ULYSSES S. GRANT
His Whiskey History

By Jack Sullivan
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Much has been said and written about Ulysses S. Grant, the great Civil War general and later two-term President. In his story the subject of whiskey comes up frequently. History tells us that he had a considerable problem with alcohol throughout much of his life. Despite that affliction, he clearly was the Union's most effective military leader and he remains one of the most interesting and impressive figures of American history. **[Figure 1]**

Grant's Particular Brand

Grant's particular brand of whiskey has become a matter of historical interest because of a purported comment by President Lincoln during a crucial point in the Civil War. The story appears first to have been told by Col. Alexander K. McClure, a Lincoln friend, in his 1901 book, "Abe Lincoln's Yarns and Stories." It goes this way:

> Lincoln was not a man of impulse, and did nothing upon the spur of the moment; action with him was the result of deliberation and study. He took nothing for granted; he judged men by their performances and not their speech.

If a general lost battles, Lincoln lost confidence in him; if a commander was successful, Lincoln put him where he would be of the most service to the country.

"Grant is a drunkard," asserted powerful and influential politicians to the President at the White House time after time; "he is not himself half the time; he can't be relied upon, it is a shame to have such a man in command of an army."

"So Grant gets drunk, does he?" queried Lincoln, addressing himself to one of the particularly active detractors of the soldier. "Yes, he does, and I can prove it," was the reply.

Well," returned Lincoln, with the faintest suspicion of a twinkle in his eye, "you needn't waste your time getting proof; you just find out, to oblige me, what brand of whiskey Grant drinks, because I want to send a barrel of it to each one of my generals."

That ended the crusade against Grant, so far as the question of drinking was concerned.

While the validity of the Lincoln story has been challenged by more recent historians, the controversy has not dampened speculation through the years about what type of strong drink Grant actually did favor. It is clear that he was partial to whiskey. In Grant's day, however, whiskey was a potable that covered a wide spectrum of flavors, ingredients, and differing alcoholic content. Moreover, at that time brand names were just beginning to be advertised and known. Among the earliest was Old Crow, a Kentucky bourbon.

Figure 1: Ulysses S. Grant as President

Old Crow makes a claim

In his book, *The Social History of Bourbon*, Gerald Carson recounts that during one night during the long and stressful siege of Vicksburg, General Grant said to his aides: "See here, before we go to bed, let's have a nightcap. Stewart [an aide] has got some prime Old Crow whiskey around here somewhere." Stewart got the bottle and then watched as Grant filled a large goblet with Old Crow whiskey and tossed it down. "It was a whopping big drink..."

Figure 2: 1955 Old Crow Ad: Houston & Webster

Old Crow has always trumpeted its historical connections including depicting important figures as customers. The ad shown here **[Figure 2]** purports to show Texas hero Sam Houston sharing its bourbon with famous orator Daniel Webster.

Old Crow also claimed Grant as a customer. Most biographers of Grant are skeptical about such claims and have decided that it is impossible to know what brand of whiskey Grant as general or President actually favored. Biographers similarly are unsure about the role Grant as President may have played in what came to be known as "The Great Whiskey Ring."

A National Scandal

The exposure of the Great Whiskey Ring of 1875 rocked Washington D.C. and indeed the entire country like few national scandals before or since. On May 10, Federal agents stormed into the offices of nine St. Louis distilleries, seized illicit whiskey and box loads of records, and arrested their proprietors. Simultaneous arrests occurred in Cincinnati, Milwaukee and Chicago. Ultimately, indictments were issued against 240 whiskey-makers, government officials and others; 110 were found guilty. Most of them went to jail. Thus ended a massive scheme to defraud the U.S. of excise taxes on distilled spirits. The fallout from the raids would roil the Nation for months and reach right into the White House. Shown here is a bottle shaped to look like a two story log cabin with a

Figure 3 (L): Old Cabin Bitters Bottle
Figure 4 (R): Kelly's "Proprietary" Revenue Stamp

peaked roof. It is a Kelly's Old Cabin Bitters **[Figure 3]**. Examples have sold to bottle collectors in recent months at prices approaching $2,000. Kelly was James B. Kelly of New York, a whiskey man, who is shown on a self-produced "proprietary" revenue stamp **[Figure 4]**. This is an ironic touch since it was an attempt to evade federal revenues on alcohol that lay at the heart of the Great Whiskey Ring.

