

# Shots Through Virginia

by Jack Sullivan  
(Special to the Potomac Pontil)

Because Virginia was not a leading distilling state – at least not the legal kind of distilling – the numbers of pre-Prohibition shot glasses issued in the Commonwealth is paltry when compared with neighboring Kentucky and Maryland. Nevertheless, there are some noteworthy examples – and at least a couple items with a story.

## The John Casper Saga

Shown here are two shot glasses from the Casper Company (**Fig. 1 & 2**). The glass one makes it clear that the whiskey is being sold by mail, asking customers to write for a list of its liquors and assuring delivery in a plain wrapper. The business was the brainchild of John. L. Casper of Winston-Salem NC. A pitchman not a distiller, Casper conceived of the idea of buying whiskey from several distilleries in North Carolina, bottling it under his own brand names, and selling it via mail order direct to consumers.



Figure 1. Casper Company, glass

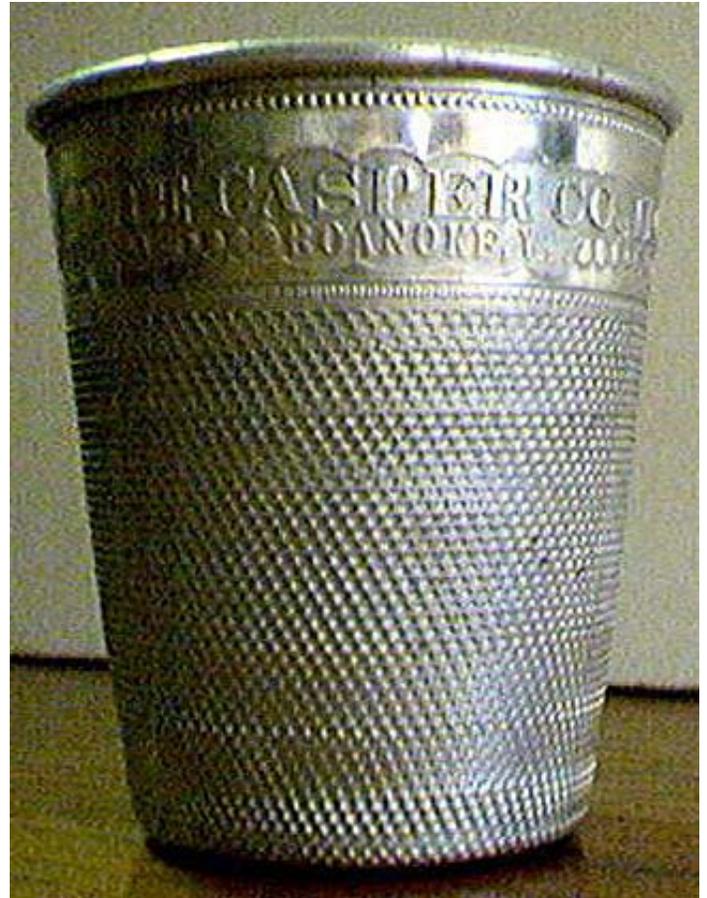


Figure 2. Casper Company, metal

By his own account he started small, with limited mailing lists in the 1880s, gradually expanding until 1900 when he sought capital from friends and incorporated as the Casper Company. Soon Casper owned a warehouse a city block long in downtown Winston-Salem. In his ads he declared it to be: “The largest building in the United States devoted exclusively to the mail order whiskey business.”

Casper emphasized the purity of his product. In a typical ad from 1903, the dapper, smooth-talking whiskey merchant claimed: “All the North Carolina whiskey we sell is good – there’s no bad. People here wouldn’t adulterate it if they knew how – they are too honest! Most whiskey sellers are noted for mixing, blending, and watering. We sell more genuine whiskey and less water than any known competitor.”

