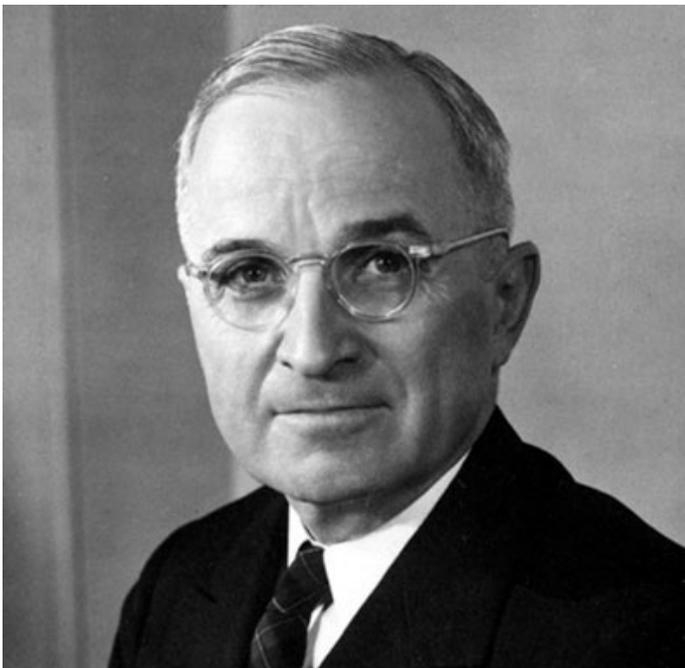


Milton Kronheim – From Teenage Hustler to Presidential Crony

by Jack Sullivan
(Special to the Potomac Pontil)

In 1968, Milton Kronheim, who dropped out of school at 14 to work in the liquor business, was asked by the Harry S Truman library in Independence, Missouri, to provide his oral memories of the 33rd President of the United States. (Fig. 1). The request signaled the heights that this District of Columbia whiskey dealer had reached during his eight decade career.



1. President Harry S Truman

In his interview, Kronheim said: “Mr. Truman and I were on a very friendly basis....He was a very simple man and so am I.” Whatever Truman was, Kronheim was anything but simple. He had a burning ambition to make money and powerful friends. He succeeded making both and in the process left us a legacy of bottles, jugs and advertising items by which to remember him.

Kronheim was born in the District of Columbia in 1889. At the age of 11 he went to work in his father’s D.C. saloon. Three years later he refused an offer by a cousin who owned a D.C. liquor store to go to work for him for \$6 a week. Milton held out for \$8. When refused, he quit school and opened his own liquor store at 3218 M Street, NW, in Georgetown. He called his business the Maryland Wine and Liquor Co. – a name he kept throughout his lengthy whiskey merchant career.

As Kronheim explained later: “In those days it did not take a lot of capital to open a store. I did not buy expensive fixtures. All I needed was some shelves.” That first day, with whiskey selling for 24 cents a pint, he reportedly made \$6.

The company met with considerable success. Kronheim bottled his own whiskey in the store and packaged it in clear glass bottles that carried embossing that makes them easily identifiable even today. Some pints carried just his name (Fig. 2), others the name of his company (Fig. 3), and still others carried both (Fig. 4). All included the Georgetown address. So did larger containers such as the handled jug shown here (Fig. 5).



2. Embossed whiskey pint - Milton S. Kronheim



3. Embossed whiskey pint - Maryland Wine & Liquor Co.



4. Embossed whiskey pint - both names



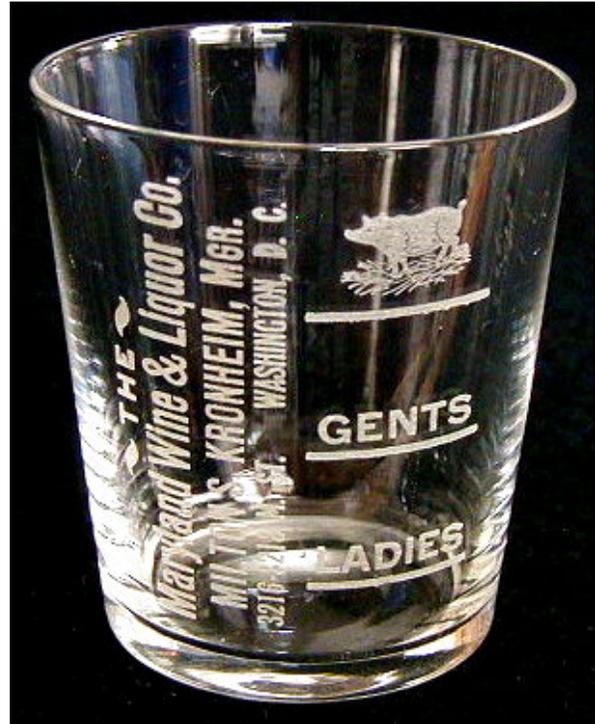
5. Kronheim whiskey or wine jug

As Kronheim's business grew he expanded his brands, among them, Snooky Oakums, after a popular song, and Casino Club. A bottle of the latter claims that it is: "The whiskey for particular people." (Fig. 6). Another early brand was Finola Pure Rye, seen here with the original label (Fig. 7). The company also bottled and sold its own brands of beer and wine (Fig. 8).

