



THE HISTORY OF BOURBON

written by Mike Veach of The Filson Historical Society

When early Americans first traveled west, they brought stills for personal use. They needed distilled spirits for social and economic reasons. A jug of whiskey was brought to all social occasions such as a cabin raising or a wedding, but it was also used as barter for supplies. These early spirits were not aged in barrels and were often was flavored with fruit and sugar to take the rough edges from the drink. It was not until the 1820s that aged whiskey called "Bourbon" was produced.

The first written mention of "Bourbon whiskey" is from an 1821 issue of the Western Citizen newspaper. Aging the whiskey in a charred barrel is what makes Bourbon. It is not known who first did this, but the earliest known mention of charring a whiskey barrel is from 1826 as a Lexington grocer writes to distiller John Corlis telling him he has heard that charring the inside of the barrel will improve the flavor of the whiskey. The next step in the evolution of Bourbon is in the 1830s when James Christopher Crow goes to work for Oscar Pepper as a distiller. Crow uses scientific methods to understand the distilling process and writes down his results. By writing down his results, he was able to reference his notes with each batch to produce a more uniform quality bourbon.

After the American Civil War the industry grew as the use of steam power, the invention of the column still by Aeneas Coffey in the 1830s and the railroad all combine to make large distilleries successful. In 1870 George Garvin Brown introduces Old Forester, the first bourbon to be sold only by the bottle. Bottles were expensive since they had to be hand blown and often were of variable size. For most of the 19th century the primary package for the distiller was the barrel as consumers would bring in their own flask, jug or bottle to purchase their whiskey from the saloon or liquor store. Some stores did bottle Bourbon to aid in this sale since not everyone had their own bottle. In the 1870s E. H. Taylor, Jr. takes advantage of new technology and marketing methods to promote his OFC whiskey. He developed a full sized trademark for his barrel heads and makes his barrels with brass instead of iron hoops. He uses color lithographic methods to print letterhead and sales brochures to promote his bourbon whiskey.

In the 1880s machine blown bottles were available and the consumer finds more brands available by the bottle. This is a time when rectifiers who did not own a distillery, but instead bought barrels from distillers to bottle as their own brand. They would often mix the whiskey with neutral spirits and adding color and flavoring agents to the whiskey to create their own product. These rectifiers were flooding the market with cheap whiskey they were calling "Bourbon". This led to the Bottled-in-Bond Act of 1897 as the distillers worked to make their aged bourbon stand out as different from rectified whiskey in the marketplace.



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The beginning of the 20th century saw further strife between the rectifiers and the distillers with the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. The question became what was "Pure Food" whiskey. This question is answered on December 29, 1909 when President Taft makes his decision of the matter, defining the categories known today as "Straight", "Blended" and "Imitation" whiskey.

Prohibition closes down the distilleries. The barrels were private property and as long as the distillers did not sell the whiskey illegally the government could not take away their bourbon. Six companies applied for and received license to sell spirits as "medicine" during prohibition. People could purchase one pint of 100 proof spirits every 10 days for medical use. The distilleries could sell to pharmacies to fill this need. They could also sell twelve pints of spirits a year to doctors and dentists. Prohibition comes to an end on December 5th, 1933 as Utah becomes the last state needed to pass the 21st amendment, repealing the 18th amendment.

With the repeal of prohibition came new liquor regulations. The Federal government imposes new rules such as standard bottle sizes and label requirements. On March 1, 1938 a regulation took effect making new cooperage required for straight whiskey. In 1964 the United States government passes a resolution making Bourbon a product of the United States.

The 1960s saw the beginning of a decline in Bourbon sales as over-production led to cheap prices and the young generation turned their backs on drinking bourbon. This decline continued through the 1970s and 80s. This turned around with the introduction of super-premium bourbons such as single barrel and small batch brands in the 90s. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Bourbon had not only recovered, but had become tremendously popular as drinkers came to appreciate the quality and taste of well-made bourbon by long-time distillers and new craft distillers.