

The Wisdom of Solomon and Naming “Old Fitzgerald”

By Jack Sullivan



(Fig. 1) The name of the enterprise became S.C. Herbst Importing Company

“Old Fitzgerald” is one of the truly iconic names in the liquor trade. The legend is that this whiskey first was produced by a master whiskey-maker named John E. Fitzgerald at a distillery near Frankfort, Kentucky. Solomon C. Herbst, a Prussian-born wholesale wine and liquor dealer in Milwaukee, knew the tale well. In fact, with the wisdom of his Biblical namesake, Herbst wrote the script for the story when he bought the distillery.

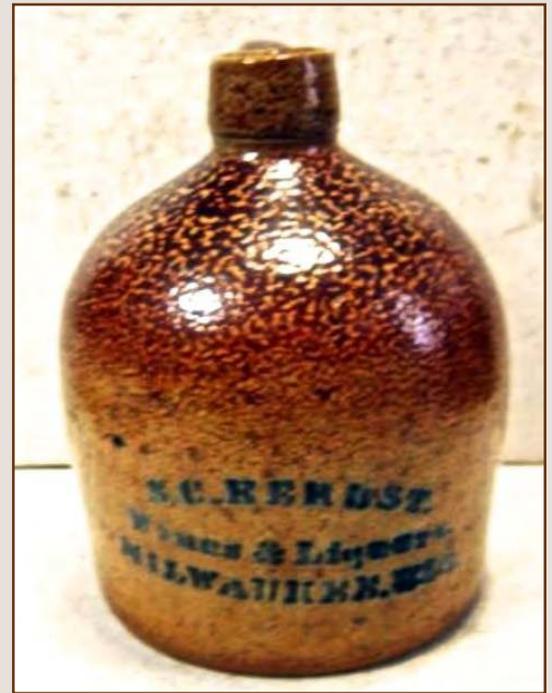
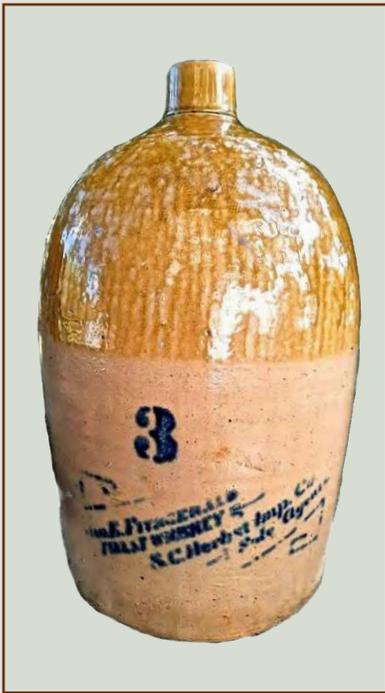
Born in 1842 in Ostrono, Prussia, and educated in local schools, Herbst left his homeland in 1859 at the age of 16 for the United States. Many German youth, including my own grandfather, emigrated at that age. It avoided the Prussian military draft with its high death rate for recruits in basic training. Herbst seems to have headed directly to Milwaukee, a city with a large German population where the language was spoken widely. The 1860 U.S. census found him, age 18, living Milwaukee’s Third Ward with a family named Nathan. He was working as a tinsmith.

Herbst soon understood that other employment opportunities offered greater reward. A canny youth, he rapidly absorbed the essentials of successful American merchandising. In 1868 at the age of 25 he emerged as a partner in wholesale Milwaukee liquor firm called Eggart & Herbst, located at 401-403 Chestnut Avenue, later to be renamed West Juneau Avenue. By 1870 Eggart had

departed the scene and left Solomon as the sole proprietor. The name of the enterprise became S.C. Herbst Importing Company (Fig. 1). According to Herbst’s obituary his liquor business had “a small beginning” but grew rapidly.

As he advanced in the liquor trade, Solomon married. He was described on a passport as standing 5 feet, 9 1/2 inches tall, with gray eyes and an oval face. His hair was prematurely gray. Solomon’s bride was Emma, a Wisconsin-born woman seven years his junior whose parents were immigrants from Bohemia, now a region in the Czech Republic. The 1880 census found the couple living on Milwaukee’s 14th Street, an area of large homes, with their three daughters, Carsie, 12; Della, 6, and Helen, 4. Indicative of Herbst’s growing wealth, the household boasted two servants.

