
TENNESSEE DISTILLERIES: THEIR RISE, FALL, AND RE-EMERGENCE

Kay Baker Gaston

In modern times, distilling is more closely associated with Kentucky than Tennessee. Yet the two remaining producers of Tennessee sour mash whiskey, Jack Daniel and George Dickel, represent a much larger industry that was from earliest settlement an important contributor to the state's economic development. A study of the rise, fall, and re-emergence of Tennessee distilleries will demonstrate this industry's substantial and complex role in Tennessee's economic and political history.

The process of converting corn and small grains such as rye and barley into whiskey was well known to the predominantly Scots, Scotch-Irish, and Irish immigrants who poured into the Tennessee country from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North and South Carolina. Evan Shelby's East Tennessee distillery, located at Sapling Grove near Shelby's Station on the Holston, was in existence by 1771 and perhaps the earliest on record in the state.¹ By 1785 East Tennesseans were producing significant quantities of rye whiskey which they used to pay taxes at only two shillings, six pence per gallon.

Middle Tennessee was close behind. In 1787 the Red Heifer, a combined distillery and tavern, was established in Nashville by John "King" Boyd.² In October of 1792, Indians burned Frederick Stump's distillery, but by 1795-96 he was producing 600 gallons with four stills, on which he paid taxes of \$41.93.³ By 1799 there were sixty-one stills for less than 4,000 people in Davidson County, according to records kept by John Overton, who was then serving as Supervisor of Internal Revenue for the District of Tennessee.⁴

Both East and Middle Tennessee were well suited for the production of whiskey, having good soil for growing corn, an abundance of firewood, white oak for the manufacture of barrels, and a good network of rivers upon which to ship the whiskey to marketing centers like Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis, and beyond. Many Tennesseans shipped their whiskey by flatboat to Natchez where it brought \$2 a gallon, twice the going price in Nashville. On the farm the mash was fed to hogs and cattle which, in the form of salted meat and hides, were also suitable for export.

Always the demand exceeded the supply. As one old-timer said in more recent years, "They never did charge enough for it."⁵ To the frontiersman, whiskey was more than a drink; it was an anesthetic, disinfectant, and either a stimulant or a tranquilizer, depending on the situation and the individual. Andrew Jackson even advised his old friend John Coffee, who was suffering from arthritis, to bathe himself in whiskey.⁶

During the Revolution and after, soldiers were partially paid in whiskey and expected their half pint daily. Most of it was consumed straight or mixed with sugar and water as a today. Although whiskey consumption was high, Harriette Simpson Arnow concludes in *Flowering of the Cumberland* that drunkenness was frowned on and relatively uncommon on the Tennessee frontier.⁷

Nonetheless, it should be noted that with the same Act of the Assembly establishing the Davidson County Court in 1784 another act was passed specifying that because of the shortage of grain there should be no distillation of alcohol in Davidson County. This act did not long remain in effect. Apparently it was passed at the instigation of General James Robertson, an early temperance advocate who argued that, no matter how large the supply of grain, its conversion into whiskey was "an unwarranted perversion-unserviceable to white men, devilish for Indians."⁸

As the frontier gave way to settlement, whiskey consumption increased, not only in Tennessee, but also throughout the nation. By 1810, 14,191 registered distilleries were producing 25.5 million gallons of whiskey, a five-fold increase over statistics for 1792.⁹ Registration fees for the distilleries were high enough to discourage small private producers; increasingly what had begun as a home industry became a more large-scale industry, with some farm producers in some counties making the transition.

As production increased, so did consumption and drunkenness. Congregationalists and Quakers in New England and Pennsylvania were the first to oppose the use of whiskey altogether. Fledgling temperance and prohibition movements spread south and west, to be carried over the mountains to the earliest settlements by Methodist circuit riders like Bishop Francis Asbury, who first visited Tennessee in 1788.¹⁰

In 1829 the first temperance societies were established in Tennessee, with support increasing in the 1830s and 40s. In 1848 the legislature chartered the Sons and Daughters of Temperance, the strongest temperance group in the state. The movement scarcely had gotten started when the threat of war diverted attention from it, but the groundwork had been laid.

In the interim, Tennesseans were not only consuming more alcohol but they were becoming major producers as well. In 1820 the Fourth Census showed that New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Tennessee had more capital invested and employed more men in the production of spirits than any other states in the Union.¹¹ The industry continued to grow right up until the Civil War, gradually becoming concentrated in certain areas. One of these was Robertson County, extending north of Davidson County to the Kentucky line.

During the war, occupying Union forces banned the distillation of whiskey because corn and other grains were needed to feed both humans and livestock. In Robertson County, distilling was one of the first businesses to start up after Federal troops pulled out in April of 1865. It was late spring, the favored season for distilling. Limestone water, corn, and firewood were readily available and a still could be set up easily and cheaply. It seemed as though nearly everyone in the county went into making whiskey for the simple reason that it was the fastest way to make money and required virtually no capital.

