

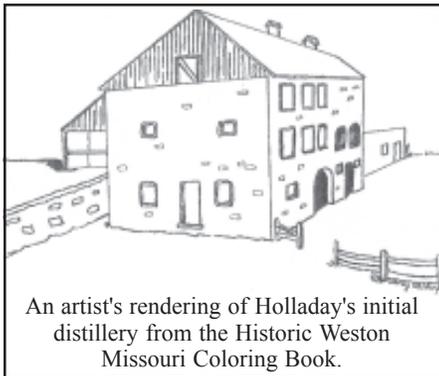
Ben Holladay: The Man and His Whiskey

by Jack Sullivan

(Special to *Bottles and Extras*)

During the mid-1800s, when Ben Holladay was accounted the largest employer in America and one of the wealthiest and most famous citizens, it probably never occurred to him that his name and legacy would live on largely through the distillery he founded as a sideline. But that is how things have turned out.

Holladay was born in 1824 in a log cabin in the Kentucky hills near the town of Blue Lick Springs. Early on, he was exposed to the ways of managing a wagon train, accompanying his father in leading soldiers westward through the Cumberland Gap. Soon the young hostler relocated to Weston, Missouri, already a "jumping off point" for thousands of pioneer settlers. It was from Weston by dint of hard work and an acute business sense that he created a transport empire that eventually included the outfitting of wagon trains, a stagecoach monopoly, steamship lines and eventually the Oregon Central Railroad. By 1864, Ben Holladay was accounted the largest individual employer in the entire United States.



An artist's rendering of Holladay's initial distillery from the Historic Weston Missouri Coloring Book.

One of his biographers calls Holladay the "America's King of Wheels" because his far flung transportation system bound half a world together. To Will Ermine, who wrote a novel about him, Ben was the "Boss of the Plains." To author Erle Stanley Gardner, he was "a truly red-blooded hero." Yet to many of his contemporaries, Holladay was a tough and ruthless businessman who did not hesitate to trample anything, or anyone, who got in his way. His enemies considered him unscrupulous and devoid of any moral sense.

Nevertheless, American elites of the day, including President Lincoln during

the Civil War, sought his company and advice, and the common folk sang his praises in popular tunes:

"You ask me for our leader, I soon inform you then;

"It's Holladay they call him, and often only Ben;

"If you can read the papers, it's easy work to scan;

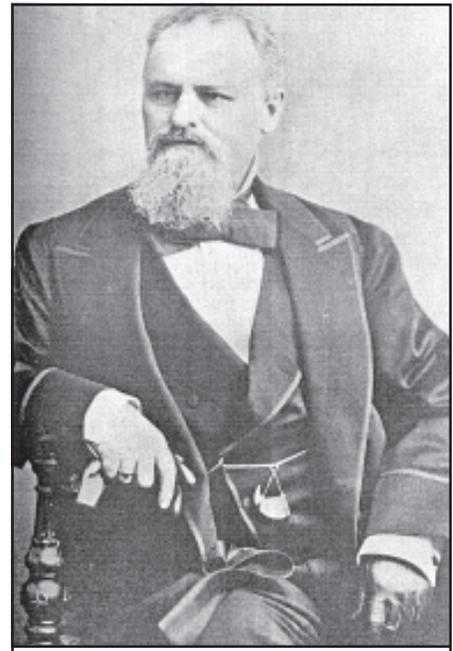
"He beats the world in staging now, or any other man."

Ben Holladay was a man of large appetites, and one of them was for whiskey. In one account, his brother Joe ran a saloon at the corner of Clifford and Burr Streets in Weston. Its window bore a sign announcing that "Monongahela Whiskey" could be found inside. But that liquor was made in Pennsylvania, a thousand miles away, and was expensive to transport all the way to Missouri.

