

Who the Heck Was Irvin S. Cobb?

By Jack Sullivan
(Special to *Bottles and Extras*)

Once he was among America's top celebrities: Author of 60 books, a writer compared favorably with Mark Twain, he was the country's highest paid journalist, a star of radio, motion pictures, and the lecture circuit. More celebrated in his time than Johnny Carson or Jay Leno in ours, he hosted the the Academy Awards in 1935. He received the French Legion of Honor and two honorary doctorates. A bridge over the Ohio River, parks, a major hotel, and a brand of cigars [Figure 1] all were named for him. Yet today, little more than 60 years after his death, almost no one knows who Irvin S. Cobb was or what he did.

If by no one else, as we shall see, Cobb deserves to be remembered by collectors of whiskiana.

Irvin Shrewsbury Cobb was born in his grandfather's house in Paducah, Kentucky, in 1876. [Figure 2]. Because of the death of that grandfather and the alcoholism of his father, at the age of 16 he was forced to quit school to support his mother and siblings. His native intelligence was soon apparent. By the age of 19 he was the youngest newspaper editor in America, working for the *Paducah Evening News*. Cobb then went to work for the *Louisville Evening News* where his interest in whiskey first surfaced as the title of a humorous column he began to write called "Kentucky Sour Mash." Elated by the success of the column, and encouraged by his wife, Cobb headed out to New York City to make his mark.

In the Big Apple, after several false starts, Cobb landed a job with the *New York World*, and within months was writing a nationally syndicated column, one that eventually boasted a readership of millions of Americans. His popularity was enormous. In 1920 while covering the Democratic Presidential Convention, Cobb received votes for President from the Kentucky and Washington delegations. His fame spread to Hollywood where beginning in 1915 he starred in silent movies. His last, a talkie, was in 1938. Cobb also was a screenwriter for more than a dozen motion pictures.

At the height of his reputation and popularity in 1920, National Prohibition was enacted. Although later Cobb would

claim to be only a light drinker, fellow journalist O.O. McIntyre once said of him: "He belonged to that illustrious period when clean-minded newspapermen drank their rye neat...got drunk like gentlemen and took over the lines of the cab driver for a spin up Broadway as a red sun bleared an eye over Manhattan."

As a native Kentuckian, Cobb was steeped in the lore of whiskey making. He once wrote: "While I was growing up, through boyhood, through my youth and on to manhood, I had the example of whiskey-drinking all about me. Many of our oldest and most respected families owned and operated distilleries. Some of them had been distillers for generations past; they were proud of the purity of their product. Men of all stations of life drank freely and with no sense of shame in their drinking...There were decanters on the sideboard; there were jimmy-johns in the cellar; and down at the place on the corner, twenty standard varieties of bottled Bourbons and ryes were to be had at an exceedingly moderate price. Bar-rail instep, which is a fallen arch reversed, was a common complaint among us."

Shown here are some of the Paducah



Figure 1: From the lid of an Irvin S. Cobb cigar box.

whiskeys [Figures 3-5] with which Cobb likely was familiar. Among them are "On the Square," a six-year-old whiskey produced by Paducah Distilleries Co. and featuring the Masonic symbols of square and compass, a clear violation of Masonic codes. Other jugs are from S.P. Gott's, of 117 North 4th St., with its mustachioed man, and Clarks River Whiskey from the H.T. Hessig Distillery of 118 South 3rd Street. None survived after 1920.

National Prohibition also fell hard on Cobb. At first he dealt with it humorously, writing that: "Since Prohibition came in and a hiccup became a mark of affluence instead of a social error as formerly, and a loaded flank is a sign of hospitality rather than of menace, things may have changed." And again: "Booze is a bad thing for some people



Figure 2: From a postcard, the birth place of Irvin S. Cobb. The house was torn down in 1914.



Figure 3: "On the Square" Whiskey, Paducah Distilleries.



Figure 4: S.B. Gott jug, Paducah.



Figure 5: "Clark's River" Whiskey, from H.T. Hessig Distillery, Paducah.

and much too good for many of the others."

That jocular attitude had vanished by 1929 when Cobb wrote the only American novel devoted to the American whiskey industry. Called "Red Likker," his book tells the story of an old Kentucky family that founded a distillery called "Bird and Son" in the wake of the Civil War. It traces the history of this operation up to the time of Prohibition when it is forced to close. Ultimately the distillery is destroyed by fire and the family is reduced to running a crossroads grocery store.

Central to the novel is Cobb's polemic against Prohibition. Colonel Bird, the fictional founder of the distillery, argues with his sister, Juanita, a teetotaler and Prohibitionist, at great length about the pros and cons of permitting the sale of alcoholic beverages. The Colonel ultimately triumphs: When the Volstead Act reduces the 42% alcohol in Juanita's patent medicine, she is shown to be an alcoholic. She revives only when the Colonel pours her a shot of Kentucky bourbon.

