

# TROUBLE BREWING

at St. Vincent

By Lauren Lamendola



Above, the growing college towers over the malt house in foreground, the gristmill behind it, and the brewery to the right.

All images courtesy St. Vincent's Archives.

In winter of 1848, while Father Boniface Wimmer struggled to build a monastic Benedictine Order with 18 of his followers in the Pennsylvania wilderness, he lamented, "We have had no vegetables other than beans. (The potatoes rotted and cabbage was scarce.) The bread was two-thirds corn meal and was stone hard. One has to have a healthy stomach for it so as not to burst."<sup>1</sup> That, combined with the lack of "that nutritious beverage"—beer—was unbearable to the men.



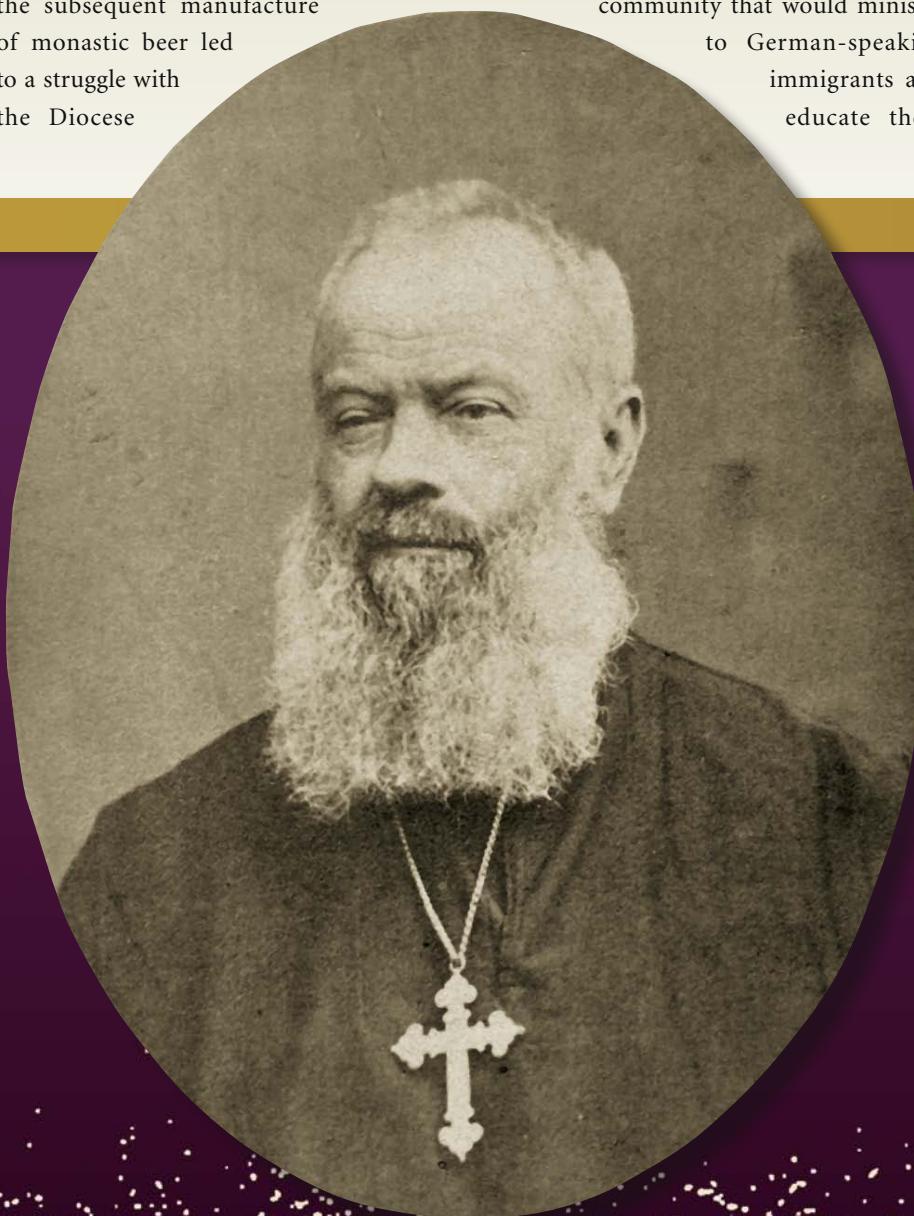
Today, Saint Vincent College, a four-year, coeducational, Roman Catholic, Benedictine, liberal arts college (the result of that struggle in the wilderness), boasts a working gristmill that for more than a century provided sustenance for the resident monks. It is ironic, though, that the same Latrobe, Pennsylvania, that nurtured the nearly 120-year-old Latrobe Brewing Company had a contentious history regarding the production of an alcoholic beverage that the brothers also deemed essential to survival. Wimmer's desire to construct a brewery and the subsequent manufacture of monastic beer led to a struggle with the Diocese

of Pittsburgh and Catholic temperance advocates that would last more than half a century and be debated in Rome.

