

THE STORY OF KT&K CHINA WHISKEYS

by Jack Sullivan

Wherever American pre-Prohibition whiskey jugs are collected, the white china ones with the KT&K mark on the bottom are certain to be found. But they might not ever have existed if it had not been for the initiative of a orphaned and unlettered pottery worker who rose to fame and fortune by selling liquor and calling it medicine.

The story begins and ends in East Liverpool, Ohio. During the late 19th and early 20th Century this town across the Ohio River from West Virginia was America's largest producer of ceramic table and vanity wares. Known widely as "Crockery City," in 1887 East Liverpool boasted 270 kilns and annually produced ceramic products valued at \$25 million -- in a time when 25 cents would buy dinner.

The largest pottery in town was KT&K - Knowles, Taylor & Knowles. It was founded in 1854 by Isaac Knowles, a cabinet-maker and carpenter by trade, with a partner, Isaac Harvey. They became best known for their self-sealing stoneware canning jars, items that show up from time to time at antique shows. In 1870 Isaac Knowles became the sole owner and brought into the firm his son, Homer S. Knowles, and his son-in-law, John N. Taylor. Thus the firm became Knowles, Taylor & Knowles.

Almost immediately the trio left off emphasizing stoneware and began to manufacture "whiteware." That is a generic term, encompassing any kind of pottery or porcelain that is white or nearly so in color. Produced by the use of more refined clays, this ware normally is given a clear glaze to allow a lustrous white show through. Good examples are customary tavern and restaurant crockery. Whiteware items often are referred to as "china," "hotel china," or "semi-vitreous porcelain" even though they are far from the quality of true porcelain or china.

KT&K prospered on whiteware. By 1877 the company was adding new buildings and had increased its capacity to five kilns. By the mid-1880s it had expanded to 16 kilns. In 1891 Knowles, Taylor & Knowles was incorporated with capital of a hefty \$1,000,000. It boasted 29 kilns and employed more than 700 people. Not only was it the largest pottery in East Liverpool but the largest in the entire United States. Considerable credit for this growth goes to the knowledge and skill of its founder, Isaac Knowles, an inventor who patented a number of innovations in the manufacture of pottery.

John Taylor, manager and money man, also was a high flyer. In 1891 he was tapped by the then-Ohio governor and future



Steinhardt Bros. White Lilly Pure Rye.

President, William McKinley, to be his personal aide-de-camp with the rank of "colonel," a title Taylor carried for the rest of his life. In a hand-written letter dated Dec. 10, McKinley says: "I need not tell you that it will give me the greatest personal pleasure to have you take this place." Taylor served four years with McKinley before returning to the company.

Under the direction of Knowles and Taylor, KT&K became known for its innovations in ceramic. Hiring a former manager of Ireland's Belleek china factory, the firm experimented with "American Belleek" only to abandon the effort following a fire at the factory. Then it turned



The three sizes of Meredith's Diamond Club Whiskey: half-pint, pint and quart.



Diamond Club variant jug with hollow letters and no mention of East Liverpool.

COMPLIMENTS OF
**STEINHARDT
BROS & CO.**

313-315 BATTERY,
NEW YORK.
TELEPHONE CALL 496 SPRING.

299-301 PITCHER AVE.
COR. CHAUNCEY ST.
BROOKLYN.
TELEPHONE CALL 91 BEDFORD.

HARLEM BRANCH,
2859 2ND AVE. NEW YORK
TELEPHONE CALL 342 HARLEM.

WHITE LILY
PURE RYE

PORCELAIN QUART JUGS.

IMPORTERS
AND
WHOLESALE

JANUARY, 1891.

SUN.	MON.	TUE.	WED.	THU.	FRI.	SAT.
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

LIQUOR
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DISTRIBUTING
AGENTS FOR **DR. HARTER'S**
WILD CHERRY BITTERS.

Steinhardt Bros. 1891 calendar, featuring the "porcelain" quart jug.

to "Lotus Ware," a bone china that was shaped and decorated as art ware. It was highly successful and brought new glory to KT&K. Today Lotus Ware pieces command big prices from collectors.

Yet smart as they were, neither Knowles nor Colonel Taylor apparently considered turning their pottery skills to whiskey jugs.



