

## THE RISE AND FALL OF LEISY BEER

By Jack Sullivan  
[Special to the Ohio Swirl]

When Cleveland's Leisy Brewing Company closed its door for the last time in 1958, it marked the end of one of America's longest surviving family breweries. Today it is best remembered by collectors who treasure both the pre-Prohibition and later memorabilia associated with the home town brewery.

The family saga begins with Isaac Leisy, an Iowa Mennonite beer-maker who first glimpsed Cleveland in 1873 during a brewers' convention held in the city. He decided right then to move to Ohio and shortly after bought the Frederick Haltnorth Brewery. That facility originally had been established by Jacob Mueller in 1858 and was purchased in 1864 by Haltnorth, a local entrepreneur. His principal use of the brewery was to supply his notorious Haltnorth Beer Garden.

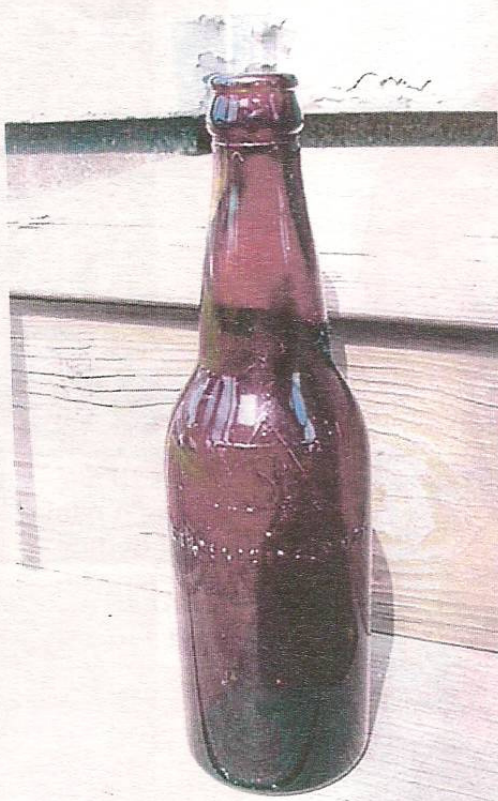
Initially assisted by two brothers, Isaac, at 33 years old, proved to be energetic in pursuing markets in Cleveland, including eventually owning dozens of saloons, and to making use of the excellent railroad facilities to ship his beer regionally. Within a year after his arrival in the city, Leisy was out producing all other Cleveland brewers.

One of the innovations wrought by the company was putting its beer in bottles at a time when most brewers almost exclusively were putting their product in kegs. Shown here is a pre-Prohibition Leisy beer bottle, showing an embossed "star of David" with a script "L" for Leisy in the center (Fig. 1). The symbol is common one in Mennonite iconography, reputed to commemorate early Jewish adherents to the denomination.

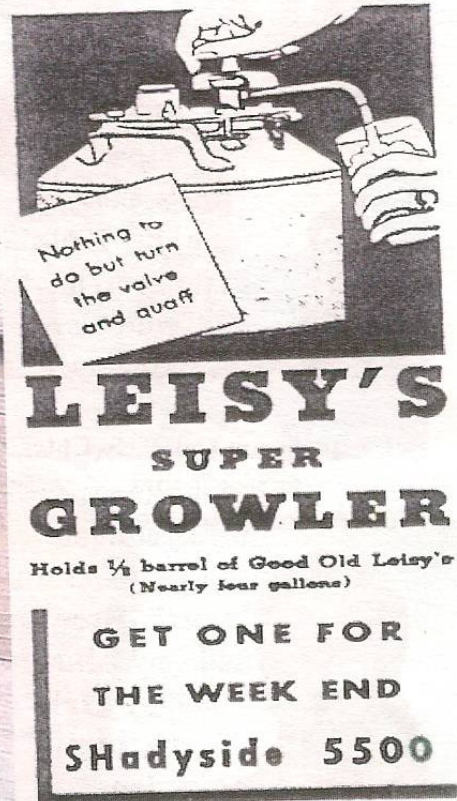
Leisy also experimented with putting beer in mid-sized containers like the "growler" shown in the ad here (Fig. 2). The name was derived from the buckets in which beer