But if John Casper had a desire to be the nation’s biggest mail-order liquor dealer, he was doomed to disappointment by some of those same North Carolinians he boasted about. It turned out that many of those honest folk were anti-drink. Little by little laws were put on the books that ultimately would drive John Casper out of North Carolina. The process began in 1901 when North Carolina legislated that distilleries could operate only in incorporated towns and ended in 1906 when the state went completely “dry.”

Casper then folded up lock, stock and whiskey barrel in Winston-Salem and moved his business to Roanoke where he operated from 1907 to about 1910. During this brief period he managed to issue shot glasses. Then he moved to Jacksonville, Florida, where by 1911 he was listed as the vice president of the Atlantic Coast Distilling Company, which boasted annual business of “over one-half million dollars.”

According to a Winston-Salem newspaper account of the 1930s, Casper eventually moved his operations west, to Kansas City, Missouri, and then to Ft. Smith, Arkansas. After National Prohibition was enacted, he moved to Mexico, and died there. His legacy, however, is in the thousands of jugs, bottles, shot glasses and other merchandizing items he left behind, many avidly sought by collectors.

Other Roanoke shot glasses fail to produce much information about their ownership. The Roanoke Dist. Co., Inc., must have been a competitor to Casper. Its shot (**Fig. 3**) emphasizes that it is the “largest, quickest and best mail order house...Ask the expressman.” But the brands names it distributed and its years of operation remain unknown – as they do for the Woodward Company shot glass (**Fig. 4**) and its “Virginia Aristocracy” Brand.

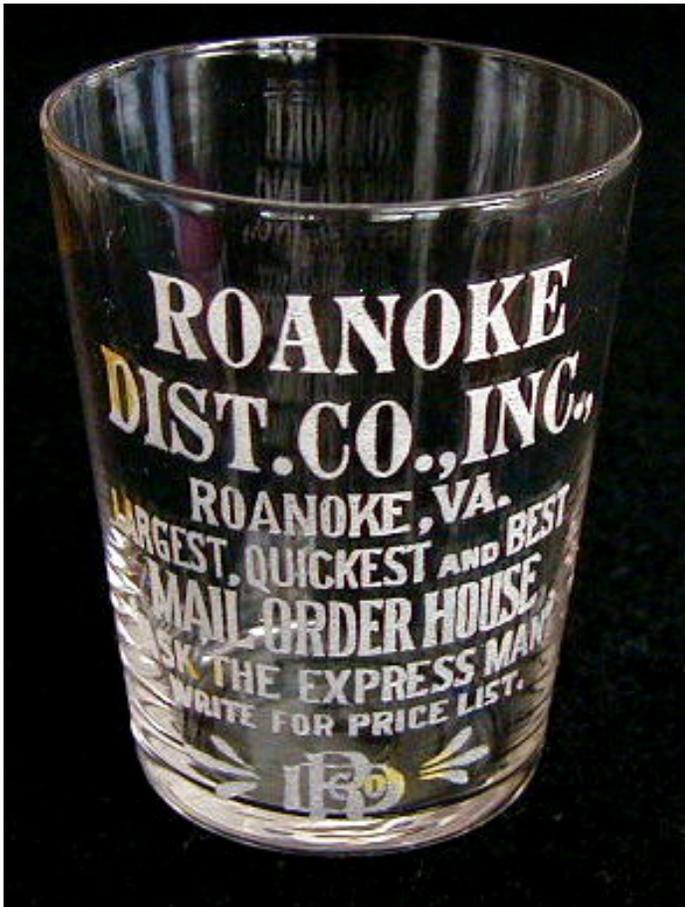
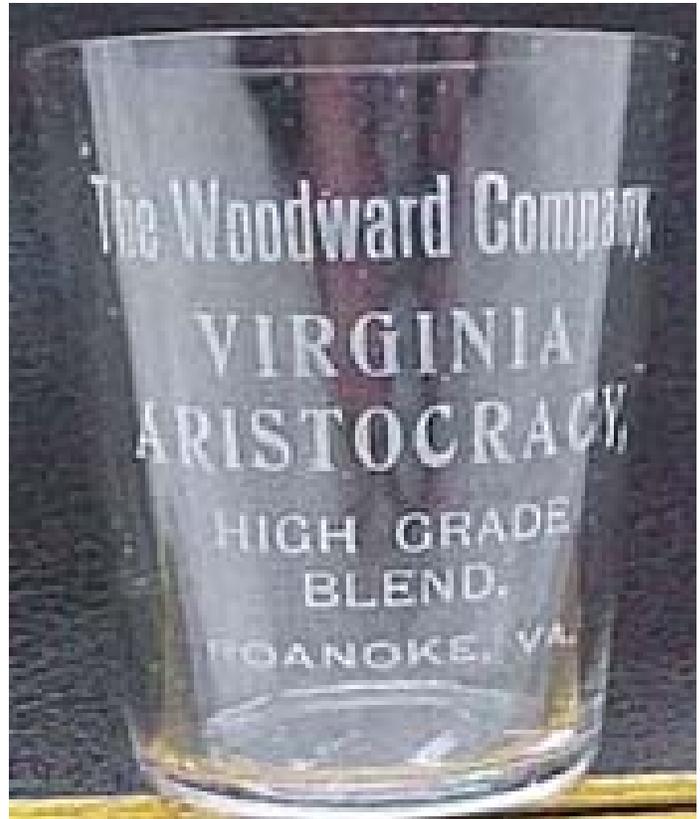


