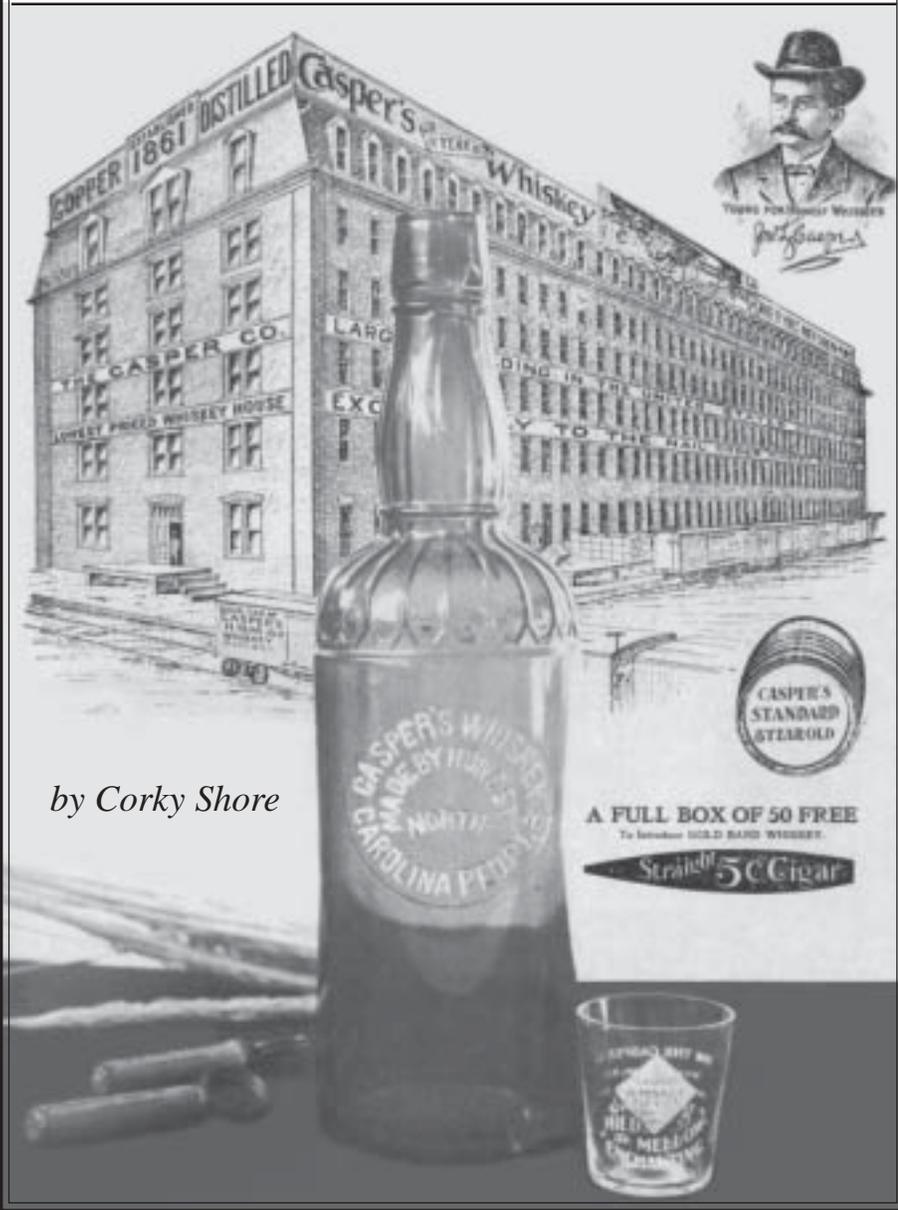


## Casper's Whiskey Theme: Honesty First, Last, Always



by Corky Shore

If John L. Casper of Winston-Salem, N.C., had ever been awarded an honorary degree, the honor would have been based on the saying, "Honesty is the best policy."

After all, bottles and labels alike proclaimed his whiskey was "Made by Honest North Carolina People."

After returning from the Civil War in 1865 and taking over the small distillery founded by his father in 1861, John C. Casper saw the company make modest gains. But it wasn't until John C.'s son, John L., took over the leadership a few years later that the company enjoyed a rapid growth. The junior Casper

reorganized the firm, called it The Casper Company Inc., and became its president.

He devoted his entrepreneurial skills into developing a quality product, selling it at low prices and turning the company in to what was claimed to be the largest mail order whiskey house in the South.

If John L. Casper had a second motto to live by, it would be "It Pays to Advertise."

He didn't hire traveling salesmen, or "drummers" as they were called in his day, but sold everything by mail order. His advertisements encouraged the public to buy his whiskey in 3, 5 or 10 gallons, or

even larger orders. It was suggested that individuals form clubs and place orders for big savings in costs per gallon.

His became one of the first companies to offer free premiums such as clocks, boxes of cigars, desk sets, trunks, shot and drinking glasses, cork screws, art, advertising matches and hand-etched fancy decanters just for buying Casper's Whiskey.

The whiskey also could be purchased in 1-gallon jugs and 5- and 10-gallon barrels.