A major advantage was the fine reputation that Robertson County distillers such as Wiley Woodard already enjoyed. The 249 gallons of whiskey Woodard shipped to Lyon & Company in Nashville on September 21, 1865, commanded \$3.75 a gallon, compared to forty cents a gallon before the war.¹² Clearly his success would have been a stimulus to other producers.

Although Woodard continued to produce the finest Robertson County whiskey and apple and peach brandies, his production was eventually surpassed by aggressive new contenders, many of whom were his relatives. By 1874, these and other Robertson County distillers were producing 45,000 barrels of whiskey annually. They consumed so much corn that it became necessary to import large amounts from St. Louis and other markets. Before the war, there had been no wholesale whiskey dealers in Springfield, but by 1874 the business had grown to nearly one

million dollars in annual sales. The barrel business that had grown up at Coopertown now produced \$125,000 in business annually. In 1872 the Springfield National Bank was established to cater to the liquor industry. Because of the whiskey deposits-the average deposit was over \$100,000-the newly established bank never wavered during the financial panic of 1873.

The Robertson County distillery that grew to be the largest was located at Greenbrier. When it was started about 1867 by Charles Palmer of Springfield, its capacity was a modest five gallons a day. In 1870, Charles Nelson, a native of Mecklenburg, Germany, who had come to Nashville from Cincinnati, bought it to supply his wholesale grocery business in Nashville (at that time grocers sold whiskey). The whiskey was manufactured in Robertson County, but it was both bottled under the Greenbrier label and distributed from his Nashville warehouse on Second Avenue North. At its peak, the distillery employed a work force of fifteen to twenty-five men, including government inspectors and gaugers as well as the operators. By 1885 the Greenbrier Distillery manufactured 8,000 barrels of whiskey or a little less than 380,000 gallons a year, and paid annual taxes of over \$341,000.

In 1886 the Nashville *Union* reported that the distilling industry was the largest manufacturing industry in the state of Tennessee, annually consuming 750,000 bushels of corn and 500,000 bushels of apples and peaches. By the late 1880s, however, the industry had begun to decline. Smaller and less successful distillers had gone into other businesses, faced with intense competition from the larger distillers on the one hand, and mounting pressure from church and temperance groups on the other. The Women's Christian Temperance Union had organized in the state in 1874 and would be joined by the Anti-Saloon League in 1899.¹³

In Robertson County, by 1894, only five distilleries were still depositing whiskey in warehouses, and two of those were run by widows: Louisa Nelson for Charles Nelson's Greenbrier Distillery, and Josephine Woodard Brown for J. S. Brown Distilleries on Wartrace Creek. As the distilleries closed down, the distillers or their families tended to transfer their considerable assets into banking.

In 1903, the Adams Law, which extended the Four Mile Law first passed in 1877 to towns of 5,000, closed the saloons of Springfield.¹⁴ In 1909, with the state-wide prohibition on the manufacture of whiskey, the two remaining Robertson County distilleries, Nelson's Greenbrier and Pitt's Cave Spring, and all others in Tennessee went out of business, although some tried to conduct sales through retail and manufacturing activities in other states.

Only two Tennessee distilleries would revive after prohibition-Cascade, later to be identified solely by the name of its distributor, George Dickel & Company-and Jack Daniel. The Cascade Distillery was located a few miles from Tullahoma in Coffee County, and only about a mile from the tiny community of Normandy, on Gage Creek, later called Cascade Springs.¹⁵ Around 1883 the distillery was acquired by Matthew Sims and McLin H. Davis. In 1888, Sims sold his share of the distillery to V. E. Shwab, a partner in George A. Dickel & Company; and in 1898 the heirs of McLin Davis sold his one-third interest to Shwab, who then became sole proprietor of the distillery.

Cascade was never owned by George A. Dickel, but its product was bottled and distributed by George A. Dickel and Company of Nashville. Dickel was a native of Germany like Charles Nelson and their pioneer predecessor, Frederick Stump. His employee, brother-in-law, and eventual partner was V. E. Shwab, a younger man whose family emigrated from Alsace-Lorraine. George Dickel died in 1894 and left no children. Shwab, who was on excellent terms with his widowed sister-in-law, Augusta Dickel, assumed complete control of the company in addition to his ownership of the distillery.

