

Edson Bradley: Washington's Whiskey Millionaire

by Jack Sullivan

[Special to the Potomac Pontil]

Growing up, Edson Bradley probably could not tell sour mash from sweet corn, but in maturity he turned whiskey-making into abounding wealth and used some of it to move his Dupont Circle mansion to Millionaire's Row in Newport, Rhode Island. In the process he promoted the rise of Old Crow bourbon – still one of America's best known brands.

Bradley was born in 1852, probably in Connecticut where his father, Edson Sr, was a partner in a large shoe manufacturing company. Although details about his early life are sketchy, he was born into wealth and trained for a career in finance. While still in his twenties Bradley became associated with Paris, Allen & Company, an important New York and London financial and importing firm.

Years earlier, members of the firm had become interested in whiskey production as an investment.

Immediately after the Civil War they had been introduced to a trio of Frankfort, Kentucky, distillers that included the estimable Colonel E.J. Taylor, a major force in Kentucky bourbon (Fig. 1). Together the money men and the whiskey men built a distillery in Frankfort they called The Hermitage. At the same time they purchased the Old Crow distillery, closed it down, and moved the operations to the new facility along with the brand name.

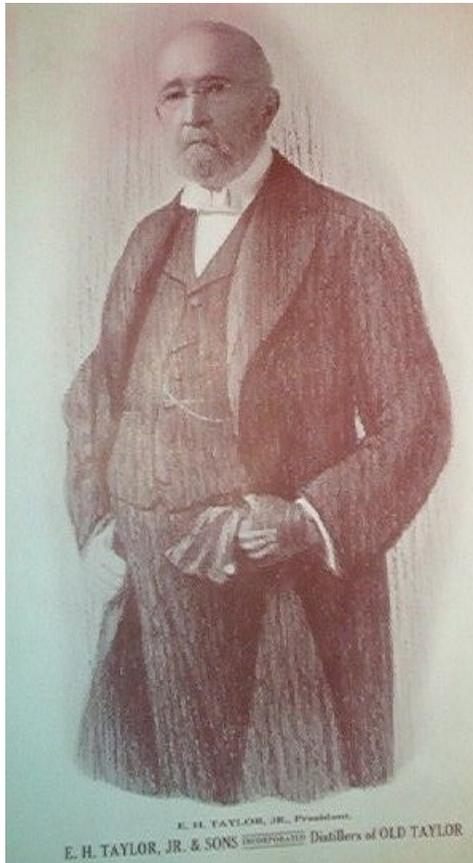


Fig. 1: Colonel E.J. Taylor

Sherman Paris of Paris, Allen became an officer of the company. Almost immediately it became highly profitable, selling its Old Hermitage and Old Crow brands nationwide. Bold and interesting advertising, as shown in these trade cards, were part of the success. (Figs. 2 & 3). The distillery grew into one of Kentucky's largest and most productive. Two photos from the Kentucky Historical Society show the distillery at its zenith. (Fig. 4).



Fig. 2. An Old Crow Trade Card

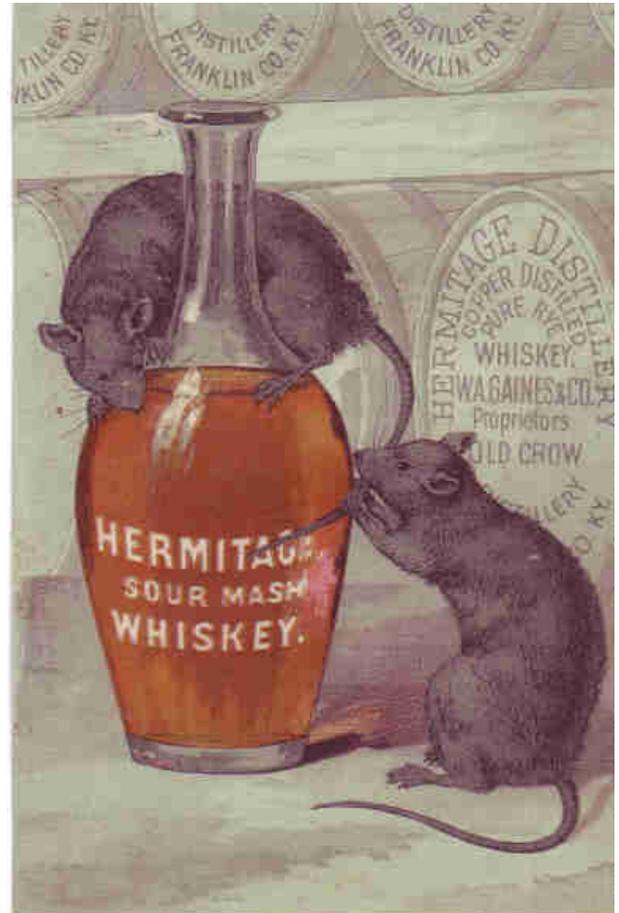


Fig. 3: Barrels at the Hermitage Distillery



Fig. 4: The Hermitage Distillery, Frankfort KY

In 1882 Sherman Paris withdrew from the distillery business and the 30-year-old Edson Bradley took his place, invested, and became a vice president. Almost immediately he was anointed the principal spokesman for the company and represented its interests and those of the distilling industry on Wall Street and in the halls of Congress. In 1884 the New York Times reported he marched in a Republican political parade as a director of the Wine and Spirits Exchange -- an apparent early attempt at a "Whiskey Trust" (see my article in the June 2008 *Pontil*).

Soon the Nation's press was referring to Bradley as a liquor millionaire and a kingpin of the Whiskey Trust. I have found little evidence for that charge despite his being a major figure in the Kentucky whiskey industry. About this time he moved his residence from New York City to Washington, D.C., buying a large Victorian on fashionable DuPont Circle and tearing it down to build the grandest mansion the city had ever seen.

