Predictably, public reception to the Hillsdale’s more unorthodox releases—Blackberry Ale, Mars Bar Ale, Java Ale, Spruce Ale and Purple Haze—was mixed. Yet, customers were daring. They were ready to journey into the frontier, far beyond the known (and tired) limits of industrial lagers, to educate themselves in the college of beer.

Now, more than two decades down that frothy path, a great many of our customers possess very sophisticated beer palates—they’ve earned their Ph.D. from beer college. Still, that excitement of old, brought about by things new and untried, is guaranteed to be found at the Hillsdale, especially during the annual brewfest, an event that’s achieved cult status among our brewers and loyal brew friends.

Of course, the Hillsdale is more than just good beer. It’s been a great gathering spot since way back when. In fact, our longtime customers may not recall that the Hillsdale began life solely as a pub—no brewery to be seen. Opened February 8, 1984, by the fabulous Thursday Jane (who is still putting up with us after all this time!), it was McMenamins’ third location, following closely behind the Barley Mill and the Greenway pubs, which had opened the previous year.

The Hillsdale was pegged to be host to our first brewing venture for the pragmatic reason that it already had a usable floor drain, a feature installed by the building’s original tenants. In the mid-1970s, Skipper’s Fish & Chips acquired what was then a vacant lot and constructed the present building as another
With the sanitorium a thing of the past, Dr. Pierce set out to find a creative new use for the property, and in 1925 it was transformed into the Portland West Side Auto Camp. A concept borne of the meteoric rise in popularity of the car, auto camps sprung up like mushrooms around the city’s suburbs (and around the country) providing camp sites—often with cabins—for families desiring a convenient overnight spot or a stopover on a long trip. This camp, operated by George and Elsie Battey, included 25 furnished cabins in addition to the former Slavin house and sanitorium.

Dr. Pierce passed away in 1948 at the age of 93, His widow, Martha, sold the property to a Portland developer who continued the auto camp another five years until finally closing the doors in 1953.

For the next 30 years the old auto camp was quiet, and this lot vacant. Over time, the surrounding area gradually emerged as the commercial core of the Hillsdale neighborhood—a prime spot, it turns out, for a Skipper’s turned neighborhood gathering spot.

When the first beer was poured from the Hilldale’s copper kettle there must have been a sense that some new adventure was just beginning, a joyous anticipation of what was to come. That anticipation and sense of experimentation has spread like wildfire from this place to virtually everything McMenamins has done since, the fearless customers that always seem game for a new angle on beer, and indeed, through the larger microbrew culture of the Northwest. Looking out over that microbrew culture more than twenty years later, the view from the Hillsdale is more spectacular than ever and its original guiding principle still rings true: “The main thing is to have fun!”