

Ice beer is sign of decaying civilization

By BEN HAMRICK

Just when you think things can't get worse, they invent ice beer.

Do we need any further signs that the end is near?

I'm not really an apocalyptic kind of guy. Yeah, I am pretty woebegone about this whole intractable ethnic strife thing. The hole in the ozone layer gives me the periodic jitters. Not to mention those ongoing earthquakes; they can get a guy to asking a cosmic question or two.

But, hey, you know what Forrest Gump's bumper sticker says. Stuff happens. (Yeah, I know, but it is a widely read school newspaper.)

Ice beer, though, is not stuff happens. Environmental devastation, war, disease, social mayhem, natural disasters, tuition increases, those are stuff happens, they being part of the natural order of things. But the development of ice beer is the product of deliberate human effort.

Whatever happened to the health-risk free cigarette? Was that just too tough a nut to crack? Why another stupid beer?

We used to build great cities, devise complex political systems, create languages, explore the sciences, and produce inspirational art. Now, we make ice beer.

They say it's what beer was meant to be. Right. And Barry Manilow is what rock-and-roll was meant to be. What ice beer really is, is pseudo-beer. The ad campaign ought to be "get unreal. Get ice." or "Living in a virtual reality? Try a virtual beer. Ice."

(Now I've crossed the line. Some marketing professor will not recognize those sentences as a condemnation of artificiality or simply won't care because he will see it as a way to show a student how to make a fortune. I can hear him now: "David, it's the perfect postmodern in-joke. Nobody believes there is a reality anymore. What is reality? It's your perspective, right? Ice beer. The new reality; no reality. Get it? The point is, it's young, it's fly, it's can't miss.")

And the student makes an ad. And it becomes a great success. And I, instead of having sounded a warning, will have actually hastened the extinction of the human race. To the prof and the would be ad guy: You're welcome. To the rest of us: Sorry.)

It's not that the people who develop ice beer are bad or evil. I'm sure they are very good people. Intelligent. Make great

small talk at parties. No, the problem is not with any one individual or even with some selection of individuals. The problem is that such shows little regard for the fruit of its labors, so out of tune with what matters that it must have run its course.

How can a rational person sleep through the night knowing things like this are going on?

I have two theories about the genesis of ice beer.

Theory one: A joke some one did not get. According to this theory, the whole thing started around the coffee urn. Their conversation turned to what most people talk about in the workplace: their jobs. They started telling jokes. The jokes ran the gamut from the boss to the co-workers to the company's product itself.

At one point, everybody was laughing about all the new types of beer on the market, even though everyone knew, even as they laughed, that because the performance of those beers determined whether they'd get profit sharing next year, it wasn't really funny. Truth and reality work that way. Anyway, while people were joking somebody threw out something new. "Hey, what about freeze dried beer; it would be like instant coffee." Everybody roared.

Everybody, that is, but those in management. "This is the best idea since dry," thundered the president.

Even though the last great experiment — clear beer — didn't work, all were sure that ice beer would soon overwhelm and take over market share.

Before you could say "lame brained," a division of the company had itself a new special little project.

Theory two: Conspiracy. This theory holds that the heads of all the major beer companies held a summit meeting, perhaps at one of those great ideas — retreat — and they decided to spread the risk around by embarking on this enterprise together.

I mean, have you noticed how, all of a sudden, every major beer company on the plan seems to have come out with an ice beer? What is that — chance? Coincidence?

Did the world really need another silly beer? What was wrong with all the other stupid beers: light, dry, non-alcoholic, and clear? It wasn't as if light, dry, and non-alcoholic, and clear weren't already goofy enough. Maybe the niche market for stupid, silly, and goofy is greater than I thought.

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The triumph of marketing. That's what it is. And that's why the world is headed to hell in a handbasket.

Don't get me wrong. There is nothing inherently wrong with marketing. The name P.T. Barnum is hallowed in some quarters, and the mention of the pet rock causes some to become misty eyed as they remember their long departed companions.