Not only did Cobb inveigh against Prohibition in his literary works, he also made it a personal crusade. In 1919, a white-haired former U.S. Navy officer and lawyer named Capt. W.H. Slayton founded an organization called the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA). Impelled neither by financial interests in the liquor industry nor by political ambition, Slayton based his opposition on what he viewed as a misuse of national government power over U.S. citizens. With this highly-principled approach he was able to attract a number of prominent Americans to the standard of the AAPA. Among them was Irvin S. Cobb.

Cobb became chairman of the Authors and Artists Committee of AAPA. The committee, under his vigorous leadership, ultimately boasted 361 members including some of the leading figures of the day. As chairman, he released statements to the press blaming Prohibition for increased crime, alcoholism and disrespect for the law. "If Prohibition is a noble experiment," he said in one, "then the San Francisco fire and the Galveston flood should be listed among the noble experiments of our national history."

Espousing the anti-Prohibition cause seems only to have enhanced Cobb's popularity. On April 30, 1929, the Irvin Cobb Hotel, the largest and most



Figure 6: From a postcard, the Irvin S. Cobb Hotel, Paducah.

opulent of its kind in Western Kentucky, had its grand opening in his home town of Paducah [Figure 6]. He attended the ceremony. Several months later a bridge across Ohio River also was named for him. *The New York Times* on July 29, 1929 reported that Cobb had given his name to "a cigar, a dahlia, a Missouri corn cob pipe, a race horse, a bass bait, a hunting shirt, an Oregon canyon, a Texas street and a pointer dog." A little about some of those namesakes:

* The hotel, which long since has closed its doors, boasted it was "Kentucky's Most Beautiful Hotel." It was a favorite spot for Cobb when he visited Paducah and featured his image on many of the artifacts used in the facility.

* The Cobb bridge [Figure 7] spans the Ohio River from Brookport, Illinois to near Paducah, Kentucky. It's still in use but has been known for its rough surface and challenge to motorcyclists.

* The cigar brand was the product of the Yorkana Cigar Co. of York, Pa. It was an appropriate naming since the rotund Cobb usually had a stogie clamped firmly in his mouth. The picture used was from a photo by Pirie MacDonald, a well-known celebrity photographer of the time.

When Prohibition finally ended in 1934, Slayton and Cobb were credited for their efforts. Although many forces combined, the AAPA was a key element because of the strength of its arguments and the many influentials among its members. The first night liquor became legal, Cobb reportedly went to a hotel establishment that once again had begun pouring, pulled out a \$20 bill and hollered, "Drinks for everyone!"

After Repeal, only a handful of the pre-1920 distilleries were able to reopen. Among them was the Frankfort Distilleries. Founded after the Civil War in Atlanta by Paul Jones, a whiskey salesman, the operation was moved to Louisville, Ky. in 1886. It survived during Prohibition by



Figure 7: From a postcard, the Cobb Bridge over the Ohio River.

being one of a few firms that received permits to produce “medicinal” whiskey, which it sold as “spiritus frumenti alcoholic stimulant,” omitting the word “whiskey.” [Figure 8] Providing some 25 percent of the national supply, its literature later



Figure 8: Frankfurt Distillery 1920s bottle of “medicinal” whiskey.

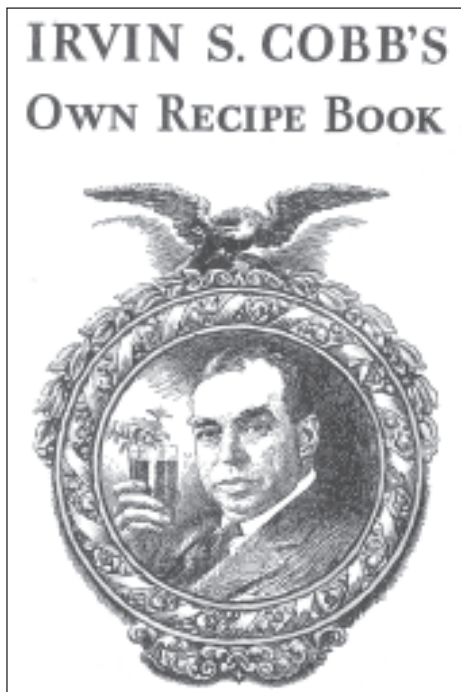


Figure 9: Cobb on the cover of the Recipe Book.

boasted that 20,000 doctors during Prohibition bought Frankfort whiskey. When Repeal came, the company, now run by Jones’ grandson, was ready with two plants in Kentucky and two in Maryland. The company quickly began producing liquor for a national market.

Immediately after Repeal the whiskey trade was concerned that the buying public no longer knew how to make mixed drinks. A raft of drink mixing booklets resulted. When the newly revived Frankfort Distilleries needed someone to author a “recipe book” for drinks containing its spirituous products, Cobb was chosen for the assignment [Figure 9]. According to the manufacturer, the author of “Red Likker” brought to American literature “the best story of whiskey-making ever written.”

