

Melky Miller: Distiller of Accident

by Jack Sullivan
(Special to the Potomac Pontil)

The farmer-distiller was a familiar figure in 19th Century Maryland. These were canny individuals with working farms who determined that the “value added” of turning their corn, wheat and rye into alcohol rather than selling to the local grain elevator made good sense. With good roads and ready markets in Washington and Baltimore, they founded distilleries and whiskey brands that often bore their names. One such was Melky Miller.

Melky was born either “Melchior” or “Melchoir” Mueller -- his baptismal certificate gives the first spelling and his tombstone the second -- in the mid 1830s. His father was Johannes Mueller, a German immigrant and farmer who arrived in the U.S. in the early 1830s, part of a great wave of German immigrants looking for good land and opportunity. Soon after, Johannes married Christina Schwalb, the daughter of another German immigrant family, in Elk Lick Township at Somerset County PA.

Melky was their firstborn, with a given natal year of 1833. In 1838 the family moved to what is now Garrett County, Maryland (it then was part of Allegheny County) and settled in a town with the highly improbable name of Accident. Located near Deep Creek Lake in the northern part of the county, the town can trace its unusual name, according to historians, to the Year 1750. At that time King George II of England paid a debt to a colonist named George Deakins by giving him 600 acres of land in Western Maryland. Deakins sent out two parties of surveyors -- each without the knowledge of the other -- to find and survey the best land in that vicinity. When the surveyors reported back they found to their surprise that each party had marked off the same oak tree as a starting point and chosen an identical 600 acres. Satisfied that this land was prime, Deakin claimed it for himself as “The Accident Tract.” The name stuck with the small town (pop. 353) that grew up on it, a place of muddy streets and ramshackle buildings in the 1800’s (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: A street in Accident, Maryland, circa 1960

The Muellers were industrious people and good farmers. They prospered in Accident. It is not clear when the family anglicized its name to Miller; the practice was a common one particularly for immigrants seeking to assimilate into American society. Moreover, little is known about the early life of Melky Miller. As an adult, he married a woman named Barbara, eight years his junior, and together they raised a family.

Melky might have gone through life unremarked had he not in 1875, when he was about 42, purchased a farm along a tributary of South Branch Bear Creek, just southeast of Accident. According to a family history, he also bought a small distillery owned by Joel Miller in the Cove area of Garrett County, and moved the equipment to his farm. Melky clearly possessed the wealth from farming to afford the investment in whiskey production. He himself, however, was not a distiller. A canny entrepreneur, he initially hired professionals to operate the business. His three sons -- William, John, and Charles -- learned the art of making whiskey from these hirelings and in time replaced them.

In 1902 Melchior sold the distillery to his sons. William continued as distiller, while John and Charles established a wholesale and retail whiskey business in nearby Westernport, Maryland. The firm also warehoused its products there. The town was so named because it was the western most navigable port on the Potomac River. Whiskey could be sent downstream by boat to Cumberland where it could either continue down the C&O Canal to Washington or be carted by wagon over the National Road to Baltimore or later go by railroad (Fig. 2). Reflecting the new owners, the company changed its name to M.J. Millers Sons Distillery.



Fig. 2: The C&O canal, with railroad

According to a 1986 history of Accident, when the Miller Distillery was in full operation there were always eight hundred to one thousand barrels of rye whiskey aging in the warehouses. In good weather, wagons were used to haul barrels of whiskey to Westernport as well as to other local markets. Area farmers often did the hauling to earn extra cash. The wagons were replaced by horse-drawn sleds when sufficient snow covered roadways. Members of the Miller family returning from church were photographed in one of the sleds (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: The Miller family in sleigh

The Miller boys had an evident genius for business and soon built Melky Miller’s Maryland Rye Whiskey into a highly respected local and regional brand. Although production was relatively small – only 29 bushels of grain processed daily according to Federal records – the quality of the company’s whiskey was high.

The firm also was noted for the artistic design of both the jugs and the bottles in which it marketed its products. Melky’s sons displayed their father’s name prominently on all their whiskey (Fig. 4). Figs. 5 and 6 show two other fancy paper labels the Millers employed to market their product. The first advertises “Melky Miller Maryland Rye Whiskey” and features a fancy scrolled signature. The second depicts the word “rye” on a shield set amidst stalks of rye grain but is stated to be a blend – not pure Maryland rye. The Millers also sold their whiskey in attractive gallon sized stoneware jugs (Fig. 7) and featured an attractive shot glass (Fig. 8).