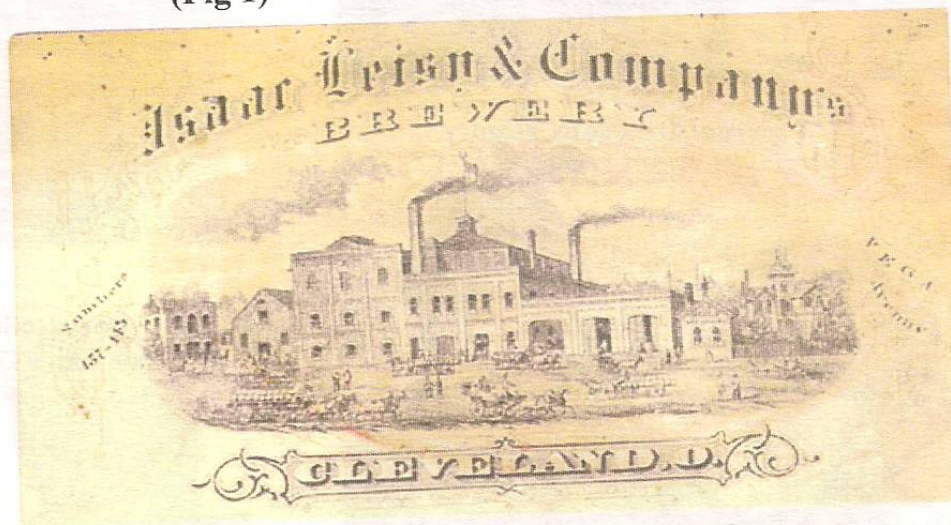
quickly was carried from saloon to home, often called "rushing the growler."



(Fig 1)



(Fig 2)



A trade card (Fig. 3) shows the Leisy brewery as likely looked shortly after its purchase. By 1883, however, Isaac



had embarked on an expansion of the facility that made it one of the most extravagant in Cleveland. It featured a new ice house for aging the beer, a life-sized statute of King Gambrinus, the legendary patron saint of beer, and a large rooftop beer keg sliced through by a weathervane. Isaac's pride in his surroundings was evident by their depiction on a tray (Fig. 4).



The company was located in a largely residential neighborhood and Isaac was known and loved for his contributions to paving local streets, creating parks, and supplying neighbors with electricity during blackouts.

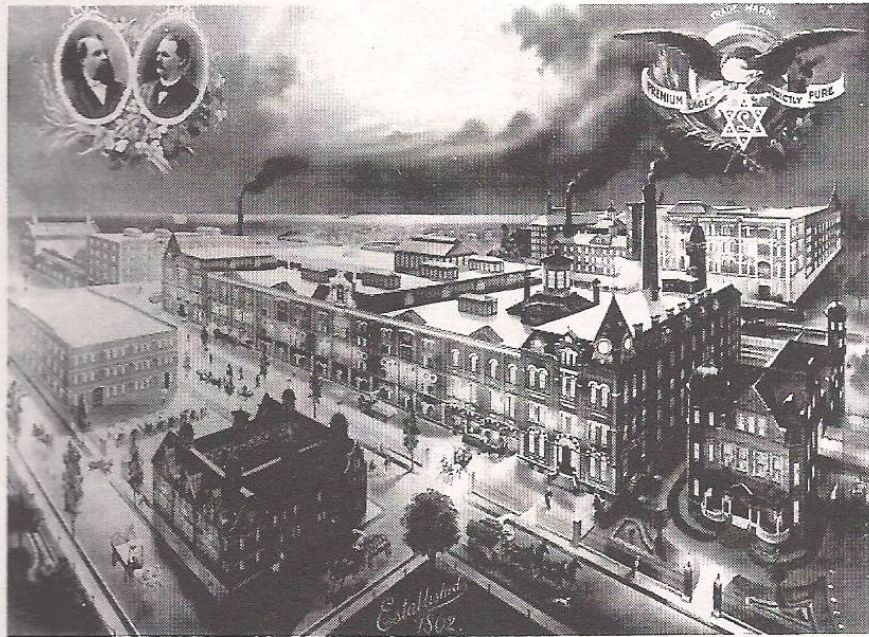
Thus he was greatly mourned when, in failing health for some years, he died in 1892 at the comparatively young age of 54.