Cobb did not let his sponsors down. The 52-page book is an eloquent testimony to the wonders of American whiskey and particularly to the brands produced by the distillery, including Paul Jones Bourbon, Old Oscar Pepper [Figure 10], Antique, Mattingly & Moore [Figure 11], Wolf Creek, Meadville Rye, Old Pirate and Duffy’s Malt. Many of these were brand names the company had bought from defunct competitors. The centerfold [Figure 12] of the drink book shows several of these whiskeys. It also contained line drawings of black men serving whites that today would be considered racial stereotyping. [Figure 13].

In the pamphlet, entitled *Irvin S. Cobb’s Own Recipe Book*, the author claims, perhaps fancifully, that his ancestor, one Deacon Henry Cobb, an immigrant from Ireland, was the first English-speaking resident in North America commissioned in 1636 to “draw spirits.” He implies that meant Deacon Cobb “was the pioneer licensed publican and victualer of all the glad New World.” Two centuries later, Cobb adds, his great-grandfather went west to Kentucky and founded “Squire Cobb Tavern” along the Cumberland River in Kentucky, a business which he reputedly abandoned one jump ahead of the sheriff.

Cobb’s decline in popularity was as a rapid as his rise to celebrity had been.

A 1937 movie he wrote was a critical and popular flop. *The New York Times* wrote: “Mr. Cobb...presents the appalling spectacle of a man who is not merely beyond his depth but insists on showing off as he goes down for the third time.” Increasingly he began to espouse conservative causes and to write demeaningly about Negro



Figure 10: An Old Oscar Pepper jug.

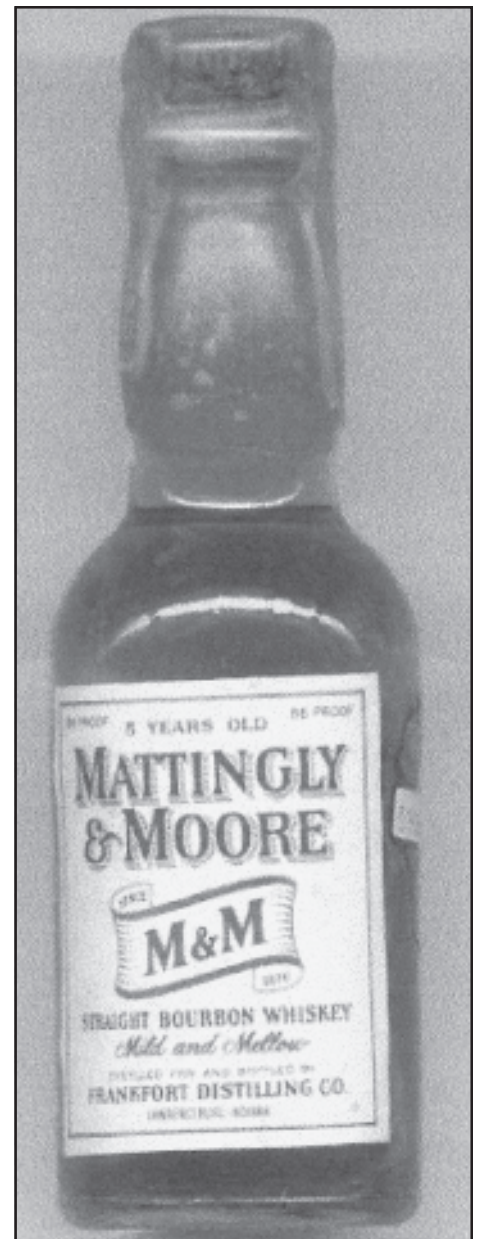


Figure 11: Mattingly & Moore bottle.



Figure 12: The centerpiece of the Cobb Recipe Book.



Figure 13: An illustration from the recipe book.

Americans. In 1941 his national column, which had run continuously since 1922, was canceled. In failing health throughout the early 1940s, Cobb, 68, died on March 10, 1944. He was buried in Paducah's Oak Grove Cemetery. The inscription on his stone says simply "Irvin Shewsbury Cobb, 1876-1944, "Back Home" [Figure 14].

Although once compared by critic H.L. Mencken to Mark Twain (Mencken quickly regretted it), Cobb's literary reputation faded rapidly. None of his books are currently in print, though many are available through used book outlets. His style today seems highly dated and out-of-step with contemporary writing.

In the 62 years since his death he has become a forgotten man. Yet Irvin S. Cobb can be remembered with honor for his role in ending Prohibition, the "Great Experiment" that became a great disaster.



Figure 14: From a postcard, the Cobb grave site.

The material for this article is drawn from a number of sources. Principal among them was Cobb's only book-length biography, entitled "Irvin S. Cobb" by Anita Lawson (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Ohio, 1984). Cobb's whiskey novel, "Red Likker," was published by Cosmopolitan Book Corporation (New York, 1929).
