PortraitsFromRuralWisconsin06DriftlessBrewing

*[smooth percussive music]*

*It's written right on the board* *at the very top:* *Hipster Picnic,* *a strong dark Belgian brew.* *What could be more hipster than a craft brewery* *serving some local artisanal cheeses* *holding a celebration* *for the end of fall?*

*§ §*

*It's a solstice open house for Driftless Brewing,* *a small operation looking to expand.* *A familiar face walks into the party:* *Steve George, treasurer* *of the Societies' Sons Motorcycle Club* *that put on the food drive.* *Here Steve is better known* *as the village president of Soldiers Grove.* *He doesn't see much difference* *between the two elected positions.*

- Like both places, you always have your public, uh, input where you get your complaints.

[laughs]

- *He's retired from his mechanic career,* *but Steve still does custom bike work* *for Harley riders who want a little more oomph.* *He has hopes that Driftless brewery* *can inject some fuel into the village's economy.*

- We've been very much supported by our village here, our village government. They gave us a low-cost loan for our small system, and they're working with us on a grant for the bigger system for our expansion.

- *We always try doing and looking* *as promoting business in our area,* and we'll help you get started so we can create businesses in a small town, 'cause, well, small towns are losing that.

- *Steve is well acquainted with that loss.*

*[rustic music]*

*In the late 1970s,* *he went through what people in Gays Mills* *experienced in the 2000s:* *seeing his town of Soldiers Grove* *moved out of the flood zone.*

- *That little town down there had, uh,* *three gas stations, a car lot,* *a hardware store,* seven bars, and they were all full on the weekends with people coming to town at that time.

*§ §*

*Many businesses simply closed down,* *but one bar made the slow uphill climb* *to higher ground.*

- *Somebody said he'd build a tavern,* *somebody else said they'd build something else,* *and the IGA store said he was going,* *so we started in.*- *Soldiers Grove's citizens started in* *by emptying out the old store* *and then stocking* *the same shelves they'd later be shopping from.*

*§ §*

- Service Station Owner: Oh, I-I think it's got a future, if we can get things booming again.

*[quiet music]*

- *The tavern known as the Wonder Bar* *has remained a fixture since the move.* *The grocery store survived against the odds for decades,* *before shutting down not long ago.*

*§ §*

*If the village and Driftless Brewing* *can secure funding,* *including state economic development funds,* *the space* *the grocery once occupied* *will have a new tenant.* *The writing's on the wall* *for construction to increase production* *15-fold* *and, no matter how you spell it,* *a biergarten.*

- *It's gonna be a destination brewery.* If we have a 70-seat taproom and a full-scale production brewery, it's gonna be a pretty exciting addition to this area. *It's gonna help the gas station.* *It's gonna help the restaurant.* *It's gonna help the B&Bs.* *Everyone's pretty excited about the potential here.*

- We loan them the money to get started, and you're taking a chance, is it gonna go or not? And it is. They're-- they're doing very well. *That's good for the community,* *so that was a good investment for the village.*