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Cultural Commentary: Advertising and Cultural Change: Budweiser Ads of the 1940s and 1990s

Jason Rallis

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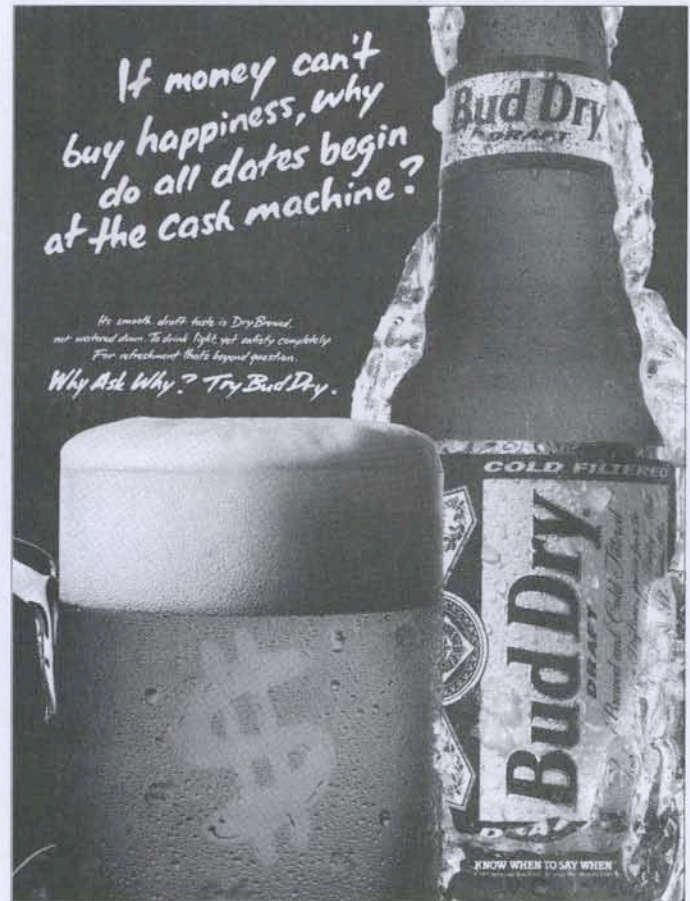
Advertising and Cultural Change: BUDWEISER ADS OF THE 1940s AND 1990s

by Jason Rallis, '93

Many historians of the media and popular culture have documented the ways in which advertisements reflect the attitudes and aspirations of the era in which they were created. Two ads for Budweiser beer, created 50 years apart, provide concrete evidence of important cultural changes.

Few people today associate beer with colonial America or with patriotism. Yet this is precisely the connection that Budweiser sought to make in its advertising during World War II. For example, a colonial tableau depicted in one of the ads released during the War shows a housewife and her three children. The woman, wearing a bonnet and apron and showing an expression of concern, stands facing the audience. Her left hand rocks a cradle while her right stirs the steaming contents of a large black kettle over an open hearth. A young girl sits to the left, smiling as she sews; to the right, a boy also smiles as he churns butter. The room is furnished with many colonial tools and implements, and a rifle and powder horn hang over the fireplace. Beneath and to the left of this hearthside tableau is a picture of a tiny minuteman, with its own caption: "For Freedom's sake...Buy War Bonds and Stamps." The text describes the life of the minuteman's wife: "She was a Jill of all trades...cook, spinner, weaver, pork salter, candle maker, baker, laundress and gardener." This lifestyle is compared with that of American women during World War II: "Some are serving with our armed forces. Some work in war plants. Others grow Victory gardens, preserve fruits and vegetables, cook, serve, sew...save fats, cans and paper." In the lower right hand corner, a tiny Budweiser bottle and some more small print suggest that "The women of America...have discovered that...Budweiser makes their simple wartime meals taste better."

