

# "SMALL SAM" ALTSCHUL AND HIS TALL TALE

by Jack Sullivan

(Special to Bottles and Extras)

A newspaper reporter, acting on a tip, in 1990 visited an elderly woman named Mollyann at a Dayton, Ohio, nursing home. She told him an incredible story about her paternal grandfather, Sam Altschul, a man who stood only 5 feet, 3 inches tall. Mollyann avowed that because of the quality of his whiskey, Grandpa Sam while still in his twenties had become a favorite of the last German Kaiser, Wilhelm II (Fig. 1), who had declared him "Baron Samuel Von Altschul." The reporter listened in astonishment.

Mollyann had other amazing details. Shortly after receiving his title, the old lady said, Sam heard that a young woman in Piqua, Ohio, bore a birthmark that heralded the coming of the Jewish Messiah. With that information, he renounced his barony and left Germany for the United States discarding the "Von" along the way. He courted and married the lady with the purported birthmark, and started once again making the Kaiser's favorite whiskey -- but now in Springfield, Ohio. All this was duly reported to the public.

## Origins of the Altschul Distillery

A fascinating story, but was it true? The historical record suggests something else. Altschul Distilling itself claimed an origin in 1862, several years before Sam was born. The business was founded by his father, Samuel Altschul Sr., an immigrant from Germany. The father was listed in 1863 Springfield business directories as a salesman in a cigar and tobacco shop located just off Main Street, shown here in a period post card (Fig. 2). By 1868 Sam Senior owned a business selling wine and liquor on South Market Street, with a whiskey-making facility at a separate location.



Fig. 2: Main Street, Springfield, Ohio, circa 1890



Fig. 1: Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany

In 1864, the elder Altschul married Sarah Wolf of Miami, Ohio. Among their children was Small Sam. The date of his birth varies by census, not a completely unusual situation since information often was given by children in the household. The 1900 census set Sam's natal year as 1869 -- and in Germany. In 1920 he is recorded having been born the U.S. in 1863 -- a year before his parents' marriage. Other records show him born in 1866 in Ohio. Despite these variations in his birth date, records show definitively that by 1881 he was a clerk in his father's business.

Nine years later, in 1900, Sam married Carolyn (Carrie) Lebolt of Piqua. She was the daughter of a prosperous supplier of groceries, feed, and crockery during the canal barge era. Her father, Charles Lebolt, had come from France and, according to family legend, was given the name, "The Bold," by Napoleon himself. This may well, however, have been another of Sam's stories.

Where Carrie bore the fabled birthmark on her person has not come to light, nor has the shape or character of the sign. Settling down to the life of a distiller's wife, Carrie bore Sam four children: Charles, Justine, and fraternal twins Leon and Malcolm. Sam claimed to Mollyann that Malcolm, her father, was the offspring who carried on the purported Messianic birthmark.

## Mighty Mouse Sam

In the early 1880's, perhaps upon the retirement or death of his father, Sam took over the Altschul distillery. At that time the business was located at 22 S. Market Street. In 1884 Sam moved to fancier quarters in Kelly's Arcade, a relatively new retail center and hotel, shown here on a 1920



Fig. 3: Kelly's Arcade photo

postcard (Fig. 3). The complex had been built on Springfield's Fountain Square by a former mayor of Springfield named Kelly. Altschul's address was 62-64 Kelly's Arcade for the next 23 years.

Although diminutive in size, Sam proved to be a giant as a marketer for his whiskey. In the late 1800s he began to advertise his liquors extensively in national magazines (Fig.



PRICE OF GOODS	Price per Gallon	Price per Qt. Bottle	Per 8 Doz. U.S. Gallons
<b>WHISKIES.</b>			
Jolly Tar Rye or Bourbon	\$2.25	\$1.60	\$12.00
Staghead Rye or Bourbon	2.25	1.60	12.00
Sweet Home Rye, 12 years old	3.00	2.25	18.00
Harvest Home Rye, 2 years old	2.10	1.50	9.00
Silver Edge Rye, 6 years old	2.10	1.50	9.00
National Club Bourbon	1.50	1.10	6.60
Springfield White Wheat, 12 years old	1.50	1.10	6.60
Old Judge White Rye, 9 years old	1.50	1.10	6.60
Sweet Clover Brand Rye, 12 years old	1.50	1.10	6.60
Altschul's Bouquet, 4 years old	1.50	1.10	6.60
Altschul Rye, 2 years old	1.50	1.10	6.60
Altschul's Private Brand, 12 years old, 10 per cent. 40 & 46 per cent. A.C.	1.50	1.10	6.60
Old Private Stock, 12 years old, XXXX Blue Ribbon	1.50	1.10	6.60
Black and Red, old rye and pure rye, 40 & 46 per cent. A.C.	1.50	1.10	6.60
Very Fine Rye, 12 years old, 10 per cent. A.C.	1.50	1.10	6.60
Very Fine Rye, 12 years old, 10 per cent. A.C.	1.50	1.10	6.60

(1896)

Fig 4: Altschul Distilling Ad

4). His ads stressed: "One profit: From producer direct to consumer." Within a fairly short time, Sam had built a thriving mail order business. Altschul assured customers that he would ship his whiskey by express free of charge everywhere in the United States except the Far West.

