
The Bourbon Country Reader

Volume 9 Number 2

© 2005 Charles Kendrick Cowdery, All Rights Reserved

December 2005

Fact or Fiction. Is There Any Difference in Bourbon Country?

In the marketing of American whiskey, it can be hard to say what is truth, especially when it comes to historical claims.

The Scots and Irish started it, this competition over historic pedigrees. Which whiskey (i.e., which producer) is the oldest? Who was the first to do this or that? Sure, you want your whiskey to be well-aged, but what does it matter how old the company that makes it is? Apparently, it matters a lot.


Compared to the Europeans, all American distilleries are newcomers, but a couple of families can cite more than two hundred years of experience. Most of the rest make at least some stab at selling their venerable heritage.

But are these claims true? Attempts to answer *that* question can become existential. What *is* truth anyway?

For example:

- Was Evan Williams's Kentucky's first distiller?
- Did Elijah Craig either invent or "discover" bourbon?
- Did Jacob Beam sell his first barrel of whiskey in 1795?
- Has the Jim Beam company, "stayed true" to its "original recipe for 209 years"?
- Did Augustus Bulleit move from New Orleans to Louisville in 1830 and begin to apply Cognac techniques to bourbon-making?
- Did the founder of Maker's Mark invent wheated bourbon while baking bread?

*Little sips of news,
history and other
information about
America's unique spirit
and the people
who make it,
for people
who enjoy it.*



*Always Independent
& Idiosyncratic.
(No distillery affiliation.)*

- Or did William Larue Weller and *his* family originate the wheated bourbon formula?
- Was John Fitzgerald (Old Fitzgerald) an early distillery owner or a more recent "government man"?
- Is Jack Daniel's "the nation's oldest registered distillery"?

(Continued on page 4)

In This Issue:

**We Look for the Truth
About Whiskeys and Their
Historical Claims.**

Who's On First? Evan Williams and Elijah Craig?

The Evan Williams and Elijah Craig brands are both made by Heaven Hill, which was founded in 1934.

The only connection Heaven Hill has that goes back further is through its line of Master Distillers, all of whom have been members of the Beam family. Unfortunately, that heritage is already taken.

With no history of its own to tout, Heaven Hill reached back into Kentucky history and found Evan Williams.

In the fledgling town of Louisville in 1783, Williams established a distillery, at least according to an early Kentucky historian, Ruben Durrett, who wrote about it in 1892. Based on that date, Durrett declared Evan Williams to be Kentucky's first distiller.

Durrett neglected to mention where he got that date, but there is a bigger question here? Is it plausible that no one had set up a still in Kentucky until 1783, 9 years after the first Euro-American settlement there?

Since most distilling in those days was an adjunct to farming or milling, an argument can be made that Williams was the first Kentuckian to establish a distillery *business*, at least the first on record. Maybe, but that would not make him Kentucky's first distiller, as Heaven Hill now claims. (Earlier labels called him "Kentucky's First *Commercial* Distiller.")

A few years after Heaven Hill first put the Williams name on a bottle, they

(Continued on page 2)

There's No Recipe Like an Old Recipe: Jim Beam and Bulleit.

Jacob Beam was a contemporary of Evan Williams and Elijah Craig, an 18th century pioneer of the wilderness that became Kentucky.

Beam family distilleries have long claimed that patriarch Jacob Beam sold his first barrel of whiskey in 1795. That claim is the foundation of Jim Beam's current advertising campaign.

The source? Beam family oral history, apparently. Even the semi-official Beam corporate biography, Paul Pacult's *American Still Life*, admits that "no recording of this genuinely momentous event in American whiskey and business history has ever surfaced."

So what about the claim that Jim Beam, the brand, has "stayed true to our original recipe for 209 years"? Since there is no 209-year-old document, no piece of paper that says "my bourbon recipe," signed by Jacob Beam, to what does the claim refer?

"No recording of this genuinely momentous event in American whiskey and business history has ever surfaced."

Jim Beam's new television commercials try to visualize it. They show what appear to be whiskey makers from different time periods moving barrels of whiskey around in a warehouse, doing everything the same way *now* as they did it back *then*.

But was 'then' 209 years ago?

American whiskey was not aged in the late 18th century, hence there were no warehouses 209 years ago. When warehouses came into use about 150 years ago, they didn't look like the one in the Beam commercials. Those came

into use only about 120 years ago.

So does Jim Beam's heritage claim have any tangible manifestation? Beam company distillers point out that the yeast they use today is bred from yeast Jim Beam himself captured on his back porch in Bardstown in 1933, using traditional methods including a yeast-propagation medium his father and grandfather taught him how to make. That may not add up to 209 years, but the link to an old family tradition is undeniable.

Bulleit Bourbon, a product created within the lifetime of any person of legal drinking age, purports to be made from a 175-year-old recipe passed down to Tom Bulleit from his great-great-grandfather, Augustus.

Mr. Bulleit blushes when asked about this story. Like the Beams, he has no parchment to show you, just a 'tradition' passed from father to son, and who can argue with that?

