

# bottoms up

by matthew desmond



Photo by Matthew Desmond

## Miller Brewery Tour Milwaukee, Wisc.

*Each page a victory, at whose expense  
the victory ball?*

Bertolt Brecht, "A Worker Reads  
History"

It's one thing for a college student who can barely afford his textbooks to pull up a barstool and order a PBR. But why is that hipster, the guy at the bar wearing \$400 glasses and \$200 jeans, chugging a can of the stuff when obviously he could have ordered a Stella Artois?

Pabst Blue Ribbon, a beer once associated with working-class Milwaukeeans, is making a comeback. In fact, America is witnessing a kind of renaissance of working-class culture, but one ushered in by people distinctively *not* working-class. New York bohemians are wearing Carhartt, latte drinkers are listening to country music, trendy restaurants are serving corndogs and tater tots, stubble is a common sighting in Silicon Valley cubicles, kickball teams are ordering pitchers of Schlitz after their (ahem) games.

Although network television has substituted the Average Joe for the upper-crust sophisticate—move over Laverne and Shirley, here come Will and

Grace—working-class reality shows are proliferating on cable: *Deadliest Catch* (Alaskan fishermen), *Ice Road Truckers* (Arctic truck drivers), *Ax Men* (Oregon loggers), *Black Gold* (Texas oil riggers). And before they were shamed into driving hybrids, white-collar executives who never needed full-sized 4x4s bought them in droves, perhaps to use their truck beds once a year to move their Dacor range from a condo on Manhattan's East Side to a swankier loft downtown.

Why do middle-class Americans seem so eager to embrace and consume the accoutrements of a working-class lifestyle? To pursue this question, I joined a group of tourists eager to take in some blue-collar factory work at Milwaukee's Miller Brewery. (I couldn't tour the Pabst Brewery, of course, as it was shut down in 1997; today, Miller distributes its products. Before that, Blatz and Schlitz folded.)

I joined 22 people, all white and mostly middle-aged, wearing tennis shoes and fanny packs, with Nikon cameras around their necks, in a large room with movie screens. Our young tour guide with wire glasses, Dustin, dimmed the lights and started the movie, a 15-minute feature about the history of Miller interspersed with old television commer-

cials. Frederick Miller, we learned, emigrated to America from Germany (as did most of the old beer barons) in 1854 to start a brewery; he settled in Milwaukee, "located in the middle of America." The movie narrator told us that Miller is "the oldest major brewery in America" and that "from the beginning, man has longed for Miller Time."

When the movie ended, Dustin led us outside. We walked past massive industrial buildings, the older ones made of pale "cream city" brick, the smell of hops in the air. Our first stop was south packing, where we gazed down at cans zipping by on wet conveyor belts. Three Miller workers wearing blue hard hats monitored the machines. Dustin announced, "We pour beer into 1,200 bottles a minute and produce half a million bottles every day."

Then Dustin ushered us on to shipping, where we lined up and looked into a giant warehouse room the size of five football fields where cases upon cases of beer were stacked on top of one another. The cases (on a typical day the room holds half a million of them) were wrapped in plastic and waiting to be delivered to your local bar or fraternity house. Dustin told us how Miller ships its product (96 percent by truck, 4 percent by rail) while two forklift drivers maneuvered their machines through aisles of beer stacked higher than a Polish flat.

We then climbed 56 steps to arrive at the brewhouse, where we stared down at larger-than-life kettles—stainless steel on the inside, copper on the outside—in which the grain extract (called wort) is boiled and blended with hops. Someone asked when the brewery closes. "Never," Dustin answered. "We operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Finally we arrived at our penulti-



Photo by Matthew Desmond

The now-shuttered Pabst brewery building.

mate stop: the Historic Caves originally used to store and ferment Miller's beer. We descended into a large, round cellar lined with stone cool to the touch. At the end of the cave was a wall painting of busty German women in dresses and mustached German men with feathered caps enjoying an outdoor party hosted by Mr. Miller himself.

After watching a hologram of an actor portraying Miller, thick German accent and all, tell us about the caves and explain why he came to America ("to live out my dreams"), Dustin flipped on the lights and said, "Any questions?" When nobody replied, he continued, "Just thirsty, huh? Well, okay. But unfortunately, my watch is broken. Can anybody tell me what time it is?"

"Miller Time!" came the reply. At that, we walked out of the caves, passing a statue of Gambrinus, patron saint of beer, and headed to the outdoor beer garden to enjoy three drinks on the house.

Sipping my Miller Light, I counted how many factory workers we saw on our 45-minute tour. Five. I literally could count them on one hand. We marveled

a chair next to Mary and Jim, both Milwaukee natives, and offered: "I was struck by the fact that you hardly ever see a worker on the tour."