Figure 3. Roanoke Dist. Co.



4. “Virginia Aristocracy”

#### Richmond Shots

More information is available about the distillers and distributors who issued the Richmond shot glasses show here. “Old Durham,” shown on two shots (**Figs 5&6**) were produced by the firm of Ellison & Harvey who did business in the state capitol from 1870 to about 1905. The partners were William Ellison and Luke Harvey, with a third, partner, Fred Swift. They operated from two locations on E. Cary Street for their approximate 35 years in business.

They registered their “Old Durham” brand with the Federal Government in 1878 but appear to have licensed others to sell the whiskey in Baltimore and on the West Coast. Other Ellison & Harvey brands were “Old Bull” and “Virginia Club.” Failure of the firm to register the latter with the government may have been due to the use of the same brand name by the Live Oak Distilling Co. of Cincinnati and Baltimore.

Another Richmond partnership was responsible for the “Silver Leaf” shot glass (**Fig. 7**). The firm was Miller & Nicholas who were in business there from 1879 to 1915. Nicholas left the scene in 1885 and the company subsequently became the Frank Miller Co. It was located at 11-14 N. 14th Street from 1879-1900 and at 1204 E. Main from 1900 to 1915. “Silver Leaf” was its flagship brand of whiskey.



Figure 5. "Old Durham" #1



7. "Silver Leaf"

#### Lynchburg and Newport News

Bigbe Bros. and Co. of Lynchburg produced a shot (Fig. 8) with an etched bee (a *big* bee, get it!). The firm, listed