Cascade was the largest of several distilleries located in Coffee County. As in the case of Charles Nelson's Greenbrier Distillery, it prospered because of marketing and distribution through Nashville, in this case through George A. Dickel and Company. The whiskey also became very popular with soldiers during the Spanish-American War and its fame spread to the West Coast. There it was distributed out of San Francisco, described by Shwab's son-in-law Paul Davis as a "great whiskey town." In the early 1900s the company hired the D'Arcy Advertising Company of St. Louis, which had also begun the advertising campaign for Coca-Cola, to initiate an extensive advertising program for Cascade. Its distinctive slogan, "mellow as moonlight," was related to distiller McLin Davis's discovery that the whiskey was improved by allowing the mash to cool in the light of the moon.¹⁶

Soon after the manufacture of whiskey was prohibited in Tennessee in 1909, George A. Dickel and Company moved its operation, first to Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and then to Louisville where it continued in production at the famed Stitzel distillery under the direction of V. E. Shwab's son, George, enjoying tremendous popularity until the Volstead Act was passed in 1919.¹⁷

In 1937, eighteen years after George A. Dickel and Company had ceased operation, Schenley, Inc., paid the Shwab family \$100,000 for the company and the Cascade trademark. Fortunately the Shwabs were able to obtain the original recipe and process from local men in Coffee County who had distilled Cascade whiskey, and this information was transmitted to Schenley. The whiskey Schenley produced in Kentucky after prohibition was thought by some Tennesseans to be an inferior brand of bourbon rather than a *bona fide* Tennessee sour mash whiskey. Since 1958, however, after the passage of appropriate legislation, Tennessee sour mash whiskey has again been produced in a modern plant just outside of Normandy. Louisville distiller Ralph Dupps was given the assignment of re-establishing the Cascade Distillery, renamed the George Dickel Distillery, near its original location and, most importantly, its original water source.

Today the most famous, largest, and, for various reasons, most authentic Tennessee distillery is Jack Daniel, which is located at Lynchburg in Moore County. This distillery is in full operation on its original site and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its founder, Jack Daniel, was born in 1848 about five miles away from the distillery. At age twelve he went to work for Dan Call, who operated a distillery a few miles away at Louse Creek, and at age fourteen became a full partner with Call, who clearly was an important mentor. In 1866 Jack Daniel leased the famous Hollow and Cave Spring which continue to be the focal point of the distillery's operation. At the same time Daniel apparently was the first to reapply for a distillery license after the war, which has been the basis of the company's claim that it is the oldest registered distillery in the United States. On June 17, 1884, Jack Daniel purchased the Hollow and cave, including in all 142 acres at a price of \$2,180.40 from Wilburn Hiles and his partner Berry, owners since 1817.¹⁸

Jack was fond of his own liquor, which he sweetened with sugar dissolved in a little branch water and garnished with bruised tansy, and of dancing with the ladies, but he remained a bachelor all of his life. From the age of twenty-one little Jack Daniel, who stood just over five feet tall, invariably dressed in a knee-length frock coat of black broadcloth and affected a high-rolled planter's hat, fawn-colored vest, and broad bow tie, just as he appears in the statue his nephew Lem Motlow commissioned in 1941. The statue, the cave spring, all aspects of the distillery operation, many of the citizens who work there, and even the ducks have been prominently featured over the years in the modern company's advertising, which was originally developed by the Gardner Advertising Agency of St. Louis.¹⁹

Although Jack Daniel grew to pre-eminence over all other Tennessee distillers, his was not an overnight success. In 1877, for example, Tolley & Eaton was producing 300 gallons a day and Jack was second in Moore County

with 83 gallons, with thirteen other distilleries together producing another 70 gallons. By 1896 the market for and reputation of Jack Daniel's famous sour mash whiskey had greatly increased, thanks in some measure to his agent, M. Ryan, in Nashville. In 1904 Jack took a couple of cases of his whiskey to the St. Louis Exposition, or World's Fair. The big distillers from other parts of the country were surprised and chagrined when Jack Daniel won the gold medal. Thereafter, Jack Daniel's whiskey won gold medals at Liege, Belgium, in 1905; Ghent in 1913, and at the Anglo-American Exposition in 1914, achieving world recognition on the eve of national prohibition.²⁰

Meanwhile, Jack had kicked his safe one cold morning when it refused to open. He incurred such a severe clot in the arteries of his leg that it eventually had to be amputated. After that he left most of the management of the plant to his nephew, Lem Motlow, who had come to work for him at age 17, in 1887. In 1907 Jack Daniel deeded the company over to Lem Motlow and another nephew, Dick Daniel. Two years later, Lem bought out Dick's share.²¹ In 1911, Jack passed away. It was Lem Motlow who saw the company through its moves to St. Louis, Missouri, and to Birmingham, Alabama, in an effort to escape the tightening net of prohibition. In 1933, when national prohibition was revoked, it was also Lem Motlow who accomplished the reopening of the modern distillery at its original location. Lem Motlow died in 1947 and the ownership of his distillery was continued by his sons, who operated it even after its sale in 1956 to Brown-Forman of Louisville, also a family-owned distillery, for \$20,000,000.²²

Thus today we have two survivors of a frontier industry, one of Tennessee's first and for a time in the 1880s its leading industry, brought here by Scots, Scotch-Irish, Irish, and, we must add in deference to Frederick Stump, German immigrants moving west. The prohibition movement virtually eliminated not only the product, but also modern awareness of the industry's extent and scope before prohibition.