The Meredith Diamond Club rye whiskey KT&K jug.



Getty & Co. Old Premium from Pittsburgh.



Urban Club Bourbon from Quincy Illinois.

That initiative was the brainchild of George W. Meredith. Orphaned before he was five years old and having scant education, Meredith worked from 1878 to 1880 at KT&K in one of the lowlier jobs -- jiggerman, the laborer who turned the potter's wheel to shape the clay. After leaving the factory, ostensibly for health reasons, Meredith rented a storeroom in downtown East Liverpool and with one employee began blending and distributing his own whiskey around town. He had a real genius for marketing his products and early on called his principal brand "Meredith's Diamond Club," reportedly borrowing the name from a prestigious local organization of leading businessmen.

Meredith's whiskey, his advertisements and labels insisted, was "pure." By making that claim he also exhibited his merchandising savvy. The Pure Food and Drug Act would be enacted a few years later and "purity" had the same draw as "all natural" does today. Diamond Club's purity, Meredith claimed, made it "the safest whiskey on earth" for medical purposes. He claimed that one "nip" was worth 10 doses of medicine and boasted that his liquor had been "officially recognized" by the medical profession.

By stressing his whiskey's therapeutic rather than its lubricating qualities Meredith was attempting to circumvent the burgeoning Temperance Movement that eventually would lead to Prohibition. His business expanded rapidly and within a decade Meredith came one of the nation's largest whiskey distributors, serving a clientele, as he put it, "from Maine to California and Canada to the Gulf."

This canny, self-promoting businessman also saw the customer appeal that bottling his whiskey in a whiteware china jug might have. So he talked his former employers at KT&K into shaping a distinctive container, one with a graceful tapering body, a serpent handle, a fancy over-glaze label and plenty of gold trimming. On April 4, 1891, the East Liverpool DAILY CRISIS ran an ad stating: "The G.W. Meredith Co. is offering its Diamond Club Pure Rye Whiskey in china jugs that will come in three sizes." The KT&K whiskey jug was launched -- every one of the bearing the message: "Expressly for Medicinal Purposes."

Before long the white jug with the serpent handle had become an important product of the pottery. Other whiskey distillers and distributors saw that the containers were attractive and commissioned KT&K to apply their labels. In Cincinnati, Sam Klein, a whiskey man with a national reputation as a merchandising

genius, found the jugs perfect for his Spring Lake Bourbon and ordered several designs. Steinhart Brothers, liquor dealers in New York City, not only marketed their White Lily Pure Rye in KT&K china, they used pictures of the container in their advertising and promoted White Lily as "bottled in porcelain quart jugs." As far away as Waco, Texas, H. Mayer bought the whiteware for his Old Times brand of bourbon.

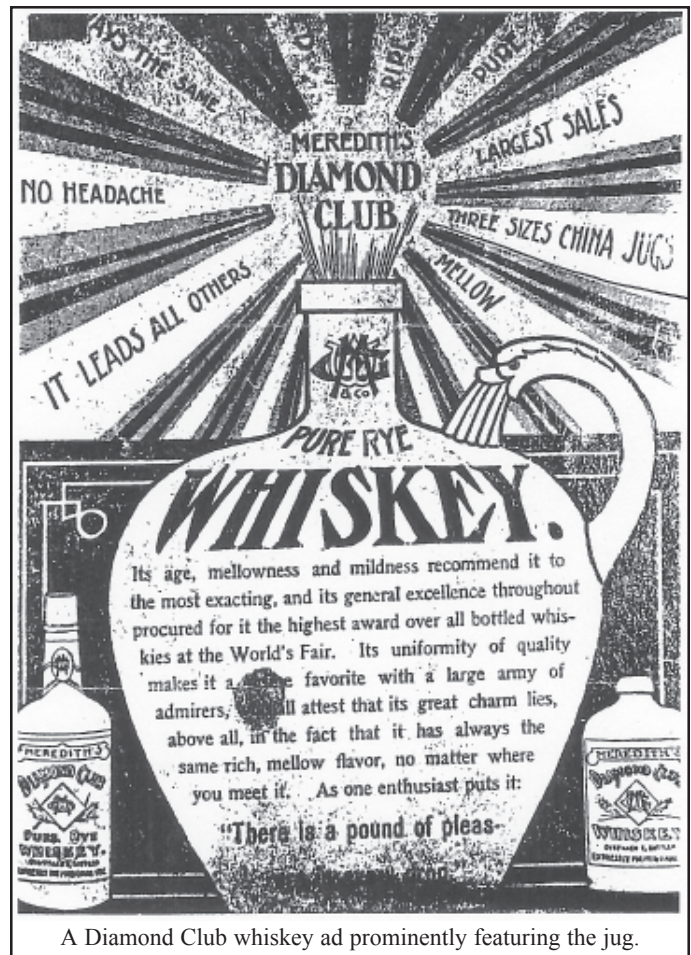
But George Meredith remained KT&K's best customer. In addition to the three sizes of Diamond Club available -- quart, pint and half-pint -- he ordered KT&K to make a non-pouring one & one-half inch advertising replica that could be used as a watch fob. He also approved a totally different design for an "1880" Meredith Rye. "East Liverpool" appears on most of his jugs. But when the town voted itself dry in 1907, Meredith retaliated by moving his operations to Pittsburgh and eliminating its name from his KT&Ks.