Figure 6. "Old Durham" #2

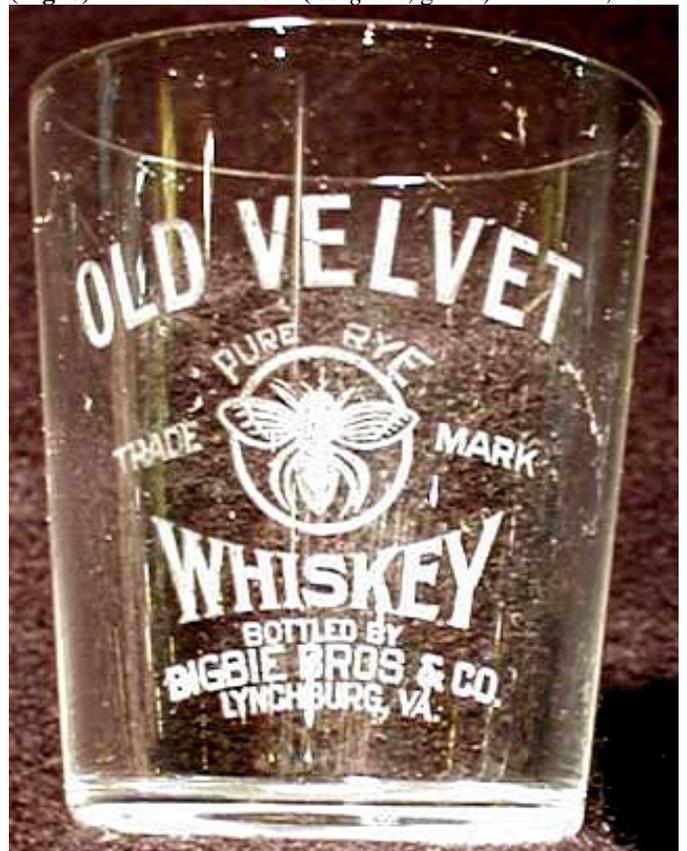


Figure 8. "Old Velvet"

in city directories as a wholesale liquor dealer probably distributed its own brands and those of other organizations. "Old Velvet," for example, was a brand originally registered by the J&G Butler Co. of Columbus OH. Other brands, such as "Old Bigbe" and "Natural Bridge" appear to have been their own whiskey recipes. Bigbe Bros. was in business in Lynchburg from 1890 until 1915, when Virginia went dry. Their operations were located at 1018-1020 Main Street (1890-1908) and, later, 815 Main (1911-1915). The brothers also appear to have operated saloon for a time.

From Newport News comes our last shot (**Fig. 9**), picturing an etched elk and called Elks Club Pure Rye. It was the product, so the item tells us, of the Union Liquor Supply Company of Newport News. It was a canny choice of a brand name since the Elks Club at the time as one of America's fastest growing fraternal organizations. However, other Union Liquor Supply Co. whiskey brands, the company timeline, and address require further research.

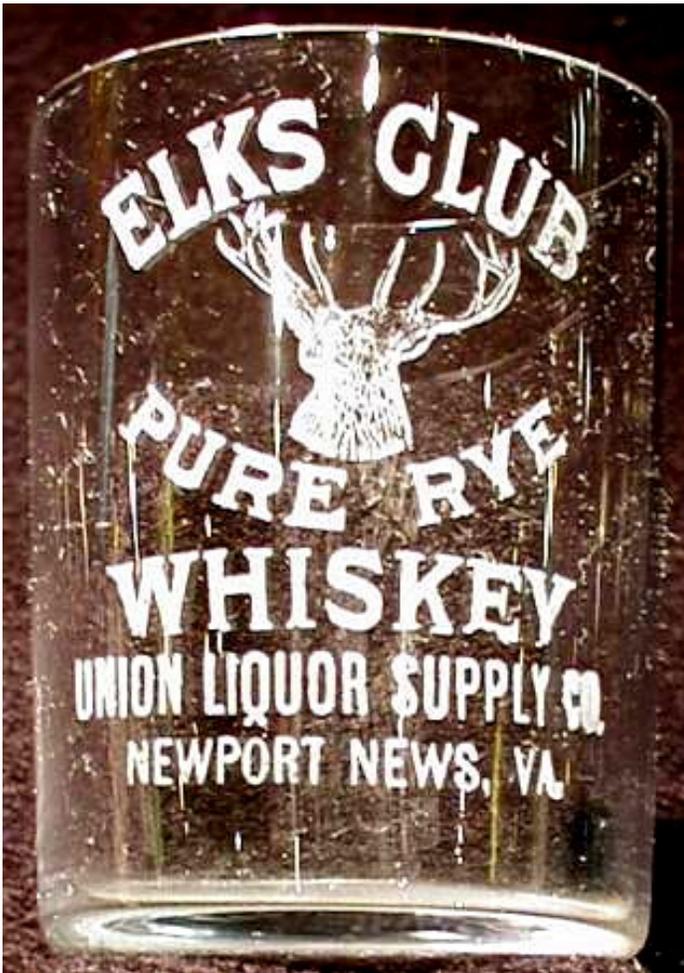


Figure 9. "Old Elk Pure Rye"