Bradley's home was truly his castle, featuring towers, turrets, and stained glass windows. It contained a Gothic chapel, an art gallery -- to hold his extensive collection of ceramics, tapestries and books -- and a 500 seat theater he called "Aladdin's Palace." Some interior rooms were transferred intact from France. Almost instantly the Bradleys became a regular item on the society pages of Washington newspapers. Edson's daughter, Julia, had a splashy and well-publicized "coming out" party in 1894 that drew a crowd of the rich and powerful to the castle. The press was not always kind: Bradley was criticized for paying a paltry amount of property tax annually on his D.C. mansion.

But Bradley had a much bigger problem. Because "Old Crow" had achieved national fame as a brand, other whiskey organizations were using some variation of the name on their products. His distillery, called W.A. Gaines Company, sought to fend them off by registering the Old Crow trademark in 1887. When that move failed to deter the

copycats, Bradley and his colleagues registered again in 1897 (Fig. 5) and repeated it in 1904 and 1909.

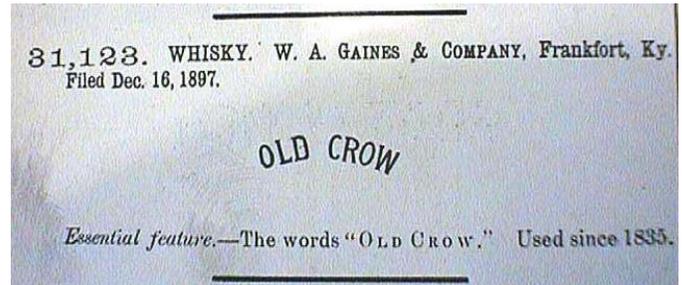


Fig. 5: The 1897 Trademark Registration

The principal culprit was the Rock Springs Distilling Company of Daviess County, Kentucky. It persisted in selling a whiskey it called Old Crow. Eventually the dispute found its way into the courts. A Federal judge in Kentucky decided for Bradley and the Gaines Company. That decision was reversed by a Federal Appeals Court and in 1918, the case found its way to the United States Supreme Court. The High Court ruled in favor of Bradley and ordered Rock Springs Distilling to "cease and desist" its use of the Old Crow name. We can speculate that at least a few of the Supreme Court Justices had been guests at Edson's palatial home.

Bradley's victory quickly became a hollow one as National Prohibition was imposed a year later. His company struggled along until 1922 when it was dissolved and the Hermitage distillery was left abandoned and derelict. Now 70 years old and enormously wealthy, Bradley was restless. He determined to leave Washington for a move to fashionable Newport, Rhode Island and, almost incredibly, to take his castle with him.

Brick by brick, tile by tile, the mansion was dismantled and transported to Rhode Island while the fascinated populace of Washington looked on. Ripley's Believe It or Not newspaper column highlighted the event for a national audience. In Newport Bradley purchased a large existing home called "Seaview Terrace." He joined the two structures to become one of the largest mansions in America (Fig. 6). It featured 17 rooms on the first floor, 25 on the second, and 12 on the third.



Fig. 6: The Bradley Newport Mansion

Time, however, was catching up with the Bradleys. Barely months after construction was completed on Seaview Terrace, Mrs. Bradley died there. Six years later in 1935, Edson, while on a trip to London, also died. The brand that had made him rich, however, survived Prohibition and lives on to this day.

Over time the image of the crow has become more sophisticated. Shown here is an early Old Crow shot glass (Fig. 7) in which the bird looks more like a robin. Contrast it with a 1938 ad in which the crow has a more realistic appearance. (Fig. 8). Also shown here are two Old Crow paperweights from my collection, one circa the 1950s (Fig. 9) and the other a contemporary example (Fig. 10). The crow has become a cartoon.

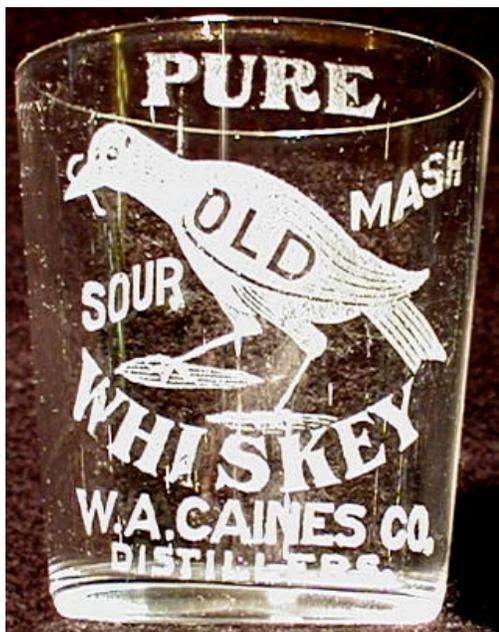


Fig. 7: A Pre-Prohibition Old Crow Shot Glass



Fig. 8: A 1938 Old Crow Ad



Fig. 9: A Circa 1950s Old Crow Paperweight



Fig. 10: A Contemporary Old Crow Paperweight

The Bradley mansion in Newport still stands. For a few years Edson's daughter Julia and her family lived there until they could no longer pay the taxes. Subsequently it became a girls' school. From 1966 to 1971 house was the setting for a spooky ABC daytime soap opera called "Dark Shadows." In 1974 it was purchased by a man named Carey. Now known as the Carey Mansion, it currently serves as a dormitory for Salve Regina University.

Notes: The information for this article comes from a wide range of written and Internet sources. The trade cards (Figs. 2&3) are through the courtesy of Reggie Lynch. The photo of the shot glass (Fig. 8) is from Robin Preston and his www.pre-pro website.