Father Wimmer, O.S.B., a Bavarian missionary, and his followers had come to Saint Vincent Parish in Latrobe two years earlier and created the first monastic Benedictine Order in North America, Saint Vincent Archabbey and College. Wimmer's dream was to create a monastic environment that mirrored the orders in his native homeland of Bavaria. The Benedictines were determined to set up a community that would minister to German-speaking immigrants and educate them

in a school and seminary based on Catholic tradition. Wimmer "envisioned his monastic foundation as a self-sufficient community."<sup>2</sup> In order to foster this independence, Saint Vincent began to build and expand the community. Without adequate food supplies, building a home in the wilderness was full of hardships, including the aforementioned lack of "nutritious beverage."

Breweries were commonplace in German monastic tradition. The first self-sustained Benedictine brewery can be traced back to the monastery of St. Gallen in 820 A.D.<sup>3</sup> The brewery contributed to the self-sufficiency of a monastery and created a valuable source of revenue if the beverage was sold. For Wimmer, building



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Left, Boniface Wimmer, college,  
archabbey, and brewery founder.

Right, another view of the malt  
house, mill, and brewery.

a brewery seemed like a natural decision and one that was in perfect agreement with Bavarian and monastic tradition as “the Benedictines were Germans accustomed to beer in their own country, where cold water is principally used for washing and cooking purposes.”<sup>4</sup> The first brewery associated with Saint Vincent, located in Indiana, Pennsylvania, was purchased by Wimmer in 1849 and subsequently run by his nephew. The nephew came to America with 1,000 florins that he was to deliver to his uncle. He embezzled the money and was promptly discovered. Wimmer wrote, “Since he no longer had it [the money], I could not get it from him. He bought a brewery in the expectation of a good marriage. It fell

through. I loaned him money in order to make it possible for him to pay the 1,000 florins or be able to pay it myself. Since he again displayed an inclination to seek his own advantage rather than mine, I threw him off the premises and kept the brewery for myself.”<sup>5</sup> Wimmer hoped to eradicate the debt that his nephew had incurred through the sale of beer at the brewery and adjoining tavern.

When Pittsburgh Bishop Michael O’Connor, a temperance advocate, learned of the brewing enterprise in Indiana, “there suddenly followed a prompt demand” that Wimmer immediately “sell, rent, or close down the brewery.”<sup>6</sup> Wimmer countered that he could not do any of these things

without suffering considerable financial loss. He agreed to close the tavern, but refused to relinquish the brewery until the debt was repaid. Although O’Connor felt strongly that it was improper for the monks to continue their brewing and consumption of beer, Wimmer asserted “the Benedictines in North America surely have the same rights as others, wherever they are living, to drink beer.”<sup>7</sup> Monastic beer production seemed the most logical and economic option as preexisting local beers were too expensive or of poor quality. Wimmer stated that “all over the world monks have their breweries and vineyards and sell what they do not need for themselves. You find nothing against it in Canon Law or in the



ST. VINCENT'S ABBEY has, we understand, been called upon by authority to state the conditions on which and the purposes for which it brews the foaming beverage. We hope the Sons of St. Benedict will be able to show they have been all along within their rights. The times are very peculiar. Who can say the day will never come when some crank will not have the good monks called to order for manufacturing sauerkraut out of cabbage.



Above, clipping from the Lake Shore Visitor, 1895. Right, the brewery.