Herbst began his career as a “rectifer,” that is, someone blending and mixing raw whiskeys in order to achieve a certain taste, smoothness and color. For his wholesale trade he packaged his products in ceramic jugs. These were then stenciled in cobalt with his name and other information. Shown here are three stoneware containers that held his whiskey, the largest holding three gallons (Fig. 2-4). For his retail trade, Herbst used glass. Shown here are an amber quart bottle embossed with his name and a distinctive round clear pint (Fig. 5,6). He also accommo-



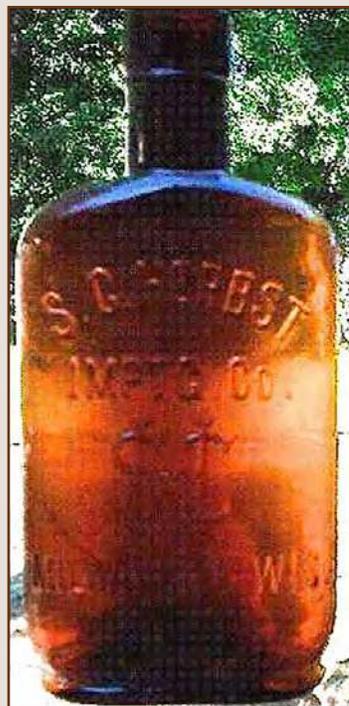
(Fig. 2-4) Shown here are three stoneware containers that held his whiskey, the largest holding three gallons



(Fig. 5) Shown here is an amber quart bottle embossed with his name



(Fig. 6) Shown here is a distinctive round clear pint with vertical embossing



(Fig. 7,8) He also accommodated his blended whiskeys in flasks, amber and clear.



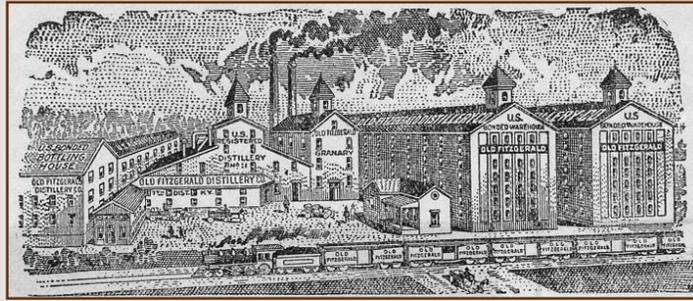
dated his blended whiskeys in flasks, amber and clear. (Fig. 7,8).

As Herbst's liquor trade grew, he faced a problem in obtaining sufficient raw product for his rectifying activities. Competition for supplies from Kentucky and other distillery sources, as well as attempts to create supplier monopolies, were driving up prices and creating shortages of available whiskey. Like many wholesalers, Herbst looked for a guaranteed flow of supplies. About 1900 he found and bought a small distillery outside Frankfort located on Benson Creek. In Federal parlance it was known as Registered Distillery #11 of

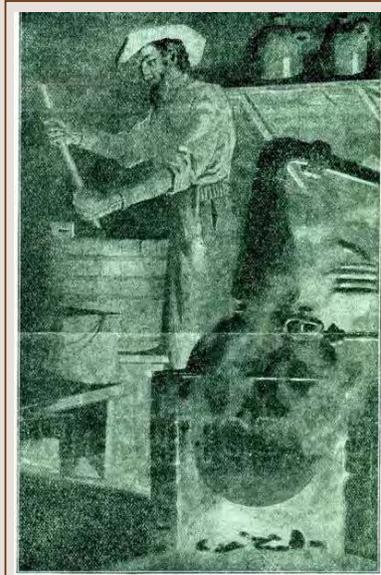
the 7th Kentucky Revenue District. Herbst named it the “John E. Fitzgerald Distillery.”