#### Enter Otto Leisy

His son was his successor. Equally good as a businessman, Otto Leisy expanded both production and the physical facilities. An artist's drawing of the brewery at the height of its development (Fig. 5) shows a huge plant and the smoke from its stacks blackening the Cleveland sky. At left apparently are photos of Isaac and Otto and at right the logo with the Star of David.

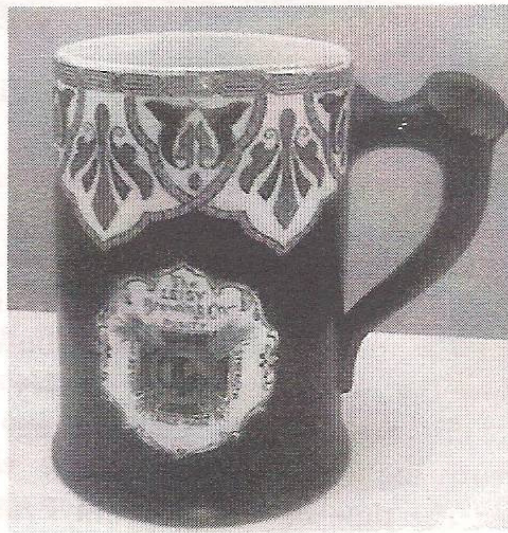
Otto called himself the "Sole Manager" of the brewery and





(Fig 5)

apparently ruled it with an iron hand. A document exists in which he reminds everyone on the payroll of his monopoly of decision-making power. He entitled it "Rules to be Strictly Adhered to in 1910 by Employees in the I. Leisy Brewing Company." He also stubbornly fought an attempt to force all Cleveland breweries into a combine called the Cleveland & Sandusky Brewing Company. He competed against this "trust" vigorously and increased sales



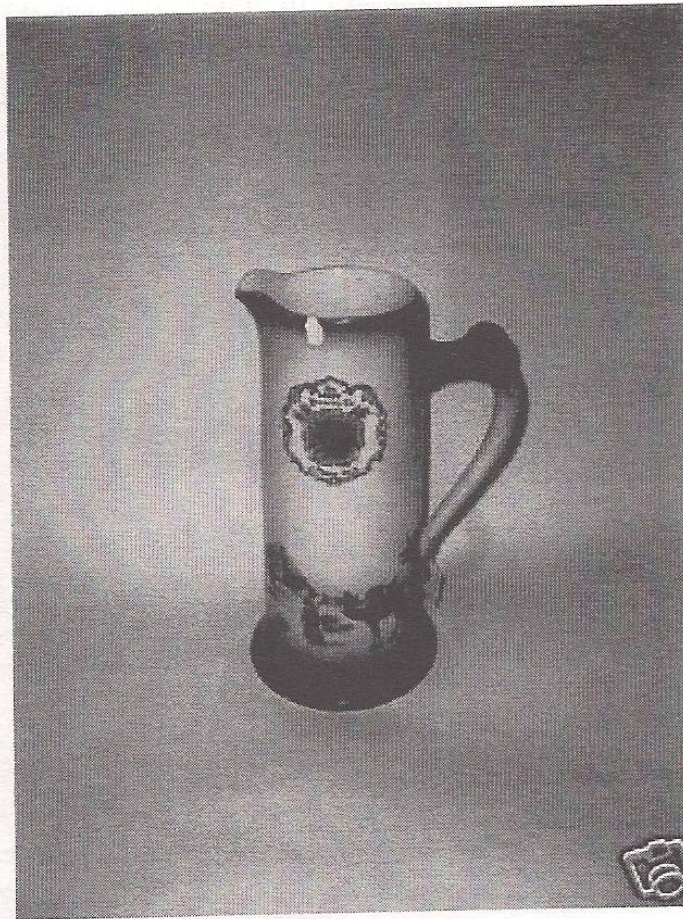
(Fig 6)

from 100,000 barrels annually in 1898 to nearly 300,000 in 1913.

