

# Watch Out For Watch Fobs!

By Jack Sullivan  
Special to Bottles and Extras

This title is a triple entendre. First, the purpose of a fob is to facilitate the process of taking a watch *out* of a vest or pants pocket. Second, bottle collectors interested in advertising “go withs” may find fobs something to watch out for. Third, in fob collecting the word is “buyer beware.” Watch out for counterfeit and reproduction fobs!

For this article, I have limited consideration to the strap type watch fobs. They are characterized by a flat hole on the top just large enough to admit a thin leather strap holding a watch at the other end (**Fig. 1**). While there are other types involving chains and clips, this is the classic style. While fobs run the gamut of American industry and commerce, I have limited consideration here to those advertising whiskey and liquor products.



Figure 1



Figure 2

I became interested in the watch fob phenomenon while doing a story for the last issue of Bottles and Extras that depicted a highly attractive enameled example from Black Cat Whiskey, the product of Cleveland's Ullman-Einstein Co. (**Fig. 2**). Research disclosed that fobs were all the fashion about the turn of the 20th Century. Businesses gave them to customers as a way of getting their advertising walking around on the streets. Prominent among them

were pre-Prohibition whiskey distillers and distributors.

## Bottles on Fobs

More than a few whiskey fobs featured bottles. An example is one is from Echo Springs Whiskey (**Fig. 3**). The opposite side declares it “Kentucky's Best” and the



Figure 3

distiller as S. Grabfelder & Co. of Louisville, KY. That firm, was in business from 1880 to 1918. It registered the Echo Springs brand in 1905. A Mattingly & Moore fob, shown front and back (**Fig. 4, 5**) was issued by one of the few brands



Figure 4



Figure 5

that survived Prohibition, produced by a distillery of the same name in Bardstown, Kentucky. Later the brand name



Figure 6

was purchased by the Frankfurt Distilling Company.

The Old Hollister fob is from St. Paul (**Fig. 6**). It depicts a bearded gentleman extracting a large bottle of whiskey from the mailing box and, in a caption below, exclaiming “By cracky, its my Old Hollister.” Research failed to uncover any additional information on this outfit which claimed to be a distiller.

Bouvier's Buchu Gin (**Fig. 7**) was sold as a medicine for a wide range of ailments including sexually transmitted diseases. The company, located in Louisville, Kentucky, described how leaves from the buchu bush, native to the Cape of Good Hope, were drenched in gin to achieve this marvelous remedy. A judge in



Figure 7



1917 was not convinced. Noting that the product was 46 percent alcohol, he determined that Buchu Gin should be subject to liquor laws.



**Figure 8**

Another bottle fob is a celluloid item that advertised Deep Spring Whiskey (**Fig 8**). This was the product of J.W. Kelly & Co. of Chattanooga, Tennessee, whose advertising slogan for this brand was “Made on Honor, Sold on Merit.” This distillery shows up in city directories from 1903-1915. Kelly himself, however, is reported to have been active in the liquor trade as early as 1882.

### Fobbing Off Pretty Ladies

Kelly like other distillers recognized that “sex sells.” The flip side of his Deep Springs fob shows a win-



**Figure 9**

some lass with a low cut bodice and a provocative (for the times) pose (**Fig. 9**). His fob seems almost chaste, however, when compared to the bare breasted beauty featured in the Corby's Whiskey fob (**Fig. 10**). This distillery was founded by Henry Corby, an English immigrant and baker, in Ontario, Canada, in the late 1850s. It has grown to be Canada's



**Figure 10**

largest spirits manufacturer with markets worldwide.

My favorite fob lady is a “art nouveau” portrait on a Thompson Rye fob (**Fig. 11**). This brand was one of sev-



**Figure 11**

eral from Charles H. Ross & Company. Ross, a distiller as well as a whiskey distributor, founded the Monumental Distillery, one of the earliest important Baltimore distilleries. The brand name was first registered in 1860. The flip side of this fob

has a bas relief of a whiskey keg (**Fig. 12**).



**Figure 12**

### Dangling History

The Phil. G. Kelly Company of Richmond honored the history of Virginia by issuing two watch fobs.. One



**Figure 13**

showed the Commonwealth's favorite son, Thomas Jefferson (**Fig. 13**). It calls him a “friend of personal liberty,” probably an oblique reference to the Prohibition forces that were then on the rise. The other is of the Virginia state capitol in Richmond, for a time the capital of the Confederate States (**Fig. 14**). The Kelly company, although in business less than a dozen years (1905-1916), managed to produce a vast array of





**Figure 14**

bottles, jugs and giveaways, among them these distinctive watch fobs. (See my article on Kelly in the July-August 2008 issue of B&E.)