Decree of Trent....If the bishop does not permit it, I will assure him that he will not see many Benedictine monasteries in his diocese.”<sup>8</sup>

Wimmer believed that by defending his right to brew and drink beer, he had brought about a peaceful understanding with the bishop. However, O’Connor was reluctant to accept the Benedictine’s claim to brewing and as a result, he declined Wimmer’s request to canonically erect Saint Vincent to the rank of priory. He attempted to make his request through other means, but the pope stated there would be “no further action until an official report had been received from Bishop O’Connor.”<sup>9</sup> Cardinal Giacomo Filippo Fransoni intervened on Wimmer’s behalf and demanded an explanation of why O’Connor “refused to use the full authority accruing to him which empowered him

to make a formal declaration” that Saint Vincent Monastery should be recognized as an independent priory.<sup>10</sup> O’Connor replied that he had no intention of inhibiting the monastery of its deserved canonical status, but he had consulted Rome and was waiting on a decision from the Vatican of “whether in America monasteries are authorized to have breweries and sell beer at retail.”<sup>11</sup> Wimmer pleaded with King Ludwig of Bavaria, his benefactor, “to employ Your Highness’s name and influence for the cause.”<sup>12</sup>

Although Wimmer was referring directly to the status of his monastery, Ludwig and other influences in Munich believed that Wimmer’s main concern was the claimed privilege of brewing in America. The King and the royal Bavarian ambassador to the Holy See petitioned the pope to settle the Saint Vincent affair on both accounts—monastic status and

the brewery. In the summer of 1853, Wimmer received word from Cardinal Fransoni that “the Holy See settled this affair in such a way that he believes the Benedictine Order can henceforth, in accordance with that decision, regulate the matter in a way that is most beneficial to the Church itself.... However, he gave only general information, namely that Rome granted permission to make beer and to sell it.”<sup>13</sup> Bishop Authorization was given on February 14, 1852. O’Connor was notably upset by his setback and out of respect for the bishop, Wimmer and his monks did not begin work on their own brewery until O’Connor’s resignation eight years later.

Although the Irish O’Connor was steadfast in his temperance sentiment, the pope himself had a far more amicable temper about the consumption of alcohol. When Wimmer visited Rome in 1855, the



Holy Father teased him about the beer affair. Wimmer replied, “You have a good saying about your Benedictines brewing and selling beer; but you forget that we don’t drink any these nine years, and that we have no brewery.” “Germans not drinking beer,” the pope replied. “That is much.”<sup>14</sup> Wimmer noted, “It may seem a laughable affair to bring such a question before the Apostolic See, but for us it was truly important.”<sup>15</sup>

Saint Vincent finally opened its brewery in a small preexisting log building in 1860. Located just a half a mile from Beatty Station in Unity Township, the brewery was in an ideal location to facilitate the wholesale manufacture and shipping of the controversial beverage. By 1868, the brewery had begun to be a significant enterprise and a new brick 32' x 93' building was built to expand the original structure. Several structures, including a malt house

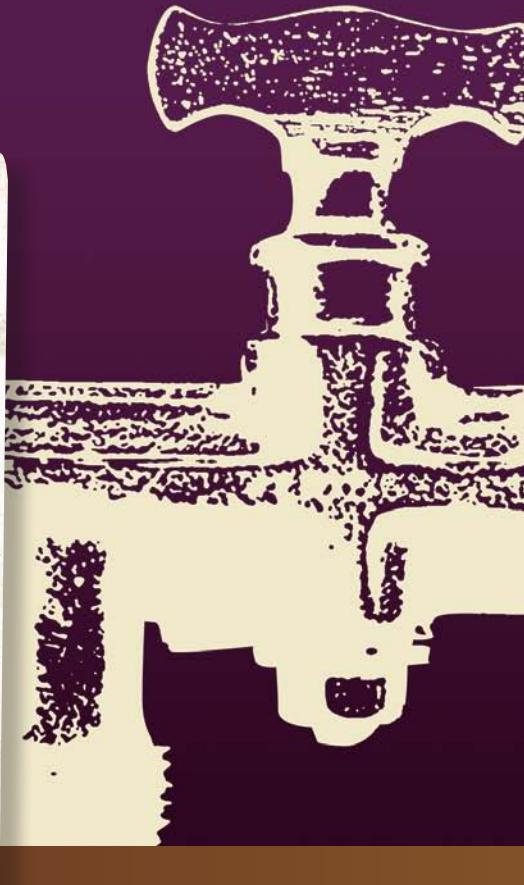
and icehouse, soon followed. The brewery was indeed a self-sufficient entity, as the monks manufactured everything from the beer to the barrels they were shipped in. The beer itself was a dark and thick brew that was made in the tradition of authentic Bavarian breweries. *The Pittsburgh Press* described the beer-making process at Saint Vincent: “Malt and hops are all that are used in its manufacture. The malt is roasted to a dark brown hue.... The tanks are filled with malt, which is stewed but once. The fluid is drained off from the tanks directly into great vats where it is allowed to cool in an iced atmosphere; the vats are sunk at the base of monastery hill, below the abbey and industrial establishments. The beer is left in the open vats for months at a time...until it has reached its maturity. Then it is barreled and stored away in caves in the hillside until ready to be shipped.”<sup>16</sup>

