3.2 Beer at the Buckaroo

I'd never heard of 3.2 beer until I got to college. Never was much of a drinker either. I had my first real beer the summer before coming to Iowa for school. Pulled one from an old refrigerator in the basement office of the state park where I worked, a fridge we kept stocked with six packs we'd confiscated from under-agers on the beach. If that fridge got short, we'd go on patrol some Saturday afternoon to restock.

That first beer was so cold it slid down like a dream; but then, as I remember, it'd been a hot day on the Lake Michigan shoreline. Once quitting time came, the whole crew indulged.

So, I was hardly a practiced drinker when I got to college. None of the guys who climbed in a car and drove all the way to South Dakota did so because we loved beer or had to to fulfill some need. Mostly, we crossed the river because doing so was a sin, or something similar at the Christian college I attended. Doing something because you shouldn't creates its own blessedness.

Took a half hour to get to the border, where the Rock and the Big Sioux put a few curves in the otherwise straight road west to Hudson, fifty years ago a town moving past whatever prime it once had.

Decline was written in empty businesses downtown, but Hudson had a tap, a place called "The Buckaroo," where you didn't have to be 21 to belly up to the bar, not as if anyone ever asked. We'd roll in from across the river and drink Grain Belt at what?--fifty cents a glass, 3.2 beer, I was told. I had no idea what that meant.

There was a time 3.2 beer was considered non-alcoholic. Today, it's really a refugee of American prohibition. Could have fooled us back then. We weren't interested in history or nostalgia. We'd toss back a few and turn into Dean Martin wannabees. Eventually, we'd leave with a six pack or two to road load all the way back to Sioux Center.
Who knows why some of us loved it and so many other classmates thought our South Dakota trips transgressions. Sometimes we'd watch the Buckaroo's noisy front door, thinking the Dean of Students would take the trip west himself just to find the sinners. All of that made 3.2 beer even more a delight.

We didn't go often. Once in a while on a Friday night, and nobody got hammered. You'd have to swallow a bathtub of 3.2 to get there. I remember thinking some guys seemed to need a snoot full, because it didn't take long and they'd start singing or dancing or yammering endlessly. Some guys wanted badly to get silly, and I remember wondering why.

The Dean never showed up, and I don't believe I ever saw the Iowa State Patrol hidden on the other side of the bridge at the place the locals claimed they sometimes would be. We never got caught. Back then, dorm counselors weren't armed with breathalyzers. As sin goes, the Buckaroo was pretty darn petty. Dante never created a level of hell for 3.2 beer.

Confession is good for the soul, you're thinking, and that's why he's telling this tale. That maybe partly true. I never got caught drinking 3.2 beer that I remember, so at 71 years old maybe it's time to come clean.

The real reason is that ever since the Great Depression, 3.2 beer maintained an American presence, but just last week Kansas officially dumped the law that said grocery stores could only sell the weak-kneed little brother of ordinary brew. Nation-wide in 2019, there's no market for it, so it's the end of the road for 3.2.

No big deal really. No lament required; no ceremony. For the most part, 3.2 has been gone for years already. Just thought I'd mention it.

And, in case you're wondering, Main Street in Hudson, South Dakota, has fewer merchants than it did a half century ago. Still, I can't help but smile when I tell you, just in case you're interested, that yes, there still is a Buckaroo.