

Interview with Lark Ludlow
Interviewed by Russ Magnaghi
June 22, 2014

START OF INTERVIEW

Russ Magnaghi (RM): Interview with Lark Ludlow, Tahquamenon Falls Brewery and Pub on June 22nd, 2014. Okay the first question I usually, you can give me some variation of it, so if there's any mention of a date or something, your birthday?

Lark Ludlow (LL): My birthday 3-18-51.

RM: What we're going to talk about today is how you got involved with the whole history of the brewing here and how you got started.

LL: All of our stories are very different and mine is no exception. It's very different. It's certainly a second career later in life kind of project. Previously, I lived in upstate New York, the ____ area. A very beautiful part of our country and I was involved in corporate human resources management for some fairly large corporations. I've been able to utilize that background in running in this business because not only am I a brewer but I also manage the restaurant. So, the entire facility is my responsibility in every way. From payroll to greeting customers and then of course making the beer. The reason the opportunity came up for me was that my youngest brother and I acquired this property where we're sitting. It's just two acres. We acquired it in 1987 and it was in my family at that time. The buildings that were constructed here in 1949 were in such ill-repair that none of them could really be saved. Although, I must say that I do remember my grandfather's hunting cabin. It's like living in a dollhouse but it's very sweet and it's the only surviving building on the property. Everything else that you see here has been reconstructed and in a slightly different style. My grandfather's buildings were more modest and lumber camp style. While they had the lumber camp feel, these are much bigger, higher ceilings and so forth. The first big building out there is the gift shop. It's made out of ____ beam construction. It's just absolutely a beautiful building. We did that in 1990. This facility didn't come along until 1996 and that's when I said to my brother, "We have these two acres, summer only and I'm thinking about changing my career. What if we build a building where people can come in in the winter time or on bad bug days in the summer and have something to eat and oh, by the way, the microbrewing industry is on a high climb." I was thinking about this before '96, before we actually started. At that time, there wasn't even a brew pub in the U.P. I don't think. Although by the time we became open, I think there were two. The Vierling was the first in Marquette, I'm pretty certain of that. You will find out in your history but to my knowledge it was the first.

RM: I think there was the _____. That might've been the first one.

LL: You think so? Okay, then very soon after was the Lake Superior Brewing Company in Grand Marais. Anyway, my family thought that this could be an interesting idea for people to come into this beautiful park, have a really nice people here and have fresh beer, what a nice experience. This is very

unique. There is not another park in the state of Michigan that has a brewery within its boundaries. This property has always been private. It was purchased by my grandfather in 1949. It previously was owned by a lumber company. He purchased it because the park was in the process of _____ properties what we know today as the Tahquamenon Falls State Parks. It was only 160 acres that he was able to buy but he gifted all but two acres to the state. He kept these two acres. He designated where the parking lot would be so that people would have to walk through the woods and have that experience of the forest. So, you can't drive up—like some people say, “Can't we just drive up?” Nope. You have to have this wonderful experience. So, we can thank him for his wisdom because I think that was wonderful.

RM: Now, what was his name?

LL: His name was John Barrett. He was a logger. He was one semester short of getting his law degree at the University of Michigan and his father called him home in the Depression and said, “I need your help.” It's interesting how our lives change, just like for me, human resources to brewing beer. I mean, who would guess? Unfortunately, he died at a young age of 55 and I was just 8 years old but I do remember him well. He was gifted at telling stories and making up things. We would drive up here. I was here every summer of my life and in those days, the roads were dirt roads. There was nothing paved and sometimes narrow two-tracks we would go on and he would have us feeling that we were quite lost, where he knew exactly where he was going but he wanted us to feel like we were lost. It was dreadful. He had a great sense of humor. Miraculously, we were fine and would find our way. He was just a fun person.

RM: I would just like to add to this that, even today, the only dining facilities in the area are at Newberry and Paradise and they don't come close to what you have here.

LL: Oh thank you. Someday, I mean, _____ been through a very _____ time. I remember when I was a little girl, for instance Blaney Park and Ted will tell you this, your friend Ted, my cousin Ted, when it was gloomy, we would go there on Saturday nights and dance to great live big band music. All the talent in this area, it was wonderful. People would come in- Blaney Park was the number one resort in the U.P way back. You could fly in. They had their own airport, they had a golf course, they had horseback riding, fine dining. It was just so lovely. It beautifully manicured. There was an Olympic-size swimming pool there. It was immaculate and people came from all over the country, very, very wealthy people. Like I said, they would fly their own planes in—

RM: I have a fellow from downstate, Jim Cameron, he is a teacher—

[AUDIO MOMENTARILY CUTS OUT]

LL: Speaking of Jim _____, when my grandfather built the building and he leased them to other people to rent in the summer, one of the tourist things that was here was it was little building out by the parking lot and there was a printing press and you could have your name put across a page of the newspaper. Then it would follow underneath it with big letters, “So and so, _____ Falls in the _____.” Then you can proceed to read all these great stories that they had made up. Ted _____ but Jimmy used to be out there doing that. He's a great friend. He's a very close family friend.

