

Name of Interviewee: Kevin West
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Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
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THERESA MCCULLA: It's July 25, 2023. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I'm interviewing [0:00:09] Kevin West, Lead Brewer at Anchor Brewing Company in San Francisco, California. We are at the brewery in San Francisco, and this interview is part of the American Brewing History Initiative, a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in the United States. So, Kevin, when and where were you born?

KEVIN WEST: Dayton, Ohio, June, 1961.

TM: What are the names of your parents and any siblings?

KW: Connie West was my mother. Kenneth West was my father and I have one brother, Matthew West.

TM: And what did [0:00:47] your parents do when you were growing up?

KW: My father was a salesman and my mother was a career nurse.

TM: What did your father sell?

KW: Mostly office supplies—copiers, stuff like that.

TM: Where did you grow up? Did you grow up in Dayton?

KW: I grew up in kind of a suburb of Dayton. Dayton was a mere 10 minutes, the Dayton limits were only a mere 10 minutes away, but I was just outside the city limits of Dayton.

TM: And what was [0:01:22] it like to grow up in the neighborhood where you did?

KW: It was wonderful. I grew up in a cul-de-sac, and it was pretty typical idyllic suburban life. My brother and I talk about it to this day, how lovely it was.

TM: What were the best parts of being there?

KW: Just a really tight neighborhood, specifically the block we lived on. We knew everybody. It was a lot of boys. It's interesting, I have two daughters now and I grew up in an extremely boy-central block, to the point where my brother and I talk about it and I can't remember there being any girls on the block but it was a lot of the typical stuff, run around, riding bicycles, building forts. [0:02:20] Yeah, it was a good life.

TM: And where did you go to school and which subjects did you feel drawn to?

KW: I went to Precious Blood Elementary, a Catholic private school and then I went to Chaminade Julianne High School. I never really focused strictly on anything, but I did find myself drawn a little bit to the sciences.

TM: How did you first become interested in beer and brewing? Was there kind of a light bulb moment that you recall or not [0:02:59] necessarily?

KW: It was more serendipity for me. I had a very good friend that I was in the Air Force with. I did four years in the Air Force and enjoyed it, got out, but stayed very good friends with a friend who I'm still friends with to this day. He was from California and we both got out of the Air Force. He went back to California and he eventually ended up here at the brewery. We stayed in touch. I was in the restaurant business at the time and not necessarily enjoying the restaurant business. One night over the phone he said, you should come out to California. [0:03:43] I think I can get you a job. And literally the rest is history.

TM: And so to back up a bit, what was your path up to Anchor? Where did you work?

KW: Like I said, the Air Force, I was a firefighter. I was a volunteer firefighter previous to that and then I was largely a bartender slash server, moving up to eventually assistant manager of restaurants in Columbus, Ohio. And when I left for California, I was in Columbus, Ohio, running restaurants.

TM: And what year was it when you had this call?

KW: That was 1990, and I have an interesting pathway. I came out here in 1990 on his advice, got the job, and then due to other personal matters I left after about a year. And then in 1993, after a couple, a few more years back in the restaurant business, I figured out I had made a terrible mistake and I called up my former boss who was still here and asked for my job back and luckily he took me back in 1993, and I've been here ever since.

TM: So when [0:05:09] you arrived here at Anchor, what was your role here and then how has that changed over time?

KW: I started in the bottle shop, that's where everybody pretty much started. Started in the bottle shop. I eventually started giving tours. Back then in the early, mid-90s, beer festivals were a thing and I did a lot of beer festivals for Anchor and represented that way. And then in 2004, after roughly eleven years in packaging, I was offered a position in brewing. I took that position in brewing and worked as a brewer until approximately, it was post-COVID, so I want to say 2021 [0:06:10] I became Lead Brewer.

TM: What are the most pleasurable aspects of brewing beer? What do you most enjoy about the process, especially here?

KW: Consistency and just being part of something that you see every day. I still, to this day, get a sense of pride when I see a 12-pack or a 6-pack of Anchor Steam in somebody's grocery cart. I'm like, *I made that*. And this place has history that goes back to the late 1800s and I was a part of it and I just never expected myself to be part of something so beautiful.

TM: How do you think [0:07:07] employees become aware of the history? Like is it this building, is the coveralls?