With success and the desire to be closer to his customer base, Sam moved his main offices in 1908 to Dayton while maintaining his whiskey operations in Springfield. As a result Altschul's artifacts may have either or both cities named on them. For example, a brass



Fig. 5: Altschul bronze distillery tag

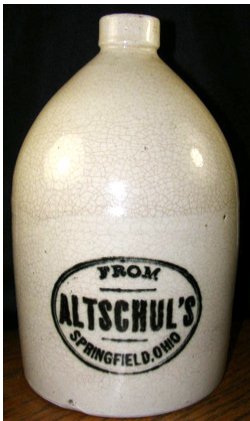


Fig. 6: Altschul gallon jug



Fig. 7: Altschul clear qt.

Fig. 8: Altschul amber qt.

distillery tag used to mark whiskey barrels identifies Dayton (Fig. 5). The distillery packaged its goods in both ceramic jugs (Fig. 6) and glass containers. The bottles were embossed with the name of the firm (Fig. 7) and came in both clear and amber (Fig. 8).

### A Blizzard of Brands

The company featured more than a dozen brands, including: "Altschul's Bouquet Old Rye", "Altschul's Private Brand", "Harvest Home Rye", "Jolly Tar Rye", "National Club Bourbon", "Old Anchor Gin", "Old Judge White Wheat", "Old Private Stock Blue Ribbon X X X X", "Silver Edge Rye", "Springfield White Wheat", "Staghead Rye", "Sweet Home Rye", "Sweet Clover Whiskey" (Fig. 9), Altschul's White Corn (Fig. 10) and "Teutonia Doppel Kummel" (Fig. 11). The flagship



Fig. 9: Sweet Clover Whiskey label



Fig. 10: White Corn label



Fig. 11: Teutonia Kummel label

label was “Old School Rye” (Fig. 12). It was styled “pure and potent.” Altschul’s “Lagonda Club” brand took its name from a posh men’s club in Springfield, shown here in a photo from the 1890s (Fig. 13).

Sam loved to give away shot glasses. Several variations of Altschul shots exist for Old School Rye (Figs. 14-16). They were designed by the most famous etcher of liquor glasses in America, George Trog. Trog’s sketchbook contained a



Fig. 12: Old School Rye ad



Fig. 13: Lagonda Club

etched glass (Fig. 19).

About 1910, Altschul moved his operation from Kelly’s Arcade to 9 W. Main Street in Springfield. Son Malcolm joined him in the company. Unlike other Ohio whiskey outfits that went out of business when the state voted dry in 1916, Sam was able to operate until 1919, probably on the basis of his mail order trade to states that still permitted alcohol.

#### What to Believe about



Fig. 15: Old School Rye shot glass, #2

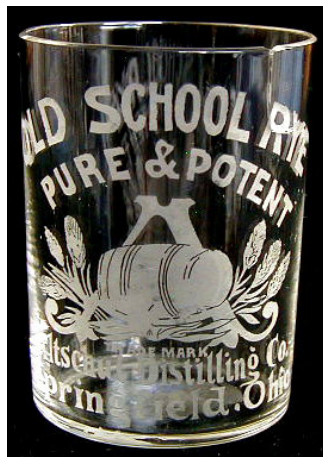


Fig. 14: Old School Rye shot glass, #1



Fig. 16: Old School Rye shot glass, #3



Fig. 17: Trog’s shot glass Design

#### Sam?

When National Prohibition arrived, Sam shut the door on Altschul Distilling Company and went into the real estate and insurance business. He and Carrie were recognized as notable citizens of Springfield. He helped found a local newspaper; she was a leader of the Red Cross. According to census records, the couple resided in Springfield until at least 1930. Sam lived until 1939, dying in St. Petersburg, Florida. His body was brought back to Springfield and is interred there in Ferncliff Cemetery.

What about the story Altschul’s granddaughter told? My research indicates that German barons were titled through heredity, not by an action of the Kaiser. Nor can I find anything in the literature about a birthmark that heralds the coming of the Jewish Messiah. Mollyann’s account gives every evidence of being the kind of story a grandfather might tell a gullible youngster. From his genius at merchandising it is clear that Small Sam had a rich imagination. And, we can believe, a taste for tall tales.

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Notes: The information for this article was derived from a number of Internet sites, including Altschul family genealogical entries. From comments made there, it is clear Sam’s descendants are not sure what to believe about him. The photos of shot glasses are through the courtesy of Robin Preston and his pre-pro.com website. Portions of this article previously appeared in “Swirl,” the monthly publication of the Ohio Bottle Club.

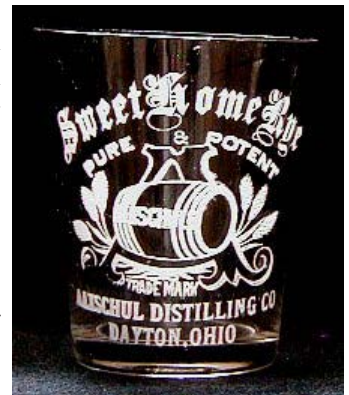


Fig. 18: Home Sweet Home Rye shot glass

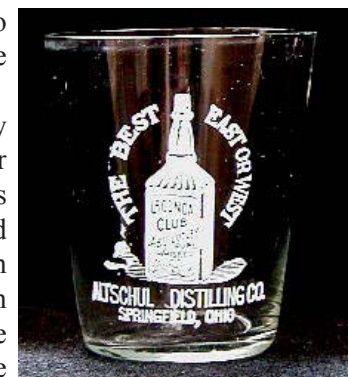


Fig. 19: Lagonda Club shot glass