

BEER, BRATS AND A LITTLE BROUHAHA

By Fred Hobbs

From Big Bear Lake, California to Boston, from Helen, Georgia to Las Vegas; from Chicago to Denver. From its home base in Munich, Germany to cities and towns all over the globe, every autumn folks love to celebrate Oktoberfest.

Prince Ludwig of Bavaria started the tradition back in October 1810 when he threw a big party, inviting some 40,000 of his subjects to celebrate his marriage to Princess Therese of Saxony. Today, each year nearly 7-million people lift their beer steins, quaff imported or local brew, down bites of bratwurst, German potato salad and sauerkraut while enjoying the music of a German polka band.

It began as a 16-day extravaganza originally ending the first Sunday in October. That schedule was modified in response to German reunification to a 17 day event to include October 3, German Unity Day. Strangely, though, most of Oktoberfest actually occurs in September.

Over the years, wars and a cholera epidemic caused the celebration to shut down, but since the end of World War II the festival has not only continued but each year has grown in popularity.

The whole notion of Oktoberfest is not a popular one in allof Germany. Historically, a distinct dislike, if not a hatred, has existed between the Bavarians in southern Germany (Munich) and the Prussians of the north including Berlin.

Today, the relationship is more like a rivalry, somewhat akin to Americans from the northern states disparaging the “rednecks” and “Georgia Crackers” from the south while the southern folks poke some fun at the “Yankees”, though not necessarily the baseball team of that name.

Consequently, Oktoberfest for Berliners is a much more subdued affair than the one mounted by their southern cousins, even though the event has been celebrated for at least 60 years, in post World War II Berlin. One critic who attended both versions of the festival described Berlin as “a black t-shirt and techno town as opposed to one emblematic of lederhosen and oompa bands.”

This doesn't mean Oktoberfest can't be fun in either setting or any setting for that matter.

So, we can all salute the occasion with cheers to the spirit of Oktoberfest and to the beverage that is synonymous with it.

No less a renowned American founding father than the great Benjamin Franklin once wrote: “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.”

Prost!