In fact, is it possible to love America and not appreciate marketing? Through garish boardwalk amusement parks, marketing built the New Jersey coast. By way of sanctimonious New Age faddism, it props up the California economy. Unsuspecting college-aged people are convinced that certain lifestyles are a positive by a group of musicians who have so altered their own

chemistries that they no longer remember where they have been or where they are going, not to mention being able to even approach directing anyone which way to turn their head as they vomit.

The way they smile at us while selling us a parasite that's feeding on our lungs which has supported this state for over a hundred years as it killed many of its finest citizens.

And Nevada would still just be an unspoiled expanse of desert if not for the shining artifice on the dirt, Las Vegas.

So, in that sense, ice beer is just another manifestation of the spirit that built this great country. Indeed, I would raise my glass and make a toast to it if not for the sad fact that I would be hoisting something totally inappropriate, a beer with body and texture and richness. Which is to say, something not gimmicky.

But when marketing becomes the end-all, you are left with all sorts of horrors. The five-day

stubble as fashion statement, for instance; how did the look of a hobo become synonymous with some panache of ruggedness? Marketing. And glamour shot — for kids no less. Dopey? Marketing.

I should make it clear that the problem is not marketing per se. It is the degree to which it has come to permeate our lives and, in so doing, further erodes the line between artificial and real. People will buy ice beer. They will drink it. They will think it is good. They will think it's beer.

And the species will have taken one more step toward the abyss.

Take heart, though. As fearsome a sign as it is, the advent of ice beer does not signal the immediate end of the world. That won't happen for a few years yet.

You'll know when it happens. When you see an advertisement for a light nonalcoholic clear dry ice beer, duck. Someone will pop one open. Pffft. That will be the sound of the world ending.

Greed is God in Las Vegas as folks flock to hit it big

By ALAN P. FELTON

(The following is excerpted from a longer article entitled "Greed is God.")

Every year thousands of people go to Las Vegas in the hopes of winning big. Some do pull off the impossible, like the swine who won \$2.7 million while I was in Vegas. But for every winner there are thousands of losers, most of whom are run out of town and driven into the Nevada desert wearing only their underwear and a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo "Vulture Meat."

Las Vegas is the most dangerous town in America. Its streets are neon canyons filled with sex, violence, and greed. Only raving lunatics and seriously depraved masochists go there, but when I wanted a vacation my travel agent assured me I would fit in perfectly.

Greed is God in Las Vegas. Nothing else matters to a gambler but the chance to make the big score. I saw a man who had been sitting at the same slot machine for five days, refusing to eat and surviving only with Bloody Marys in his system. Another gentlemen had a heart at-

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tack while standing at the craps table. As he waited for the paramedics, the man asked me to prop him up on a stool so he could continue to play until help arrived. Demented behavior is the norm in Vegas.

Las Vegas is also home to packs of sadistic senior citizens who roam the town in search of fresh meat and a place to gamble away their Social Security checks. This is a violent crowd with tunnel vision when it comes to winning big. One old woman viciously attacked me with a pair of brass knuckles just because I sat down at what was supposedly "her" slot machine. Soon an entire gang of AARP members pounced upon me, each intent on introducing me to the true lifestyle of Las Vegas.

It is no wonder that celebrities don't flock to Las Vegas like they used to in the old days. The town has just gotten too ugly for most of them. Wayne Newton is still performing at the Sands, but his only audience is a group of con-

fused, blind souls who mistake him for Elvis Presley.

Only Caesar's Palace, the gambling Mecca, can produce the big show anymore. But the scene at the Palace can turn ugly and often does. I witnessed George Bush losing heavily at the roulette wheel, drinking martinis by the dozens, and grumbling about lousy perks for ex-Presidents, while Barbara made her way into a loud procession of retired women going to terrorize the Circus-Circus. I wasn't about to get involved with that crowd, so I got drunk with Tony Curtis in one of the Palace's bars. As they say, when in Rome...

The only way to survive in Las Vegas is to give into the greed and violence. People who are perfectly respectable doctors, lawyers, and college professors in their own communities transform into venom-spitting drag queens while they are in Vegas.

The only alternative is to go out into North Vegas to shoot up with the heroin junkies and eat snake meat hot dogs, but only professional freaks are allowed there. The rest of us must settle for the dangers of the Strip, where no one ever sleeps. No one can; they are too afraid.