Holladay had a better idea. In 1804, at Weston, the explorers Lewis and Clark had found some excellent limestone springs that later generations used to fill their water barrels on the way West. The young entrepreneur understood that the same tasty limestone-based water would be an ideal ingredient to make very good whiskey. So it was, as a sideline to his transportation empire, that in 1856 he founded a distillery on the outskirts of Weston and put his brother, Donald, in charge.

Whiskey proved to be a highly lucrative product. As the liquor began to flow from his stills, it found a ready market in frontier America. Ben's whiskey sold for five dollars a gallon, but he later charged his Indian customers a beaver pelt for just two swigs. Legend has it that he personally measured his drinks in half-pint cups coated inside with tallow and stuck his fingers in to aid his measure. Biographer Ellis Lucia says that "between tallow and fingers, the whiskey stretched a long way." As with most of his business enterprises, Holladay's distillery flourished.

Barrels of liquor were stored in cool limestone caves near Weston until Ben's hostlers could load them on wagons to the thirsty folks out West. As time went by, Holladay himself was developing a taste for more exotic libations, like champagne



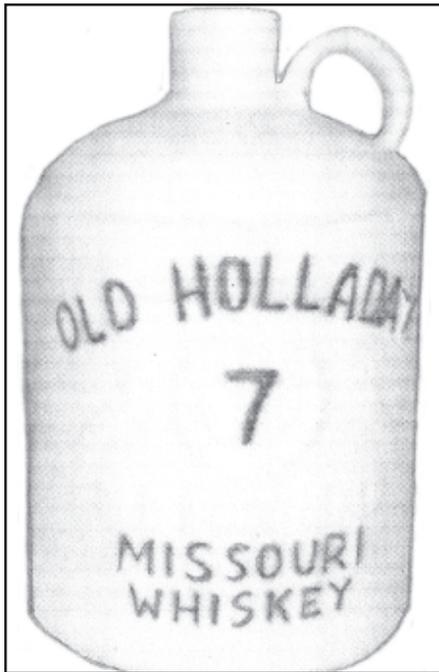
Ben Holladay at the height of his wealth and fame.

and scotch. As one of America's wealthiest men - and abetted by a social-climbing wife - he became renowned for his fancy parties. At a time when 25-cents would buy dinner, some of the couple's extravaganzas reputedly cost \$10,000. Holladay, a large man with a spreading beard, eventually owned three mansions, one in New York City, a two-hundred room palace near White Plains, N.Y., and a long-disappeared stately residence at 1311 K Street, N.W., in what is now downtown Washington, D.C. The D.C. mansion was used mainly as a place for Holladay to entertain Members of Congress to influence them to increase his subsidies for carrying the mail. At one point, his company was being paid \$1 million annually by the U.S. Post Office.

In the 1860s, Holladay bought two large bronze lions to grace the spacious entrance to his K Street mansion. They were not originals, but excellent copies of lions cast by the famous Italian sculptor Antonio



One of Ben's lions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Old Ben Holladay whiskey ceramic.

Canova for the tomb of Pope Clement XIII in Rome. It was common in those days for the American super-rich to covet such statues. They suggested a heritage of culture and classical interest that was otherwise lacking in free-booting millionaires like Ben Holladay.

Everything seemed to be going right for this self-made man until railroads begin to make stagecoaches obsolete. That was followed by the Black Friday stock exchange panic of 1873. Ben Holladay was ruined. He lost his business to creditors and was forced to sell off many of his buildings.

Perhaps because of strong personal attachments, he held on to his D.C mansion with its lions and to the Weston distillery. During ensuing years, Holladay struggled hard to make a financial recovery, but he died in Portland, Ore. in 1887, without having succeeded in regaining his lost wealth.

Despite Ben's financial reverses, the distillery stayed in the Holladay family for a number of years. David Holladay's daughter married a man named Benton, and the firm became Benton and Holladay. Despite an 1880 explosion during the processing of applejack that killed three workers and injured six others severely, the business flourished under the direction of Holladay's relatives. In 1895, eight years after Ben's death, however, the family sold out to another "larger-than-life" character, George W. Shawhan. He dumped the Holladay name and gave the company his own as the Shawhan Distillery Company. In 1907, Shawhan cashed out his Weston interests and moved to Verona, in Southwestern Missouri, where he operated another distillery until his death in 1912.