Another historical figure that appears on a whiskey fob is Daniel Boone (Fig. 15). Issued by the Thixton, Millett & Co. Distillers of Louisville, Kentucky, the medallion shows



**Figure 15**

the explorer and American folk hero with his coonskin hat, rifle, and dog. It carries the slogan: "Ever Drink...Old Boone." In 1889, John Thixton took over his father's banking and wholesale liquor businesses in Owensboro, KY. He later teamed up with E. P. Millett, who recently had sold another distillery. Together they created a liquor wholesaler and distiller's agent company. In 1903 Thixton, Millett bought out the Boone & Bro. distillery together with the "Old Boone" brand name. The firm lasted until the onset of Prohibition.

### Hanging Oddities

Some fobs do not fit well into categories, including three displayed here. Note the Old Fitzgerald whis-

key fob in the shape of a key (Fig. 16). The wording on the back is similar to hotel keys of the era, instructing



**Figure 16**

finders to deposit it into the nearest mailbox and the company would take care of postage. With an identification number on the back Old Fitzgerald presumably could restore the fob and the attendant watch back to the owner. It is unclear how well the watch could be expected to work after being thrown to the tender mercies of the U.S. Postal Service.

The oldest item on display here likely is a rusted fob with the likeness of a dog and the legend: "Dog On Good Whiskey" (Fig. 17). It was a giveaway from Bonnie & Co., a Louisville liquor wholesaler that operated under that name from 1874 to 1877. In 1878 the firm became known as Bonnie Brothers. It ultimately purchased the J. G. Mattingly & Sons' distillery in Louisville to supply liquor for the wholesale business which it operated until 1919. "Dog



**Figure 17**

On Good Whiskey" was the actual brand name for this Bonnie product.

A Walton Whiskey fob served two purposes. It operated as a pull for a watch but also swung open to reveal a bottle opener (Fig. 18). The back of the opener is dated 1913. That is the same date that J.J. O'Connor, a whiskey distributor of Elmira, New York, registered the Walton brand with the government. Little is recorded about his firm, except that O'Connor was prominent in the New York Irish-American circles. This fob is exceptional because it is made of both metal

and celluloid.



**Figure 18**

### Ads on a Strap

Some whiskey makers simply stamped their watch fobs with their well-known trade mark, apparently figuring the image made the best ad-



**Figure 19**

vertising. Duffy's Malt Whiskey was famous for its trade mark of an ancient chemist, as noted in my Sept.-Oct. 2008 Bottles & Extras article. It shows up on the company's watch fob with the slogan "Absolutely Pure and Unadulterated." (Fig. 19).

Clarke Brothers of Peoria advertising featured a sour-looking elderly man holding a bottle and tasting the firm's "Pure Rye." The same gent appeared on its fob (Fig. 20). The back featured the Clarke Bros. logo with the spurious claim: "Bottled by the U.S. Government." (Fig. 21). The firm later was forced to drop that wording.

A third well-known trademark used on a fob was that of Green River Whiskey, a brand of J.W. McCulloch



### Figure 21

example, an Echo Springs fob like the one shown here recently fetched \$167 on eBay. A few greedy dealers have found incentives to cheat. That has spawned a small industry in restrikes, reproductions and outright counterfeits. A prime example is are the Green River fobs. They turn up regularly on eBay, but there is no perfect way to test their genuineness from a photo. The depth and clarity of the



### Figure 23

The International Watch Fob Association (IWFA), officially founded in 1968, is grappling with this problem (**Fig. 24**). The first meeting of the organization was held in April, 1965, at the American Legion Hall in Norwalk, Ohio. There were 33 members present. Three years later the first show was organized and held at the same venue. Since that time the annual event has been held at various locations around Northern Ohio with hundreds of eager fob fans attending. To stem the tide of fakes, the

The attraction of collecting pre-Prohibition watch fobs is tempered by the large number of fakes in circulation. Although the original cost of these items was negligible, in recent years prices have risen sharply. For

Judging from eBay user group website, fob collectors still must spend a great deal of effort distinguishing the real from the fake. The discussions to be found there are marked by a great deal of rancor and strong language, charges and counter-charges. The gist of the verbiage seems to argue for considerable caution on the part of beginning -- and perhaps even seasoned -- collectors.

**Figure 24**

**Notes:** The information for this article was gathered from a number of Internet and other sources, an important one being the website of the IWFA: [www.watchfob.com](http://www.watchfob.com).

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★ P.S. We are aware that other auction  
★ houses gave an indirect boost to our sale.  
★ We also tip our hats to them.