The re-emergence of Tennessee distilleries after prohibition is in both cases one of modern business involving politics, advertising, and acquisition by larger companies from outside the state. The quality of the product was upheld: both distilleries utilize the leaching process through maple charcoal which is the most distinctive characteristic of Tennessee sour mash whiskey. Advertising has been a key ingredient for both, with Jack Daniel achieving an almost legendary success.

Most important were the human ingredients: Jack Daniel got his start in the pre-Civil War era and made the transition to the new postwar economy; Lem Motlow took over the reins at the onset of prohibition and guided the company to the modern era, passing it on to his sons who negotiated its sale to an eminently compatible company, Brown-Forman. George Dickel had a less sure route to success, but fortunately George B. Shwab was able to achieve the transfer to Schenley at the end of prohibition; then, when the move back to Normandy was undertaken, Schenley had the right man, Ralph Dupps, for that challenging assignment. So it is that these two historic companies, representing a pioneer industry that started about 1771, still provide a hint of the tastes and smells of Tennessee's past whenever Tennesseans enjoy their Jack Daniel's or George Dickel over ice.

NOTES

1. Henry C. Crowgey, *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskey-Making* (Lexington, 1971), 23-24. Shelby's Station is the present site of Bristol, in Sullivan County.
2. J. G. M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Knoxville, reprint 1967), 284.
3. *Ibid.*, 598. Stump was a member of the German community that settled White's Creek; today his log home can

be easily viewed from the Briley Parkway.

4. John Overton, "General Account of County Distilleries, 1795-1801," Jacob McGavock Dickinson Papers, Tennessee State Library & Archives.
5. This statement was attributed to Sam Krisle, Robertson County storekeeper, by George Henry Brown, author's grandfather.
6. Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Flowering of the Cumberland* (New York, 1963), 78.
7. Arnow, 280. She writes: "My own conclusion is that, though consumption of alcoholic beverages was heavy, there was among the Cumberland pioneers during the years 1780-1803 not only much less alcoholism than today, but even less than in most states during this same period."
8. A. W. Putnam, *History of Middle Tennessee: or, Life and Times of General James Robertson* (Knoxville, reprint 1971), 237.
9. Herbert Asbury, *The Great Illusion: An Informal History of Prohibition* (Garden City, 1950). See pp. 3-12 for a discussion for the period 1750-1840, which he describes as "the most intemperate era in American history."
10. John Allen Krout, *The Origins of Prohibition* (New York, 1925), 36.
11. Asbury, 89.
12. Wiley Woodard, *Memorandum of Articles Delivered 1857-1865*, in possession of author. This and subsequent information about Robertson County distilleries is drawn from her article, "Robertson County Distilleries, 1796-1909," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* XLIII (Spring 1984): 49-67.
13. Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us From Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition* (New York, 1976), 48-50, 93.
14. The Four Mile Law was the device through which anti-saloon leaders achieved prohibition; it outlawed the sale of liquor within four miles of any chartered institution of learning outside an incorporated town. In 1887 it was amended to include rural public schools, and in 1909 it was extended to all parts of the state. See Eric Russell Lacy, "Tennessee Teetotalism: Social Forces and the Politics of Progressivism," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* XXIV (Fall 1965): 224, 229.
15. See Kay Baker Gaston, "George Dickel Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey: The Story Behind the Label," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* LVIV (Fall 1998): 48-69.
16. Gaston interview with Thurman Davis, 1983.
17. Harry Harrison Kroll, *Bluegrass, Belles, and Bourbon* (New York, 1967), 208.

18. Ben A. Green, *Jack Daniel's Legacy* (Shelbyville, 1967), 207-208; Moore County Deed Book 3, pp. 130-31.
19. Green, 197.
20. "Rare Jack Daniel's," *Fortune*, July 1951, 105.
21. Ibid.
22. Green, 175.

Copyright © 1999, Middle Tennessee State University.

Border States On-Line is hosted by [Georgetown College](#).

This page was last updated on 5/5/99. | [Border States On-Line](#) | [Site Map](#)

This web page is maintained by

Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College

400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075

E-mail: htallant@georgetowncollege.edu



Border States: Journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association, [No. 12](#) (1999)

TENNESSEE DISTILLERIES: THEIR RISE, FALL, AND RE-EMERGENCE

Kay Baker Gaston

In modern times, distilling is more closely associated with Kentucky than Tennessee. Yet the two remaining producers of Tennessee sour mash whiskey, Jack Daniel and George Dickel, represent a much larger industry that was from earliest settlement an important contributor to the state's economic development. A study of the rise, fall, and re-emergence of Tennessee distilleries will demonstrate this industry's substantial and complex role in Tennessee's economic and political history.

