

THE FATAL GLASS OF BEER

Why a Canadian brewer had to dump out one million gallons of liquid refreshment



In late 1965 and early 1966, the medical community in Quebec City in Canada was baffled by a mysterious illness that had stricken some fifty people in the area. Patients were coming in complaining of severe stomach pains and nausea, along with the symptoms of heart disease such as shortness

of breath along with leg and chest pains. Some had a strange blue tinge to their faces.

About half of the victims died shortly after seeing the doctor. The disease turned out to be cardiomyopathy, a severe degeneration of the heart muscle. The degeneration was so severe, in fact, that when a coroner sent a sample of heart tissue to a lab technician, the technician phoned back and indignantly asked, "What's the idea of sending me something from someone who's been dead for six weeks?" Actually the victim had only been dead for six hours, according to a report in the Canadian newsmagazine *Maclean's*.

All of the victims had several things in common. They were all serious beer drinkers who consumed eight or more quarts a day, some up to twelve quarts, they all came from the same Lower Town area of Quebec City, and all of them, it seemed, drank the hometown favorite, Dow beer. Two of the victims were women, and most were patrons of fourteen taverns in the area that served Dow.

Chemical analyses were made on older and newer batches of the beer supplied by the brewery

but nothing could be determined to be wrong with it. The only possibility—and it was a remote one—was the recent addition of cobalt sulfides to the beer to give the product a better head of foam when poured into a mug. Cobalt, a metallic element used to make glass and ceramics blue, did have the potential to cause heart problems in large quantities but the amounts being used in the beer, about one milligram to a liter, was far below the limit considered safe for human consumption and besides, other brewers in Canada and the United States were adding it too, including Dow's other brewery in Montreal, presumably without any problems. It was determined, however, that Dow's Quebec City brewery was adding more cobalt to the beer than the other breweries were, but it was still below the level of being poisonous.

Dow Brewery, Ltd. denied any blame for the illnesses and deaths but the once best-selling beer in the province of Quebec was being called "the killer brew" and sales dwindled to almost nothing once the brand was implicated in the press. The



Ad for Dow Old Stock Ale from 1937