Like other Washington, D.C. whiskey dealers, Kronheim merchandised through an array of giveaway items. Among them were shot glasses, one of them featuring the pig motif (Fig. 9), and drink glasses. One of the latter advertises the firm as a "Mail Order House" (Fig. 10), which probably dates it from around 1905 when neighboring states were going dry but liquor by mail was still legal.



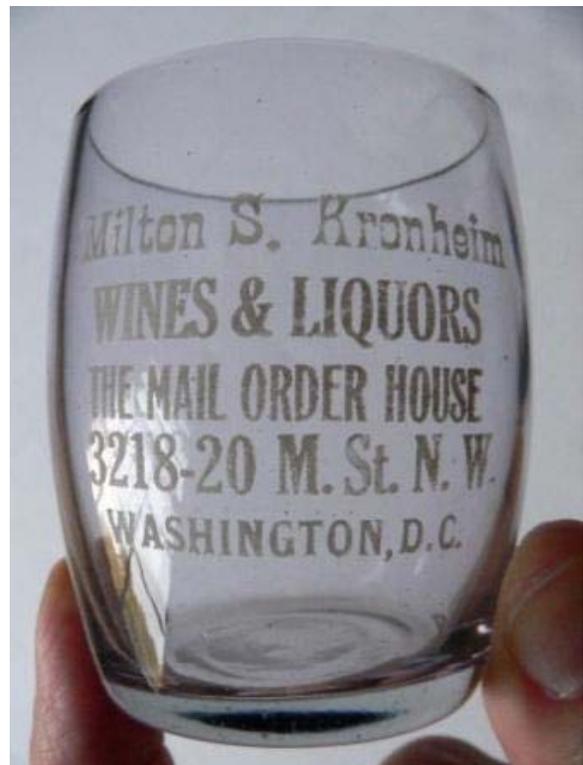
6. Casino Club Whisky bottle
7. Finola Rye bottle



9. Kronheim shot glass



8. Kronheim wine bottle with close-up



10. Kronheim drink glass

When Prohibition hit the District of Columbia in 1917, Kronheim's Maryland Wine and Liquor was forced to close its doors. Milton was 29 years old and already a rich man. Apparently without missing a beat, he opened a clothing store in Washington and a bail bonding business. Later his critics would claim that he specialized in furnishing bail money to notorious bootleggers and other underworld characters.

Those businesses failed to absorb his energy, and, when Prohibition ended in 1934, he jumped back into the business as a liquor wholesaler, providing whiskey to the Roosevelt Administration. About this time he took his lawyer son, Milton Jr., into the firm. That dates the bottle of "Kronheim's Bond" as post-Prohibition, probably late 1930s or 1940s. (Fig. 11).



11. Kronheim Bond Whiskey (post-prohibition)

Kronheim's reputation as a Washington "mover and shaker" arrived with the Truman Administration in 1945. He had befriended the then senator in the restaurant of the Mayflower Hotel during the 1930s and thereafter contributed generously to the Missourian's elections, including \$25,000 for Truman's presidential campaign in 1948.

After Truman became President, Milton was a frequent guest at the White House. This proved controversial for both men. In 1945, the Office of Price Administration (OPA) levied its stiffest fine of \$200,000 against the Kronheims for "black marketing." The story goes that Milton paid by plunking stacks of hundred dollar bills on an OPA hearing table. Reputedly because of his father's influence, Milton Jr. became a D.C. judge. The appointment stirred further controversy. An anti-Truman "muckraking" book of 1952 called the senior Kronheim the "czar and Boss Hague" of Washington.

Such terms, however, unfairly characterize a complicated man who also was known as a local philanthropist and friend to many. As one writer has characterized him: *Milton Kronheim Sr....had friendships with lawyers and judges, police officers, journalists, retail liquor dealers, old athletes, politicians, local businessmen, Little Sisters of the Poor, and has-beens.* He also was an athlete, boxing and playing baseball in his younger days, and pitching softball for the Kronheim Tigers in D.C. into his 80s.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must confess to having been the guest of Milton Kronheim at a charity lunch in the mid-1970s at which my then congressman boss was being honored. The whiskey millionaire appeared less than thrilled at having this nobody Capitol Hill aide at his table and never said a word to me after a tepid hello. He probably was hoping for the Speaker of the House.

By the time of Kronheim's death at age 97, following a stroke at his Mayflower Hotel apartment in 1986, his storefront enterprise had grown to mammoth proportions. His firm distributed an estimated 4.5 million cases of beer, wine and liquor annually. It employed some 350 employees in the D.C. area and maintained a 211,000 square foot distribution facility in Jessup, Md.

A dozen years after his death, in 1998, Kronheim Co. was bought by National Distributing Co. of Atlanta, an even larger liquor wholesaler. It continues to operate from the Jessup location, but the Kronheim name has disappeared.

Notes: The information for this article was gleaned from a number of Internet sources. They include the Truman Library website where a complete transcript of Kronheim's interview about the deceased President may be found. The bottles shown here are through the courtesy of Dr. Richard Lilienthal.

Upcoming Area Bottle Shows

FEBRUARY 3 - SOUTH RIVER, NEW JERSEY

The New Jersey Antique Bottle Club's (NJABC) 12th 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



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

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.