The process of converting corn and small grains such as rye and barley into whiskey was well known to the predominantly Scots, Scotch-Irish, and Irish immigrants who poured into the Tennessee country from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North and South Carolina. Evan Shelby's East Tennessee distillery, located at Sapling Grove near Shelby's Station on the Holston, was in existence by 1771 and perhaps the earliest on record in the state.¹ By 1785 East Tennesseans were producing significant quantities of rye whiskey which they used to pay taxes at only two shillings, six pence per gallon.

Middle Tennessee was close behind. In 1787 the Red Heifer, a combined distillery and tavern, was established in

Nashville by John "King" Boyd.² In October of 1792, Indians burned Frederick Stump's distillery, but by 1795-96 he was producing 600 gallons with four stills, on which he paid taxes of \$41.93.³ By 1799 there were sixty-one stills for less than 4,000 people in Davidson County, according to records kept by John Overton, who was then serving as Supervisor of Internal Revenue for the District of Tennessee.⁴

Both East and Middle Tennessee were well suited for the production of whiskey, having good soil for growing corn, an abundance of firewood, white oak for the manufacture of barrels, and a good network of rivers upon which to ship the whiskey to marketing centers like Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis, and beyond. Many Tennesseans shipped their whiskey by flatboat to Natchez where it brought \$2 a gallon, twice the going price in Nashville. On the farm the mash was fed to hogs and cattle which, in the form of salted meat and hides, were also suitable for export.

Always the demand exceeded the supply. As one old-timer said in more recent years, "They never did charge enough for it."⁵ To the frontiersman, whiskey was more than a drink; it was an anesthetic, disinfectant, and either a stimulant or a tranquilizer, depending on the situation and the individual. Andrew Jackson even advised his old friend John Coffee, who was suffering from arthritis, to bathe himself in whiskey.⁶

During the Revolution and after, soldiers were partially paid in whiskey and expected their half pint daily. Most of it was consumed straight or mixed with sugar and water as a today. Although whiskey consumption was high, Harriette Simpson Arnow concludes in *Flowering of the Cumberland* that drunkenness was frowned on and relatively uncommon on the Tennessee frontier.⁷

Nonetheless, it should be noted that with the same Act of the Assembly establishing the Davidson County Court in 1784 another act was passed specifying that because of the shortage of grain there should be no distillation of alcohol in Davidson County. This act did not long remain in effect. Apparently it was passed at the instigation of General James Robertson, an early temperance advocate who argued that, no matter how large the supply of grain, its conversion into whiskey was "an unwarranted perversion-unserviceable to white men, devilish for Indians."⁸

As the frontier gave way to settlement, whiskey consumption increased, not only in Tennessee, but also throughout the nation. By 1810, 14,191 registered distilleries were producing 25.5 million gallons of whiskey, a five-fold increase over statistics for 1792.⁹ Registration fees for the distilleries were high enough to discourage small private producers; increasingly what had begun as a home industry became a more large-scale industry, with some farm producers in some counties making the transition.

As production increased, so did consumption and drunkenness. Congregationalists and Quakers in New England and Pennsylvania were the first to oppose the use of whiskey altogether. Fledgling temperance and prohibition movements spread south and west, to be carried over the mountains to the earliest settlements by Methodist circuit riders like Bishop Francis Asbury, who first visited Tennessee in 1788.¹⁰

In 1829 the first temperance societies were established in Tennessee, with support increasing in the 1830s and 40s. In 1848 the legislature chartered the Sons and Daughters of Temperance, the strongest temperance group in the state. The movement scarcely had gotten started when the threat of war diverted attention from it, but the groundwork had been laid.

In the interim, Tennesseans were not only consuming more alcohol but they were becoming major producers as

well. In 1820 the Fourth Census showed that New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Tennessee had more capital invested and employed more men in the production of spirits than any other states in the Union.¹¹ The industry continued to grow right up until the Civil War, gradually becoming concentrated in certain areas. One of these was Robertson County, extending north of Davidson County to the Kentucky line.

During the war, occupying Union forces banned the distillation of whiskey because corn and other grains were needed to feed both humans and livestock. In Robertson County, distilling was one of the first businesses to start up after Federal troops pulled out in April of 1865. It was late spring, the favored season for distilling. Limestone water, corn, and firewood were readily available and a still could be set up easily and cheaply. It seemed as though nearly everyone in the county went into making whiskey for the simple reason that it was the fastest way to make money and required virtually no capital.