Throughout the early 20th Century KT&K continued to prosper. Homer Knowles had died in 1892 and Isaac Knowles retired about the same time, replaced by his sons, Willis and Edwin. Col. Taylor ran the firm successfully until 1914 when he retired and his son Homer took over. The coming of National Prohibition, however, spelled the demise of the market for whiskey jugs. Sales of other KT&K products faltered. By the mid-1920s the pottery was struggling financially. In 1923 net income was \$339,000; by 1926, despite being economic boom times, company earnings had fallen to \$44,850.

In March 1929 KT&K's corporate officers approved merging the firm with the ill-fated American Chinaware Corporation. The merger occurred just six months before the Stock Market crash and the onset of the Great Depression. Within two years American Chinaware was bankrupt. Knowles, Taylor and Knowles, the largest pottery in America for the previous 50 years, put out the fires in its kilns, released the remaining workforce and forever ceased operations.

As for George Meredith, after Prohibition wiped out his Pittsburgh liquor business, he migrated to Atlantic City, N.J., where he dabbled in real estate and bottled a popular orange-flavored soft drink called "Whistle." He died in 1924 at the age of 74.

Although the East Liverpool Museum of Ceramics has kept alive the traditions of "Crockery City," through its exhibits of local ceramic products and archival materials, there is no sure way of knowing just how many different styles of KT&K whiskeys were created during the three decades they were in production. Two slightly differing lists from anonymous sources were given to me almost 15 years ago. Subsequently I consolidated the two lists and have looked to add newly found examples as well as variations on known jugs. Among the most interesting to come to light in recent years are a Meredith Diamond Club Rye with painted roses and gothic letters appar-



A Diamond Club whiskey ad prominently featuring the jug.

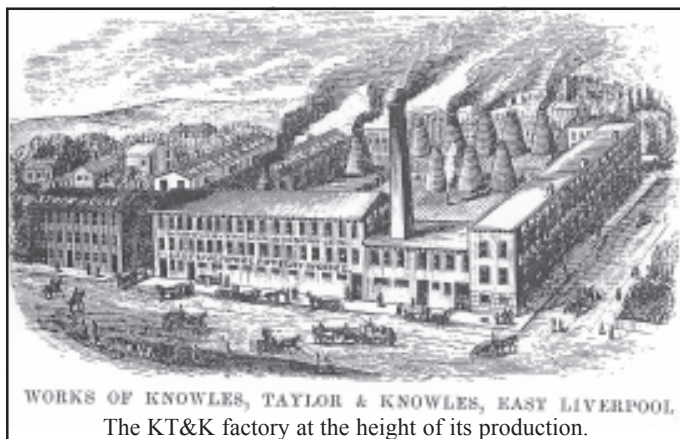
ently created for the Mount Airy Hotel (North Carolina or Maryland?), and a Klein Brothers and Hyman jug featuring a large "B," apparently for bourbon, again with painted roses.