By the early 1900s, the company counted more than 250,000 regular customers and was sole owner of a dozen of the largest distilleries in western North Carolina. Casper controlled output in 21 others. The Casper Company operated out of Winston-Salem and Roanoke, Va..

Among advertisements was one that included a suitcase filled with 12 full quarts of either rye or corn whiskey that could be ordered so the customer could receive whiskey secretly, as well as a quality premium. The cost was \$12, or \$1 per quart. For just \$3.90, a customer could receive four quarts of Casper's Zulioka Whiskey and a handsome pocket watch.

Business was certainly booming, so much so that the Newton (N.C.) News reported that "jug makers are so rushed with orders, they can hardly meet the demand."

John L. Casper was not averse to publishing testimonials praising his products. From Jacksonville, Fla., F.M.I. reportedly wrote: "I attach my check for \$6.95. Please send me 8 quarts corn whiskey and 4 quarts rye. This is my second order and I wish to say your liquors are all that you advertise and I think a little more, or in other words, your claims are modest."

When he was in need of more capital, he addressed a "personal letter" to the public, summing up the reasons for his success. Here are excerpts from one of those letters:

"Years ago, I conceived the idea of selling direct to the consumer, the homemade Honest Whiskies I produce here in the mountain district. I started without the aid of capital — worked night and day — kept the customers gained and month after month added new names to my list.

"After plodding along in this way from year to year, I found myself worth several thousand dollars and calculated I could



never expect to amass much unless I resorted to the business-like mode of advertising. I knew I had at my command whiskies, the honest kind which the world had never known. . . I knew that to get them before the consumers meant a fortune to me. . .

"I approached several of my acquaintances and told them confidentially what I could do... offered to borrow money and pay 6 percent interest, offered to pay 8, 10, 15 and even 25 percent per annum, but excuses seemed to be in vogue and I got disgusted. I then realized that a good working record counted for nothing in the absence of assets. By December of 1900, I had built up those assets so I called my friends together again. . . some showed a willingness to invest, others would not

"Anyway, I was successful in obtaining enough help from these friends to insure the formation of a corporation with a working capital of \$20,000. . . On May 1st, 1905, we re-incorporated and reorganized The Casper Co. The inventory showed a net worth of \$250,000. . . I want ample capital at my command — it takes money to make money. I want the Casper Co. to have a half-million dollars in the corporation. . . I offer to my friends, customers and the public in general throughout the U.S. \$250,000 worth of treasury stock of the par value of \$10 per share fully paid and non-assessable."

Casper cited the example of one friend withdrawing \$2,000 from a bank paying 4 percent annual interest "and today he holds \$25,000 worth of stock in The Casper Co... he is an officer and director and what cost him \$2,000 less than four years ago, no man can buy today for \$25,000 in U.S. gold coin."

He went on to say that he would personally guarantee every share holder

12 percent per annum in the way of dividends, to be paid 1 percent on the first of each month.

How well that scheme worked is not known, although a booklet issued later by the company indicated a working capital of \$500,000.

But everything became moot when the Tar Heel State went bone dry on Dec. 31, 1908. Happy New Year 1909 must have been a quiet one.

Casper must have strayed from his honesty policy because on Oct. 21, 1916, he was among seven persons pleading guilty for defrauding the federal government in the manufacture of "moonshine" whiskey in Fort Smith, Ark.

Casper and the others had been charged with making "six-" and "seven-year-old whiskeys" in just 50 hours through the use of certain chemicals. The still was located at the site of an abandoned distillery on a Fort Smith street.

Casper pleaded guilty for placing canceled revenue stamps on boxes. He was sentenced to nine years and 28 days in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary and fined \$33,000. Property owned by him and valued at \$100,000 was confiscated.

However, Casper received a pardon just three months later and joined his son-in-law, John D. Lambe, at Villa de Acura in Coahuila, Mexico where Casper attempted to revive his fortunes by building another distillery.

But the 55-year-old Casper died of heart failure on July 29, 1921, according to his son-in-law. Survivors included his daughter and a son, John L. Casper Jr. The deceased's body was shipped back to Winston-Salem where he was buried several days later.

Fast-forward to the 1960s when bottle collecting became the vogue. Surviving

Casper's product bottles and jugs soon became collectible — especially the fancy cobalt bottles embossed CASPER'S WHISKEY/MADE BY HONEST/NORTH CAROLINA PEOPLE.

While those bottles aren't considered rare, they are highly prized by many collectors and bring a three-figure premium, depending upon condition. Labeled varieties are especially scarce. The rarest, according to collector David Jackson of Greensboro, N.C., "is probably the clear glass bottle embossed with four cities — Winston-Salem, New York, Chicago and St. Louis."

Jugs in half-gallon, 1-gallon and 5-gallon sizes also exist, with the latter considerably rare. "Eared" jugs with wire bail and wooden handles may be the most common variety around.

Readers also need to check out the web site of Jackson, a Raleigh Bottle Club member who loves Casper's containers, at [www.casperwhiskey.com](http://www.casperwhiskey.com). He also offers a Casper's Newsletter on the site.

*Some of the photos used in this article are used from Jackson's website with permission.*

