

Phil. G. Kelly: Value in the Name

by Jack Sullivan

Special to the Potomac Pontil

In the never-ending guessing game over what gives an item value, it must be conceded that a name is an important factor. Among collectors of whiskiana in Pennsylvania, for example, the name "Foust" on a bottle or jug may double its normal value. Similarly, whiskey containers bearing the Casper brand in North Carolina, regardless of how homely they may be, fetch a good price. In Virginia, a clear favorite son is Richmond's Phil. G. Kelly Co.

For example, a fairly ordinary looking miniature pinch bottle of Kelly's Bankers Rye (Fig. 1) sold on Ebay in October 2006 for \$357. More recently, a Kelly advertising hand mirror, two inches in diameter, with pictures of birthstones on the back brought \$103.50 (Fig. 2). A Kelly giveaway thimble, probably costing a few cents to make, sold for more than \$20. The firm's bottles and jugs regularly sell for hundreds of dollars. The only explanation for such advanced prices is competition among Virginia collectors for Kelly products.

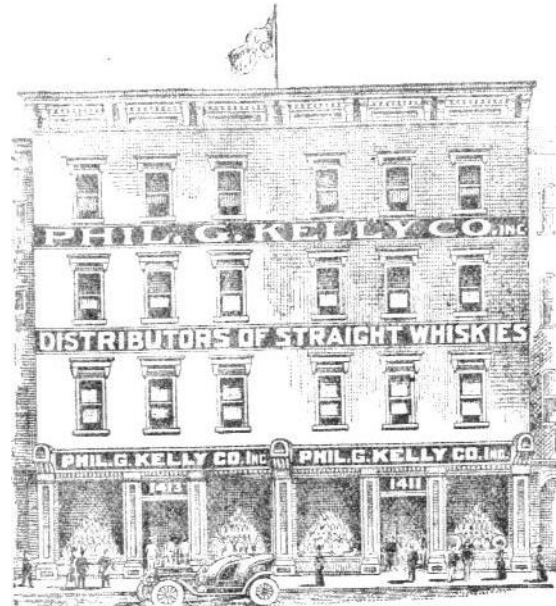


Fig. 1: Banker's Rye Miniature



Fig. 2: Miss Tempting Pocket Mirror

The company first appears in Richmond directories around 1905, located at the corner of 17th Street and Franklin Streets. A 1909 ad gives its next address as "1413 East Main St." and shows a three story building with the slogan "The House that Treats You Right." (Fig. 3). The same ad claims the Kelly enterprise as "importers, distillers and distributors of fine liquors." It is doubtful that the firm actually was a distiller. More likely it was a "rectifier," that is, a company that bought raw liquor from distillers, mixed and bottled it, slapped on a label, and sold it to the public.



"The House That Treats You Right."

Fig. 3: The Kelly Co. Building

The sign on the Kelly building claimed "distributors of straight whiskies." The company also claimed that it handled only "straight goods...the pure food kind." That too may have been disingenuous. Real distillers were seeking to have the government enforce the Pure Food and Drug Act against rectifiers on the grounds that they made only "artificial" whiskey.

Kelly Co. clearly was retaliating by claiming its whiskeys were "straight" and the pure food kind. The company featured more than a dozen brands, of which only one -- its flagship label, Westover Rye -- was registered with a federal trademark (1905). Among other Kelly whiskeys, in addition to Banker's Rye, were Kelly's Maryland Belle, Miss Tempting Rye (seen on the Fig. 2 hand mirror), Huron River, Old Tiverton Rye, Kelly's Special Reserve, Virginia Queen Corn, and El Maize Corn.

Early in the 1900's the company bought out a competing whiskey merchandiser, the E.A. Saunder's Sons Co. of Richmond, which had been in the liquor business since 1885, Saunder's Sons thereafter concentrated on the "fancy and heavy" grocery trade. In buying out their whiskey business Kelly added Saunder's brands to its own. They included Casey's Malt Whiskey, Old Bob Burton Rye, Old Fulcher Va. Mt. Rye, Old Bumgardner Va. Mt. Rye, and Possum Hollow Corn.