During Prohibition, subsequent owners shut the Weston facility, but continued the farming operations that George Shawhan had started as a way to use spent mash from the distillery for animal fodder. After Repeal, the company was purchased by Isadore Singer and his brothers. They began making Old Weston and Old Holladay bourbons at the site where Ben first had begun distilling. About 1939, the Singer family bought the name "McCormick" from a nearby distillery founded years before by E. R. McCormick. The story is that Mrs. McCormick had "gotten religion" during Prohibition, and would not let her husband reopen when whiskey again became legal.

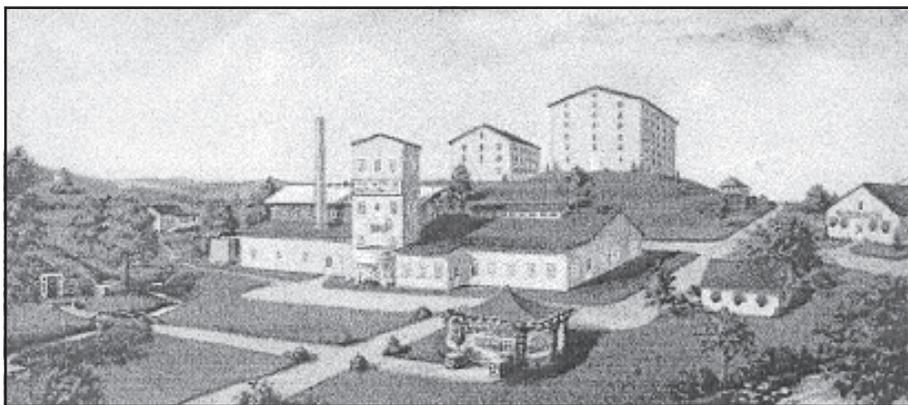
Under the McCormick Distillery name, the Singers later sold out to Cloud L. Cray, who used the facilities to make industrial alcohol during World War II. After the war, Cray's sons began a small bourbon-making operation that sold its product regionally. They soon joined other distillers like Jim Beam, who were selling their liquor in fancy ceramic bottles, and from 1969-1987, issued a



McCormick's Bourbon - 7 Years Old.

series of collectible decanters honoring American events and heroes. In 1983, McCormick issued a bottle in honor of the Pony Express - but did not mention Ben. And while "Doc" Holliday, the gun-slinger, was memorialized with a special McCormick decanter in 1972, Ben Holladay, the distillery founder, was ignored. McCormick also marketed its products in ceramic jugs, some of them shown here.

After a change of management in 1980, the McCormick Distilling Co. began marketing its products nationwide,



The Holladay and Barton plant of the late 1800s.



McCormick's Platte Valley Corn Whiskey, with Hillbilly.

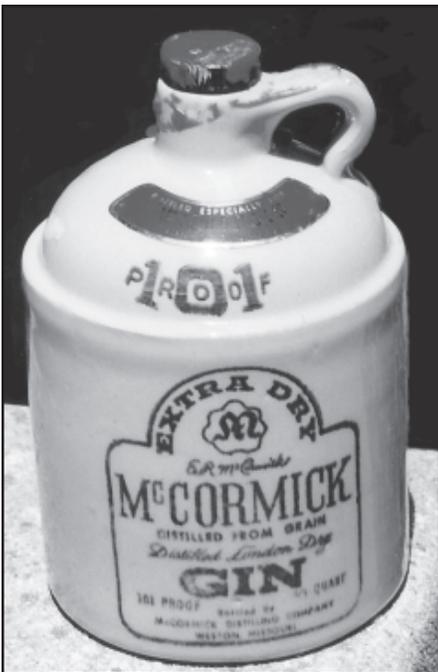


"Made in the Hills" Platte Valley half-pint and pint.

selling blended whiskey, gin, vodka and grain alcohol. Following still another change in ownership in 1993, the company ceased giving tours of the factory and moved its Country Store operation - tee-shirts, hats, mugs, etc. - into an 1886 building in downtown Weston, current population, 1,528.