Kelly also had a St. Louis address and a partnership there with a man named John H. Garnhart (sometimes spelled "Garnhard"). Garnhart began a wholesale liquor business in about 1854. He was a "rectifier" who took raw spirits, added other ingredients, and sold them as whiskey. Among the spirituous products he apparently concocted with Kelly's collaboration was Old Cabin Bitters. When the May 10 raid occurred, Garnhart was one of those arrested. His company disappeared forever from St. Louis city directories. For one year, Adler, Furst & Co. was listed in directories as "successor to J. H. Garnhart & Co.", then it too disappeared. My research has failed to determine the fate of Kelly but his Cabin Bitters brand vanished about the same time.

General Babcock and "The Sylph"

The "femme fatal" of the Great Whiskey Ring was a St. Louis woman of easy virtue named Louise "Lou" Hawkins, who ultimately would become known to millions of Americans simply as "The Sylph." This was the name given to her by one of the conspirators, General Orville E. Babcock **[Figure 5]**, who also happened to be a White House aide, personal secretary to President Grant.

Figure 5: General Orville Babcock

A contemporary observer described Ms. Hawkins this way: "Her form was petit and yet withal, a plumpness and development which made her a being whose tempting luscious deliciousness was irresistible.... She was the essence of grace, distilled from the buds of perfection, and with a tongue on which the oil of vivacity and seduction never ceased running; she was indeed a sylph and a siren, whose presence was like the flavor of the poppy mixed with the perfumes of Araby." While she might not have lived up to this extravagant description, one of her few extant likenesses **[Figure 6]** indicates a certain appeal.

Figure 6: Louise Hawkins, aka "The Sylph"

Certainly General Babcock found her enchanting. In St. Louis to collect a share of kickbacks from local whiskey men, he met her through a friend and the two almost immediately began an affair. Babcock's visits to St. Louis to pick up graft payments for himself and, some have alleged, the Republican Party, became more frequent. He may even have gathered a few bottles of contraband whiskey and given them to the President. Back in Washington, he repeatedly referred to "The Sylph" in messages to cronies that eventually became public through court records and titillated the Nation.

Because Babcock was a close colleague of Grant, the press and public began to ask: "What did the President know and when did he know it?" — the same questions that later would fuel speculation about Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal.

President Grant Testifies

Grant was in his second term as President when news broke about the Whiskey Ring. His Secretary of the Treasury, Benjamin H. Bristow **[Figure 7]** discovered that in St. Louis alone at least $1.2 million in tax revenues annually were not accounted for. The total cost of the scam to the U.S. approached $3 million a year at a time when fifty cents would buy a hefty meal. Knowing that the corruption involved Republic political appointees, Bristow discussed the investigation with Grant who told him to proceed with vigor without regard to party labels or government positions.

Grant's response likely occurred before he was aware of Babcock's involvement in the Great Whiskey Ring. Always loyal

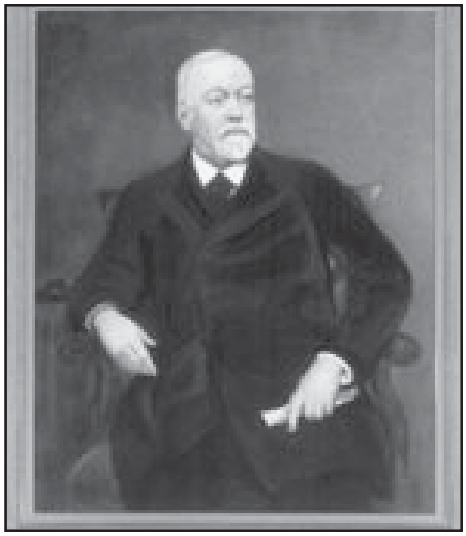

Figure 7: Secretary Benjamin Bristow

to his staff, Grant later agreed to be deposed in Babcock's graft case. He was willing to go to St. Louis to testify but was persuaded by presidential advisors to answer questions from prosecution and defense lawyers only in the White House. Even so, it was the first and only time in American history that a sitting American President has testified in a criminal case.