It apparently required a large and fancy catalogue to tout all these brands. Strong in the mail order business, Kelly Co. asked customers not to tear out pages or otherwise mutilate the catalogue in ordering their favorite liquor: "...It may prove of use to you in the future." The company also promised to send its goods in neat, plain packages "with no marks to indicate contents." Kelly's Special Reserve, for example, shipped in one, two or three gallon glass jugs packed inside a wooden case. That jug, its ad claimed, is the "the safest and most up-to-date package. It's a beauty and you will say so when you see it." Another Kelly slogan was: "The Prompt Mail Order House."

By 1915 the firm had moved to 427-431 N. 18th St. It disappears from Richmond directories after that year. Virginia officially went "dry" in 1916 and we may assume Phil. G. Kelly Co. shortly thereafter closed its doors. It would appear, therefore, that all Kelly items were created within a single decade (1905-1915).

Part of the Kelly mystique may be the prominence of its name on its whiskey containers. The firm embossed many of its glass bottles prominently with its name and often added decoration (Fig. 4,5). My own preference has been for Kelly jugs and an early addition to my collection was a quart ceramic with a flat shoulder and strong black lettering. (Fig. 6). That is only one among perhaps a dozen variations of Kelly jugs. They range from very crude (Fig. 7) to very sleek (Fig. 8), with a number of variations in between (Figs. 9-11).



Fig. 4: Kelly Pint Bottle



Fig. 5: Kelly Flask



Fig. 6: Kelly Quart#1 Jug



Fig. 7: Kelly Rough Jug

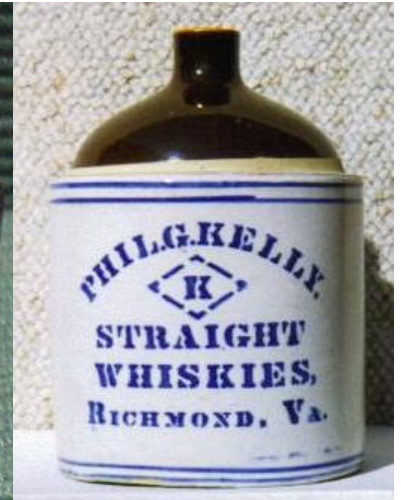


Fig. 8: Kelly Blue Stencil

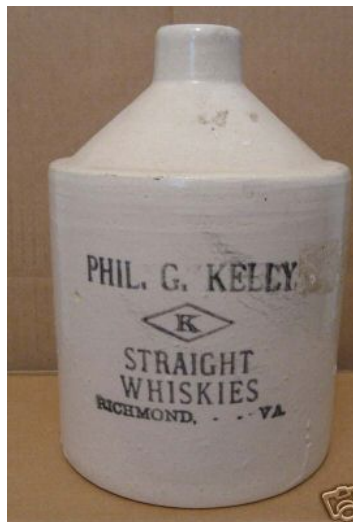


Fig. 9: Kelly Quart#2 Jug (at left)

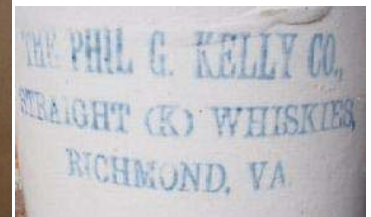


Fig. 10: Kelly Gallon#1 Jug (above)

Fig. 11: Kelly Gallon#2 Jug (below)

Deep in the heart of Virginia, I believe there are a few privileged collectors who regularly revel in the Phil. G. Kelly bottles, jugs and go-withs that adorn their shelves and walls. And then there are others -- more than a few -- who would like to emulate them. As a result, the prices for Phil. G. Kelly Co. whiskiana go ever higher.



Notes: The material here was gathered from a number of sources, including the "www. pre-pro" Internet site of Robin Preston. The jug shown in Fig. 8 is from the collection of Karen Gray.