RM: I guess I should say he knows me intimately.

LL: Oh yeah, that's what he does. He's hilarious, isn't he?

RM: Just wonderful. Even when you go into the procedures, there's always a whole little string of jokes and whatnot. I do have to interview him and I told him I can get back to him. I said, "I do want to interview you on your reminiscences of Blaney Park." I could start with him.

LL: He would be awesome. He has wonderful recall and he's just gifted at speaking. He can tell you great stories.

RM: Then his brother, Matt ____, I worked with him at Northern. We're good friends. I guess he worked there as well but he's sort of the exact opposite of Jim. He's kind of quiet and introspective and Jim's outgoing.

LL: So, Jim used to work out here so when you see him—and when he was in high school, that's what he did. Isn't that funny? When my brother and I—I wasn't here but I was involved financially, everything you see out there except this building and again it was summer only and my brother, he had a degree from Northern in business and he had just finished a degree in meteorology from University of Wisconsin and that's his first love, weather, but he put that on hold because he wanted to run this gift shop. I said, "No, no, no." You can run with your career. You can always come back to this but you can't go the other way. It would be unusual and be very difficult. You'd have to go back to school again because weather is so complicated on but he's on the computer all the time looking at weather, telling us what his thoughts are.

RM: Your brother was in meteorology?

LL: Yes, it's his favorite thing but he wanted to do this gift shop and they've done very well and we've enjoyed it. His wife is a social worker in the school system in Petoskey but was in Newberry. So, together, they were able to do this and make a good living. My thought was, we could be open all year round and I was just looking for something very different to do. I've never run a restaurant before. I had never really worked in a restaurant before and I certainly didn't know a thing about brewing beer but I thought it was a great idea for this park. So, they all agreed and we did this. I was supposed to go to a brew school in California and this project had so many complications, part of which was associated with being here in the park and other parts were because a delay in getting the equipment. The equipment, by the way, it's a ten barrel system. It was made by ____ Breweries and actually, physically made in Hungary and then shipped over to the United States. I love the system but they never were able to give me a manual on all the parts. I mean nothing. In the process of doing that, they went out of business. So, you can imagine, I didn't know one thing. I mean, I researched their equipment and so forth and I was very impressed and when I went out to visit their facility, I just loved the beer. So, I had those recipes. That was a good thing. So, my first ____ were with one of their technical people when they set up the facility. That was my education if you can even imagine that. I was never a home brewer. I mean, everybody assumes that I was. For me, I'm just overwhelmed with running this restaurant and trying to learn all this. So, for a short time, I contracted with the brewer from the Vierling. His name is Chumley, he's a very good guy. I called Terry Doyle, he's the owner of the Vierling and I said, "Terry, could I pay your brewer to come over and help me?" which was a very

unusual thing to ask, especially back then and he did. He would come over and we would just do things together but I'd have him doing most of the work while I was running the restaurant but we were still going to do parts of things together. Anyway, I finally got weaned from Chumley and I was doing this by myself. I've been doing it for 18 years now. The recipes that I started with bohemian style and I love what I call my _____ and it's a red beer. It's very good. I'm sorry that you're here when I'm down to two and then the pale ale also is very good. All the beers I make are on the lighter side, in terms of _____ because our clientele is not here just because we're a brew pub. Although, there's a tremendous brew pub following now after all this time but that's taken years to cultivate in this area. People come here from all over the world to see this pub and secondly, they're here for the food and then I'd say thirdly for the beer. Anyway, it's been fun. I remember in the first few years, particularly in the winter, the dominant visitor would be the snowmobilers. In the winter, they don't drink as much of my beer. They want bottled beer because so much of the advertising is around that. You know, they have a tremendous amount of sponsoring at events and so forth and you see all the ads on TV and I think it heavily influences all these people. So, I would walk around with a tray of little samples and ask them to taste the beer. It was really quite remarkable to have some of them who have never had a microbrewed beer before and they actually liked it, most of them, 99% of them. They come here now and they drink our beer because we get that clientele. In the winter, we get very much the same clientele.

RM: Do you get cross-country skiers?

LL: Yes, cross-country skiing is very good and it's right here in the park. It's beautiful. You can ski right here and then come in and eat and have a beer. We also have a full bar too.

RM: So, now, from the very beginning, you've remained open year round?