If nothing else, this set of Virginia shot glasses should be notable for the imaginative depictions of animal and plant life – bull, bee, elk and silver leaf.

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The shot glass photos used here are through the courtesy of Robin Preston and his website, [www.pre-pro.com](http://www.pre-pro.com). Research on the companies was from a range of internet and other sources.  
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## Upcoming Area Bottle Shows



### FEBRUARY 3 - SOUTH RIVER, NEW JERSEY

The New Jersey Antique Bottle Club's (NJABC) 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Show & Sale (9 AM - 12 PM) at the Knights of Columbus Hall, 88 Jackson St., South River, New Jersey. INFO: **NJABC**, 24 Charles St., South River, NJ 08882-1603 or call **JOE BUTEWICZ**, PH: (732)-236-9945 or E-mail: [botlman@msn.com](mailto:botlman@msn.com)

### MARCH 2 - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

The Baltimore Antique Bottle Club's 28th Annual Show & Sale (8 AM - 3 PM) at the Physical Education Center, CCBS-Essex, 7201 Rossville Blvd, Essex, Maryland. INFO: **BOB FORD**, PH: (410) 531-9459, E-mail: [bottles@comcast.net](mailto:bottles@comcast.net)

### MARCH 8 - BADIN, NORTH CAROLINA

The Uwharrie Bottle Club's 1st Annual Antique Bottle & Collectibles Show & Sale (Sat. 8 AM - 3 PM, Adm. Free; Set-up, 6 - 8 AM) at the Badin Fire Department, Badin, North Carolina. Tables (8 ft.) \$20. INFO: **TODD MCSWAIN**, PH: (704) 474-0552, E-mail: [mcswain8649@alltel.net](mailto:mcswain8649@alltel.net).

### MARCH 9 - TYLERSPORT, PENNSYLVANIA

The 14th Annual Bucks-Mont Bottle Show (9 AM - 2 PM, Early Buyers 8 AM) at the Tylersport Fire Company, 125 Ridge Rd, Tylersport, Pennsylvania. INFO: **DAVID BUCK**, PH: (215) 723-4048 or **GREG GIFFORD**, PH: (215) 699-5216

### APRIL 27 - HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA

The Historical Bottle-Diggers of Virginia 37th Annual Antique Bottle and Collectible Show & Sale (9 AM - 3 PM) at the Rockingham County Fairgrounds, (US Rt. 11 South, Exit 243 off I-81), Harrisonburg, Virginia. INFO: **SONNY SMILEY**, PH: (540) 434-1129 or E-mail: [lithiaman1@yahoo.com](mailto:lithiaman1@yahoo.com).

### AUGUST 8-10 - YORK, PENNSYLVANIA EXPO

The 2008 FOHBC EXPO (Fri. Seminars and Specialty Meetings in AM; Set-up, Early Adm. 1 - 5 PM, Banquet 6:30 PM; Sat. 9 AM - 5 PM, Early Adm. 7 - 9 AM; Sun. 9 AM - 3 PM) at the York Fairgrounds, York, Pennsylvania. 600-800 tables capacity for the largest EXPO ever! For consignments, contracts and INFO: **R. WAYNE LOWRY**, 401 Johnston Ct., Raymore, MO 64083, PH: (816) 318-0161, E-mail: [JarDoctor@aol.com](mailto:JarDoctor@aol.com)