Analyzing this advertisement, one is struck by the imagery of labor and frugality. Not only are both children working, but the mother is doing two jobs at once. The fact that the room is filled with household tools also emphasizes labor and economic self-sufficiency. Both the text and illustration also convey the idea of survival without luxuries ("simple wartime meals"); readers are



encouraged to save what they can and do without what they don't need.

The reasons for the minuteman imagery are obvious. The nation was being asked to pull together in a collective effort to combat a powerful enemy, and the romanticized determination of the colonists during the American Revolution was an appropriate parallel for Americans in the early 1940s.

CULTURAL COMMENTARY

For Freedom's Sake
BUY
WAR
BONDS
AND
STAMPS

**You Know the Minuteman...
Now... Meet the Missus**

The hand that rocked the cradle
ad to have a good trigger finger,
because the Minuteman's wife often
did her "marksmanship" in the forest
with a gun. She was a jill of all
trades, too—cook, spinner, sewer,
ink salter, candle maker, baker, laun-
dron and gardener.

How are her great, great grand-
daughters doing? Very well, thank
you. Some are serving with our armed

forces. Some work in war plants.
Others grow Victory Gardens, pre-
serve fruits and vegetables, cook,
sew, sew... wave hats, cut and paper
... make things last, wear them out
and do without. They carry their
own bundles, keep the family cheer-
ful—in a word, they are doing their
share to win the war by taking over
on the home front—for their hus-
bands and sons.

*The women of America
have proved their resource-
fulness in the kitchen in
war-time work. Many have
discovered that a glass of
cold, golden Budweiser
makes their simple wartime
meals taste better.*

Budweiser

KNEUSER • BUSCH • SAINT LOUIS

Fifty years later, merchandising strategy has changed dramati-
cally. Beer advertising has largely shifted from magazines to
television, and the focus and content of the ads have undergone a
striking change. An ad for Bud Dry illustrates the point. In
contrast with the small, discreet image of the Bud bottle and glass
in the World War II ad, here an oversized bottle of Bud Dry and a

glass mug occupy two-thirds of the magazine page. Beads of water
cover both, and the condensation on the mug has been wiped away
to form a dollar sign. The caption reads, "If money can't buy
happiness, then why do all dates start at the cash machine?"
Beneath the caption, a few lines of text extol the virtues of Bud Dry
and pose the question "Why ask why? Try Bud Dry."

The caption jokingly reflects the cynicism of contemporary
society (preoccupied with rape trials, sexual harassment hearings, a
disintegrated Soviet Union and continuing tension in the Middle
East). "Why ask why?" suggests that it's useless to question or
analyze excessively, as many people tend to do in an attempt to
make order out of the natural chaos of life. It tells the reader to
relax and accept things the way they are. This same mood spawned
the popular Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy," in
the late 1980s.

The most famous Anheuser-Busch television ad campaign in
recent years centered around a "party animal," a black and white
dog named Spuds MacKenzie. Spuds was always at the scene of a
party, usually by a pool, where naturally the beer flowed freely.
Three or four beautiful bikini-clad women were constantly in
attendance, and Spuds observed the festivities with cool, calm
composure.

These contemporary ads are, culturally, poles apart from the
magazine ads of the forties. No early American scenes are nostal-
gically evoked. Instead of drinking beer as a reward for hard work,
the idea in the '90s seems to be to forget the hard work and skip
straight to the beer. Americans, apparently, don't want to see labor
idealized; they want to see a carefree life. One student I know says
that his idea of a perfect lifestyle would be to live in a beer com-
mercial. In place of Americana, the pioneering spirit and the work
ethic, contemporary Budweiser ads nourish the dangerous illusion
that Americans have already reached the top and that we have only
to sit back, relax and enjoy the rewards. ☛

*Jason Rallis is majoring in art with a concentration in graphic design.
This article is an excerpt from a research paper he composed for
Professor Barbara Apstein's English Composition class. It has been
abridged and edited by Professor Apstein.*