LL: Yes, I thought we would open literally year round but I learned that there's times in between the season where there's no one here. We are closed for most of April. Believe me, there's no one here. Nobody wants to be here then. Also, we're open through the third Sunday in October and then we close through the middle of December because there's nothing happening then either. I thought, with my first experience at this, not knowing, I thought the hunters would come here but very few of them do and that is because of the tradition of going to their camps and making their own food, which is understandable. It's great. It's a great tradition. Otherwise, they might end up at a late night bar and we're done by 9:00 because it's not a final destination. There's no lodging here. There's some pretty strict restrictions on alcohol and people don't want to be driving, at least not very far. So, that's why we're not open late at night, which is fine for me because I do this seven days a week and it's pretty intense. One big factor that inspired me, as far as these thoughts about making beer, was the quality of our water. People come in and think that I am actually getting water from the river. Anyway, I tell them I do. I've got my _____ that looks just like the river water. Our well is only 85 feet deep here and is the most perfect water for brewing. It's just great water to drink. You should have a glass before you leave and you'll know what I mean. I don't have to do anything to treat the water and I think about these breweries in cities where they have to take the chlorine out and have to do all these things. I just can't even imagine. So, that was another inspiration, the water. It was a gift.

RM: That was part of your thinking.

LL: I didn't even know how to make beer at that point. I just knew that the quality of the water was probably number one.

RM: It sort of sounds like, and this is kind of a constant thread that I'm going to put in the book, it sounds like you growing up here and being a part of the country, you became familiar with some of these things on your own. So now, you kind of see this has a community, a public venture, I mean ____ people, bringing people here as kind of a destination and also now, you have the fellow back here that's going to go out of his way to visit all of the brew pubs.

LL: We want people to do that. When I heard you speaking with him, I just wanted to get him that publication. Part of the fun, I don't really feel like I'm competing with other breweries at all. I feel like we're giving a gift to people and they need to visit and take part in all the gift giving and that's part of the fun. We all do things a little differently. All the amenities that the different brew pubs or breweries are all different, the atmosphere, some offer food, some don't.

RM: Because now I guess the, what is it called—up in Copper Harbor. He's bottling so that he can sell it. I think he's only going down to Calumet.

LL: You're not thinking of the Library?

RM: No, no, no. This is one in Copper Harbor. It's called the Brick House or something up there. It's relatively new, maybe been open three years. So, it's the end of US-41 and the people wanted the beer. So, now I guess he's bottling it and selling it in the lower part of the Copper Country, the lower Keweenaw peninsula but he's not going being the bridge there in Houghton. So, there's a number of, as I get into this, I begin to get the essence and the characteristics of the various breweries and they're all different but the one constant element is the fun, the excitement and people _____. I'd never seen that around any business in most cases. Your following the same pattern. All the other ones I've been to, all the guys are wearing shorts and are in the midst of—they have water bubbling all over the place.

LL: In most cases, at some point, I hope you get to see more women involved in this process. One of the things that was told to me was that there was no way that you're going to brew and run a restaurant at the same time. You have to choose one or the other and I said, "I'm sorry, that's not in my business plan." To make it work here, just because of the nature of it, I have to do both and I haven't met anybody that's doing both either.

RM: So, that's unique to you.

LL: I think it's quite unique.

RM: It's unique to the breweries in the Upper Peninsula. That's why I wanted too—I didn't even give it a second thought, I wanted to obviously include you because you're so unique being in a state park. When I first heard of it a number of years ago, I said, "The state of Michigan is brewing beer?" I mean, the state of Michigan is uptight about liquor. We have a very bad New England temperance mentality that affects all the liquor, the wine, the beer and talking to people, a lot of the regulations probably fit at a certain time but they don't fit today and now the Brewers Association is working with the state

and is revising some of this because it's a major industry.

LL: Absolutely, it's wonderful too.

RM: So, you see it as just "fun." Now, how does this compare to your _____?

LL: It compares—the role that I played doing human resources, generally, I was an adviser to different groups of people and different skilled people. From the house level management people to people _____ together and to clerical staffs in the electric, baseboard air conditioning business there was one faulty situation. That was a lot of fun. It's a non-union facility. It used to be owned by the Singer Company years and years ago. It was wonderful to work with all those people. Then I went to New York State Electric and Gas Corporation and working with a whole different nature of people, different skills and so forth. I was in an advisory capacity. So now, I have my own business and quite frankly, there's no one to help and say, "Well, have you thought about doing this differently?" or "Here, let me help you with this," because I'm doing all the aspects of what makes a little business. At any one time, I'm really involved with about forty different people that work for me. Some of them are part-time, some just in the summer and there's always a changeover but I experience a lesser percentage of change than a lot of restaurants and a lot of breweries because people love to be here. That makes me feel good.

RM: That's sort of the whole situation here: the brewery, the restaurant, the gift shop, the whole complex. So, it's just a fun experience. You're sort of reliving your childhood, in terms of having a good time with it. Now, how do you view the future, in terms of what you plan to do here?

