

Old Ice House to Become McCook's First Brew Pub

By Gene O. Morris

One of McCook's oldest and most rustic buildings is on the way to becoming the location for this region's newest business.

The slope-sided brick building at West First and A streets - built originally as a railroad ice house - has been selected as the site for the Loop Brewing Company, the 2010 winner of the Hormel Business Plan Competition.

"It's a natural for a brew pub," said Tyler Loop, the 27-year-old McCookite who began looking into the potential for a craft brewing business a year ago. "The building is big enough to house the brewing equipment, the restaurant and the bar, and, as an added plus, there's a second floor area that will make a great party room."

Luckily for Tyler, the spacious historic building is owned by Mark Wacker, who has been a close friend of Tyler's father, Gale, since their days in high school. The building has had several uses over the years, including serving as a produce warehouse for Gamble-Robinson and as storage space since Wacker purchased the building 10 years ago.

It's not a done deal, but Tyler Ray and his wife, Tyler Sue, are off to a great start in their efforts to make their business dream come true. In addition to the \$25,000 prize for winning the Hormel competition, the two Tylers are in line for financing from the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Rural Enterprise Assistance Project.

"The Hormel Family Foundation has been a great help to us, not only with the prize, but also for their guidance on business strategy and legal matters," Tyler Ray said.

Also, family members have provided a big boost for the young couple with the brew pub idea. "My brother, Jason, is a Certified Public Accountant, and my dad, Gale, is an electrician," Tyler Ray said. "Added to that, my mother, Becky, has business experience as co-owner of the Country Corner grocery store."

Even so, Tyler Ray and Tyler Sue know that long-range success depends upon their efforts and expertise. After deciding that a brew pub had great potential in McCook, Tyler Ray traveled to Ridgeway, Colorado to train with a Master Brewer. Tom Hennessy. In the one-on-one training, which lasted five days, Hennessy instructed Tyler Ray in the art of brewing and the science of business. "Tom's been brewing beer for more than 20 years and has owned and operated multiple breweries, including the Colorado Boy Brewery in Ridgeway the past two years."

In preparation for starting the new business, Tyler Ray has been brewing craft beers in his home for the past year. "It's very exacting," Loop said. "You can spoil a whole tank with a timing or ingredient mistake."

Loop Brewing Company will be producing everything from real dark to really light beers. Tyler's favorite is close to the middle. "These are what are popularly known as Irish beers, ranging from the middle to light side on the color spectrum," he said.

Stainless steel tanks - which look much like the tanks used by dairies - are essential in the brewing process. Using four main ingredients - barley grain, hops, yeast and water - the brewer first boils the mixture in a kettle. He then cools, ferments and conditions the beer in tanks, getting it ready to flow from the tap.

To build interest, the brewing tanks will be visible from the bar and tables in the new brew pub.

The Loops' plans call for the bar and restaurant to be open seven days a week. Anticipated hours of operation are 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 4 p.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday nights. Sunday hours will be 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

In addition to the craft beers brewed by Tyler Ray and an assistant brewer, Loop Brewing Company will also serve domestic beers, such as Bud and Miller Light, and wines, including those produced by Nebraska vineyards. Specialty sandwiches and hamburgers will come from the establishment's Panini grill.

Both Tyler Ray and Tyler Sue (Randolph) Loop were raised in McCook. Following graduation from McCook High School, Tyler Ray went on to the University of Nebraska-Kearney, obtaining his Bachelor's degree in Business Management in 2006.

He served as branch manager of Enterprise Rent-A-Car in Kearney before returning to McCook where he is employed in sales for the K Lawn Division of Kugler Company.

The Loops have two children: Kapri, who will be 3 in September, and Keaton, who is six months old.

Much remains to be done before the brew pub opens. Financing, remodeling, purchase of equipment, obtaining licenses and hiring of staff all are left to do, but the Loops say the finished product will be worth the wait.

"We're excited. It will be a fun place to gather," the Loops said. "The old ice house offers so much atmosphere and the trains passing by will be a reminder of why McCook came to be. Other towns have shown us the quality and good taste of craft beers. It's our honor to bring this business to McCook."