

Excavation at Cranky Sam Public House uncovers mostly forgotten pieces of Missoula's history

As anyone who has tried to start up a brewery will surely admit, unforeseen complications can seem nearly inevitable. Prospective owners must put together a number of disparate puzzle pieces, after all—beer recipes, brewhouse equipment, taproom buildout, plumbing, electricity, staffing, licensing and permits—often before the first beer can even be brewed.

Most future brewery owners don't have to deal with facilitating an archaeological excavation, however. Jennifer Heggen, who is hoping to open Cranky Sam Public House in downtown Missoula in January next to the separately-owned brewery that will supply the beer for its taps, certainly didn't plan for it. She hadn't ever planned to open a pub named "Cranky Sam" at all, in fact.

"When we got under the agreement to rent our property, we were going to have a different name for the pub," Heggen said. She and her husband Jed already had a design mapped out for the space and had even acquired a brewing system—purchased from Bowser Brewing Co. in Great Falls when they closed down about two years ago—to be used by the separately-owned brewery.

"We didn't feel as attached to the building as much as we wanted to, though, so we asked the brewer to visit the city archives to kind of figure out what the history of the space was," Heggen said. "That's when he ended up meeting Nikki Manning and Kate Kolwicz from the University of Montana, who guided him toward the information about Cranky Sam, who used to be a pretty famous guy back in the day."

As it turns out, downtown Missoula was a hotbed of activity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "The area that the brewery is located on was once part of Missoula's small but raucous red-light district and Chinatown," Kolwicz, a master's student in the University's Department of Anthropology, said.

A Chinese immigrant who went by Cranky Sam to the English-speaking residents of Missoula—his actual name is unknown—played a central role in some of the illicit activities going on in the area. An article in an issue of *The Missoulian* dated January 17th, 1909 announced Sam's arrest for running a "hop-joint" (opium was known as "hops" at the time, though brewing has since monopolized the term) using terms for Sam, his compatriots and their activities that we won't reprint here.

Sam appears to have died about a year and a half later, as according to Heggen his October 18th, 1910 obituary reads, "He was known to every frequenter of the restricted district as a man who knew no law and respected no person."

With this information in hand, the Heggens rebranded as Cranky Sam Public House to focus on the historic aspects of the area and their building. Shortly after, their construction crews began making discoveries around the property. A team putting in a tank uncovered bottles and pieces of pottery, and plumbers found much of the same while digging a trench.



Cobalt glass medicine bottle found at the future site of Cranky Sam Public House. Photo by K. Essex.



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ANTHROPOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENT,
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA



"We had already changed the name, and then all of a sudden started uncovering all of this stuff," Heggen said. "We had a group of about 10 students from the University looking over everything and they're now in the process of dating and categorizing and cataloguing all of the items. They uncovered quite a find."

"The site has turned up thousands of artifacts. We have found intact liquor, beer and medicinal bottles, ceramics, countless ceramic shards and glass shards," Kolwicz said. "We have also found artifact types associated with the Chinese specifically, such as distinctly Chinese ceramics, pill vials associated with Chinese traditional medicine, opium paraphernalia and Go game pieces. Artifacts that could be associated with prostitution, including perfume bottles, feminine hygiene products, and cosmetics jars were also collected at the site."

The artifacts seem likely to provide a wealth of knowledge about the Chinatown that once existed in Missoula, as well as the area's history of sex work. "As archaeologists familiar with downtown Missoula, we had always had an interest in the site due to its association with the Chinese in Missoula, but it wasn't until excavation began in late summer that we realized how important the site really was," Kolwicz said. "Because of the small size of the Chinese population in Missoula and

the amount of urban development that has occurred over the last hundred-plus years, this site is one of the only intact Chinese archaeological sites that we are likely to find in the city. Unlike larger, better documented Chinatowns, like in San Francisco, we know very little about the Chinese experience here.”

The discoveries have radically reshaped plans for the public house; arguably, the Heggens are now trying to find a potential brewpub amongst the history, rather than the other way around. “We took all of the beams from the old roof, which are thought to be over 100 years old, and we’re planning to make our bar top out of them,” Heggen said. “We’ve also uncovered a fairly risqué mural of a pin-up girl that they think was done in the 1940s—we’re working with the Montana Historical Foundation and a local artist to have it put back to its original state.”

The mural’s color scheme will provide the template for the rest of the pub’s materials, and one of the rooms on the separate brewery side will reveal a stone wall belonging to what they believe to be one of the oldest buildings in Missoula, dating back to the 1860s. “The components that are true to the space have become elemental parts of the interior,” Heggen said. “We had a plan as to how we wanted the brewery to be, and we’ve scrapped almost the whole thing in favor of the things we’ve found.”

