

by Don Denzin

### From the Monongahela River to the World:

#### John Gibson Sons & Co.

"You men!" The dealer at the adjacent table peered over her glasses as I handed her a bottle. "You're so visual!"

"Guilty," I responded cheerfully. The Federation's national show was in high gear in Toledo. I'd picked out the bottle from among hundreds of dealer tables. It was the color of Baltic amber and it sparkled like an oversize gem. Any more whittle, I thought, and it would have seemed faceted.

"Impressive," she conceded after a moment. She held the bottle to the light.

"You getting visual too?" I asked.

"Maybe," she offered. "I'll admit you bought a good one. But after you've admired it, then what? Who are the guys

embossed on its side? John Gibson Sons & Co? Never heard of them."

"Me neither."

"Put a price on it," she urged. "Bet you can sell it for more than you paid."

Maybe, I considered. But several years later, I'm glad I didn't take her advice. That bottle became one of my collection's standouts. It's still among my favorites. One thing, however, has changed. Oh, I'm still a visual guy, all right. But now I know something about John Gibson.

#### Gibson Mills

If the bottle with John Gibson's name was impressive, so was the enterprise he built, literally, from the ground up. The year was 1856 when Gibson, an Irish immigrant and successful Philadelphia spirits merchant, purchased 40 acres of land on the Monongahela River south of Pittsburgh. His goal was as straightforward as it was ambitious. Gibson intended to become a major American distiller.

Unhappy with difficulties he encountered procuring significant quantities of whiskey from Pennsylvania producers, Gibson recognized that the growth of his Philadelphia business required a reliable source of product. If he couldn't buy it, he concluded, he would make it.

He set to work on the land immediately. Using stone from local quarries, timber from nearby woods, an army of contractors, and a single-minded determination to get the job done, Gibson began constructing a distillery far larger than any in Pennsylvania.

Certainly, he must have understood the risks. "When Mr. Gibson began building," John Van Voorhis later recalled, "his neighbors strongly advised him against committing what they termed an act of the greatest folly." In the early 1890's, Van Voorhis documented his memory of Western Pennsylvania from decades before. "The idea was termed extravagant, and a speedy failure was predicted."<sup>1</sup>

But failure was not in Gibson's future. By spring of 1858, construction had finished. Gibson Mills, resplendent in

its freshly quarried limestone, shined on the eastern bank of the Monongahela River. The site included eight bonded warehouses, a four-story malt house, a distillery, mill house, drying kiln, cooperage, and even residences for workers.

John Gibson was ready. He began making wheat and malt whiskeys and, especially important, he devoted much of his distillery's capacity to the product for which his new region was already famous, Monongahela rye. In a short time, his distillery's output equaled 65 barrels of whiskey a day. Over the next six years both production and sales grew. By the end of the Civil War, John Gibson filled 5,000 railroad cars a year.

He built it big and they came, or more accurately, he shipped. Alas – at least for today's collectors of American glass – much of his output left the distillery in barrels, not bottles.

#### Henry Clay Gibson

John Gibson died in 1865 and was succeeded by his son, Henry Clay Gibson. With partners, Andrew M. Moore and Joseph F. Sinnott, the younger Gibson renamed the business John Gibson's Son & Co. and led it for the next nineteen years. That the son of the founder distilled quality whiskey and expanded the enterprise still further is indisputable. "The products of the Gibson Mills were sought after in every state and territory in the United States," wrote Van Voorhis. Adding that Gibson whiskey was also exported to many foreign countries, he offered a basic explanation for the firm's success. "No article was turned out but pure whiskey."

With growth came the reach of progress. A telegraph office was added in 1877. A U.S. Post Office opened in 1884. The thriving community added a school.

Set backs occurred as well. In 1882, some 3,000 barrels of whiskey were lost to fire. Another 7,000 barrels were destroyed in another blaze the following year. No fatalities resulted from either tragedy but the business itself must have felt the effects of mishaps so large they might have put other firms out of business. At Gibson Mills, workers rallied, schedules adjusted, and whiskey making continued.