A major advantage was the fine reputation that Robertson County distillers such as Wiley Woodard already enjoyed. The 249 gallons of whiskey Woodard shipped to Lyon & Company in Nashville on September 21, 1865, commanded \$3.75 a gallon, compared to forty cents a gallon before the war.¹² Clearly his success would have been a stimulus to other producers.

Although Woodard continued to produce the finest Robertson County whiskey and apple and peach brandies, his production was eventually surpassed by aggressive new contenders, many of whom were his relatives. By 1874, these and other Robertson County distillers were producing 45,000 barrels of whiskey annually. They consumed so much corn that it became necessary to import large amounts from St. Louis and other markets. Before the war, there had been no wholesale whiskey dealers in Springfield, but by 1874 the business had grown to nearly one million dollars in annual sales. The barrel business that had grown up at Coopertown now produced \$125,000 in business annually. In 1872 the Springfield National Bank was established to cater to the liquor industry. Because of the whiskey deposits-the average deposit was over \$100,000-the newly established bank never wavered during the financial panic of 1873.

The Robertson County distillery that grew to be the largest was located at Greenbrier. When it was started about 1867 by Charles Palmer of Springfield, its capacity was a modest five gallons a day. In 1870, Charles Nelson, a native of Mecklenburg, Germany, who had come to Nashville from Cincinnati, bought it to supply his wholesale grocery business in Nashville (at that time grocers sold whiskey). The whiskey was manufactured in Robertson County, but it was both bottled under the Greenbrier label and distributed from his Nashville warehouse on Second Avenue North. At its peak, the distillery employed a work force of fifteen to twenty-five men, including government inspectors and gaugers as well as the operators. By 1885 the Greenbrier Distillery manufactured 8,000 barrels of whiskey or a little less than 380,000 gallons a year, and paid annual taxes of over \$341,000.

In 1886 the Nashville *Union* reported that the distilling industry was the largest manufacturing industry in the state of Tennessee, annually consuming 750,000 bushels of corn and 500,000 bushels of apples and peaches. By the late 1880s, however, the industry had begun to decline. Smaller and less successful distillers had gone into other businesses, faced with intense competition from the larger distillers on the one hand, and mounting pressure from church and temperance groups on the other. The Women's Christian Temperance Union had organized in the state in 1874 and would be joined by the Anti-Saloon League in 1899.¹³

In Robertson County, by 1894, only five distilleries were still depositing whiskey in warehouses, and two of those were run by widows: Louisa Nelson for Charles Nelson's Greenbrier Distillery, and Josephine Woodard Brown for J. S. Brown Distilleries on Wartrace Creek. As the distilleries closed down, the distillers or their families tended to

transfer their considerable assets into banking.

In 1903, the Adams Law, which extended the Four Mile Law first passed in 1877 to towns of 5,000, closed the saloons of Springfield.¹⁴ In 1909, with the state-wide prohibition on the manufacture of whiskey, the two remaining Robertson County distilleries, Nelson's Greenbrier and Pitt's Cave Spring, and all others in Tennessee went out of business, although some tried to conduct sales through retail and manufacturing activities in other states.

Only two Tennessee distilleries would revive after prohibition-Cascade, later to be identified solely by the name of its distributor, George Dickel & Company-and Jack Daniel. The Cascade Distillery was located a few miles from Tullahoma in Coffee County, and only about a mile from the tiny community of Normandy, on Gage Creek, later called Cascade Springs.¹⁵ Around 1883 the distillery was acquired by Matthew Sims and McLin H. Davis. In 1888, Sims sold his share of the distillery to V. E. Shwab, a partner in George A. Dickel & Company; and in 1898 the heirs of McLin Davis sold his one-third interest to Shwab, who then became sole proprietor of the distillery.

Cascade was never owned by George A. Dickel, but its product was bottled and distributed by George A. Dickel and Company of Nashville. Dickel was a native of Germany like Charles Nelson and their pioneer predecessor, Frederick Stump. His employee, brother-in-law, and eventual partner was V. E. Shwab, a younger man whose family emigrated from Alsace-Lorraine. George Dickel died in 1894 and left no children. Shwab, who was on excellent terms with his widowed sister-in-law, Augusta Dickel, assumed complete control of the company in addition to his ownership of the distillery.

