walk in to like a barbecue joint down in Milwaukee and there's twelve, fifteen, some bars have twenty beers on tap. And, it's, yeah, it's a, it's a lot of competition just to stand out. So, it is a lot different than it used to be, that's for sure.

49:11 McCulla: It seems also that craft's, craft brewers brew a, a greater number of styles than.

Krueger: Right.

McCulla: Bigger brewers.

Steinhardt: Right.

McCulla: So, you have, you have more breweries, but also more styles coming from individual breweries to.

Krueger: Right.

McCulla: Design.

Krueger: And you see different things happening with, with the varieties, too, you know. IPAs have been the big thing for years. And now you're gonna see sour ales kind of, they're starting to become a big thing now. And you'll see that kind of boom. And now we'll see all these sour ales varieties. And then, I'm sure they'll figure out something else. Some other crazy beer to brew.

McCulla: Right.

Zirngible: And I, I think the, the consumer themselves are changing as well too, I don't think we drink as much beer as we used to. But I think they're treating the craft brewing, beer, like a treat. You know, you don't, you know, you don't go out and, you know, do eight, eight bottles of Miller Lite. But, you'll go out and buy, you know, a, a six-pack of something that's really unique and different as a treat. And I think that's really what's helping the industry. I think people are drinking differently. And they like the variety. They like the chance to try different things, as of right now anyway.

50:24 McCulla: Have your jobs here change-, changed you as beer consumers at all? Whether, when you walk into a taproom, or just in terms of your, how you approach drinking or appreciating beer?

Steinhardt: Yeah, I'm sure it has. I certainly am tuned into the beer industry and the varieties and probably more open to trying different things and certainly if I see a customer's beer that I haven't tried, I'm like, "Oh, I gotta try that." And I enjoy a variety of beer. Not just the plain old pilsner, which is fine, too, in the right setting. But, I enjoy, you know, a variety of beers. So, it's, it's fun for me as a beer drinker.

Zirngible: One of the things that happens to us, Theresa, when we're, we're selling, when we go out to visit the breweries, they want you to taste their beer. And we're on sales calls. And so, you really have to stagger that, and, and either say yes or no. But, or just maybe take a little sip. But, no, they, I mean, they're so proud they want you to try their beer. And, it's usually, the routine that most of our salespeople will do, is they'll start going out on a brewery day. They probably start at noon or maybe one, as the breweries open up a little bit later in the day. And then just kind of pace yourself until, you know, like your last, your last visit would be like maybe six or seven o'clock and then, that's when you taste your beer, you know. Or, actually sit down and maybe have one. And maybe have

dinner as well, too. But, it's, it's interesting, I mean, that they do want you to try their beer.

52:06 McCulla: How about you, Cole? Has it, has your work here changed you as a beer consumer at all? Or?

Krueger: I think it absolutely has. I didn't drink much, definitely not much craft beer, before I started working here. But, I go to bars and I see tap handles that I've worked on, designed, on the tap lines, I'm definitely gonna try it. And I think that's helped me branch out into trying lots of different kinds of beer that I, I didn't really, yeah, drink a lot of that kind of beer before I started here. So, yeah. I'd say for sure.

52:36 McCulla: It seems like you all get a kind of, a peek at the stories behind breweries, too, which compels interest. Alright, I have one, one final question. It's a big one, but a simple one. And that's to ask what do you value most about what you do?

Zirngible: I'll start. I value making people happy. That's pretty much my job, and, in sales, trying to get the customer satisfied is always, at least in my book, the number one concern. And so, that's what kinda drives me, and it, it's, with everyone that's here and the, the, the way the company is set up, the support people, the staffs, our customer project managers, it makes our life a lot easier. And so, to accomplish the fact that, I mean, there's nothing-, I, I can tell you about a brewery, in Pitts-, Pittsburgh that I helped do their handles. And they had just started, and just opened up a small brewpub, and they got some really good rave reviews from the Pittsburgh newspaper, I can't remember what it was. But, they called me up and said that they were just using their brother's old wood staves, or something, for their handles. And he said, Bob, we're gonna be getting a lot bigger now real soon so, can you help us design a handle? And, Cole, I think you helped out with this, too. They really like, it's the, the barrel on top, the wood and then a barrel on the side.

Krueger: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Zirngible: It's in two pieces. A really, really unique handle. And, it, it really spoke. When you looked at the pictures of their place, and then you looked at the handle that we created with their help, it was like their vision was just like, I mean, they just went, "Ah." It was a "a-ha" moment. And they were so happy and thankful that we had helped and done, to design their handle. That it fit so well into what they were doing. And that made my day. And that's what makes me wanna continue to do that, because it makes me happy. And, they were extremely happy. And, and a lot of times you don't, you don't get that, in, in the business that I was in before, in the display business where it's all cutthroat and just, you know, like, get this stuff done. Get it, get this on time. These people actually gave us the

time to create the handle that they wanted, and it was beautiful. It was a great experience. That's what I like the best.

54:59 Krueger: Yeah, I'd say before I started here, I was a production artist. And, you get, I got zero feedback about my design work, you know. You don't, you don't get to really see the end product or see anyone interacting with your design work. It's just kinda like you do it in a vacuum and it just kinda goes out and it's gone. And, here I, you know, I, I get to not only get the satisfaction of having the customer be, the client be happy, but then, you know, I can go to a bar and see someone maybe comment on a tap handle or I can point 'em out to my friends, the ones that I've designed and, it's cool getting to see, like, something that I thought of, you know. It just kind of came out of my head, went down on paper, and then was created. And then it's now out in the world. And it's also, a lot of times a customer's first interaction with a brewery is seeing the tap handle on a tap line. So, I think it's, I think of it as a very important part of their marketing. And a very important part of their identity. So, I take a lot of pride in that.

56:00 Steinhardt: I enjoy beer [Laughter], so it's great to be a part of the beer industry. But, really I enjoy the people even more. As Bob mentioned, our customers are so passionate about the industry and what they do. It's fun to be around them, and to engage with them, and work with them on projects. So, that's really a great part of the job. And then, being able to provide jobs for employees that are really engaged as well and really care about the quality of the products we produce. It's, it's really special.

McCulla: Great. Well, thank you all for your time. This has been a pleasure.

Krueger: Thank you.

Zirngible: Thank you.

Steinhardt: Thank you.

Krueger: Yeah.