The popularity of the heavy and hoppy beer ushered in a “Golden Age” of brewing at Saint Vincent. In 1868, Wimmer wrote, “We drink a lot of beer and cannot brew enough. It costs \$11 a barrel plus \$1 tax. In the cities, they sell it for \$14. I do not make much profit from it, but at least we have it for our own table.”<sup>17</sup>

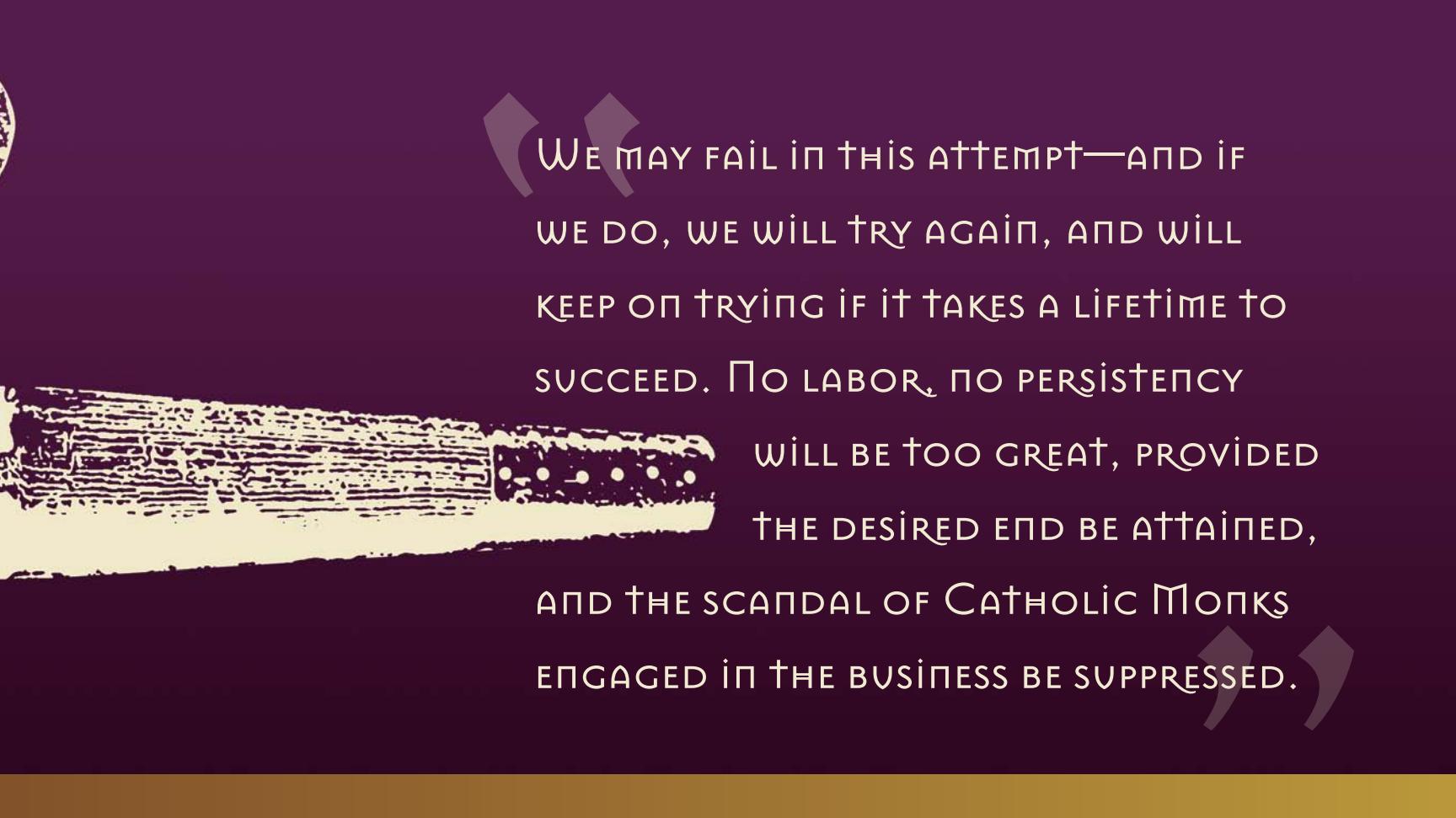
While the Benedictine beer business went largely uninterrupted for three decades, the death of Boniface Wimmer in 1887 and the reemergence of the temperance movement ushered in the second era of controversy and ultimate demise of brewing at Saint Vincent.