Today the firm is a major bottler and distributor of alcoholic products, with sales in 50 states and 37 foreign countries. It has corporate offices in Dallas, but its main plant is still located in Weston. The original Weston distillery has been placed on the National Register of Historical Sites and - with the demise of the Michter operation in Pennsylvania - McCormick can claim to be the oldest continuously active distillery in the United States.

During his lifetime, Ben Holladay was a celebrated figure as Bill Gates is in his own time. Newspapers and magazines regularly profiled him and reported his



McCormick Gin Jug.



McCormick Missouri Whiskey.

escapades. Songs were written about him. Denver named one of its major streets after him in the 1850s. But time takes a toll on celebrity status and today, only Western history buffs readily recognize his name. Ironically, Denver's Holladay Street later became the site of that city's "red light" district, and synonymous with wanton women and debauchery. In the late 1800s, Ben's relatives petitioned the city fathers to change its name. Today, the avenue is known as Market Street.

Nor did ownership of Canova's famous lions bring Holladay immortality. One year later, after his death, the K Street mansion, and the lions, were sold at auction. For \$1,600 - a considerable sum in those days - Washington's Corcoran Gallery bought the resting felines. At first they resided on Pennsylvania Avenue, across from the White House, outside the museum's first location. In 1897, they were moved down 17th Street to the present museum site, where they are identified with Corcoran - not Holladay. Today, Ben Holladay truly is a forgotten giant of the Old West. As biographer Lucia puts it: "...Nowhere in all this broad land is there a monument, a marker, a statue, to the King of Wheels."

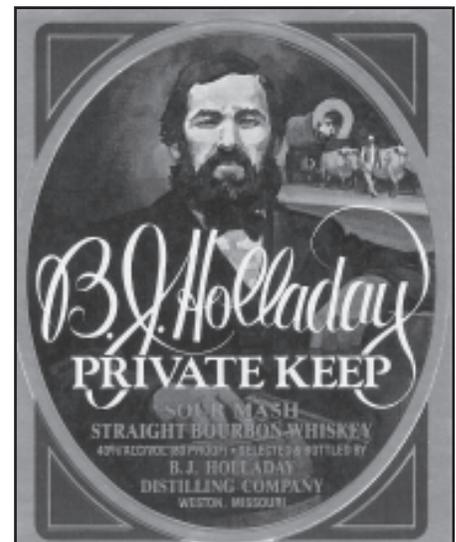
Today, the principal reminder of this fabulous American figure is a whiskey brand from the McCormick Distillery. It is B.J. Holladay "Private Keep" Sour Mash Straight Bourbon Whiskey. The distinctive black and gold label shows a striking figure with a black beard and an ox-drawn Conestoga wagon in the background. It is an image of Ben, idealized and perpetu-



Cover of Holladay Street, a Denver History, with one of the ladies responsible for the street name being changed to Market.

ated. Some celebrities might not be happy with their only memorial being a whiskey bottle, but his history suggests that Ben Holladay might not mind at all.

Information for this article has come from a number of sources. Many thanks go to Stephanie Parsons of the McCormick Distilling Co., for her help. The distillery website also provided useful facts and illustrations. Among books written about Ben Holladay are a biography: THE SAGA OF BEN HOLLADAY: GIANT OF THE OLD WEST, by Ellis Lucia (1959), and a novel based on his life, BOSS OF THE PLAINS, by Will Ermine (1940). Some of this material previously has appeared in the *Potomac Pontil*, the newsletter of the Potomac Bottle Club.



Label for B. J. Holladay Private Keep Bourbon.