Of course, many of the sensitive historical elements pertaining to prostitution, Chinese immigrants and Cranky Sam’s opium dealings have the potential to be depicted in a sensational, casually racist or culturally-appropriated manner, meaning that thoughtful consideration is paramount.

“Among our core values is always encouraging the cultural diversity of Missoula,” Heggen said. “From way back when to right now, we want to celebrate the diversity of this city. We want to be respectful and not be judgmental at all.”

“The owners of the public house have been incredibly conscious of and sensitive to the nature of the artifacts and the risks of perpetuating negative and inaccurate stereotypes,” Kolwicz said. “They understand that cultural heritage is complex, and it’s important to them to represent and honor the history of the former



A construction crew works on the exterior and future patio area in front of Cranky Sam Public House, which the Heggens hope to open in January.

residents of the area without racial, class or cultural distortions that are so easy to perpetuate.”

The pub will open next door to Biga Pizza, a popular restaurant in the process of expanding, adding another pizza oven and some extra seating. Patrons at Cranky Sam will have the option of ordering pizzas from next door to enjoy alongside their beer.

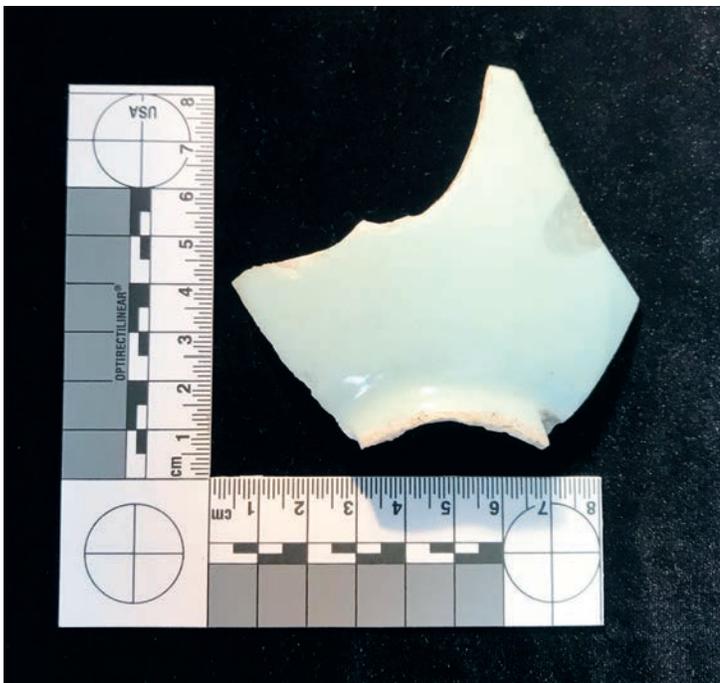
Timmy Evon will take on head brewing duties at the connected but separately-owned brewery that will supply beer to Cranky Sam. Walls and a door will separate the two businesses, though they’ll both be housed in the same richly historical setting (you gotta love MT brewery licensing). Evon previously brewed for Dry Dock Brewing Co. in Aurora, CO and will have his hands full keeping beer flowing to the 16 taps planned for Cranky Sam. “Our mission is to focus on drinkability,” Heggen said. “We want to be welcoming to those looking for a hoppy IPA, but we’ll also make more balanced beers that are approachable for everybody.”

A display case exhibiting some of the items found during excavation alongside a timeline of Missoula’s history will help to educate visitors to the public house and put its various features in the appropriate historical context. “Even though history may sometimes be hurtful, it isn’t something that can be nor should be ignored,” Kolwicz said. “If anything, being transparent about the history of these historically marginalized groups and open to learning about it is an effective way to avoid sensationalization, perpetuation of racial stereotypes, and further exploitation.

“Archaeology does no public good if it is hidden away in the basements of academia, and venues like Cranky Sam Public House bring archaeology to the people. I am so thrilled that Jed, Jennifer and Timmy reached out to us.”

The rest of the items are likely to remain at the University of Montana Anthropological Curation Facility, where they can be examined and used to instruct for years to come.

“The site and its associated artifacts have the potential to inform future research projects for both local and non-local scholars,” Kolwicz said. “As a native Missoulian, I have always been fascinated with the lives of ‘people of little note’ in historic Missoula, but never dreamed that I would be lucky enough to find an archaeological site in downtown Missoula. This site will probably end up being not only the topic of my master’s thesis, but part of a doctoral dissertation as well.” ■



A fragment of a celadon rice bowl, often associated with Chinese archaeological sites, found at Cranky Sam. Photo by Kate Kolwicz.