In 1895, a slew of correspondence and outrage from Fr. Ferdinand Kittell sparked a new wave of questions about the morality of monastic brewing and selling of the beverage. Kittell, a disciple of Father Matthew, claimed to harbor no reservations about the monks brewing for their own

Below, Ferdinand Kittell believed selling beer to the public brought shame to the church.



use, but he was horrified “of its being advertised in secular papers as ‘ON TAP’ in various saloons.”<sup>18</sup> Kittell testified that his sentiments were unanimously shared by the clergy of the Diocese of Pittsburgh and that the practice brought “odium on the Church and shame on our people.”<sup>19</sup> Another Pittsburgh priest said, “It is a disgrace to our church that a brewery should be operated virtually under its sanction, and by a brotherhood of priests...the majority of our priests feel that same way.”<sup>20</sup> Like his predecessor, new Archabbot Leander Schnerr responded to the attackers that Saint Vincent had obtained papal permission to both manufacture and sell beer. While the presence of a brewery indeed had been an



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issue over 30 years ago, the case was dropped with the decree from Rome. Schnerr asserted that the issue had long been settled and there was to be no more controversy over the brewery. Kittell had known very well that Saint Vincent brewed with papal permission. He stated, "My idea in getting up the petition was precisely to inaugurate a movement to have that permission revoked. Times had changed, and so have we."<sup>21</sup>

When it became clear to Kittell that Schnerr and his monks had no intention of cooperating with his demands and would not join the Catholic laity in the attack on alcoholic consumption, he began to lobby against the Benedictine Society. The brewery was loathsome and unacceptable. He said, "We may fail in this attempt—and if we do, we will try again, and will keep on trying if it takes a lifetime to succeed. No labor, no persistency will be too great, provided the desired end be attained, and the scandal of Catholic Monks engaged in the business be suppressed."<sup>22</sup> Like Bishop O'Connor did

almost 40 years prior, Kittell attempted to take his complaint to Rome.

He sent a signed petition to Archbishop Francis Satolli, the pope's apostolic delegate in Washington, D.C. Kittell asserted the monks of Saint Vincent were advocating intemperance and that the making and selling of intoxicating beverages was dangerous and dishonorable. He believed the monks to be in clear violation of church law and contributing to the spread of intemperance. Satolli urged the monks to stop brewing for public sale in order to curb the evil effects of alcohol on the outside community, but he never forwarded the matter to the pope himself.

As the Saint Vincent "beer fuss" was being debated within the hierarchy of the church, the issue proliferated throughout mainstream press as well. *The Voice*, a Scranton newspaper, argued, "Our fight against the Saint Vincent Brewery is not a local affair. It is a matter that concerns the entire church in the United States.... If you people are content to condemn breweries managed by laymen,

without including in the condemnation those conducted for filthy lucre by monastic institutions, either you excuse the existence of the latter by your silence, or you are guilty of moral cowardice."<sup>23</sup> The Catholic Total Abstinence Society asserted that the brewery should be closed because the religious beer has a quicker and more extreme effect on a man.

In 1898, the Rev. George Zurcher wrote a temperance novel, *Monks and Their Decline*, about the sins of the Saint Vincent monks. Zurcher was appalled that the monks participated in the manufacture and sale of beer instead of advocating sobriety. Since the monks were not under the jurisdiction of the diocese, the bishop could not halt production. Zurcher also believed that "the monk priests are largely to blame that the temperance laws of the Catholic Church in America are not observed in so many sections of this country."<sup>24</sup> While many church and lay entities condemned the Benedictine Monks, countless others were quick to defend the tradition of beer brewing.