The problem with these and every other claim about an ancient, unchanged bourbon recipe is that bourbon today is much better in every way than what they were drinking in 1795 or 1830.

American whiskey back then was made in pots stills, not the column stills in use for the last 150 years or so. No one had heard of the sour mash process, so the product was notoriously inconsistent from batch to batch. These two facts alone render the fetish for ancient 'recipes' ridiculous.

For Bulleit, it is the high ratio of rye to corn in Bulleit's mash, 1:2 as compared to the conventional 1:5, that is cited as the family's contribution.

Bulleit *is* a very tasty bourbon and Beam makes some good ones too. That, at the end of the day, should be all that matters. ←

Williams & Craig ...

(Continued from page 1)

went back to the well for another figure from early Kentucky history. This time it was Elijah Craig, a religious leader who founded Georgetown, Kentucky, and its college, and recorded many other 'firsts.'

"Is it plausible that no one had set up a still in Kentucky until 1783, 9 years after the first Euro-American settlement there?"

Another early Kentucky historian, Richard Collins, credits Craig with the invention of bourbon in 1789. This claim, first published in 1874, is unsupported by any documentation.

The elaborate story about how Craig did not 'invent' bourbon but instead 'discovered' it when he stored some new whiskey in a barrel he had accidentally burned, that came later. It didn't come from Collins and its origin is unknown.

As with the Williams claim, the problem is how these claims jibe with the rest of what we know about early whiskey-making. In this case, what might Craig have done in 1789 that differed from what Williams did in 1783, to make Craig's distillate uniquely 'bourbon'?

It is hard to guess why Collins wrote what he did, but the trouble with his claim is that the product we know today as bourbon whiskey did not come into being until much later, around the middle of the following century.

Even the word 'bourbon,' used in reference to frontier whiskey, did not first appear until several decades after the Williams and Craig period. ←

A Founding Fathers ‘Firsts’ Fight: Weller Takes Aim at Maker’s.

It appears the stage is being set for a tussle between W. L. Weller (i.e., Buffalo Trace/Sazerac) and Maker’s Mark (i.e., Jim Beam/Fortune) about recipe origins, specifically who was the first to substitute wheat for rye in a bourbon mash?

Maker’s Mark, now owned by Jim Beam, has long claimed that its founder, Bill Samuels Sr., developed the Maker’s Mark recipe in the 1950s while baking bread. Since more people like wheat bread than rye bread, he wondered, perhaps people who don’t like bourbon would like it better if wheat were used instead of rye.

“Who was the first to substitute wheat for rye in a bourbon mash?”

This is the brand’s foundation myth, the heart of what it means to be Maker’s Mark Bourbon.

Recently, Buffalo Trace has begun to call William Larue Weller ‘the father of wheated recipe bourbons.’ Did Weller beat Samuels to the punch?

When asked for evidence, Buffalo Trace replies, “The Weller brand is the ‘Original Wheated Bourbon.’ William Larue Weller and his family originated the Wheated formula and the William Larue Weller bourbon we bottle today is a tribute to him.”

Bill Samuels Sr. was born in 1910. Bill Weller died in 1908, so Weller’s ‘heirs’ (Sazerac bought the brand in 1999) seem to have the better claim, *if* Weller made wheated bourbon.

The thing is, Weller never made *any* bourbon. Weller was a distributor, not a distiller. One of his main suppliers

was a distillery run by Jacob Stitzel. After Prohibition, the owner of W. L. Weller and Sons merged that company with the Stitzel Brothers Distillery to form Stitzel-Weller.

We know *that* company made wheated bourbon because the owner, Julian ‘Pappy’ Van Winkle, wrote about it in the folksy ads he ran for his flagship Old Fitzgerald brand.

Where did the wheat recipe originate? Van Winkle’s granddaughter, Sally, who wrote the book, *But Always Fine Bourbon*, about her grandfather and his company, says it came from the Stitzels.

Could Weller somehow have collaborated with his supplier, Stitzel, on the wheat recipe or in some other way provided the impetus for its development back in the 1880s or 90s? (Weller retired in 1896.) No evidence links Weller or any other individual or company to a first use of wheat in bourbon mashes, or to *any* use of wheat in bourbon mashes prior to Prohibition.

Julian P. Van Winkle III, brother of Sally, grandson of Pappy, ran for many years an aging and bottling operation at the old Commonwealth Distillery outside of Lawrenceburg. His whiskey stock came primarily from his family’s former distillery, which operated under various corporate ownerships until 1992. In 2004, with that supply running out, Van Winkle joined forces with Buffalo Trace.

In other words, the Van Winkle family (Julian’s son, Preston, is part of it too), which had owned the Weller company since 1915, has been officially reunited with the Weller name after a 32-year separation. Does that make W. L. Weller the ‘father of wheated recipe bourbons’? I don’t see how it could. ←

The Fitzgerald Identity: How Old Fitz Got Its Name.

Neither the Weller Company nor the Stitzel Distillery created the Old Fitzgerald brand, which was the flagship bourbon of the combined Stitzel-Weller entity for all the years of its existence.

