

Those Pre-Pro Whiskey Men!

Henry McKenna: Ireland's Gift to American Whiskey

By: Jack Sullivan, July 1, 2013



Henry McKenna's story begins in Ireland where he was born in Draperstown, County Derry, in 1819. As a youth Henry worked for a period in an Irish distillery and later clerked in a liquor store for a relative. When he emigrated to the United States as a teenager in 1837, a period of exceedingly hard times in Ireland, he apparently had no thought of becoming a whiskey maker, but was very intent on making his mark in the New World.

Upon reaching America, McKenna, shown here, appears to have headed for Kentucky in 1838. There in Lexington in 1847 he married Elizabeth "Lizzie" McGuigan, herself an Irish immigrant from County Derry. Her surname is sometimes rendered as "Goodwin," a name her family adopted apparently to seem more "American." The couple ultimately settled in Nelson County, Kentucky, where Henry worked for a time on the roads. Many Irish immigrants, including my great grandfather, found their early employment in building the transportation infrastructure for our rapidly expanding Nation.

As often as possible, however most moved on to less physical and more lucrative occupations. Henry was no exception. By 1855 he had gone into business with a partner milling flour in Fairfield, Kentucky. Together they bought a plot of land at the edge of town, built a grain elevator and mill, and set about grinding wheat into flour for their neighbors. The gristing process of those days produced considerable waste. To put that material to use, Henry bought a farm and pigs to eat the leftovers, but apparently had so much refuse that he decided to turn the rest into whiskey.



McKenna set up a wooden still in the back of his flour mill and began turning out about a barrel of whiskey a day. At first he used only wheat but eventually turned to corn, the

basis of true bourbon. According to a Kentucky newspaper report, initially he did his own distilling with the help of a slave. By 1858 he apparently had enough business to hire a fulltime distillery manager, another Irish immigrant whose name was Patrick Sweeney.

McKenna is said to have been a stickler for sanitation. He never simply whitewashed his fermenter tubs with lime, as some early distillers did to save time, but had them scrubbed and sterilized with boiling water before reusing. This was the only way to insure that “wild” yeasts did not adulterate his product. A newspaper of the time also credited him as unique among Kentucky distillers for refusing to sell his whiskey until it had been aged at least three years.



Meanwhile, his family was growing. The 1870 census found Henry, age 51, living in Nelson County with Lizzie and boys, Daniel, 21; John, 20; James, 15; Stafford, 7, and a girl, Mary, 11. His occupation was given as “distiller and

millar.” As his children matured he saw to giving them good educations and from an early age engaged all of them in the distilling business.

In 1880 McKenna opened an office on Louisville’s Market Street to market his whiskey but rapidly found those quarters too constrained and later bought “The Old Blue House” on Market Street. That name is found on some McKennawhiskey jugs. Shortly after he moved his Lexington offices once again, this time to Fourth Street near Main, the latter soon to be known as Louisville’s “Distillery Row.”

Probably reflecting the great care McKenna took with his product, his whiskey proved to be very popular. In 1883 he built a brand new brick distillery. It had the capacity to make three barrels a day. Testimonials from recognized figures assisted sales. A doctor named Dudley Reynolds was quoted saying: “H McKenna’s whiskey is the purest and best I have ever seen.” By the



1890s the Irishman's Old Line Sour Mash Whiskey was being sold throughout the United States. Although McKenna never officially called it "bourbon," that is exactly what it was. Even his liquor containers were notable, including Albany slip jugs with his label "scratched" into the glaze, two of them shown here.

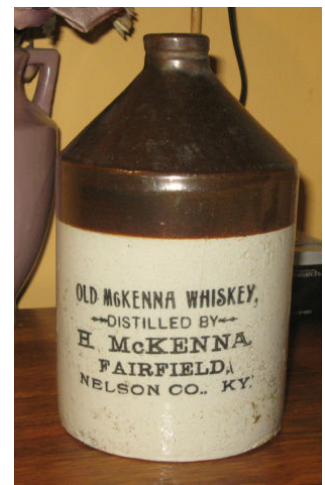


In time McKenna became widely recognized as one of the true patriarchs of Kentucky whiskey. In 1892 a bill was introduced into Congress asking for an unlimited bonding time for whiskey. It was known as "The McKenna Bill." A year later, however, Henry was dead, age 75. He was buried in Saint Michael's Cemetery in Fairfield, Nelson County. In death he joined his wife, Elizabeth. Their gravestone is shown here.

With great foresight Henry had brought his two older sons into the business after sending them to get university educations. Daniel McKenna, the eldest, who had helped around the distillery almost since he was out of diapers, took over the management. His brother, James, was also involved, earlier having been sent to Louisville to head up marketing the family's whiskey.

By today's standards, the McKenna production was small. Family members have insisted that capacity never exceeded more than nine barrels a day and then only for nine months of the year. Because Henry believed that summertime was bad for correct fermentation, production ceased for three months. Even after McKenna whiskey was well established, the family continued with milling and farming, so their year remained full.

Under Daniel's leadership the McKenna brand continued its strong growth. The 1911 Mida Financial Index listed the distillery as having a capital value of \$125,000 to \$150,000, ten times that in today's dollar. Daniel McKenna advertised broadly and continued his father's preference for ceramic containers, modernizing the underglaze labels. As glass began to replace pottery, the McKennas adopted embossed amber bottles.





Daniel died relatively young in 1917 not long before Prohibition. It was left to James McKenna to shut down the whiskey-making but the distillery itself was left intact throughout the “Dry Era.” Following Repeal, James, now age 79 and his younger brother, Stafford, a mere 73, reopened the Nelson County distillery. They employed a distiller named Coleman Bixler. He had been taught by Sweeney and apparently knew the original Henry McKenna recipe despite the seventeen years shutdown. Soon the distillery had a 20 barrel a day capacity and warehouses to store up to 8,000 barrels.

After James died in 1940, family members sold the distillery to the Seagram Corporation, a Canadian outfit that continued to issue the Henry McKenna brand. (According to one authority, however, the Canadians may not have been given the original McKenna recipe.) Seagrams packaged the whiskey in glass but also in 1964 issued a white ceramic jug with a cobalt blue label of Amish country tulip design. Although its advertising called the container “scarce as hen’s teeth,” a dozen or more of these jugs are offered for sale every day on Ebay.

Seagram dismantled the the original distillery in 1976, selling the brand name in the early 1980s to Heaven Hill Distillery of Bardstown, Kentucky, which to this day markets McKenna bourbon nationwide. Thus the name of Henry McKenna, Ireland’s great gift to American whiskey, has continued to be recognized on the U.S. liquor scene.

**This is Henry McKenna's new Americana jug.
It's scarce as hen's teeth.**



This cool stoneware jug holds a half-gallon of McKenna Hand Made and is smack out of 1879-1883. Take a look at it. After 1861, the gentle curve of foot, shoulder, neck and lip became a straight line and the handwork lettering was replaced by a stencil. We liked the old way best and made it up. The whiskey inside is still made in McKenna's original distillery building, Kentucky's oldest.

Now, hand made jugs are slow to make, and your dealer may not have one yet. Try McKenna in the regular bottle, until he does. The bottle looks good too.

After you empty the jug, you can use it as a candleholder or vase or lamp base and the like. Or just look at it.

And if you want to drink straight from the jug, Kentucky style, go ahead. That's how the West was won.

H. MCKENNA DISTILLERY
FAIRFIELD, KENTUCKY 40307
KENTUCKY STRONG
SINCE 1855



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