LL: There is not a plan of succession. That's what we need to work on because I'm 63 years old. I can't do this forever. It'd be nice for, in some way or another, for this to continue. So, we're working on that. I don't know what we'll do. So far, this has all been family.

RM: Now, your family has been involved with this, just to recap, your family has been involved since your grandpa.

LL: My grandfather started the property. This wasn't passed down to us which is kind of interesting. It skipped a generation but my mother was an only child and she passed away early in her life unfortunately and my youngest brother and I bought the property. It wasn't anything that was considered —this is what you needed to do. It didn't work that way but it ended up staying in the family which is interesting. I don't know how much longer it'll be like that. My nieces and nephew are all involved with other things, very different but you know, maybe at some point in their lives, they'll want to do something. I was in my forties when I thought about it, late forties. So, it could happen. It's just two little acres.

RM: Yeah, this was the winter I've had in Marquette. I mean, most yoopers, usually when somebody brings something up _____, this year, everybody agrees that this was a cold winter. We had a number deaths of people. This cross-country skier had problems, went out and found him in Marquette—now, aren't there some activities here in Paradise in the winter, not running but there's a dog sled.

LL: Yes, there is dog sled races. Yeah, that's wonderful. That is gaining popularity too.

RM: Okay, then the effects people coming here.

LL: Absolutely and there's more cross-country skiing up that way. The only thing is they have what they call "radar runs", snowmobile short races. They have a winter festival in Paradise, Mardi Gras _____ snow. That's what they call it and they have lots of fun activities. _____ on open fires outside in the winter.

RM: So, you're then, being affected by that. I mean you're an anchor in that whole—oh, wonderful.

LL: As a matter of fact, in the summertime, there's a blueberry festival in Paradise, there's one in Marquette as well but the one in Paradise has been going on much longer and my contribution to it was to make a blueberry beer and I would only make it for the festival for the first ten or so year and I was _____ about it. I thought that was supposed to be special but the snowmobiler's—

RM: Okay, so you're doing blueberry beer in the winter for the snowmobilers?

LL: In the winter for the snowmobilers. They were happy about that. That was one of the things that Chumley—it's interesting, he was an experienced brewer but had never made a lager before until he came here and that was one of my staples. I call it the "lumberjack lager." So, he now, at least on occasion, is making them for the _____ but the other idea he got from me was the blueberry flavoring for the, basically, a wheat ale. He tells me that that's one of their best-selling beers. So, I think that's lovely but he got the idea from me.

RM: And then he said that they started it and they were doing it for the Blueberry Festival and then again so many people wanted it that I think now it's standard at the Vierling.

LL: They do have it, all the time.

RM: Okay, is there anything that I left out? Or something I didn't ask? What I'm going to do is, I have this transcribed, then I will send you a copy. You can go through it and make corrections and then it'll have a release form and the transcript will be put on file at Northern in the archive. So, what I'm putting together, when I do this work, I'm putting together a file on brewing. No, archives has this.

LL: I just thought of this. The Vierling, their brewing system was purchased by the same company that I bought mine from.

RM: I was wondering because he talked about that.

LL: Theirs is a five barrel system and it needed to be that way because of the historic qualities of the building they're in and it's in the basement. You know how you can look in and see it from the street, which I think is charming, but it's a five barrel system. Anyway, they did purchase their system from the same company I did—_____ Brewers. Yeah, I just thought of that.

RM: Now, did they give you any help with parts and whatnot?

LL: No but we had a few parts made. We have found other brewery suppliers where we can get some things that were compatible but it was very hard, extremely hard, no manual. So, it's been an amazing experience.

RM: And you survived.

LL: Yeah, somehow, just amazing. Before you leave, I just want to share something with you that has nothing to do with the beer but it's something I want you to know about because I think you'd be interested.

RM: Do you want this on tape?

LL: No. I want to show you something.

RM: Okay, so you're pretty much done now?

LL: Yeah. I think so.

RM: Well, what I'm going to do, as I said, I'll send you a copy of the transcript, you read it over. You can add or delete material and so on. I am not going to verbatim quote you and so on.

LL: You can at times, that's fine.

RM: No, no. It'll be the story of your operation here. Okay, thank you.

LL: Just maybe one small point of interest. Traditionally, in Europe, the brewers were women, not men. It's so the opposite in this country. It's so dominated by men. It's just the way that it's been. So, my title would be brewster, not brewer. Yes, I would like you to know that.

RM: Now, is this true, somebody told me that in the Middle-Ages women were the brewers?

LL: They were. You probably don't see it as much but there's more women involved in breweries in Europe then there are in this country.

RM: Now, that's an important point for my book.

LL: I think so.

END OF INTERVIEW