KW: It was Fritz Maytag without a doubt. Fritz Maytag pushed that. I think he was super smart in the sense that he saved a brewery but then he knew there was a history here and he organically grew that history and through us, gave us the opportunity to push that history to people. It was him. And it was also giving the tours. He was smart in that sense that before the brewery explosion in this country happened, there were a few hundred breweries, and he was one of them that was giving a tour and spreading that history, that legacy. And I was fortunately part of that, giving the tours. But 100% Fritz Maytag. He's always had I think a penchant for history and he marketed it.

TM: So, this likely answers the question, but you have spent a lot of time communicating with the public in various roles and so, if you had to define the Anchor brand or its unique strengths or aesthetics, how would you differentiate Anchor from all other American breweries?

KW: Its uniqueness. [0:08:54] Everybody makes beer from generally the same four basic ingredients: malt, hops, water, yeast, but we do it just so uniquely here. Number one, doing it in these old 100% copper vessels and then also very largely then sending it to primary fermentation in these open vats. I know of multiple breweries who have experimented with open fermentation, but we have largely made the flagship beer in open fermentation since 1896, and we haven't changed. Nobody does it that way. So, it's just a really unique place. It's kind of like working in a museum. That's what I enjoy about it. [0:09:57] It's not a typical brewery.

TM: Would you say you have a favorite place in this building or particularly strong memories tied to places within this building?

KW: It would be the taproom. It would be the taproom and the brewhouse. The taproom because I would get to do the tours there and then the brewhouse because, sadly, it might be the last place. It's just the beauty. And Fritz made a point of designing this third floor this way, that when you walk into this building on the third floor, it's just a showpiece and [0:10:42] you have the copper and it's just wonderful.

TM: Would you say that you have a favorite beer to brew or to work with?

KW: It would always be Steam Beer. Steam beer is a wonderful beer and, little side story: I found an old brew chart of steam beer from 1982 the other day. I compared it to the last steam beer I made a few weeks ago. It was quite literally the same. It hasn't changed in all those years. Fritz developed a wonderful, well-balanced, drinkable beer, and we have never changed it.

TM: And the yeast has not—can you talk too about the yeast, its continued usage?

KW: The yeast? Oh, my goodness, the yeast. I've been here 30 years. I have never seen a yeast strain for steam beer brought into this building. That's just wild. Most breweries will, every so often they have yeast strains stored away and they'll repropagate a yeast strain over time. We've never done that. In the 30 years I've been here, we just continually will harvest the yeast strain, the steam beer strain, [0:12:22] we'll clean it up a little bit with some phosphoric acid, which is quite typical in the industry, every so often,

and we'll use it a few times and then when we'll pass that on to the dairy farmer. The dairy farmer picks up our yeast, our spent yeast and our spent grain, and they feed it to the cows, and it's a wonderful food additive for them. But the yeast has never changed. The yeast that's in this building was related to the yeast that was in this building when I walked in here in 1993.

TM: That's amazing. Alright. Just a few questions to end on and [0:13:01] these will pertain to the recent events. So, on July 12, 2023, Sapporo USA announced that Anchor Brewing Company would be transferred to a liquidator on August 1. Could you describe the experience of hearing that news and then what the past week has been like for you and others here?

KW: It's been a rollercoaster. On the good side, the outpouring of strangers and people I know, people I haven't talked to for years reaching out and supporting me and everyone through this process has been amazing. Downside, I just never thought I'd see it happen. [0:13:53] I knew we were slow. I knew the industry had changed. I knew there were multiple factors making it a challenging business, but I just never thought it would go away like it looks like it's going to happen.

TM: What do you want the public to know about Anchor Brewing Company past and present or what do you hope the knowledge of Anchor continues to be?

KW: It was beautiful. It was just, it was a family. We joked the other day, some old school people I was talking to from Anchor from a long time ago, and we were, he was a paternal figure. He took care of us. We were like his kids, and we were a family. I've had jobs previous to Anchor that were like that for a short period of time, a short window, but the fact that it's lasted for me personally, 30 years, I never would've expected that at all.

TM: Okay. Last question, what would you say you value most about what you do?

KW: I like working with my hands. I like making things and making things that people—it's always pleasant when you make something that people like [0:15:38] and the pride of making something that matters to so many people.

TM: Alright. Well, thank you for your work and your words and your time.

KW: Thank you. I really appreciate it.