On the following page is my current list of KT&K whiskey jugs.

In addition to these known KT&K examples reports have been received about examples marked "Old Colony Bourbon" and "Metropolitan Club" -- but these are unconfirmed.

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BRAND NAME	COLORS	SIZE	VARIATIONS
Meredith's Diamond Club Pure Pure Rye Whiskey East Liverpool, Ohio	Green	1/2 pint Pint Quart	Pint without address and "Pure Rye" omitted Quart with address omitted. Quart with "open" letters.
Meredith Diamond Club Pure Rye 1880	Red Green	Quart	"1880" in two sizes.
Meredith Diamond Club Rye Mount Airy Hotel	Pink & Black	Quart	With painted roses; gothic letters.
"B" (for bourbon)	Red	Quart	Klein Bros. & Hyman, with painted flowers.
Spring Lake Hand Made Sour Mash Bourbon	Purple Green	Quart	Klein Bros. & Hyman, 17 Sycamore St., Cin'ti., Ohio
	Purple Green	Quart	Klein Brothers, 121 Sycamore St., Cin'ti, Ohio.
	Blue Gray	Quart	Fancy lettering, Klein Bros. & Hyman, Cin'ti, Proprietors.
Spring Lake, etc.	Purple	Quart	H. Ehrenburg, Little Rock, Ark., Proprietor
Spring Lake, etc.	Purple	Quart	O'Brien & Hughes, Proprietors "The Opera"
Old Times Hand Made Sour Mash Bourbon	Black	Quart	H. Mayer, Waco, Texas, Proprietor
Pennsylvania Club Pure Rye Whiskey	Purple Green	Quart	Swan trademark
White Lily Pure Rye	Green Purple Light Blue Dark Blue	Quart	S.B. & Co. - Lion with error in the neck, in circle.
Old Maryland 1881 Pure Rye Whiskey	Purple Blue Brown	Quart	G. Riesmeyer, St. Louis, Mo.
Old Maryland Whiskey A Blend	Brown Blue	Quart	G. Riesmeyer, St. Louis, Mo. Distilling Company.
John Limegrover, Jr.	Green	Quart	Gibson's, 44 Ohio St., Allegheny. Also, "Sherwood" & "Dougherty's"
Getty & Company	Green	Quart	Several dealer variations.
Old Premium Pure Rye Whiskies, Pittsburg, Pa.	Black		
Mike & Jim's Private Stock 1881 Pure Rye Whiskey	Green Red	Quart	Swan trademark.
Mike & Jim's Anderson Co. Whiskey	Green	Quart	Otherwise, identical to above.
Urban Club Sour Mash	Purple	Quart	Bottled Expressly for A. Urban & Sons, Quincy, Illinois.
Hotel Lafayette	Green	1/2 pint	Marquis de Lafayette coat of arms.

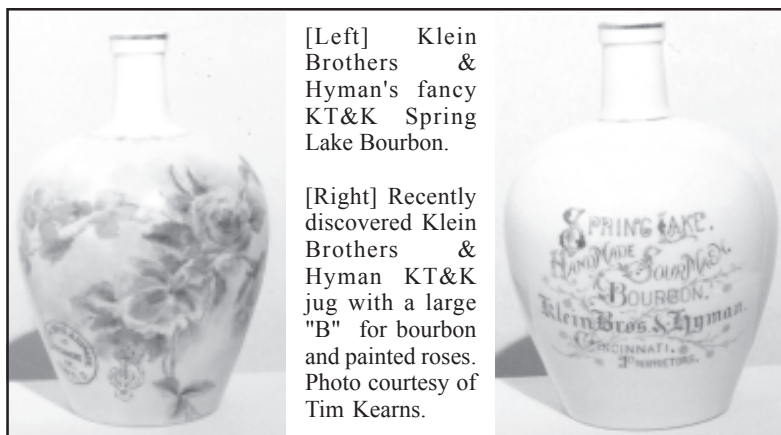
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[Left] Klein Brothers & Hyman's fancy KT&K Spring Lake Bourbon.

[Right] Recently discovered Klein Brothers & Hyman KT&K jug with a large "B" for bourbon and painted roses. Photo courtesy of Tim Kearns.