The workers were an important part of the equation. Although its product was whiskey, Gibson Mills was a classic mill town in every other respect. Employees lived on land controlled by the company. They ate hogs and cattle raised on the premises - livestock fed, no doubt, from spent mash used in the distilling process. Discipline was important; even during off times, workers were obliged to follow company rules. Ironically, one of these was a modified prohibition against



[Fig. 1]



[Fig. 2]

drinking. Workers could not obtain even a pint of a Gibson potable without permission.

### A Second Whiskey Rebellion

That the Gibson endeavor became significant is born out by more than just surviving commercial statistics. Henry Clay Gibson's business was enough of a force to make it into the U.S. Congressional Record. In 1873, his firm challenged the imposition of fees for the purchase and installation of metering devices required by regulation – but little used in practice – for the calculation of federal taxes.

Invented by John Tice, the Tice Spirit Meter was intended as the standard for all whiskey makers when the fledgling Internal Revenue Service required distillers to install it in 1868. But the meters did not find universal acceptance. Revenue gaugers backed away from using them, and by the early 1870's, the equipment sat idle. An addled Henry Clay Gibson wanted his money back.

"In the larger distilleries," he complained to the Senate and House of Representatives, "the cost of meters alone was not less than \$2,000, and in those requiring two sets double that amount."<sup>2</sup> Henry S. Hannis, J.A. Dougherty, and Alexander Young, whiskey makers from Pennsylvania and neighboring West Virginia whose names are recognized by bottle collectors today, joined Gibson in the dissent.

The protest was almost certainly accompanied by a sense of history because Western Pennsylvania had once before been the site of controversy about taxes and the distilled fruit of native grain. In the 1790's George Washington had actually returned to Western Pennsylvania

at the head of an army to enforce the Federal collection of excise taxes from the output of local stills. The "Whiskey Rebellion," as the incident became known, was an early test of Federal constitutional powers. Few shots were fired, and the rebellion ended with Federal control intact. But many small distillers dismantled their stills. The tax on whiskey enforced then remains an institution today. This time, the dispute was not about the tax itself. It was about costly, ineffective regulations. Yet as before, emotions ran high. "Without intending any imputation upon Mr. Tice," the distillers declared with one voice, "we are free to say that we have had enough of him and too much of his meter."

Their pleas recorded, the distillers lost their battle. The House of Representatives failed to act on the measure. Gibson's outlay for the useless equipment likely stayed on the books as an irreversible expense.

### Moore and Sinnott

Henry Clay Gibson retired in 1884, leaving management of the business in the hands of Moore and Sinnott. They changed the name of the company to the Gibson Distilling Co. shortly thereafter, but ran things in much the same manner as their predecessors. Whiskey still left the bend of the Monongahela River with the Gibson name, and the company continued to expand. Notably, by the 1890's Moore and Sinnott claimed branch offices in New York, Boston, New Orleans, San Francisco, Charleston, Savannah and Augusta, Georgia. The firm's principal office was on South Front St. in Philadelphia.

A measure of the business' continuing success is the taxes paid to the U.S. Treasury. In the year following Henry Clay Gibson's retirement, and in nearly every year thereafter, the Gibsonton Distillery generated tax revenues in excess of \$675,000. The firm also constructed a seven-story bonded warehouse in 1905. A time capsule in the cornerstone fittingly included an old and new bottle of Gibson Whiskey. Moore and Sinnott incorporated the effort in 1909. Business was as good as it had ever been.

It was legislation - not fires, commerce, nay-saying neighbors, or even excise taxes that finally ended the company's existence. The 18th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the Volstead Act, made prohibition the law of the land. The enterprise ended as suddenly as it had begun. The great distillery emptied its stills and shut its doors forever as the 1920's dawned.

A sheriff's sale in 1923 disposed of the distillery's effects. The Pittsburgh Steel Company acquired the property and,

in 1926, sold even the stones from the dismantled buildings for \$1 a load. Limestone blocks that once stood proudly in the sun found new uses throughout the area. Perhaps fittingly, since they had once supported the region's commercial vitality, they now became part of foundations, buildings, and walls for the larger community.