Cascade was the largest of several distilleries located in Coffee County. As in the case of Charles Nelson's Greenbrier Distillery, it prospered because of marketing and distribution through Nashville, in this case through George A. Dickel and Company. The whiskey also became very popular with soldiers during the Spanish-American War and its fame spread to the West Coast. There it was distributed out of San Francisco, described by Shwab's son-in-law Paul Davis as a "great whiskey town." In the early 1900s the company hired the D'Arcy Advertising Company of St. Louis, which had also begun the advertising campaign for Coca-Cola, to initiate an extensive advertising program for Cascade. Its distinctive slogan, "mellow as moonlight," was related to distiller McLin Davis's discovery that the whiskey was improved by allowing the mash to cool in the light of the moon.¹⁶

Soon after the manufacture of whiskey was prohibited in Tennessee in 1909, George A. Dickel and Company moved its operation, first to Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and then to Louisville where it continued in production at the famed Stitzel distillery under the direction of V. E. Shwab's son, George, enjoying tremendous popularity until the Volstead Act was passed in 1919.¹⁷

In 1937, eighteen years after George A. Dickel and Company had ceased operation, Schenley, Inc., paid the Shwab family \$100,000 for the company and the Cascade trademark. Fortunately the Shwabs were able to obtain the original recipe and process from local men in Coffee County who had distilled Cascade whiskey, and this information was transmitted to Schenley. The whiskey Schenley produced in Kentucky after prohibition was thought by some Tennesseans to be an inferior brand of bourbon rather than a *bona fide* Tennessee sour mash whiskey. Since 1958, however, after the passage of appropriate legislation, Tennessee sour mash whiskey has again been produced in a modern plant just outside of Normandy. Louisville distiller Ralph Dupps was given the assignment of re-establishing the Cascade Distillery, renamed the George Dickel Distillery, near its original location and, most importantly, its original water source.

Today the most famous, largest, and, for various reasons, most authentic Tennessee distillery is Jack Daniel, which is located at Lynchburg in Moore County. This distillery is in full operation on its original site and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its founder, Jack Daniel, was born in 1848 about five miles away from the distillery. At age twelve he went to work for Dan Call, who operated a distillery a few miles away at Louse Creek, and at age fourteen became a full partner with Call, who clearly was an important mentor. In 1866 Jack Daniel leased the famous Hollow and Cave Spring which continue to be the focal point of the distillery's operation. At the same time Daniel apparently was the first to reapply for a distillery license after the war, which has been the basis of the company's claim that it is the oldest registered distillery in the United States. On June 17, 1884, Jack Daniel purchased the Hollow and cave, including in all 142 acres at a price of \$2,180.40 from Wilburn Hiles and his partner Berry, owners since 1817.¹⁸

Jack was fond of his own liquor, which he sweetened with sugar dissolved in a little branch water and garnished with bruised tansy, and of dancing with the ladies, but he remained a bachelor all of his life. From the age of twenty-one little Jack Daniel, who stood just over five feet tall, invariably dressed in a knee-length frock coat of black broadcloth and affected a high-rolled planter's hat, fawn-colored vest, and broad bow tie, just as he appears in the statue his nephew Lem Motlow commissioned in 1941. The statue, the cave spring, all aspects of the distillery operation, many of the citizens who work there, and even the ducks have been prominently featured over the years in the modern company's advertising, which was originally developed by the Gardner Advertising Agency of St. Louis.¹⁹

Although Jack Daniel grew to pre-eminence over all other Tennessee distillers, his was not an overnight success. In 1877, for example, Tolley & Eaton was producing 300 gallons a day and Jack was second in Moore County with 83 gallons, with thirteen other distilleries together producing another 70 gallons. By 1896 the market for and reputation of Jack Daniel's famous sour mash whiskey had greatly increased, thanks in some measure to his agent, M. Ryan, in Nashville. In 1904 Jack took a couple of cases of his whiskey to the St. Louis Exposition, or World's Fair. The big distillers from other parts of the country were surprised and chagrined when Jack Daniel won the gold medal. Thereafter, Jack Daniel's whiskey won gold medals at Liege, Belgium, in 1905; Ghent in 1913, and at the Anglo-American Exposition in 1914, achieving world recognition on the eve of national prohibition.²⁰

Meanwhile, Jack had kicked his safe one cold morning when it refused to open. He incurred such a severe clot in the arteries of his leg that it eventually had to be amputated. After that he left most of the management of the plant to his nephew, Lem Motlow, who had come to work for him at age 17, in 1887. In 1907 Jack Daniel deeded the company over to Lem Motlow and another nephew, Dick Daniel. Two years later, Lem bought out Dick's share.²¹ In 1911, Jack passed away. It was Lem Motlow who saw the company through its moves to St. Louis, Missouri, and to Birmingham, Alabama, in an effort to escape the tightening net of prohibition. In 1933, when national prohibition was revoked, it was also Lem Motlow who accomplished the reopening of the modern distillery at its original location. Lem Motlow died in 1947 and the ownership of his distillery was continued by his sons, who operated it even after its sale in 1956 to Brown-Forman of Louisville, also a family-owned distillery, for \$20,000,000.²²

Thus today we have two survivors of a frontier industry, one of Tennessee's first and for a time in the 1880s its leading industry, brought here by Scots, Scotch-Irish, Irish, and, we must add in deference to Frederick Stump, German immigrants moving west. The prohibition movement virtually eliminated not only the product, but also modern awareness of the industry's extent and scope before prohibition.