Fig. 4: A half pint of Melky Miller rye (left)

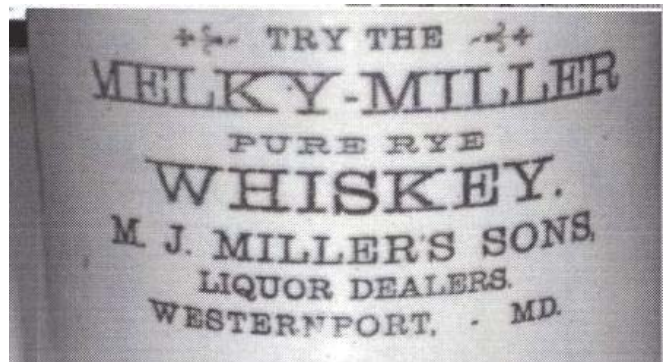


Fig. 5: A Melky Miller amber quart (right)



Fig. 6: A Melky Miller clear quart (above left)

Fig. 7: A Miller two-gallon jug (above right, and close-up below)



Barbara Miller died in 1913 when she was 72, two years before Melky passed away in 1915 at the age of 82. They are buried in the cemetery next to Zion Lutheran Church in Accident. Their sons continued to operate the distillery until 1919 when Prohibition closed their doors, never to reopen. The structure was destroyed by fire in 1971. The Garrett County Historical Society has erected a sign memorializing the site (Fig. 9). It is said that foundation stones for the distillery warehouses can still be seen there, just off Miller Road (named for Melky). His spacious home and farm have been in the Miller family for many years and a recent resident was a great-grandson, William Aiken.

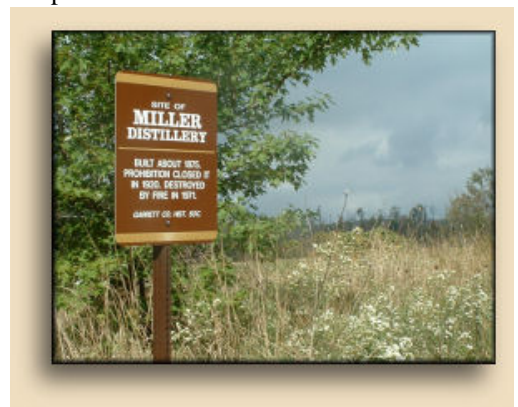


Fig. 9: Miller Distillery historical sign

The American farmer-distiller clearly was a creature of the 18th and 19th Centuries. Prohibition effectively terminated the distillery Melky built as well as other such farmer enterprises nationwide. All were relatively small operations and the Dry Years spelled their complete demise. In their place, U.S. and Canadian whiskey syndicates formed and created the system of a few large producers that have dominated the national whiskey trade for the past 70 years. America is the poorer for the loss.

Notes: Much of the information here comes from a 1986 history of Accident by Mary Miller Strauss, a Melky descendent. The photographs in Fig. 1 and 3 are from the Ruth Enlow Library in Accident. Jim Bready, the guru of Maryland whiskey, graciously gave me permission to photograph Miller whiskey bottles in his collection, Figs. 5 & 6. Figs. 4 and 9 are from the website of Linda and John Lipman on American whiskey, www.ellenjaye.com. The shot glass in Fig. 8 is courtesy of Robin Preston and his pre-pro website.



Figure 1: Union Valley Dairy bottle in pint size

Union Valley Dairy

by Richard Lilienthal

Another unlisted Washington DC milk bottle has surfaced – a round pint embossed UNION VALLEY DAIRY, J. W. ESTES in slug plate (figure 1).

The bottle took a rather circuitous route to my collection. Mike Cianciosi purchased it on eBay as part of a large group of bottles recently dug in Washington DC. Mike sent me a list of the DC milks in his purchase and I replied that they were already in my collection. The Union Valley bottle was not on Mike's list because he did not know it was from DC. Some days later, Henry Fuchs phoned to ask if I knew anything about a Union Valley Dairy/J.W. Estes milk bottle. I said that I wasn't familiar with it and that it sounded like a Pennsylvania bottle. (Although it is not always a safe guess that an unknown milk is from PA, the name Union Valley did sound like PA to me.) A few days later, I noticed that Henry had listed the bottle on eBay and decided to do some research. (We retired folks look for things to do.) First, I checked my historical Baltimore dairy records and found nothing. Then, I checked my DC records and found that John Walter Estes/Union Valley Dairy was located at 300 I St. NW from 1903 to 1907 and 652 F St. NE from 1909 to 1925. I then went to my basement and dug out the box containing raw material for the club's bottle book. In that box were several pages of photo copies of milk bottle caps from the early 1900s. I found a picture of the Union Valley Dairy cap (figure 2), not used in our book because the red lettering did not provide sufficient contrast. I bid on the bottle and won the auction.



Figure 2: Paper cap from Union Valley Dairy

The bottle has a 24 embossed on the base which I believe represents the date of manufacture. 1924 would put the bottle at the 652 F St. NE address. As part of my milk collection, I take a picture of what is currently at the address of each dairy. Figure 3 shows an attached house at 652 F St. NE. A resident informed me that he was told that there was once a business located on the ground floor.