## Sipping my Miller Light, I counted how many factory workers we saw on our 45-minute tour. Five. I literally could count them on one hand.

at the majesty of industry—"Look at those pipes!"—and admired the final product, but nary a brewer did we see. Dustin kept saying, "We produce this, we produce that," but Dustin himself doesn't produce anything except zingers to keep tourists laughing. He's never mopped out a vat in his life.

Although Miller employs roughly 800 factory workers, when blue-collar work was refracted through the tourist's shutter, those workers—and their labor—disappeared. I began wondering if anybody else noticed this. I pulled up

"A worker, huh," Jim replied. "You're right. We didn't see a lot of workers, huh? I see what you mean. The workers never seem to be emphasized at all.... On most of the tours, it's all about the product now, the company itself. I mean, there's so few companies where the workers even last anymore, and they're not important to the company anymore."

I shook hands with the couple, went back for my third complimentary sample, and met Greg, who is "just a food delivery guy," and his buddies,

who had driven down together from Appleton to catch a Brewers game. "It's kinda weird," I said, "that there is all this stress on the product but hardly any mention of the worker."

"It's pretty automated," Greg replied. "They spend so much on advertising that they can't afford to have many workers."

"What do you think about that?" I asked.

"That's America," he shrugged.

That's America? But what's more thoroughly "American" than (white and masculine) images of blue-collar labor: the steelworker marching to work, lunch pail in tow; the cowboy on horseback driving steers across the plains; the soot-faced, sure-footed firefighter carrying a child to safety? Politicians conjure up these images when they roll up their sleeves and praise "small town values" and the "backbone of America"—its workers.

And therein lies the rub. For what we're experiencing in America today is a dual movement, the simultaneous erosion of blue-collar work and the adulation of blue-collar culture. Celebrating factory work renders the factory worker invisible. The Miller tour reflects this very phenomenon.

Since the 1970s America has been hemorrhaging blue-collar jobs, shedding its industrial skin to become a post-industrial society based on a service, not a goods-producing, economy. Only 15 percent of American men wore white collars in 1900, but that percentage rose to 25 percent by 1940 and 42 percent by 1970. In 2006, services accounted for almost 70 percent of the gross domestic product while manufacturing, by comparison, accounted for only 12 percent.

Of the many consequences of deindustrialization, one of the most ironic has taken place in the realm of culture. It can be described as the emergence of a kind of nationwide longing for the industrial society that was destroyed. Blue-collar workers may have declined in number, but their image remains

strong. It's branded deep into the American psyche, and we've found no viable substitute for it.

"The image of tens of thousands of workers streaming from the sprawling factories marks indelibly the picture of industrial America, as much as the fringed buckskin and rifle marked the nineteenth-century frontier, or the peruke and lace that of Colonial Virginia. The majority of Americans may not work in factories, as the majority of Americans never were on the frontier, or never lived in Georgian houses; yet the distinctive ethos of each time lies in these archetypes."

## What we're experiencing in America today is a dual movement, the simultaneous erosion of blue-collar work and the adulation of blue-collar culture.

So wrote Daniel Bell in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, first published in 1976. He continued: "Office work, particularly in large insurance companies, banks, utilities, and industrial corporations has the same mechanical and dronelike quality, for routing procedures serve the same pacing functions as assembly lines. And yet, the distinctive archetype has gone."

Although new archetypes indeed have emerged—the code monkey, the blogger, the working mom—none seem as deeply implicated in the idea of America as the blue-collar worker. In this respect, our cultural mythology lags behind our economic reality. But this temporal dissonance often is soothing. It's our present— isn't it?—that feels foreign to us.

In our past, or rather, our "misinterpretations of the past," as historian Lewis Mumford called them, we find stability and meaning. That's why American politicians exalt the blue-collar worker, who should be listed as an endangered species. It's why many activities we call hobbies—farming, gardening, wood-

working, sewing, upholstery—are what our grandparents called work and why Americans who can afford fancy cameras tour the Miller Brewery in the first place. The consumption of working-class culture by non-working-class Americans is a collective groaning over the passing of industrial society. It's a eulogy for a romanticized time when the factory was king, a eulogy that does not recognize itself as such.

The Miller tour unsettled me. It had offered me a half-truth—the brew minus the brewer—and, inclined to have neither rather than only one, I drove down to what's left of the old Pabst Brewery.

I snuck in the side entrance, past the security guard, and walked around the construction equipment, the piles of twisted metal, the dilapidated buildings, all blackened and hollow and crumbling. As I stumbled about the rubble, an expansive urban wasteland surrounded by some of Milwaukee's roughest neighborhoods, I began to feel more at peace. It wasn't pretty, this present, but at least it was honest. Scars usually are.

**Matthew Desmond** is a Ph.D. student in the sociology department at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He is the author of *On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters*.