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These three photos  
show the brewery  
after the 1926 fire.

Alumni of the college were quick to defend their alma mater and the good monks who had quite an impact in their lives and the lives of the surrounding community. Ernest J. Wimmer, Dr. Sebastian J. Wimmer (relatives of Boniface Wimmer), and Dr. Justin Herold, all Saint Vincent alumni, asserted “the cold-water critics know nothing of the hundreds of children who have been educated, though too poor in this world’s goods to pay their tuition.”<sup>25</sup> In short, the brewery was simply one of the many enterprises at Saint Vincent that helped to contribute funds to educate the poor community. If one was unable to

pay the tuition, they would not be refused an education at Saint Vincent. The beer itself was regarded as a form of nourishment and sustenance, rather than vice. Its defenders ascertained that the beer’s “health giving properties” contributed to rather than detracted from the preservation of faith and the body. Rather than the monks being in violation of church, it was suggested that the temperance advocates themselves were heretics by defying the pope and his papal decree of Saint Vincent brewing rights and that their actions were “libeling and slandering an industrious and God fearing

community.”<sup>26</sup> The *Lake Shore Visitor*, an Erie newspaper, simply stated, “The times are very peculiar. Who can say the day will never come when some crank will not have the good monks called to order for manufacturing sauerkraut out of cabbage.”<sup>27</sup>

Although there was as much defense of the brewery as there was contention for it, Saint Vincent Beer declined in outside sales. There are IRS stamp statements up to 1900 that record the sale of the beverage for public consumption. The monastery continued brewing for its own consumption in spite of pressures to close from temperance advocates.



On January 29, 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment or Prohibition Amendment was ratified and put a legal halt to monastic beer production. The brewery met its final demise on January 13, 1926, when a mysterious fire broke out and destroyed the beer compound. When morning came, only the outer brick and cellars were left standing.<sup>28</sup> The brewery cellars that remained were used for storage as they were undamaged. The remaining pieces of the structures were razed in the early 1990s.

After the fire, the *Saint Vincent College Journal* recorded, "When daylight came, the brick walls were all that remained of a plant

that in its former years had been the object of a prince's favor.... There they stand, four gaunt walls with windows gaping as if the place were gloating over the escape from the ignominy which shrouded the years of its senility, or is it, perhaps, in open-mouthed protest that such could never have been its end had it been permitted to follow the proper bend of its genius."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boniface Wimmer to Karl Von Reisach, March 3, 1848.

<sup>2</sup> Omer U Kline, O.S.B., *The Saint Vincent Archabbey Gristmill and Brewery: 1854-2000*, (Latrobe: Saint Vincent Archabbey Publications, 1999), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Gunter Freudenthal, "An Account of the Brewing Business in German Monasteries," 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest J. Wimmer, Sebastian J. Wimmer, and Justin Herold, "Monkish Beer Defended," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1895.

<sup>5</sup> Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B. to Rupert Leiss, March 27, 1850, Saint Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

<sup>6</sup> Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B. to Gregory Scherr, August 14, 1850. Saint Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kline, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B. to King Ludwig I, September 4, 1851, Saint Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B. to King Ludwig I, July 4, 1853, Saint Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

<sup>14</sup> Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B. to Mathias Loras, February 8, 1856, Saint Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Saint Vincent Beer," *The Pittsburgh Press*, August 11, 1895.

<sup>17</sup> Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B. to Utto Lang, April 19, 1868, Saint Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

<sup>18</sup> Ferdinand Kittell to Archabbot Leander Schnerr, O.S.B. July 24, 1895, Saint Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Unknown Newspaper. August 5, 1895.

<sup>21</sup> Ferdinand Kittell to Archabbot Leander Schnerr, O.S.B. July 29, 1895, Saint Vincent Archabbey Archives, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Brewing Holy Beer," *The Voice*, July 20, 1895.

<sup>24</sup> George Zucher, *Monks and Their Decline*, (Buffalo: 1898), 35.

<sup>25</sup> Ernest J. Wimmer, Sebastian J. Wimmer, and Justin Herold, "Monkish Beer Defended," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1895.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Lake Shore Visitor*, August 15, 1895.

<sup>28</sup> Kline, 53.

<sup>29</sup> *Saint Vincent Journal*, February 1926.