As the sole owner of the facility, Herbst was fashioning a myth for his whiskey. He recognized that giving his own name to the distillery might not resonate far in Kentucky. Consequently, he spun a story, still perpetuated by some authors, that the plant had been built by an Irish master distiller named John E. Fitzgerald who then sold the distillery to him. Fitzgerald then had on moved to Hammond, Indiana, to run another distillery, or so Herbst’s story went. In reality, Fitzgerald was a U.S. Treasury agent assigned to bonded warehouses who had a reputation as a heavy drinker with a taste for the best in whiskey. Using his post to good advantage, he held the keys to the warehouses of his assigned distilleries. While the owners discretely looked the other way, John E. frequently tapped the best barrels for his personal consumption. As word spread in the trade about the revenue man’s practices, prime whiskeys began to be known as “Fitzgeralds.”

Even before buying the Kentucky plant Herbst had recognized the attraction of an Irish name and in 1884 registered the brand of his flagship blend under the name “Jno. E. Fitzgerald.” After his purchase of the Frankfort distillery he



(Fig. 9) He renamed it the Old Fitzgerald Distillery Company. An illustration shows the name on all the buildings and even on freight cars being transported past the site

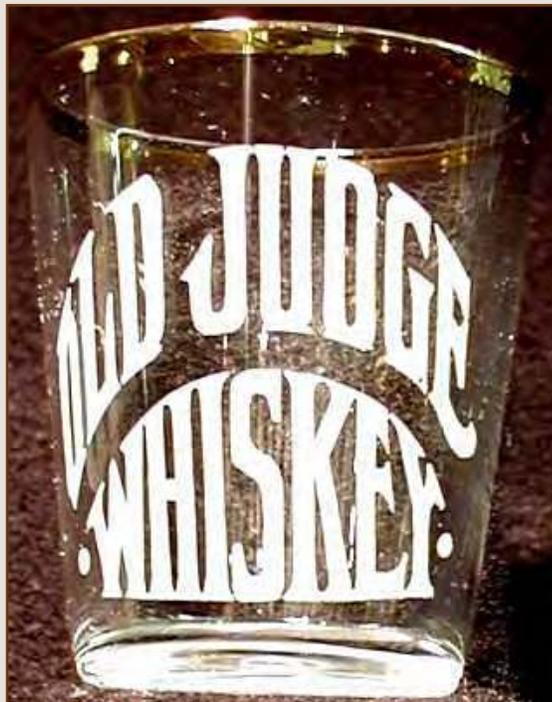


THIS CUT ILLUSTRATES THE OLD FASHIONED PROCESS

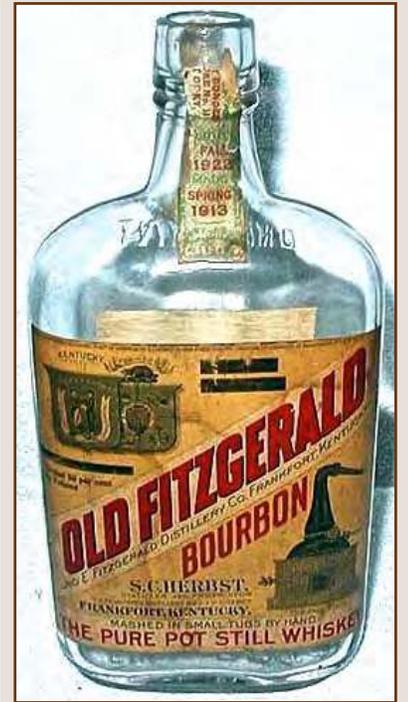
(Fig. 10) Herbst in his advertising featured workers using an “old fashioned process,” preparing the mash in a wooden tub

re-registered that name in 1905, adding a second label as “Old Fitzgerald Bourbon, indicating it was “straight” (unblended) whiskey. Herbst expanded the plant size and capacity until it became one of the largest whiskey manufacturers in the America. He renamed it the Old Fitzgerald Distillery Company. An illustration shows the name on all the buildings and even on freight cars being transported past the site (Fig. 9). To run this major facility Herbst hired Jerry Bixler, a member of a highly respected Kentucky whiskey-making family, as manager and master distiller.

Despite the impressive size of his distillery, Herbst in his advertising featured workers using an “old fashioned process,” preparing the mash in a wooden tub (Fig. 10). His proof for the validity of his claim, he asserted, was in a letter from Sam J. Roberts, the collector of whiskey revenue for the 7th District. Herbst had asked the federal official to confirm that in his Frankfort distillery “small tubs are exclusively used.” Without responding directly to Herbst, Roberts replied that the paperwork in his office indicated that the process “called for the use of seventy-one mash tubs, of which seventy are small and one large used as a



(Fig. 11, 12) “Old Judge,” the last a brand purchased with the distillery



(Fig. 13, 14) Herbst’s flagship, needless to say, was Old Fitzgerald, bottled as both bourbon and rye. It was sold over the counter in quart and flask sizes bearing a highly recognized label



(Fig. 15) He and his family he moved from the downtown fringe of Milwaukee to a house at 3015 Shepard Street in the more fashionable Upper East Side, adjacent to Lake Michigan

cooler; the mode of mashing ‘by hand;’ the mode of fermenting ‘yeasting back, sour mash.’ Period. Roberts signed off without really backing Herbst, who still found the official’s reply enough affirmation to use in his ads.

With his distillery running full out, the Milwaukee entrepreneur featured a number of brands, among them “Benson Creek,” “Old John,” “Clifton Springs,” and “Old Judge,” the last a brand purchased with the distillery (Fig. 11, 12). Herbst’s flagship, needless to say, was Old Fitzgerald, bottled as both bourbon and rye. It was sold over the counter in quart and flask sizes bearing a highly recognized label (Fig. 13, 14). Old Fitzgerald also found a ready market on steamships, trains, and high class “gentleman’s” clubs. To help distribute his whiskeys from a central location Herbst opened an office in Chicago in 1901 and maintained it for a dozen years. He also claimed overseas outlets in London, Paris and Genoa.

As his reputation for success in business grew in Milwaukee, Herbst expanded into other fields. In 1904 as S. Charles Herbst, he became an investor, incorporator and vice president of the Milwaukee Investment Company, a local financial institution. Later he helped establish the Citizens Trust Company with assets of more than \$3 million. With his family he moved from the downtown fringe of Milwaukee to a house at 3015 Shepard Street in the more fashionable Upper East Side, adjacent to Lake Michigan (Fig. 15).

With no sons to succeed him, even as he aged Solomon continued to manage his major liquor distilling and distribution businesses. He was well into his seventies when National Prohibition forced him to shut down both his Kentucky distillery and his Milwaukee liquor dealership. Herbst sold the rights to the Old



(Fig. 16) Herbst was given a funeral of the Masonic orders at his Shepard Street home and buried in Milwaukee’s Greenwood Cemetery

Fitzgerald brand name to W.L. Weller for “medicinal whiskey” during the “dry” years, thus keeping the label alive and recognized by the drinking public. After Repeal in 1934 Old Fitzgerald became the lead brand of the Stitzel-Weller company as the famed “Pappy” Van Winkle and his colleagues reorganized the Frankfort plant. When Stitzel-Weller was sold to Diego Ltd. in 1992, the Old Fitzgerald brand went to Heaven Hill distillery in Bardstown, Kentucky. The bourbon is still being produced there; its label bears the signature of “John E. Fitzgerald.” Herbst’s fable rolls on.

As he aged Herbst must have had many a quiet chuckle as he saw the fictitious origin story of Old Fitzgerald he had concocted being repeated again and again. Late in life he apparently admitted that naming his whiskey for the tipsy Fitzgerald had been to him a wickedly funny insider joke. King Solomon died at 80. This Solomon lived to be a ripe old 98, dying in February 1941. As his three daughters and their families looked on, Herbst was given a funeral of the Masonic orders at his Shepard Street home and buried in Milwaukee’s Greenwood Cemetery (Fig. 16).

Note: The story Solomon Herbst had concocted about John E. Fitzgerald as a famous distiller has persisted for decades. I own several books on bourbon that repeat the myth. In 2011 whiskey authority Chuck Cowdery, using evidence he says surfaced a decade earlier, wrote an expose’ of Herbst’s fabrication that now is generally accepted as the truth behind the Old Fitzgerald name. The last image here is of a post-Prohibition Old Fitzgerald milk glass decanter featuring a famous Irish castle (Fig. 17). The legend says, “Shure’n it’s the Blarney.” “Blarney” aptly describes Herbst’s Old Fitzgerald



(Fig. 17) Post-Prohibition Old Fitzgerald milk glass decanter featuring a famous Irish castle