The re-emergence of Tennessee distilleries after prohibition is in both cases one of modern business involving

politics, advertising, and acquisition by larger companies from outside the state. The quality of the product was upheld: both distilleries utilize the leaching process through maple charcoal which is the most distinctive characteristic of Tennessee sour mash whiskey. Advertising has been a key ingredient for both, with Jack Daniel achieving an almost legendary success.

Most important were the human ingredients: Jack Daniel got his start in the pre-Civil War era and made the transition to the new postwar economy; Lem Motlow took over the reins at the onset of prohibition and guided the company to the modern era, passing it on to his sons who negotiated its sale to an eminently compatible company, Brown-Forman. George Dickel had a less sure route to success, but fortunately George B. Shwab was able to achieve the transfer to Schenley at the end of prohibition; then, when the move back to Normandy was undertaken, Schenley had the right man, Ralph Dupps, for that challenging assignment. So it is that these two historic companies, representing a pioneer industry that started about 1771, still provide a hint of the tastes and smells of Tennessee's past whenever Tennesseans enjoy their Jack Daniel's or George Dickel over ice.

NOTES

1. Henry C. Crowgey, *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskey-Making* (Lexington, 1971), 23-24. Shelby's Station is the present site of Bristol, in Sullivan County.
2. J. G. M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Knoxville, reprint 1967), 284.
3. *Ibid.*, 598. Stump was a member of the German community that settled White's Creek; today his log home can be easily viewed from the Briley Parkway.
4. John Overton, "General Account of County Distilleries, 1795-1801," Jacob McGavock Dickinson Papers, Tennessee State Library & Archives.
5. This statement was attributed to Sam Krisle, Robertson County storekeeper, by George Henry Brown, author's grandfather.
6. Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Flowering of the Cumberland* (New York, 1963), 78.
7. Arnow, 280. She writes: "My own conclusion is that, though consumption of alcoholic beverages was heavy, there was among the Cumberland pioneers during the years 1780-1803 not only much less alcoholism than today, but even less than in most states during this same period."
8. A. W. Putnam, *History of Middle Tennessee: or, Life and Times of General James Robertson* (Knoxville, reprint 1971), 237.
9. Herbert Asbury, *The Great Illusion: An Informal History of Prohibition* (Garden City, 1950). See pp. 3-12 for a discussion for the period 1750-1840, which he describes as "the most intemperate era in American history."
10. John Allen Krout, *The Origins of Prohibition* (New York, 1925), 36.
11. Asbury, 89.

12. Wiley Woodard, *Memorandum of Articles Delivered 1857-1865*, in possession of author. This and subsequent information about Robertson County distilleries is drawn from her article, "Robertson County Distilleries, 1796-1909," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* XLIII (Spring 1984): 49-67.
13. Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us From Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition* (New York, 1976), 48-50, 93.
14. The Four Mile Law was the device through which anti-saloon leaders achieved prohibition; it outlawed the sale of liquor within four miles of any chartered institution of learning outside an incorporated town. In 1887 it was amended to include rural public schools, and in 1909 it was extended to all parts of the state. See Eric Russell Lacy, "Tennessee Teetotalism: Social Forces and the Politics of Progressivism," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* XXIV (Fall 1965): 224, 229.
15. See Kay Baker Gaston, "George Dickel Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey: The Story Behind the Label," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* LVIV (Fall 1998): 48-69.
16. Gaston interview with Thurman Davis, 1983.
17. Harry Harrison Kroll, *Bluegrass, Belles, and Bourbon* (New York, 1967), 208.
18. Ben A. Green, *Jack Daniel's Legacy* (Shelbyville, 1967), 207-208; Moore County Deed Book 3, pp. 130-31.
19. Green, 197.
20. "Rare Jack Daniel's," *Fortune*, July 1951, 105.
21. Ibid.
22. Green, 175.

Copyright © 1999, Middle Tennessee State University.
Border States On-Line is hosted by [Georgetown College](#).
This page was last updated on 5/5/99. | [Border States On-Line](#) | [Site Map](#)

This web page is maintained by
Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College
400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075
E-mail: htallant@georgetowncollege.edu

And finally, the Fall-Rise in many various examples. We might hear or want to say most if not all of these any day, but of course there are thousands more expressions like these! I always encourage anyone working on this stuff, to keep lists and make dialogues of the language they themselves hear on a daily basis. And finally, the Fall-Rise in many various examples. We might hear or want to say most if not all of these any day, but of course there are thousands more expressions like these! I always encourage anyone working on this stuff, to keep lists and make dialogues of the language they themselves hear on a daily basis. In the meantime, this is a large number of things I've chosen myself based on what I say and / or hear.