Grant's usually good memory seemed to fail him at times during the examination but he was strong in his defense of General Babcock's character and conduct. The President's testimony clearly influenced the St. Louis jury, which ultimately acquitted Babcock and then adjourned to a nearby saloon to celebrate. Grant subsequently appointed his erstwhile secretary to the post of inspector of lighthouses in the South. Babcock later drowned while on an inspection tour in Florida. Grant never admitted any involvement in the Great Whiskey Ring.

American Heroes on Whiskey

If Grant had lived just a little longer, however, he could have imbibed a whiskey with his own name on it. American whiskey distillers and distributors commonly have applied the names of famous national figures to their products. Among such "name" brands have been Ben Franklin, Daniel Boone, Henry Clay, Sam Houston, Daniel Webster and Paul Revere.

After the Civil War, both Southern and Northern generals were honored with their names on whiskey bottles. For example, General Stonewall Jackson, a Confederate leader killed in battle, had two whiskeys named for him. One, as shown in an ad here, **[Figure 8]** was "General Stonewall," a product of the B.B. Davies Company of New York City. "Stonewall Jackson" whiskey by contrast was a Southern product, from the H. Myers Company of Savannah, Georgia. Northern General Philip Sheridan could claim his name on three whiskeys: In 1876 the Bryce Smith Company of New York City registered its Sheridan Whiskey brand. Subsequently the Joseph Davis Co. of Minneapolis applied to the U.S. government in 1906 for exclusive use of the general's name for "Sheridan Rye," apparently ignoring the Sheridan Rye brand being merchandised by M. Goldsmith Company of Louisville. Even the ill-fated General George Custer was honored with "Custer's Reserve Whiskey" by the Herrscher-Samuel Co. of San Francisco.

Figure 8: Stonewall Jackson whiskey ad

"Grant 63" Whiskey

Perhaps because of Grant's checkered whiskey history, distillers did not rush to name one after him. I can find only one. That was "Grant 63," a brand of the Joseph P. Spang & Co. of Boston. The company first appears in Boston city directories in 1892 and from the first Spang had an eye to naming his whiskey after famous people. Among his numerous brands were "Revere" for the famous Revolutionary War rider and "Queen Wilhemina." for the reigning monarch of Holland. Spang also saw the possibilities in naming a whiskey after Grant, one that also would celebrate the year 1863 when the General won some of his most impressive victories. Unfortunately, Grant died in 1885 and was not around to taste "his" whiskey.

The label on the bottle and items such as Spang's give-away shot glasses featured Grant, one of the best horsemen America ever produced, astride a prancing steed **[Figure 9]** There are loops of braided rope on either side and curlicues on the base. The glass also shows a frosted shield that holds a JPS monogram — representing Joseph P. Spang. A Spang tip tray **[Figure 10]** in bright red and green replicated a similar motif, adding the words "Highest...Grade."

Figure 9: Grant 63 shot glass

A particularly interesting ad for "Grant 63" appeared on a blotter given away by the company. It shows a bellhop with a bottle of the whiskey on a tray with two shot glasses and praises the product as "The Perfect Whiskey." **[Figure 11]** The blotter also contains a quote from Mark Twain about Prohibition: "They have just invented a method of making Brandy out of sawdust! Now, what chance would prohibition have when a man can take a ripsaw and get drunk with a fence rail or with the shingles on his roof or with the leg of his kitchen table...."

Figure 11: Grant 63 ink blotter

The admixture of Twain and Grant is appropriate since the two were close friends and the author published the former President's autobiography. The spoof on Prohibition, however, failed to stem the temperance tide in the U.S. and in 1918 the Joseph P. Spang Company was forced to close its doors. With its demise "Grant 63" became one of hundreds of forever extinct whiskeys — thus leaving us no closer to learning what really was Grant's preferred brand.

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NOTES: Material for this article has been gathered from a number of sources, both published and the Internet. The quote about "The Sylph" is from "Secrets of the Great Whiskey Ring" published in 1880 and written by Gen. John McDonald, one of the co-conspirators who served time and blamed Grant. The picture of the lady is from his book. Illustrations of the "Grant 63" shot glass and tip tray are courtesy of Robin Preston.

Figure 10: Grant 63 tip tray