The Fitzgerald brand, which was first registered as a bourbon trademark in 1884, was created by Charles Herbst, a Milwaukee-based international wine and spirits distributor.

Herbst owned a Frankfort, Kentucky, distillery called Old Judge, which portrayed Old Fitzgerald in advertising. The ads told of a distiller named John E. Fitzgerald, who made only premium bourbon for sale to railroads, steamship lines and private clubs, which everyone knew only served the best whiskeys.

By the time Prohibition closed everyone down in 1920, Old Fitzgerald had become a significant brand. During Prohibition, Herbst was doing some other business with Pappy Van Winkle and offered to sell him Old Fitzgerald. A deal was struck.

After Prohibition, Van Winkle’s new company, Stitzel-Weller, began to make and market Old Fitzgerald Bourbon. It became their leading brand. Stitzel continued to tell the story of John Fitzgerald and his premium bourbon for the railroads. It is possible Van Winkle even believed it.

That is what Sally Van Winkle Campbell, his granddaughter, thinks. She now knows the *real* story. According to a reliable source, John Fitzgerald was not a whiskey maker, he was a whiskey thief.

Specifically, John Fitzgerald was the Herbst plant’s resident ‘government

(Continued on page 4)

Oldest Registered Distillery in the United States: Jack Daniel's.

The first page of the web site holds the tip-off. The history section is titled 'legends and lore.'

There we find this: "Mr. Jack Daniel was the first to register his distillery with the government in 1866, making it the oldest registered distillery in the United States of America."

You would think that such a claim, involving registration with the federal government a mere 140 years ago, would be, well, on record somewhere and easy to check.

It isn't.

Brown-Forman, which owns Jack Daniel's, says it has relied on information "passed down from generation to generation." The available records, it says, are "inconclusive" due to the upheaval of the Civil War,

Old Fitzgerald ...

(Continued from page 3)

man,' the U. S. Treasury agent who controlled access to the whiskey warehouses. Like many in his profession, Mr. Fitzgerald helped himself to a taste from time to time, but he chose unusually well, so well that Herbst and his employees got in the habit of calling any particularly good barrel of whiskey 'a Fitzgerald.'

When Herbst needed a name for a new premium-quality straight bourbon he was introducing, 'Fitzgerald' seemed like a natural choice.

Until Campbell's account was published in 1999, no one had any reason to doubt the original tale. In that year, Old Fitzgerald was sold to Heaven Hill, which now tells *both* stories. ←

Reconstruction, courthouse fires and Prohibition.

The 'oldest registered distillery' claim is repeated so often, no one thinks to question it. Yet we are asked to believe that the federal government in 1866 decided to start registering distilleries for tax collection purposes and a 16-year-old boy in rural Tennessee was the first to comply.

Peter Krass, author of 2004's *Blood & Whiskey: The Life and Times of Jack Daniel*, says Daniel's was not the first registered distillery in the country and never won a gold medal for world's best whiskey either.

Krass says land and deed records show Daniel didn't even go into business until 1875.

He also says it's impossible that Daniel's was the first registered distillery because many Northern distilleries were registered long before to comply with revenue laws.

Depending on what you mean by 'registered,' the first 'registered' distilleries in the U.S. had to have been the ones that complied with the first federal liquor excise tax, levied on July 1, 1791.

The tax was on and off for about 30

Fact or Fiction? ...

(Continued from page 1)

That is quite a list and it is not complete. Perhaps we'll tackle some of the many other claims in future stories.

For now, we devote this entire issue of *The Reader* to getting to the bottom of these. ←

years until it was abolished in 1818.

Reimposed in 1862, it has been with us ever since. The rate was raised twice in 1864 and again in 1865. While the Civil War was underway, distilleries in areas not under control of the Union did not pay the tax, but plenty of distilleries in Pennsylvania and other Union states got "registered" and started to pay back in 1862.

As consumer packaged goods go, whiskey was one of the earliest. Many claims were first made before anyone even conceived of 'truth in advertising' as a value. To some extent they were grandfathered in when the government began to police product claims in the early 20th century. No one means any harm. It has simply become part of the brand's fabric, its background music.

All the same, it's nice to know the truth. ←

Contact *The Reader*.

Address all suggestions, comments, debunks and rebunks, etc. to:

Chuck Cowdery, Editor
The Bourbon Country Reader
PMB 298, 3712 North Broadway
Chicago, IL 60613-4198

E-mail *The Reader* at
cowdery@ix.netcom.com

Visit us on the web at
http://cowdery.home.netcom.com.

Subscriptions are \$17 each, for which you will receive six issues. Make check payable to Made and Bottled in Kentucky. Back issues are available.

"The Bourbon Country Reader" is published every other month or thereabouts by Made and Bottled in Kentucky, PMB 298, 3712 North Broadway, Chicago, IL 60613-4198.

"The Bourbon Country Reader" assumes no responsibility to return unsolicited editorial or graphic material. All rights in letter and unsolicited editorial and graphic material will be treated as unconditionally assigned for publication and copyright purposes and subject to "The Bourbon Country Reader's" unrestricted right to edit and to comment editorially. All rights reserved. Nothing may be reprinted in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher.