

The Van Bergens and “The Holy Grail” of Western Whiskeys

By Jack Sullivan

Shown here is just a portion of a label-under-glass Gold Dust Whiskey back-of-the-bar bottle that has been termed “The Holy Grail” of Western whiskeys (Figure 1). Some speculate this bottle may be one-of-a-kind while knowing that at one time others certainly did exist. The Van Bergens, whose San Francisco liquor house issued the “Grail” circa 1880, would be stunned at the current value of a bottle that originally was given away. If one were found it might well sell for five figures at auction.

The Van Bergens were among the earliest pioneers in liquor sales in San Francisco. John Van Bergen, who had emigrated from Hanover, Germany, as a youth in the 1830s, settled initially in New York. He is recorded surfacing in San Francisco in 1851 selling general merchandise. The following year he opened a wholesale liquor business he called “John Van Bergen & Co.”

Joining John on the West Coast was Nicholas Van Bergen (Figure 2). He was born in Hanover in August 1821, likely a younger brother. From a passport document we know that at the age of 17 Nicholas arrived in New York from Germany in the summer of 1838 aboard the steamship *Isabella* out of Bremerhaven. Over

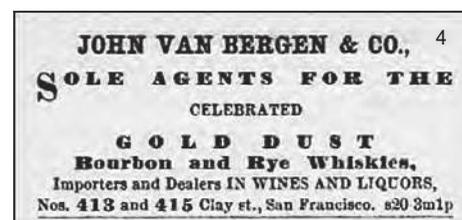
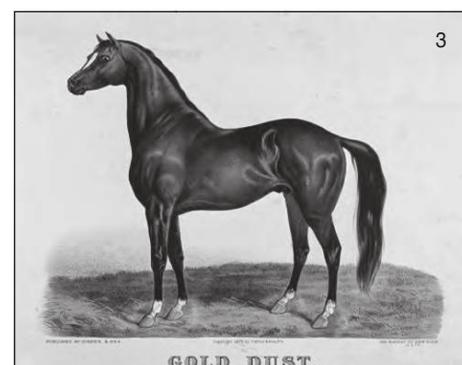
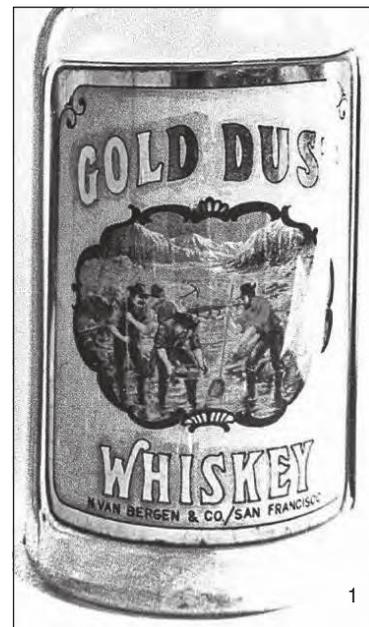
the next decade, he established himself as a New York grocer and married. His bride was Rebecca, also from Hanover and six years his junior. Their first three children would be born in New York. Five more would follow.

When John beckoned in 1856, Nicholas responded, bringing Rebecca and his young family across the continent to San Francisco. Future events indicated that he would find the environment there more cordial than his brother. By 1867 John Van Bergen was recorded in business directories as having returned to live in Germany, apparently leaving day-to-day management of the liquor business to Nicholas. The latter soon found lifelong friends among leading citizens of San Francisco and gained a reputation as a canny businessman.

Nicholas pursued a marketing strategy somewhat different from his competition. Rather than blending his own proprietary brands of whiskey, he bought the rights to established labels. One was a whiskey called “Gold Dust.” The brand came from Kentucky, bearing the name of a nationally famous horse. The trotting stallion is shown here in a Currier & Ives print (Figure 3). Barkhouse Brothers, distillers in Louisville, trademarked the name in January 1872.

Seeing Gold Dust Whiskey as a natural for the San Francisco drinking public, Van Bergen contracted with the Barkhouses to become the sole distributor for the bourbon on the West Coast (Figure 4). The brand proved so successful in California that in 1880 he purchased all rights to the label and became sole proprietor. He used the same style of bottles as the Barkhouse Brothers, sometimes peening out the old name and adding their own.

Those glass containers came in both aqua and shades of amber (Figures 5-7). A number of variations exist in both colors, some more rare than others, sparking considerable interest in the collectors of Western whiskeys. All are considered rare

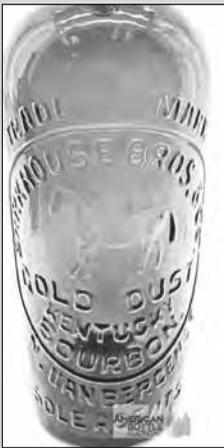




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and fetch fancy prices when upon rare occasion they come up for sale. Several years ago an aqua Gold Dust bottle sold for \$38,000, a record.

As a result, the highly elusive Van Bergen Gold Dust back-of-the-bar bottle that opens this post is believed to be even more valuable and the “Holy Grail.” Some have seen it as “one of a kind” but the economics of creating a label under glass would indicate that more were made by Nicholas Van Bergen, whose name was attached. In 1874 John Van Bergen had sold his share of the company to Nicholas who wasted no time in changing the name to N. Van Bergen & Company, a name that also graced shot glasses advertising Gold Dust whiskey (Figure 8).



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Not all of Van Bergens’ selections apparently proved profitable. During the 1870s the company also gained the rights to “Old Woodburn Whiskey” (Figure 9). This was a brand of the Cook & Bernheimer Company of New York City who trademarked the name in 1870. The bottle also is considered one of the most desirable of Western whiskeys since only three specimens, one shown here, are known. Because the bottle is so rare some assume the brand did not do well on the West Coast and was produced by Van Bergens for only one or two years.



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The mid-1870s were a period of change for Nicholas. Not only was the liquor house now under his major ownership, he brought into the business his eldest son, John W. Van Bergen. As he aged, Nicholas increasingly turned the business over to him and spent his time fraternising with other San Francisco “pioneers.” Nicholas died on November 10, 1898 at the age of 77. He was buried in Cypress Lawn Memorial Park in Colma, California, just outside San Francisco.



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Shown here in a caricature (Figure 10) from the 1912 book, *Men Who Made San Francisco*, John W. Van Bergen carried on the liquor house his uncle and father had founded 32 years earlier. He also was active

politically as a California Republican and hailed as “one of the leading citizens of San Francisco.” With John W.’s death in 1916 at age 64, the N. Bergen Company came to an end, disappearing from city directories, along with Gold Dust Whiskey.

Diggers in California regularly seem to unearth Van Bergen bottles. Others have been found squirreled away in attics and basements. Each new find sends a tremor of anticipation through the collector community. Convinced as I am that the Gold Dust back-of-the-bar bottle was not “one of a kind,” I anticipate news someday that a second or perhaps more examples of the Van Bergen “Holy Grail” have surfaced and big bucks are on the table.

Note: This post has been drawn from a wide range of sources, as have the images shown. In addition to the references provided in the text, the genealogy and city directories available from ancestry.com were particularly valuable, as were information and images from the *Western Whiskey Gazette* website and the FOHBC Virtual Bottle Museum. My appreciation goes to both.



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