One Leisy ploy was providing customers and saloons with



plenty of giveaways. Among them were beer steins with the company logo, now an "L" surrounded by sheaf's of wheat (Fig. 6). A matching pitcher to pour the beer also was available (Fig. 7). A particularly unusual item is a



(Fig 7)

bottle opener shaped like a baseball pitcher in his windup (Fig. 8).

Like his father, however, Otto, a Cleveland multimillionaire, was known for his philanthropy. It is said that he once offered to contribute \$200,000 to the city to allow the mayor to reduce trolley fares to three cents. Also like his father, Otto died young, at 51 in 1914, and was greatly mourned.

At the time of Otto's death Prohibition was ever present and when Ohio and then the whole Nation went dry, the Leisy Brewery went out of the beer business and tried to survive by brewing a soft drink, When that product failed in 1923 the brewery was closed, 6,000 barrels of the drink were



poured down a sewer, and the equipment sold.

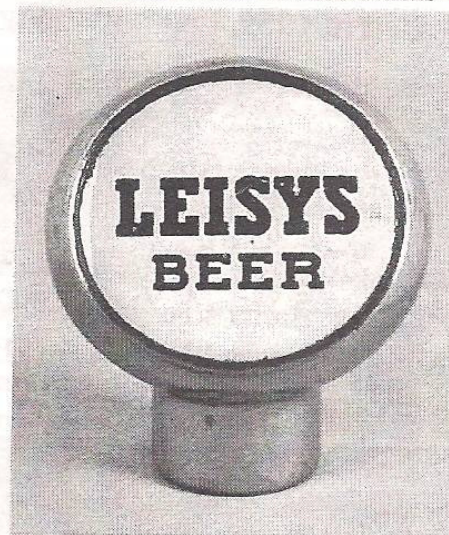
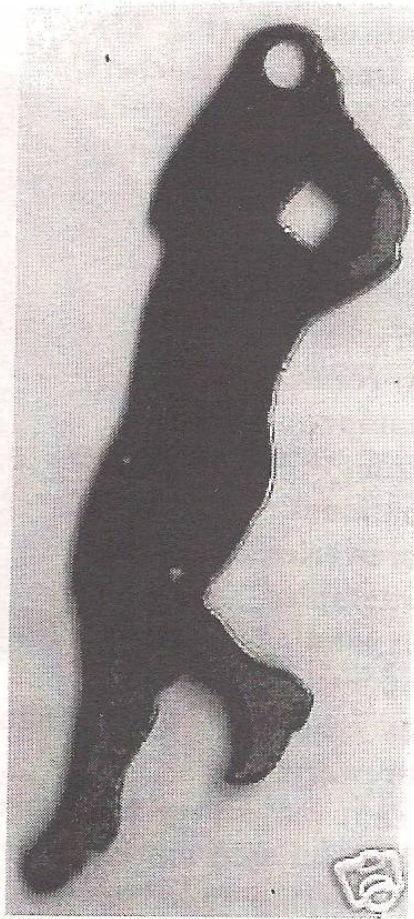
(Fig 8)

### Enter Herbert Leisy

With Repeal, Herbert F. Leisy, Otto's son, revived the Cleveland brewing dynasty. He re-equipped and modernized the brewery. It produced in bottles and cans such brands as Leisy Beer, Leisy Black Dallas malt liquor, Leisy Light (Fig. 9),