For some, the stones may even today serve as reminders of the great enterprise that once powered the economy of a region known for whiskey and initiative. For most, however, the stones yield no clue about their former purpose. Time has erased memory and the stones remain silent. Other tangible relics, of course, still exist. Scattered documents and an occasional written account provide proof that the business even existed at all.

And, fortunately, there are the bottles.

Am I a visual guy? Sure. But now when I hold a piece of glass with old John Gibson's boldly embossed name I appreciate more than color and texture. The light reflected is the glow of history.

"But after you've admired it, then what?" the dealer asked that day in Toldeo.

The only answer I can give now is the one I gave then. My answer is that I'm keeping this bottle.

### JOHN GIBSON BOTTLES

While others may exist, the following bottles are known with the John Gibson name:



[Fig. 3]



[Fig. 4]

<sup>1</sup> *Old and New Monongahela*, by John S. Van Voorhis, Pittsburg, P A: Nicholson, 1893.

<sup>2</sup> *Memorial to John Gibson's Sons & Co.* from the U.S. Congressional Record, 43rd Congress, December, 1873.

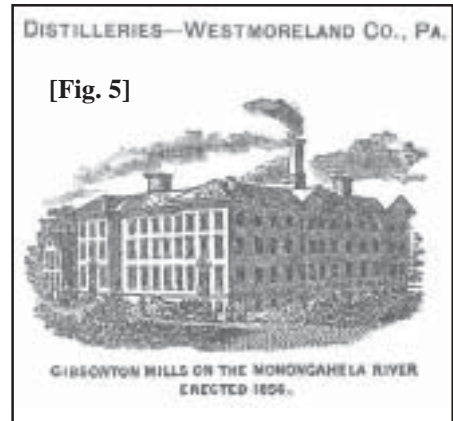
[Fig. 1] *John Gibson Sons & Co., / Pure Old / Rye Whiskey, the bottle from Toledo. "You men! You're so visual!"*

[Fig. 2] *Henry Clay Gibson presided over the company from 1865 until 1883.*

[Fig. 3] *Gibson whiskey was so important to his business that Philadelphia distributor, James Kerr, commissioned flasks with the Gibson name. Interestingly, a Mr. Kerr (no first name is given) is also mentioned in the Congressional Record. Unmistakably on the side of the distillers, he emphatically denounced regulations requiring the Tice spirit-meter as "arbitrary and without even a pretense of authority of law."*

[Fig. 4] *Two Gibson bottles. The labeled example (left) bears the name John Gibson's Son & Co., which dates from the era of Henry Clay Gibson (1865-1883). The bottle on the right, embossed John Gibson Sons & Co., is from the firm's earlier period (1858-1866).*

[Fig. 5] *Detail from a 1914 Gibson invoice. The image remained unchanged on business stationary through the firm's 60+ year history.*



[Fig. 5]

#### JOHN GIBSON SONS & CO. / PURE OLD / RYE WHISKEY /

Embossing on three sides of an amber, square bottle with applied tapered collar, smooth base, c. 1858-1866. Available in two sizes, 10" and 8" tall, examples of this bottle are scarce.

#### PATENT JOHN GIBSON PHILADELPHIA

Classic whiskey cylinder, yellow-green, IP base that also includes H. RICKETTS & CO. GLASSWORKS, BRISTOL, 11" tall, c. 1845-1860. This bottle likely pre-dates Gibsonton Mills. When an example sold in a Glassworks auction some years ago, the catalog noted that despite its Ricketts embossing, it appeared very much like the product of a Dyottville glassblower.

#### GIBSONS in script / PURE RYE / CONTENTS / FULL PINT.

With a tooled top, this is a clear, rectangular flask, 8" tall. It probably dates from the first two decades of the 1900's.

#### JAMES KERR / 1709 & 1711 MARKET ST. / GIBSON'S OLD RYE A SPECIALTY / PHILADA. PA.

Smooth-base, 7 3/4 inch flask made before the era of strapsides and slugplates, c. 1860-1870.

Labeled, unembossed, bottles have also survived, including some like the examples pictured in this article, as well as those from the Moore and Sinnott era.

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