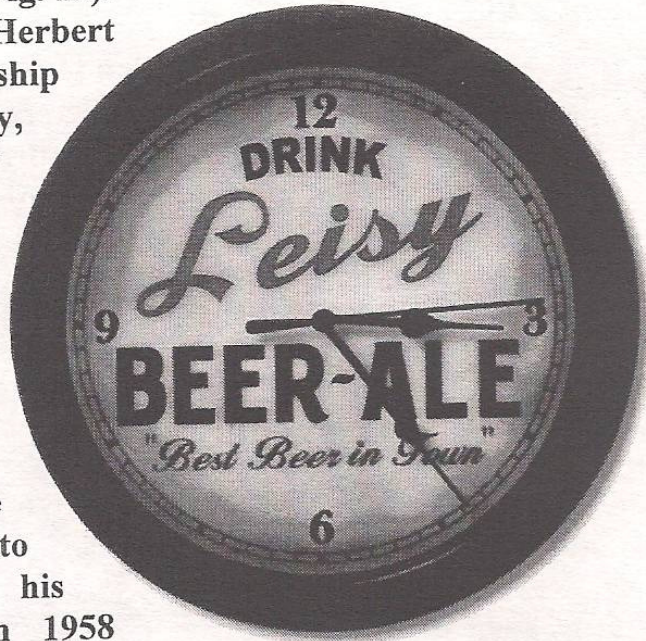
and Mello-Gold. The beer sold in Cleveland and five neighboring states. Moreover, you could still get Leisy out of the tap (Fig. 10). This era gave rise to new kinds of Leisy giveaways, including barroom clocks (Fig. 11) and a utilitarian bottle and can opener (Fig. 12). Remember that Leisy items today are at least a half-century old. An exception is a latter day toy





railroad car (Fig. 13).

During Herbert Leisy's leadership of the brewery, it came under increasing financial pressure as a result of competition from the national breweries. He attempted to expand his operations in 1958 by buying a Buffalo brewery.



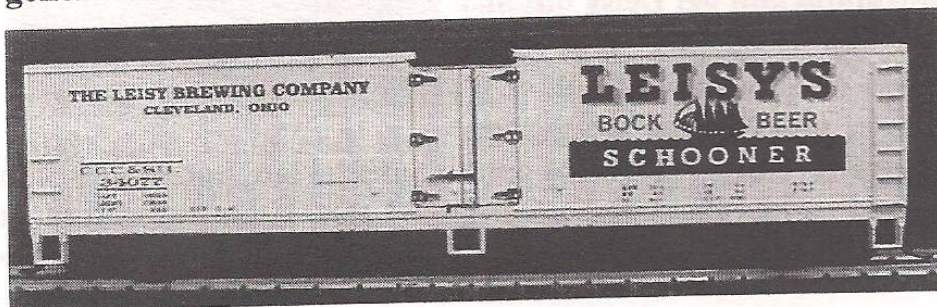
(Fig 11)

That move may have stressed the company financially and Herbert sold out to other interests the same year. The new ownership failed to turn profits around and all operations ceased in 1959.

(Fig 12)



Today there are many old timers in Cleveland who still thirst for a cold glass of Leisy Beer and value the three generations of a Mennonite family who made it, for a time,



the city's favorite brew. For them and us, there remains their memory and their collectables.

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Notes: Two major sources of information for this article were an excerpt from the book, *Breweries of Cleveland*, by Carl H. Miller. It is an indispensable reference for anyone interested in the subject. Out of print, the book can be purchased through Amazon for about \$30. A second source was the online Encyclopedia of Cleveland History entry about the Leisy Brewing Company. The trade card in Fig. 3 is courtesy of the [OhioBreweriana.com](http://OhioBreweriana.com), an excellent website on the state's beer industry.

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**Illustrations:**

Fig. 1: A pre-Prohibition Leisy beer bottle

Fig. 2: Leisy "growler" ad

Fig. 3: Trade card of the early brewery

Fig. 4: Leisy tray with factory scene

Fig. 5: Artist's concept of the Leisy Brewery

Fig. 6: Leisy ceramic beer stein

Fig. 7: Leisy ceramic pitcher

Fig. 8: Baseball pitcher bottle opener

Fig. 9: Can of Leisy Light

Fig. 10: Leisy tap knob

Fig. 11: Leisy barroom clock

Fig. 12: Leisy "church key" opener

Fig. 13: Toy Leisy Bock Beer railroad car